

# **The Riddle That Doesn't Exist: Ludwig Wittgenstein's Transmogrification of Death**

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"Depend on it, Sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully." –Dr. Johnson

A fascination with death conjoins the lives of numerous creators, from Emily Dickinson to James Agee, from E.A. Poe to Rene Magritte, from John Berryman to Jack Kerouac to Sylvia Plath. Existentialists like Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus, among others, crafted an entire philosophy out of the dread subject. Ernest Becker and Norman Brown used it as a means of revising Freudian "metatheory." Soren Kierkegaard proclaimed death mastery to be a critical prerequisite for true religiosity. Arnold Schopenhauer called death "the truly inspiring genius of philosophy."

Serving an "apprenticeship in death" [\[1\]](#) (as abstraction or as eventuality, willfully or fatefully) sometimes leads to art or epiphany. But it can also, when intolerable, become an impediment to full creative expression, not to mention psychological well-being. Ludwig Wittgenstein, the designated father of modern language theory and to many the most influential philosopher of the 20th-century, lived both ends of that spectrum. The brutality of death touched him early and repeatedly, in the process throwing an immensely cultured, immensely comfortable life into emotional disarray. At the same time, the idea of death inflamed his genius, the culmination of which amounted to no less than the creation of a brand new version of philosophy.

Wittgenstein had every reason to be preoccupied with the question of how to make death less problematical. For one thing, he belonged to a culture of suicide. Turn-of-the-century Austrians, of whom Wittgenstein was one, killed themselves at alarmingly high rates. One can speak of a virtual epidemic of suicide ideation. Members of the so-called Habsburg Empire apparently endorsed suicide as a valid, even laudable response to life's torment, a tactful "way out," so to speak (see McGuinness, 1988; Janik and Toulmin, 1973). The list of prominent fin-de-siecle Austrians to die by their own hands is nothing short of astonishing. Janik and Toulmin alone list Otto Mahler, Georg Trakl, Eduard van der Null, Alfred Redl, General Baron Franz von Uchatius, and Crown Prince Rudolf.

So, there were culture-based reasons to have death on the mind.

From a more individual angle, when he was between 12 and 15 years old (1902-1906) Wittgenstein also endured at least four suicides of unique personal significance. His brother Hans, a "musical prodigy of Mozartian talents" who at the age of four began composing complex music, disappeared from a boat in Chesapeake Bay, distraught over his father's insistence that he pursue a career in industry. Although there were no witnesses, the family (when told of the disappearance roughly one year after it had occurred) presumed suicide. Another brother Rudi, likewise rebelling against his father's wishes by seeking a life in theatre, drank cyanide in a pub in Berlin after asking the piano player to play his favorite song, "I am Lost." [2] And Otto Weininger, a cult figure in Vienna who wrote a book called *Sex and Character* which Wittgenstein read and apparently deeply admired as a schoolboy, shot himself in Beethoven's home "in an act of self-consciously symbolic significance" (Monk, 1990). Weininger's suicide gave morbid expression to one of his book's chief arguments: namely, if one failed to achieve genius, then one had no right to live. (For a thoughtful summary of Weininger's philosophy as well as a consideration of its impact on Wittgenstein, see Monk, 1990, p. 19-25). Because of its effect on Wittgenstein's life, specifically his choice of occupation, the 1906 suicide of Ludwig Boltzmann, the father of statistical thermodynamics, deserves mention as well. Shortly before that suicide, Wittgenstein had made plans to study under Boltzmann in Vienna. At a relatively early age, then, and because of an intersection of sorts between *Zeitgeist* and personal circumstance, Wittgenstein found himself faced with Camus' (1955) elementary philosophical query: Why not kill yourself, given the apparent meaninglessness and impossibility--i.e., "Absurdity"--of a world which continuously humiliates thought? Wittgenstein needed to find some way of accepting his brothers' choices; but beyond that, he also had to discover a cogent reason for continuing to live, for not killing himself as his brothers had done before him. Repeated losses of the kind Wittgenstein lived through can have innumerable psychological consequences. In what follows, I want only to focus on one particular consequence: the fact of Wittgenstein's fear of death. I begin by trying to understand Wittgenstein's fear on its own--in the wake of his "relentless lucidity," as Sass (1994) describes it, and unencumbered by its connection to other examples of death fear. Second, I try to provoke theory, to whatever degree necessary, by confronting it with the patent oddity of Wittgenstein. And third, I consider several ways in which Wittgenstein's fear of death may have collided with his philosophizing.

Before moving ahead, I should clarify that my analysis here ends with Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the aphoristic, essentially poetic formulation of what can and can't be said, and therefore includes no mention at all (save for one footnote) of the *Philosophical Investigations* which (depending on whom you read) represents either a radical break with, or a smooth evolution of, those ideas expressed in the earlier work.

## The Facts of the Fear

Wittgenstein's life has always elicited a combination of perplexity and awe from those attempting biographical sketches. Any bewilderment is compounded, according to Bartley (1988), by the fact that those in charge of Wittgenstein's literary estate seem bent on preserving, at all costs to truth, his image as genius-saint (see Bartley, 1988, for an intriguing expose of the resistance against renegade Wittgenstein biographers). At present, life-history information on Wittgenstein consists of three biographies (one by a Wittgenstein scholar—Brian McGuinness—who is currently working on a second volume, and who enjoys the blessings of Wittgenstein's executors), an array of memoirs written by intimates and non-intimates alike, and a miscellany of letters and journal entries.

All sources are in essential agreement on the subject of Wittgenstein's death fear, although different authors attach different degrees of significance to it. No biographer makes anything more than a casual effort to explain the fear; each limits himself—untypically, I might add—to description alone. For that matter, Bartley (1988) and McGuinness (1988) are both anti-psycho-biographical in their approach. The former, a Popperian, finds "epistemological expressionism" ("the popular idea that a man's work. . . is an expression of his inner state," p. 171) logically fallacious, while the latter just seems overly respectful. To wit: "If it were not impossible to reconstruct the exact motives for Wittgenstein's despair in the first half of 1920, it would be intrusive" (McGuinness, 1988, p. 292).

At any rate, the facts are these: After settling on philosophy as a vocation (in the process putting aside thoughts of engineering and aviation), and after meeting with carefully weighed encouragement from both Frege and Bertrand Russell, the most respected logicians of the time, Wittgenstein started recording some of his very first ideas on logic, metaphysics, ethics, and the meaning of life. At the time (summer, 1911), Wittgenstein was, in the words of his sister, "shaken to the depths of his being," and "in a state of indescribable, almost pathological excitement" (McGuinness, 1988, p. 74). Shortly thereafter, while bringing these somewhat desultory first ideas together, writing them up more formally with (one presumes) an audience in mind, Wittgenstein concluded, without any accompanying reason, that he was going to die. Initially the fear appeared reducible to a deeper worry that his death would preclude the organization of his papers, which in turn would preclude their having any impact on the philosophy of his time. He feared that if he were not around to explain his ideas to those "in the know," the ideas would languish in a certain sort of promising inscrutability.

He became desperate. Most illustratively, in September 1913, when the fear seemed to reach its apex, Wittgenstein insisted on meeting with Russell immediately to explain in detail all that he was trying to say in his writings. As Wittgenstein explains on September 20, 1913:

I have had all sorts of ideas which seem to me very fundamental. Now the feeling that I shall have to die before being able to publish them is growing stronger in me every day and my greatest wish would therefore be to communicate everything that I have done so far to you as soon as possible. . . If this is ridiculous please try to excuse this foolishness of mine because it is not a superficial foolishness but the deepest of which I am capable. But my point is this: I want to ask you to let me meet you as soon as possible and give me time enough to give you a survey of the whole field of what I have done up to now and if possible to let me make notes for you in your presence (McGuinness, 1988, p. 183).

Russell acceded, and Wittgenstein arrived in Cambridge less than a month later, "like a whirlwind," in Russell's words. He insisted on talking through the night (McGuinness, 1988, p. 184). At the time, Wittgenstein believed he would die either within four years, or else within two months, that is, September 1917 or mid-November, 1913. Fearing his friend would commit suicide shortly, or else that he would go mad, Russell struggled to listen and to dedicate Wittgenstein's thoughts to memory, but found the task unbearably arduous. Ultimately Wittgenstein was convinced to talk in the presence of a shorthand writer, who dutifully but no doubt bemusedly secured a record of the ideas. In the end, there were apparently two sessions with stenographers taking place over a span of eight days. From these, seven pages of typescript along with twenty-three pages of manuscript—Russell's English translation of Wittgenstein's German—still exist, and all together constitute Wittgenstein's first philosophic work, *Notes on Logic* (see McGuinness, 1988, p. 186).

The death fear peaked in Fall of 1913, although it preceded that time (and lingered long after, as well). On 9/5/13 Wittgenstein discloses feeling "as though my work [is] all sure to be entirely lost in one way or another," and implores Russell: "Whatever happens don't forget me!" (McGuinness, 1988, p. 182). On 9/17, three days before asking Russell to meet in person, Wittgenstein, according to David Pinsent's diary,

is morbidly afraid he may die before he has put the Theory of Types to rights, and before he has written out all his other work in such a way as shall be intelligible to the world and of some use to the science of Logic. . . He talked again tonight [9/20] about his death—that he was not really afraid to die—but yet frightfully worried not to let the few remaining moments of his life be wasted. It all hangs on his absolutely morbid conviction that he is going to die soon—there is no obvious reason that I can see why he should not live for a long time. But it is no use trying to dispel that conviction, or his worries about it, by

reason: the conviction and the worry he can't help—for he is mad (quoted by McGuinness, 1988, p. 158).

The fear seems to be on the order of what psychiatrists might call an "overvalued idea" or, less benignly, a "delusion." According to the DSM, delusions are beliefs based on incorrect inferences about external reality, sustained in spite of contrary evidence (although delusion is an immensely problematical concept—see Sass and Spitzer); overvalued ideas are defined as "unreasonable" beliefs maintained with "less than delusional intensity." Apparently, the two psychological realities exist on a continuum ranging from less to more severe and disabling. Needless to say, giving the fear a name doesn't illuminate its function or meaning or etiology. On the other hand, it might be useful, in some future context, to take up the question of whether Wittgenstein was, in fact, psychotic during this period—especially in light of Sass' (1994) argument concerning the schizophrenic character of many of Wittgenstein's philosophical ideas. Whatever the case may be, it is enough for now to establish that (a) Wittgenstein was indeed afraid of dying before laying down his work in an understandable form, and that (b) he offered no realistic explanation for this fear. Wittgenstein fully expected his insights to rock the philosophical world. He therefore feared the death of the idea more than the idea of death.

What makes a peculiarly gifted person like Wittgenstein fear death? Is the fear unconnected to the work he was doing at the time, or is it a sort of sequela of that work? Can one seek death and fear death at the same time? Does it matter at all that Wittgenstein feared death, or does the fact of that fear warrant no consideration in comparison with the ideas he managed after all to leave behind? These questions and others will be taken up shortly. In the following, I suggest Wittgenstein's death fear functions as defense; in that sense, it covers up or substitutes for something deeper. First, the death fear might express, more or less logically, fear of suicide; second, the death fear might express a kind of fear of intellect or greatness; and third, the fear might negate its opposite, which would be death-wishing. I take each possibility in turn.

### 1. Death Fear as Fear of Suicide.

Wittgenstein began to think of killing himself as early as 10 or 11 (McGuinness, 1988, p. 48), even prior to the four suicides already described. In adulthood he made frequent allusions to the idea, some of them oblique (e.g., signing off a letter suggesting a future rendezvous with "perhaps we shall no longer be alive by then"), some of them directly to the point (e.g., "I have continually thought of taking my own life, and the idea still haunts me sometimes"), and some of them almost fearful of the prospect (e.g., "I know that to kill oneself is always a dirty thing to do. Surely one cannot will one's own destruction, and anybody who has visualized what is in practice involved in the act of suicide knows that suicide is always a rushing of one's defenses. But nothing is worse than to be forced to take oneself by surprise").<sup>[3]</sup> On June 1, 1912, David

Pinsent reports in his diary that Wittgenstein "continually thought of suicide. . . , and felt ashamed of never daring to kill himself: he put it that he had had 'a hint that he was de trop in this world,' but that he had meanly disregarded it" (quoted by McGuinness, 1988, p. 93).

Both Russell and Wittgenstein himself believed Wittgenstein would kill himself eventually. As Russell describes in his autobiography (and this would be right around the time of the death fear): "[Wittgenstein] used to come to see me every evening at midnight, and pace up and down my room like a wild beast for three hours in agitated silence. . . I did not like to suggest that it was time for bed, as it seemed probable both to him and to me that on leaving me he would commit suicide" (Russell, 1968, p. 137). Several times Russell feared Wittgenstein had killed himself on occasions when he failed to arrive as scheduled for meetings between the two of them. Malcolm also worried that Wittgenstein would take his own life in response to the loss of his capacity for philosophical reflection, especially considering that Wittgenstein once had asked him, "When a person has only one thing in the world--namely, a certain talent--what is he to do when he begins to lose that talent?" (Malcolm, 1958, p. 94).

Wittgenstein began to feel very early on (he himself traces it to age 8 or 9, immediately prior to his initial bout with suicidal thinking) the effects of a peculiarly self-reproachful character, what Erikson, in his analysis of Gandhi, calls a "curse of conscience." He saw himself as weak, cowardly, not up to the moral imperative always to tell the unpleasant truth, and possibly not temperamentally suited to withstand his father's crippling judgments. He questioned his intelligence, doubted he would ever achieve anything at all in life, and often felt unworthy of being alive on account of his vileness.

For Freud, ideas like those above tend to result from some kind of loss experience. To be more specific, self-depreciation, "relentless self-criticism," and "bitter self-reproach" all share, as their "most notable" exciting cause, the real or emotional loss of a loved object (Freud, 1959, p. 41). Via introjection, the "shadow of the object" falls upon the ego (as Freud rather famously put it)--with the effect that any self-disparagement applies "at bottom to the object and [represents] the ego's revenge upon it" (p. 41). In different words, self-hatred in the end takes the place of anger really intended for the lost person him- or herself. Wittgenstein's crippling conscience therefore most likely had twin roots: those forming around numerous loss experiences at a relatively young age, and those traceable to the fact that Wittgenstein grew up in the presence of a stupendously successful father (one of the wealthiest members of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) who insisted on the strictest standards of duty and who assumed responsibility for telling his children what to do.

Consistent with Freud's ideas on how loss foments self-loathing, Wittgenstein's suicidal thinking may represent a submission to punishment, a validation of worthlessness (also see

summary by Fenichel, 1945, p. 400); its aim might have been to pacify a pressuring conscience formed, as mentioned before, both in the wake of repeated loss, and by an identification with a peculiarly perfectionistic, duty-bound father [41]. The letter (of 9/20/1930) cited earlier lends some support to these ideas. Notice how Wittgenstein describes his fear. He worries, not that he will die, but that he "shall have to" die. (Because "have to" accompanies "shall," I don't believe the phrasing to be merely idiomatic). Atonement is the connotation. One gets the sense that Wittgenstein is imagining himself accepting some sort of dreadfully mysterious judgment.

And so where does the death fear come in? Given that Wittgenstein often contemplated killing himself, and even alludes to "tak[ing] oneself by surprise," in that respect his fear of death appears perfectly logical. But more interestingly, from both a phenomenological and an analytic standpoint, in his letters Wittgenstein assigns the threat of death not to his own self-hate and potential for suicide, but to some sort of invisible, looming force bearing down on him. He worried, that is, that death would occur through external rather than internal means (i.e., by preordained justice, not by his own hand). That being the case, it therefore follows that the statement "I fear being struck down by Fate" might equal the statement "I fear killing myself," in the sense that the former represents a deflection of self-scorn and suicidal ideation onto external reality. The two ideas, often occurring in close proximity, express one and the same worry, but the former receives special attention because it relieves him of a measure of personal involvement and casts his lot to providence (e.g., "I am still afraid the devil will come take me one day. I am not joking." In Engelmann, 1967, p. 29). The world, not the conscience, becomes the enemy. In either case, fear of suicide or fear of death, a good portion of the motive strength derives from Wittgenstein's "fundamental" conviction of his own badness. His only hope, as he complains to Engelmann (1967), is that "the devils in hell pull the other way" (p. 37).

In his notebooks, Wittgenstein writes: "Certainly it is correct to say: Conscience is the voice of God" (1979, p. 75). In psychoanalytic terminology, that statement (in the context of Wittgenstein's previous thoughts on his own demise) might translate into something like the following: Fate, a projection of impending doom, is the superego, or conscience. The person who predicts that something bad will happen to him implies a desire, or at least an expectation, of punishment. Therefore, to fear the judgment of a terrible fate which is both capricious and ineluctable is, in psychic reality, to fear the conscience, whose ultimate option is to engineer self-destruction. Consider also that the work Wittgenstein was doing during the period in which his death fear reached its apex was to have the effect of displacing major portions of Russell's *Principia Mathematica*. This may have occasioned extra measures of guilt and self-doubt, for the person who received the bulk of Wittgenstein's correspondence about his ideas was the person whose own ideas stood the prospect of being dethroned. The character of Wittgenstein's relationship with Russell will be explored in additional detail below.

## 2. Death Fear as Fear of Intellect

Oddly enough, another contributing factor might be Wittgenstein's genius itself. Various authors note with near stupefaction how he held and manipulated thoughts almost out loud, so to speak--visibly struggling to pierce their center. Malcolm (1958) describes a typical Wittgenstein lecture: "His gaze was concentrated; his face was alive; his hands made arresting movements; his expression was stern. One knew that one was in the presence of extreme seriousness, absorption, and force of intellect. . . He was constantly fighting with the deepest philosophical problems. The solution of one problem led to another problem. Wittgenstein was uncompromising; he had to have complete understanding. He drove himself fiercely. His whole being was under a tension. No one at his lectures could fail to perceive that he strained his will, as well as his intellect, to the utmost" (p. 26-27).

Wittgenstein lived in a state of almost chronic frustration engendered at least partly by the sense that he was perpetually on the brink of realizing the profoundest insights. Again, this intuition was accompanied by thoughts such as "Will I be killed first?" and "Will my intellectual powers desert me?" (McGuinness, 1988, p. 228). In December 1913, he writes: "Deep inside me there's a perpetual seething, like the bottom of a geyser, and I keep on hoping that things will come to an eruption once and for all, so that I can [ ] into a different person"; similarly, on 11/16/1914: "I am obviously on the point of solving the most profound problems, so much so that the solution is practically under my nose!!! The thing is, my mind is simply blind to it just at this moment. I feel that I am at the gate but cannot see it clearly enough to be able to open it. This is an extremely remarkable state which I have never experienced so clearly as at present" (McGuinness, 1988, p. 228).

Wittgenstein's force of intellect was stupendous but, at the same time, unyielding. The demands it made and the burden it supported--a powerful charge to remove obstacles to truth--often left him on the verge of mental collapse. Indeed, Malcolm (1958) reports that Wittgenstein was always exhausted by his lectures; revolted and disgusted by them too, probably because they failed to meet his bonebiting standards.

In light of the above, it seems to me that Wittgenstein's fear of death and the timing of its occurrence may have something to do with the powerful strain his genius constantly put him under. What I mean is this: Death fear might signify a less specific fear of being annihilated or overwhelmed by a force too powerful to subdue or, at least, attenuate. Fear of death allows for a greater degree of self-management than does free-floating anxiety. Death fear "identifies" the source of the upset (rightly or wrongly is beside the point in this instance), and in so doing tethers upstart affects to one specific idea, thereby limiting their capacity to disturb--the assumption being that discrete fear is less disruptive than unassigned psychological discomfort.

In the case of Wittgenstein, it's a matter of a mind becoming too much for itself. For instance, Maslow (1971) spoke of the "fear of own's own greatness" or the "evasion of one's destiny." This "Jonah Syndrome," as Maslow ultimately named it, refers to a "justified fear of being torn apart, of losing control, of being shattered and disintegrated, even of being killed by experience" (p. 37). Especially when in ecstatic moments of insight, some people, in addition to feeling thrilled or awed, feel as though they "can't stand it" or as though they "could die" (p. 37). As Maslow puts it, "our organisms are just too weak for any large doses of greatness" (p. 37).

To make matters worse, an abiding sense of extreme power or turgidity of self, as Wittgenstein by virtue of his genius often felt, also can lead to guilt. Feelings of fullness and superiority, of godlikeness or "puffed-upness," as Jung liked to call it, may recall feelings of Oedipal prowess and the consequent imagined castration threat, which may get expressed as fear of conscience, which in turn gets expressed as fear of death<sup>[5]</sup>. Such an equation fits well with Wittgenstein's dread of being struck down by fate.

Fania Pascal, Wittgenstein's close friend and confidante, makes the following confirmatory observation: "I am reluctant to use Freudian terminology [apparently because of Wittgenstein's perceived ambivalence with regard to Freud], but cannot put it more clearly and briefly than by saying that there was in Wittgenstein no perceptible split between the ego and the super-ego. For that matter, no split of any kind" (in Rhees, 1984, p. 47). It does seem to be the case that, in Wittgenstein, the ego coincided at times with the ego-ideal, that internal personification of a "Superior Being" or standard of relative perfection, whose function it is to watch, compare, and criticize (Freud, 1924/1967, p. 435 & 1933/1965)<sup>[6]</sup>.

Wittgenstein's cycling between power and triumph and inferiority and guilt--the latter pair seems to be Pascal's chief concern--can be understood as an expression of tension between the ego and the ego-ideal (see Freud, 1921/1959, p. 63). Fusion of the two agencies inevitably gives way to conflicted demarcation. If the ego succeeds in resolving itself into the ego-ideal, that can be merely a temporary state of affairs. In the end, the ego-ideal is prepared to tolerate only "periodic rebellions," and therefore responds to inflations of personality with excess sensitivity and condemnation, which together set the stage for delusions of inferiority and self-deprecation. As Maslow avers, greatness can't be borne for long--not just because our organisms are too weak for it, but because, as Maslow also pointed out, we tend to fear hubris or sinful pride. In a passage of special relevance for Wittgenstein himself, Maslow writes: "The person who says to himself, 'Yes, I will be a great philosopher and I will rewrite Plato and do it better,' must sooner or later be struck dumb by his grandiosity, his arrogance" (p. 37). Why must one be struck dumb? Imagining greatness offends humility as represented by the ego-ideal, that internalized critical agency of the mind. We recoil from our own power, especially when, like Wittgenstein, we feel guilty just for

remaining alive and, beyond that, for actually possessing the intelligence to realize those awesome possibilities we had the temerity to imagine. Genius therefore bears a peculiar burden of guilt which must be overcome or somehow redirected if it is to succeed.

Wittgenstein often felt larger than life, and capable of gigantic, crystal-clear ideas that had the potential to move all of mankind an inch or two forward. But because of an already punishing sense of duty, along with the tendency towards self-attack described previously, Wittgenstein responded to feelings of vastness with doubt, self-resentment, condemnation, and finally despair. That intuitive sense of being "on the brink" almost naturally incites fear—partly because of self-doubt, and partly because of shimmerings of immortality.

Here Wittgenstein's relationship with Russell again becomes important. Wittgenstein's father died in 1913. As mentioned, the death fear reached its apex in 1913 as well, eight months or so after Wittgenstein's father's death, and in the midst of his most demanding work on principles of logic. In a sense, Wittgenstein in 1913 was in the process of supplanting two fathers: his own, who had died, and Russell, a mentor whose ideas stood as the benchmark to his own. Under these conditions, the emergence of guilt, and subsequent delusions of being struck down, both seem unsurprising.

### 3. Death Fear as Negation

Wittgenstein sought confrontations with death by purposefully putting himself in situations of extreme danger. Not only was he frankly suicidal, but he tended to dare death, take ludicrous chances with his life. Shneidman (1963) calls this kind of predilection "subintentioned cessation behavior," meaning roughly that some people orchestrate their demise indirectly, partially, or covertly. Paradoxically (given what has been described above), to Wittgenstein death sometimes seemed less fearsome than compelling. Contrasting the "more basic or reality-oriented" fear of death, on one hand, with the fantastical attraction to death on the other, McClelland (1963) elevates the latter to the status of an organized complex, which he names after the character Harlequin. In Wittgenstein's case, it may be too much to say that he wanted literally to die, but it isn't too much to say that he wanted to come as close as possible to dying. Death thrilled him because of the lessons it might teach, just as the character Harlequin-qua-death thrilled the women he courted.

Much of Wittgenstein's most explicit death-seeking behavior appeared in the context of World War I. His first military assignment was searchlight orderly on a vessel providing mobile fire-power to assist river crossings or troops engaged in the area (McGuinness, 1988, p. 217). Since the searchlight was crucial both in terms of directing fire and in terms of navigation, the person who manned it constituted a first line enemy target. Wittgenstein relished the opportunity

to hold this risky position, and in fact consistently sought any job that would put his life at the greatest risk, even though many positions he requested were considered well beneath his high standing (for instance, demanding transfer to the infantry rather than keeping a less threatening artillery post; in that case, he was denied—McGuinness, 1988.) Bartley (1988) reveals that in 1920 Wittgenstein told one of his teaching colleagues that he originally volunteered to serve in World War I "in order to find death, as a method of suicide" (p. 37).

The goal seems to have been spiritual growth of the sort achievable only via confrontation with, as Heidegger put it, no longer being-in-the-world. On 9/15/14, one year after his most intense bout with death fear, Wittgenstein writes: "Now I might have an opportunity to be a decent human being, because I am face to face with death" (McGuinness, 1988, p. 221). On 5/4/16 he adds: "Perhaps nearness to death will bring light into my life" (McGuinness, 1988, p. 240). This last comment coincides with Wittgenstein's asking to be permanently assigned to an observation post position—again, a job of grave risk due to constant exposure to enemy fire. In response, Wittgenstein was characteristically philosophical, taking the stance that only death gives life meaning; he envisioned the job as an opportunity to master his greatest fears.

So, Wittgenstein clearly welcomed death during the war; he did so to understand his feelings about his own demise, and in so doing to make himself a better person. Bartley (1988) cites one source who maintains that Wittgenstein hoped he would be killed. On the other hand, we know that Wittgenstein feared dying for several different reasons, the chief one being that physical death equalled death of the idea. How can both statements be true?

In Wittgenstein, death fear alongside death-seeking behavior may express the fear's apparent opposite: that is, a wish to suicide or a wish to die. While Wittgenstein sought brushes with death during the war, fear of suicide nevertheless continued to make sporadic appearances—that fact can't be too surprising, since seeking death and fearing suicide almost imply one another (i.e., when I seek death, I fear killing myself, and when I fear killing myself, I do so because I seek death). At the same time, during the war years the death fear disappears, according to all available biographical sources covering that period of Wittgenstein's life.

Alternations between death fear, fear of suicide, and death-seeking behavior make sense if fear of death is understood as a constituent of the death-seeking impulse, including, tangentially, those suicidal ruminations analyzed before. Simply said, fearing death "negates" an unconscious wish for death to occur, where negation denotes a procedure by which a person, "while formulating one of his wishes. . . which has been repressed hitherto, contrives, by disowning it, to continue to defend himself against it" (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1973, p. 261). Freud (1925) asserts that "we never discover a 'no' in the unconscious and that recognition of the unconscious on the part of the ego is expressed in a negative formula" (p. 239).

Once more, wishing to die can connote a wish to be rid of the superego's tormenting presence and/or the presence of genius paired with an uncompromising sense of duty. The lacuna of death is actually preferred to the anguish of living under the scrutiny of an endlessly demanding internal judge. In notebook entries Wittgenstein isolates an emotional reality by reasoning that "If suicide is allowed, then everything is allowed; if anything is not allowed, then suicide is not allowed" (Wittgenstein, 1979, p. 91). Even so, the notebook's final statement takes the form of a demurral: "Or is even suicide in itself neither good nor evil?" (p. 91).

#### 4. Death Fear as Symptom?

The easiest way to understand Wittgenstein's fear of death would be to categorize it as merely one among many interconnected symptoms of a major depression. Such an explanation has the advantage of being relatively simple, and of appearing to remove competing variables of questionable consequence. On the other hand, like comparably simple approaches, the symptom-focused explanation has the disadvantage of being a pseudo-explanation. I take it up here only to reject it.

Thomas Szasz, a kind of enemy of psychiatric complacency, offers numerous bold but unnuanced critiques of the concept of mental illness (for instance, see Szasz, 1970). On one point in particular, however, he voices an irrefutable and underappreciated truth: that mental illness is a description of a state, not an explanation. It makes nonsense to say that one is suicidal because one is depressed, and that one is depressed because one is suicidal, among other things. Two descriptive statements don't amount to an explanation of anything, and besides, the reasoning is circular. Another way of putting it is: When I drop a breakfast tray, I break both a glass and a teacup. But I wouldn't want to say that the broken teacup caused the broken glass. Still, fallacious or not, the path of least resistance when attempting to explain Wittgenstein's fear of death seems to fall along the aforementioned lines. Perhaps his death fear is nothing more than a symptom of the depression he complained of throughout his life?[\[7\]](#)

In my opinion, there can be no doubt that Wittgenstein suffered from depression; he presents all the standard indices. He hates and deprecates himself; he reports feeling no pleasure in anything and being full of anxiety and agitation; he complains of exhaustion to the point where he can't even begin to think of doing any work; etc. In this scenario, death fear could be considered "delusional," a sign of madness, one component of a "major depressive episode with mood-congruent psychotic features." Significantly depressed people often feel as if they are going to die, sometimes constructing a loosely plausible somatic basis for the fear (e.g. an undetected brain tumor), and other times not. The question is, Does this sort of analysis make any headway in understanding why Wittgenstein felt the way he did?

Unless we presuppose the presence of some underlying brain disease impossible to verify--both in practice and because Wittgenstein is dead--the answer must be no. Even assuming a disease model of the sort capable of functioning in an explanatory fashion, too many questions remain unexamined and hence unexplained. For instance, why did the death fear arise when it did? Are the events surrounding it meaningless from a causal standpoint? Can we say that the depression lifted of its own accord, untreated as it were, or do we need to examine life-events and changes of circumstance? How does death fear relate to suicidal thinking and death-seeking behavior? The disease model ignores such questions or else, by virtue of its own internal logic, deems them inconsequential, not worth thinking about. Like brain-biased explanations of mental illness in general, in this case, too, all psychological and life-history variables pale before a certain sort of faithful and ultimately unsatisfying reductionism. Did Wittgenstein fear death because he was depressed or was he depressed because he feared death, among other things? Precisely because it entertains questions pertaining to the interactions between environmental circumstance, life-history, and personality development, the psychological point of view, in contrast to what might be called the psychiatric viewpoint, has the capacity to iron out the wrinkles.

The Difference Wittgenstein's Death Fear Makes It was Iris Murdoch who recommended that before entering into the study of any particular philosopher, one ought first to determine what that philosopher was afraid of. Whatever else he may have feared (leading candidates include madness and the loss of mental sharpness), Wittgenstein feared death. How does knowing that to be true make a difference for the understanding of his philosophy?

The one and, in my opinion, only answer to such a question is that personality in its most inclusive sense almost always shapes the form and content of creative material. It isn't ever the sole instigator, and understanding it isn't always necessary for the understanding of any particular work--of art, philosophy, and so on. But creativity is an element (or expression) of personality, and so it only makes good sense to expect that its manifestations almost always reveal or depend upon the personality whence they sprang. That said, I am convinced that Wittgenstein's fear of death had a substantial impact on certain of the formulations contained in the *Tractatus*. Since psychobiographical understanding seeks ever-diminishing states of doubt, what follows represents the first step of an iterative process.

The very least we can assert is that Wittgenstein's death fear propelled him in the direction of creativity. It added urgency to the work he was doing; he felt as though he had only a certain amount of time in which to put his thoughts together. He worked under the threat of an imaginary enemy which he projected or displaced onto the external world. We all labor under the

threat of death, but for Wittgenstein death was experienced as impending, and that made an important difference.

Wittgenstein regarded philosophy not as an ethereal, lofty, recondite exercise in pure thinking, but as a method for solving problems of living. He insisted on nothing less when questions of philosophy's function arose. In a passage that neatly sums up his position on the subject, Wittgenstein asks Malcolm: "What is the use of studying philosophy if all that it does for you is enable you to talk with some plausibility about some abstruse questions of logic, etc. & if it does not improve your thinking about the important questions of everyday life, if it does not make you more conscientious than any. . . ?" (Malcolm, 1958, p. 39).

Philosophy offered a total solution. Right answers to right questions resulted in right ways of living. "If my notebook is to be in order," Wittgenstein writes, "I must, as it were, step straight out of doors from it--into life--and not have either to climb up into the light as if from a cellar or to jump down onto earth again from a higher level" (McGuinness, 1988, p. 57). The thinking and the living need to meld; one must lead seamlessly into the other.

Especially when philosophizing about the meaning of life or the happy life, Wittgenstein's death fear makes an important appearance. The connection is circuitous but clear nonetheless. To begin with, Wittgenstein recognizes two solutions to the meaning of life: living "eternally" and fearlessness. Setting aside fearlessness for the moment--an aim, in any case, overtly associated with fear of death--leaves us with the idea of the eternal, by which Wittgenstein means not infinite temporal duration but non-temporality--i.e., timelessness. But there is more, for "only a man who lives not in time but in the present is happy. . ." and "For life in the present there is no death" (1979, p. 75). One characteristic of non-temporality, then, is its mitigation of death. Another way of saying the same thing is: life in the present is distinguished by an absence of death. As it turns out, the second solution to the meaning of life--fearlessness--is identical to the first. According to it, "A man who is happy must have no fear. Not even in the face of death" (p. 74). Happiness requires no fear, particularly no fear of death; it also requires non-temporality, which is distinguished above all else by an impossibility of death fear. What seem like two independent elucidations wind up sharing one and the same quality or lack of quality: Happiness is contingent upon invulnerability to the idea of death.

Moreover, for Wittgenstein "Fear in the face of death is the best sign of a false, i.e., a bad, life" (Wittgenstein, 1979, p. 74 & 75). In different words, falseness equals badness, and the best sign of badness is the fear of death. Little wonder Wittgenstein insisted on his rottenness (e.g., "I am clear about one thing: I am far too bad to be able to theorize about myself; in fact I shall either remain a swine or else I shall improve, and that's that" or "I have had a most miserable time lately.

Of course only as a result of my own baseness and rottenness"--in Engelmann, p. 11 & 33), and little wonder he put such fierce emphasis on truthful living in its most comprehensive sense.

Because Wittgenstein aimed to live by ideas rather than merely to write them, and because more than anything else he strived to be consistent, psychological disorder called for philosophical treatment. In the end Wittgenstein came to believe that through philosophy he might become "independent of fate." He writes: "Death is not an event in life. It is not a fact of the world" (Wittgenstein, 1979, p. 75). On the face of it, this sort of proclamation, while unassailable logically, just seems too predictable given what we now know. Death, being a projection of a future state of affairs and not an event that anybody lives through, is in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* a concept that cannot be said. And of course, "what we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence." Apparently, one must learn to accept the lack of value of the facts of the world; or, as McGuinness puts it, "Only by seeing (as the *Tractatus* allows you to) that there is no scientific (still less philosophical) answer to the problems of life, . . . do you come near to answering them" (1988, p. 313).

Thus, Wittgenstein's position on death, a subject that haunted him throughout the years he generated many of the ideas contained in the *Tractatus*, is that one cannot even speak about it in anything but a nonsensical fashion. It is transcendental, categorically ineffable (for instance the lines, "And it is not surprising that the deepest problems are in fact not problems at all" and "The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem"). Wittgenstein feared death horribly, but his philosophy required him to declare that death can't be talked about. He therefore "isolates" (in psychoanalytic terms) an emotional problem by pronouncing it vacuous. Of course, in the psychoanalytic paradigm, unutterability--what can't be said--represents the *sin qua non* of repression. Unpleasurable affects/experiences are denied the quality of consciousness by depriving them of what Natsoulas (1984) has called "the conscious-making verbal." One might go so far as to say that Freud's repression is the psychological equivalent of Wittgenstein's what can't be said: for Freud, repression hides the core of subjectivity; for Wittgenstein, what can't be said "contains the whole of logic and philosophy"--including but not limited to ethics and the mystical (see Russell, introduction to Wittgenstein, 1988, p. 21-22) [8]. Furthermore, acts of repression give rise to "ideational representatives," an outcome Freud referred to as the "return of the repressed"; Wittgenstein intimates something similar when he states "And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then nothing gets lost. But the unutterable will be--unutterably--contained in what has been uttered" (in Engelmann, 1967, p. 7). In Freudian language, manifest content reveals disguised derivatives of the repressed.

Although Wittgenstein himself most often resisted the idea [9], many of his interpreters hold that Wittgensteinian philosophy amounts to a sort of psychotherapy whose aim is to describe

then cure what might be termed errors of reflection. This emphasis on "therapeutics" may have begun with Bertrand Russell, who says in his allusive 1922 preface to the *Tractatus*: "The object of [Wittgensteinian] philosophy is the logical clarification of thoughts. Philosophy is not a theory but an activity. A philosophical work consists essentially of elucidations. The result of philosophy is not a number of 'philosophical propositions' but to make propositions clear. Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred" (in Wittgenstein, 1988, p. 11; italics mine). More directly, Sass (1994), in an inventive comparison of Wittgensteinian philosophy with essentially thought-based, "quasi-solipsistic" symptoms of schizophrenia, remarks that "Wittgenstein often spoke of his own philosophical thought--a kind of antiphilosophy--as an attempt to restore sanity and health to the mind caught up with certain abstract dilemmas and disengaged attitudes typical of philosophy of a more metaphysical sort" (p. 74). Innis (1979) contends that "a specifically therapeutic intention lay at the very heart of Wittgenstein's project" and that his goal was not so much to develop a philosophy of philosophies but to "dissolve philosophical problems. . . by laying bare the misleading analogies, the grammatical mistakes, the pieces of nonsense embedded in our language" (see introduction to Brand, 1979, p. x).

Again, much of what Wittgenstein wrote in the *Tractatus* can be considered antidotal. He worked to purify, purge, and cleanse, to cure maladies of mind born of disturbed language usage. If one could only say it right, spell it out cleanly and understand it clearly as it ought to be understood--whatever the "it" might be--then one stood the chance of being free from trouble, uncluttered mentally. In the end, fearing death made no sense philosophically. To Wittgenstein, it indicated a misunderstanding. The only recourse was to understand the misunderstanding, and that required more and more philosophy.

Wittgenstein's effort was heroic and admirable in the sense that he demanded no division between his life and his work. Not unlike other great philosophers, he truly believed he could remedy deep emotional difficulties by untangling then confronting them philosophically. He pulverized his fear by philosophical attack and counted on lucidity as the key to the happy life. Wittgenstein apparently did die happy, but yet, despite the efforts of his antiphilosophizing, his thinking never brought itself to a stop, as he wished it might. So in 1931 he speaks of feeling like "an empty tube which is simply inflated by a mind." He calls wisdom "grey" and "stupid"; it "merely conceals life from you. . . like cold grey ash, covering up the glowing embers" (quoted in Sass, 1994, p. 124). Even so, as he once put it to his friend M. O'C. Drury, "You know I said I can stop doing philosophy when I like. That is a lie. I can't" (quoted in Sass, 1994, p. 108).

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## NOTES

[1] See Camus, A. (1955). The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays. New York: Knopf.

[2] On the subject of Hans' and Rudi's suicides there are numerous inconsistencies which, at any rate, don't confound my arguments. Bartley (1988) has Hans dying in Havana, Cuba, in April, 1902, and Rudi in Berlin on May 2, 1904. He adds that both Hans and Rudi "were known to be homosexual" (p. 35); McGuinness (1988) has Hans vanishing from a boat in Chesapeake Bay in 1902, and Rudi poisoning himself in Berlin in 1903; Monk (1990) has Hans disappearing in Chesapeake Bay in 1902, with the family being told of his death in 1903, and Rudi swallowing cyanide in Berlin in 1904. As for a third brother, Kurt Wittgenstein, who shot himself in 1919 when Ludwig was near 30, Monk (1990) records the date as October or November of 1919, McGuinness (1988) and Bartley (1988) as Fall, 1918. Since Monk's accounts are, of the three, the most researched, I've chosen for the most part to present his version.

[3] All three quotes are taken from letters to Paul Engelmann, 1967.

[4]Appropriately enough, Wittgenstein seems to have been ambivalent about the usefulness of Freudian theory. He is known to have said of Freud's Interpretation of Dreams, "Here at last is a psychologist who has something to say." Also, he apparently described himself to friend Rush Rhees as "a disciple of Freud's" (Monk, 1990, p. 356-357). At the same time, however, Wittgenstein lectured against what he took to be Freud's excessive reductionism, at times using Freudian explanations as examples of pseudo-explanations; he also felt Freudians evinced a wrong-headed drive to explain at all costs, rather than simply to describe.

[5]In a comparison of male versus female judgments of the effectiveness of death metaphors, McClelland (1963) found that men more than women---18% to 3%---favored the metaphor of the "grinning butcher."

[6]Although Freud in early writings used the terms ego-ideal and super-ego interchangeably, in later texts the function of the ideal is assigned to a "specific substructure within the super-ego" (Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 144). Simply put, the ideal results from the coming together of idealization of the ego and identification with the parents. Some have taken the position that the super-ego corresponds to authority and the ego-ideal to the way in which the subject must behave in order to respond to the expectations of authority (e.g., Laplanche and Pontalis, 1973, p. 145).

[7]For the record, some (e.g. Sass, 1994) imply that, if anything, Wittgenstein suffered from a schizophrenia-spectrum disorder. In fact, Sass (1994) has fruitfully compared aspects of the phenomenology of schizophrenia to Wittgensteinian critiques of paradigmatic errors of philosophical reflection.

[8]At the same time, Wittgenstein at least appreciated the break between what he felt--in this case, fear of death--and what he philosophized, and worked to mend it. He experienced the fear, the fear was a fact, and the antidote was better philosophy.

[9]On the other hand, he is ambivalent at the very least, for in the Philosophical Investigations he writes: "The philosopher treats a question; like an illness" (p. 255).