

## Wittgenstein on Being (and Nothingness)

**Luca Zanetti**

INDIRE

[l.zanetti@indire.it](mailto:l.zanetti@indire.it)

**Abstract** In this paper, I present an interpretation of Wittgenstein's remarks on the experience of wonder at the existence of the world. According to this interpretation, Wittgenstein's feeling of wonder stems from perceiving the existence of the world as an absolute miracle, that is, as a fact that is in principle beyond explanation. Based on this analysis, I will suggest that Wittgenstein's experience is akin to what has been described by other authors such as Coleridge, Pessoa, Heidegger, Scheler, Sartre, and Hadot, among many others. Through a comparison between Wittgenstein and Coleridge on the experience of existence, I shall highlight some core features of this experience, chief among them the use of the notion of nothingness in clarifying what is understood in the experience, the role of intuition, and the presence of a specific pathos. As a whole, this paper aims to provide a contribution to the project of a phenomenology of the experience of existence and intends to create a bridge for a dialogue between Wittgenstein and the phenomenological tradition on the enigma of existence.

**Keywords:** Wittgenstein, Existence, Nothingness, Mystical, Ineffability, Coleridge, Heidegger, Phenomenology of Existence

Received 28/10/2023; accepted 06/11/2023.

### 1. The Experience of Existence (and Nothingness)

In *The Life of the Mind*, at one point Hannah Arendt discusses the thesis that the experience of wonder is at the origin of thought and philosophy. Arendt articulates this thesis with reference to Plato, Aristotle, Leibniz, Kant, Schelling, Heidegger and Sartre. In this context she also quotes a relatively little-known passage by Coleridge, in which he describes what it feels like when one encounters existence.

Hast thou ever raised thy mind to the consideration of existence, in and by itself, as the mere act of existing? Hast thou ever said to thyself thoughtfully, It is! Heedless in that moment, whether it were a man before thee, or a flower, or a grain of sand,—without reference, in short, to this or that particular mode or form of existence? If thou hast indeed attained to this, thou wilt have felt the presence of a mystery, which must have fixed thy spirit in awe and wonder. The very words,—There is nothing! or,—There was a time, when there was nothing! are self-contradictory. There is that within us which repels the proposition with as full and instantaneous a light, as if it bore evidence against the fact in the right of its own eternity. Not to be, then, is impossible: to be, incomprehensible. If thou hast

mastered this intuition of absolute existence, thou wilt have learnt likewise, that it was this, and no other, which in the earlier ages seized the nobler minds, the elect among men, with a sort of sacred horror. This it was that first caused them to feel within themselves a something ineffably greater than their own individual nature. (Quoted in Arendt 1978: 234-5).

In this passage, we find a *description* of an experience and an *interpretation* of what is understood or intuited in that experience. The description emphasizes the presence of a specific feeling - «awe», «wonder», «sacred horror» - and the fact that understanding takes place «with as full and instantaneous a light». In the interpretation, several points stand out: what astonishes is not a «particular mode or form of existence» but the existence itself of what exists; existence is grasped in contrast to nothingness, which cannot be; not to be is impossible, to be is incomprehensible; the «intuition of absolute existence» was understood by the «the nobler minds, the elect among men» and it made them feel «within themselves a something ineffably greater than their own individual nature».

The experience lived by Coleridge is similar to that found in many other authors<sup>1</sup>. Heidegger arguably describes the same experience in *What Is Metaphysics?* (1929) and holds that living such an experience represents our fundamental possibility. In the *Postscripts* (1941), he writes:

Of all beings, only the human being, called upon by the voice of being, experiences the wonder of all wonders: that beings are. (Heidegger 1943, eng. tr.: 234).

Similar descriptions to those of Coleridge and Heidegger can be found throughout the history of Western thought<sup>2</sup>. Although different authors provide different descriptions and interpretations of their experiences, in their essential traits, the experiences seem to be, if not the same, at least members of a single family. The minimal core that unites these experiences appears to be the following: those who live them *intuit*, in a particular *feeling* (wonder, anxiety, awe, absurdity, horror, etc.), that what exists - be it the whole or a particular being - *exists*.

Wittgenstein also speaks in the *Lecture on Ethics* of an experience he describes as wonder at the existence of the world. I will argue that Wittgenstein's experience exhibits features that are structurally similar to those we find in other accounts of the experience of existence.

In this paper I want to contribute to the larger project<sup>3</sup> of a *phenomenology of the experience of existence* and to create in this way a bridge for dialogue between Wittgenstein and the phenomenological tradition on the enigma of existence<sup>4</sup>. In the phenomenological tradition, especially in Heidegger and Scheler (Pareyson 1992), we find the claim that to experience the existence of the world requires an appreciation of (the meaning of)

---

<sup>1</sup> E.g. (Pessoa 2016, eng. tr.: 299), (Hadot 2008, eng. tr.: 5-6), (Sartre 1938), (Scheler 1954, eng. tr.: 98).

<sup>2</sup> For a brief (partial) history, in addition to the previously mentioned discussion by Arendt, see (Pareyson 1979) and (Pareyson 1992).

<sup>3</sup> For another chapter of this project, see (Zanetti 2023).

<sup>4</sup> There are many studies that engage in a dialogue between the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. While most studies highlight the resonances between the early Heidegger of *Being and Time* and the later Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations* (see Perissinotto 1994, Cooper 1997, Egan *et al.* 2013, Mulhall 2016), there are some works that have related Wittgenstein's observations on the mystical to Heidegger's early reflections. Specifically, there are authors who argue that Wittgenstein's experience of existence and Heidegger's experience of nothingness in *What is Metaphysics?* are the same experience: (Horgby 1959), (Murray 1974), (Fay 1989), (Fay 1991), (Philipse 1992), (Cooper 1997), (Volpi 2001), (Camerlingo 2011).

nothingness. So, in order to create the conditions for a dialogue between the phenomenological tradition and Wittgenstein on *this* topic, it is important to understand whether nothingness (and related notions) plays any role (be that implicit or explicit) in his thought about the experience of existence. For this reason, in what follows I shall highlight the loci of Wittgenstein's thought in which a reference to nothingness can be evinced. Moreover, I shall show that in Wittgenstein we find a particular phenomenological sensibility to the conditions that might favor, or hinder, the experience of existence.

## 2. The Experience of Wonder at the Existence of the World

In the *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein aims to illustrate what he means by absolute good, absolute value, or ethics<sup>5</sup>. In order to do so, he mentions three experiences. The first, his experience «*par excellence*», is introduced with these words:

I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it I *wonder at the existence of the world*. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as “how extraordinary that anything should exist” or “how extraordinary that the world should exist”. (Wittgenstein 1965: 8).

That this is an *experience* - and not just an intellectual observation - is evident from the fact that Wittgenstein emphasizes the presence of a particular *feeling*: here he speaks of *wonder*, elsewhere he suggests that such an experience, or experiences in the vicinity, may be accompanied by a darker feeling, such as *fear*<sup>6</sup>.

Now, in the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein describes as «mystical» the fact that the world is, contrasting the fact that the world is with how the world is: «6.44 The mystical is not how the world is, but that it is». The experience described in the *Lecture on Ethics*, wonder at the existence of the world, is thus the experience of the mystical, that is, the experience that the world is<sup>7</sup>.

The mystical is also connected with the view of the world *sub specie aeternitatis*: «6.45 To view the world *sub specie aeterni* is to view it as a whole—a limited whole. Feeling the world as a limited whole—it is this that is mystical». The experience of existence and the view *sub specie aeternitatis* share the same *object*, the world, although they apprehend it in different ways. In the experience of the existence of the world the emphasis is on the *existence* of the world. The view *sub specie aeternitatis* views the world as a *limited whole*, and so here the emphasis is on the fact that the world is *everything that there is*. The world is seen as a limited whole because there is nothing beside it. When we see the world as a whole, we *might* also be struck by its existence, and when this happens there is a shift of emphasis, from viewing the world as a limited whole, to viewing its existence. The shift easily occurs because when the emphasis is on the world as a whole, *how* the world is is not important - since we are considering the world regardless of the way in which it is - and so we might be struck by the fact *that* it exists.

Here we find a first indication of the role of nothingness in Wittgenstein's experience of existence, as well as a first indication of Wittgenstein's phenomenological sensibility. First, the notion of the world (that is, the whole) is the notion that refers to the opposite

---

<sup>5</sup> This includes also «the most essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics» (Wittgenstein 1965: 4), but also considerations about the meaning of life and God. On this connection between ethics, aesthetics, the meaning of life and religion see (Barrett 1991), (Tilghman 1991).

<sup>6</sup> We shall go back to this issue in §5. See also his reference to the “uncanny” in Engelmann's remark (Wittgenstein 1977, eng. tr.: 6-7).

<sup>7</sup> On Wittgenstein on the mystical, see (McGuinness 1966), (Rump 2019), (Oliva 2021).

of nothingness. Second, to speak of the world as a limited whole is to consider the whole *in a particular way*, that is, as *everything* that there is, and it is seen or experienced as *limited* precisely because there is an appreciation, however unarticulated, that there is nothing beyond it, the whole is all there is. Third, Wittgenstein highlights, as every account of the experience of existence does, the presence of a *feeling* - wonder and the Tractarian «mystical feeling».

### 3. The Existence of the World as an Absolute Miracle

Later in the *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein says that it is possible to describe the experience of wonder at the existence of the world in another way, namely as «the experience of seeing the world as a miracle» (Wittgenstein 1965: 10). Let us see how he arrives at this redescription, for this will allow us to articulate the *source* of wonder in the experience of existence.

Wittgenstein distinguishes between two uses of the word “miracle”: a *relative* and an *absolute* use<sup>8</sup>. That something happens - Wittgenstein proposes, as an example, that one of us suddenly grows a lion’s head and begins to roar - is a miracle *so long as it is not explained*. And even if it were never explained, the «scientific way of looking at a fact» (*Ivi.*: 11) is such that *in principle* there should be an explanation for that fact. Facts, viewed with this scientific perspective, are miraculous only in a relative sense, that is, relative to what we *currently* know about the workings of the world. But «it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared» (*Ivi.*: 10). A real miracle is a miracle in the *absolute* sense, that is, an event that *in principle* cannot be explained. Wittgenstein draws the distinction between relative and absolute miracle to make it clear that the experience of wonder at the existence of the world consists in seeing the world as an *absolute* miracle.

In this context Wittgenstein speaks of explanation. One way of explaining is to identify the *causes* of what happens. In this sense, then, the existence of the world, seen as an absolute miracle, is seen as *causeless*. More generally, when we explain, even if we do so without mentioning causes, we are trying to *understand* or *make sense* of an event by finding the *reason* for it. In this sense, then, to see the existence of the world as an absolute miracle is to see it as *incomprehensible* or as an event that occurs *without a reason*. In other words, to see the world as an absolute miracle, is to see it as something that does not respect the *principle of sufficient reason*.

Note that we speak of “mystery” in those contexts where we are unable to explain what is happening. In the light of the distinction between relative and absolute miracle, we can distinguish between *relative mystery* - as in the case of a crime, when we do not know the murderer but know that there must be one - and *absolute mystery*, when we know that in principle no explanation can be given for what happens. In this sense, for Wittgenstein the existence of the world can be seen as an *absolute mystery*.

The distinction between relative and absolute miracle also affects our understanding of wonder. There is *relative* wonder, which is that concerning an event that we marvel at even though we know it must have an explanation. And there is *absolute wonder*, which is the wonder we feel about an event that we regard as beyond explanation.

So, to sum up, the source of wonder in the experience of existence is the fact that existence is seen as an absolute miracle or mystery, that is, as an event that is *beyond explanation, causeless, incomprehensible, ungrounded*.

---

<sup>8</sup> For a study of the notion of miracle in Wittgenstein, see Perissinotto 2009.

Wittgenstein says that it is possible to *see* the world as an absolute miracle. But does he also think that the world actually *is* an absolute miracle? In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein writes:

6.371 The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.

6.372 Thus people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages.

And in fact both are right and both wrong: though the view of the ancients is clearer in so far as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus, while the modern system tries to make it look as if *everything* were explained.

The conception of the ancients, by highlighting God and Fate as termini of the explanation, clearly showed that there is something that cannot be explained, that a terminus of explanation exists: in their case, the terminus is God and Fate. The «modern conception of the world» is not as clear as the view of the ancients in showing that there is something that cannot be explained. Since, according to this conception, there is nothing beyond natural phenomena, and it is presumed that natural laws explain all natural phenomena, there is the illusion that everything can be explained. And this is «the scientific way of looking at a fact» (Wittgenstein 1965: 11) that removes miracles and wonder.

What fundamentally remains unexplained, both in the view of the ancients and in that of the moderns, is the existence of the world itself - including the existence of natural laws, if it makes sense to speak of their existence, and the existence of what the ancients regarded as the termini of explanation, that is, God and Fate. So, in this passage Wittgenstein seems to imply that the existence of the world really *is* without explanation: since it is an illusion that everything is explained, it means that something is not explained, and that which is fundamentally without explanation is precisely the existence of the world (in addition to the supposed termini of explanation)<sup>9</sup>.

#### 4. Existence and Ineffability

One of the goals of the *Tractatus* is to draw a limit to thought by drawing a limit to what can be said. Within the realm of the unsayable, there is the mystical. The existence of the world is the mystical. Although one cannot meaningfully speak of the mystical, it reveals itself: «6.522 There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They *make themselves manifest*. They are what is mystical».

The thesis of the ineffability of the mystical is reiterated in the *Lecture on Ethics*:

[...] the verbal expression which we give to these experiences is nonsense! If I say “I wonder at the existence of the world” I am misusing language. (Wittgenstein 1965: 8).

Now, why is it that for Wittgenstein we cannot speak meaningfully about the existence of the world and about the wonder at its existence? In answering this question, we shall see that Wittgenstein refers to nothingness and we shall also appreciate one respect in which both Wittgenstein and Heidegger would agree on how *not* to think about existence or being.

---

<sup>9</sup> For other interpretations that put an emphasis on this aspect, see (Churchill 1994), (Cahill 1996), (Cooper 1998), (Kidd 2018).

#### 4.1 Nothingness is unimaginable (therefore impossible)

First, according to the *Tractatus* every fact is accidental. But the existence of the world is not accidental. This point is argued explicitly in Weismann's notes.

What we mean by saying of something that it is empirical is this: that we can imagine it to be different. (In this sense every proposition with sense is accidental.)  
The existence of the world is not empirical in this sense, for it is something that we cannot imagine to be otherwise. We cannot imagine a world that exists at one time and does not exist at another. (McGuinness 1979, eng. tr.: 77)

There are two important points to note for our purposes.

First, here Wittgenstein is making an *epistemic* claim concerning our ability to *imagine* the nonexistence of the world. However, since Wittgenstein's thesis is that we cannot speak about what could not have been otherwise, then we must think that here Wittgenstein is considering unimaginability as an indication of impossibility.

Second, Wittgenstein is not saying that it is impossible for us to imagine the nonexistence of the world *tout court* - which would be tantamount to asserting the impossibility of imagining non-being or nothingness. Instead, he is saying that we cannot imagine «a world that exists at one time and does not exist at another». There is thus a reference to the impossibility of imagining non-being, although this is a non-being that follows or alternates with the existence of the world.

What is missing from Wittgenstein's discussion of this point is a *justification* of the thesis that it is not possible for us to imagine a world that exists at one time and does not exist at another. In other words, he does not tell us why nothingness is not imaginable. And if Wittgenstein talks about the impossibility of imagining nothingness in order to determine that it is impossible for nothingness to be, then Wittgenstein does not tell us why it is impossible for nothingness to be. We will have to return to this point, since in many accounts of the experience of existence the existence of the world is grasped when we grasp that nothingness is not (and cannot be).

In the *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein explains why the expression "I wonder at the existence of the world" is nonsense by dwelling on the misuse of the word "wonder". To clarify why there is a misuse of language here, he tells us under what conditions it makes sense to speak of wonder: it only makes sense to wonder that things are a certain way if I can imagine that things are not the way they are. So, just as it makes sense to speak of a fact only if that fact might not have been, so it makes sense to wonder at a fact only if that fact might not have been. He then adds:

But it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing. I could of course wonder at the world round me being as it is. If for instance I had this experience while looking into the blue sky, I could wonder at the sky being blue as opposed to the case when it's clouded. But that's not what I mean. I am wondering at the sky being *whatever it is*. (Wittgenstein 1965: 9).

Here Wittgenstein does not say, as in the conversations recorded by Weismann, that he cannot imagine «a world that exists at one time and does not exist at another». He says, instead, that he cannot imagine a world that is not. The reference to non-being or nothingness is more explicit here.

Again, note how Wittgenstein places the emphasis not so much on the impossibility of nothingness but rather on the impossibility of imagining nothingness. However, here again it seems safe to assume that Wittgenstein regards the impossibility of imagining

nothingness as an indication that nothingness is impossible. In any case, Wittgenstein does not explain why nothingness is unimaginable (nor why is it impossible).

In the *Lecture on Ethics*, Wittgenstein explains why it is foolish to say “I marvel at the existence of the world” by dwelling on the misuse of the word “wonder”. A little later he says, in passing, that in the case of the utterance “I marvel at the existence of the world”, the words used incorrectly are “wonder” but also “existence” (*ibidem*). However, he does not explain how the word “existence” is misused here. Probably, the diagnosis is exactly what he proposes in the above passage from Waismann’s notes<sup>10</sup>.

#### 4.2 The Ontological Fallacy

Staying within the theoretical framework of the *Tractatus*, I think there is also another way to explain why it is not possible to speak meaningfully about the fact that the world exists. When we use “fact” to refer to the fact that the world exists, we must keep in mind that we are not using “fact” in the same way that we use it when we talk about the facts that constitute *how* the world is. The “fact” that the world exists is not a fact that is given on the same level, as it were, as the facts that constitute how the world is. The “fact” that the world exists is the “fact” that the totality of facts exists. If it is permissible to speak of facts only relative to how the world is (and relative to what is accidental), then, properly speaking, there is no *fact* that the world exists. And therefore we cannot speak meaningfully about this “fact”.

Here, in my view, there is a place where a parallel can be drawn between the difference between the “how” of the world and the “that” of the world in Wittgenstein, and Heidegger’s *ontological difference*. The fact that some particular thing is is not, in turn, a particular thing. Likewise, the “fact” that the world is is not a particular way (the “how”) in which the world is - it is not something, it is not a particular being.

To consider the *existence* or *being* (where “being” here, of course, does not refer to *essence*) of something as a particular being is to commit what we might describe as the *ontological fallacy*. The fallacy consists in confusing *how* something *is*, with the fact *that* that something *is*.

We can get an illustration of the ontological fallacy in the contemporary debate - and a way of exposing it - if we look at Quine’s famous reaction in *On what there is* (1948) to the position defended by Meinong in his work *Über Gegenstandstheorie* (1904). In order to account for the possibility of thinking about non-concrete objects (numbers, fictitious objects, etc.) Meinong argues that one must distinguish different ways in which a thing can exist (or different levels of being). Quine objects:

We have all been prone to say, in our common-sense usage of “exist” that Pegasus does not exist, meaning simply that there is no such entity at all. If Pegasus existed he would indeed be in space and time, but only because the word “Pegasus” has spatio-temporal connotations, and not because “exists” has spatio-temporal connotations. If spatio-temporal reference is lacking when we affirm the existence of the cube root of 27, this is simply because a cube root is not a spatio-temporal

---

<sup>10</sup> Wittgenstein also sketches another diagnosis, which, in my opinion, is less incisive. «One might be tempted to say that what I am wondering at is a tautology, namely at the sky being blue or not blue. But then it’s just nonsense to say that one is wondering at a tautology» (*Ibidem*). To speak of a tautology is a way of highlighting the fact that when we wonder at existence we are wondering at something *regardless of how it is*. But it is clear that the aspect that is capable of arousing wonder and astonishment is the *existence* of what exists; and that this is so is harder to grasp if we say that what arouses wonder is a tautology (or that something is a tautology?).

kind of thing, and not because we are being ambiguous in our use of “exist”.  
(Quine 1948: 23)

Here Quine is denouncing, in the terms we are taking from Wittgenstein, the fallacy that consists in confusing an essential aspect of the how of something - the fact that something like Pegasus is spatio-temporal, while something like a number is not - with the mode of existence of that something. The confusion consists in regarding the fact that something is with the way in which that something is<sup>11</sup>. And this is a confusion the exposition of which is also central to Heidegger’s thought.

## 5. Coleridge and Wittgenstein on the Mystery of Existence

We now have enough evidence to show some structural similarities between Wittgenstein’s description and philosophical interpretation of his experience, on the one hand, and the descriptions and interpretations provided by other authors. Since a comparison with the experiences of Heidegger and Sartre would require other spaces, in this article I would like to focus on a comparison between Coleridge and Wittgenstein on the experience of existence. Wittgenstein’s remarks give us the key to interpret some crucial aspects of the passage. This, in turn, suggests that we are facing the *same* experience, or at least experiences belonging to the *same family*.

Coleridge clearly distinguishes the *how* of the world from the fact *that* the world *exists*.

Hast thou ever said to thyself thoughtfully, It is! Heedless in that moment, whether it were a man before thee, or a flower, or a grain of sand,—without reference, in short, to this or that particular mode or form of existence? (Quoted in Arendt 1978: 234)

What is astonishing is not the *how* of the world - that there is a flower or a grain of sand. What is astonishing is *that something, no matter what it is, exists*. Here the emphasis is on the miracle of existence manifested *through a particular being*: a flower or a grain of sand. But then Coleridge’s passage continues, and the emphasis shifts from the miracle of the existence of some *particular* being, to the miracle of the existence of the *whole* (that this shift occurs is clear as the notion of nothingness or non-being makes its appearance).

The very words,—‘There is nothing!’ or,—‘There was a time, when there was nothing!’ are self-contradictory. There is that within us which repels the proposition with as full and instantaneous a light, as if it bore evidence against the fact in the right of its own eternity.

Not to be, then, is impossible: to be, incomprehensible. (*Ivi*: 235)

This passage gives us many indications for a phenomenological investigation of the experience of existence.

---

<sup>11</sup> For a recent, explicit exposition of this fallacy, see (van Inwagen 1998). This fallacy might then lead one to regard as natural the idea that there can be different *modes* or *ways of being*, whereas in fact these so-called ways of being only belong to *how* things are. This is the view defended by ontological pluralists: see (McDaniel 2009), (Turner 2010). An ontological pluralist can hold that there is a plurality of ways of being *and* also that there is a general property of existence (Simmons 2022), and perhaps this is another particular way of committing the ontological fallacy, for that something is is not itself something, not even a property. I do not intend to delve into the debate between ontological monists and pluralists here, nor do I wish to settle with these few remarks the debate between Meinongians and Quineans (see Berto 2012 for an introduction to the topic). My sole aim is to clarify my exegetical point of view by utilizing distinctions drawn from these contexts.

First, Coleridge says that «There is nothing» is a contradiction in terms. This might lead the reader to think that what shows that something exists is the observation that to think otherwise - namely, that there is nothing - would be to think a contradictory proposition. But although the proposition is indeed contradictory, it is not a mere *intellectual observation* that reveals the existence of the world. Coleridge says that «There is that within us which repels the proposition with as full and instantaneous a light». This is a description of an intuition, not of a mere intellectual observation.

If it is through an intuition that the existence of the world is revealed, we might ask *under what conditions can such an intuition arise*. Looking at Coleridge's passage, we can extrapolate a *practical indication* for fostering the intuition that the world exists: one must *doubt* that anything at all exists, considering the possibility that, instead of something, there is nothing. What is rejected with the intensity and instantaneity of a light is the possibility that there is nothing. Doubting in this way, the mind considers the possibility of nothingness and, in considering it, *it is highlighted, by contrast*, that which denies nothingness, namely, the *existence* of what exists. The world is experienced in a particular light, namely, in that light that indicates that *instead of nothing, there is something*. In this moment we *feel* (wonder, sacred horror) and understands («It is!») that instead of nothing, there is something. In such understanding, it is not important *what there is* (the *how*, the *particular entity* through which the miracle is revealed); it is important *that it is*<sup>12</sup>.

Coleridge concludes that nothingness is *impossible*. Why is it impossible? This is the same question we encountered just above in analyzing Wittgenstein's passages on the ineffable character of the existence of the world. Here Coleridge says something more than Wittgenstein: he says that to claim that there is nothing is a contradiction and he suggests that the impossibility of nothingness is something that is grasped through intuition that arises when one doubts whether there is (or there could be) nothing.

After saying that nothingness is impossible, Coleridge adds: «to be, incomprehensible». However, Coleridge does not explicitly justify this conclusion. Wittgenstein argues for a claim that is at least in the *vicinity* of Coleridge's remark: the existence of the world, for Wittgenstein, is without explanation, and insofar as one understands an event by explaining it, *in this sense*, the existence of the world is also incomprehensible.

## 6. The Experience of Existence of Particular Beings

I wish now to highlight two more aspects of Wittgenstein's account of existence that would be pivotal in a comparison between Wittgenstein and other authors on the phenomenology of the experience of existence.

The first aspect concerns the *object* of the experience of existence. We saw that for Wittgenstein this experience has the *world* or the *whole* as its object. But in the experience described by Coleridge, existence seems to be revealed *through* the experience of *particular beings*. Can we find in Wittgenstein's texts an indication that he regarded this experience as possible? I think that there are many indications that the answer is positive.

First, in the *Lecture on Ethics* Wittgenstein makes an example of an experience of wonder at the existence of the world through the experience of a particular being, the sky.

---

<sup>12</sup> In my opinion, this is the correct interpretation of what can happen when one follows Descartes in hyperbolic doubt: by *doubting* everything, including one's own existence, one may experience the absolute certainty that, *instead of nothing, I am*. Here, the emphasis is not only on the meaning of *being* or *existence* - regardless of *how* things are - but also on the *particular being* whose existence is ascertained - *I!* Just as in the case of the intuition of absolute existence, the being of a particular entity - *I* - is highlighted by contrast, by evoking the meaning of nothing.

I could of course wonder at the world around me being as it is. If for instance I had this experience while looking into the blue sky, I could wonder at the sky being blue as opposed to the case when it's clouded. But that's not what I mean. I am wondering at the sky being whatever it is. (Wittgenstein 1965: 9).

Here the wonder is felt by the appreciation of the sheer existence of the sky, regardless of the way it is.

Moreover, we know that for Wittgenstein one fundamental source of aesthetic experience is the appreciation of the miraculous existence of the world: «Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That what exists does exist». (Wittgenstein 1961, eng. tr.: 86)<sup>13</sup>. This miracle can be experienced when particular things are viewed *sub specie aeternitatis* - «The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*» (*Ivi*: 83e) - and as examples he mentions the experience of a *stove* (*Ibidem*) and the experience of «seeing a man who thinks he is unobserved performing some quite simple everyday activity» (Wittgenstein 1977, eng. tr.: 6).

Finally, in a long passage in which Wittgenstein's comments on Renan's "Peuple d'Israël" (*Ivi*: 7-8), he suggests that particular events - such as lightning - can elicit wonder or fear (and thus being seen as absolutely miraculous) even if we think we know everything about them. In this passage he implicitly draws the distinction between two kinds of wonder and fear: one which is *relative* to what we know (and in this sense, primitives are more likely than we are to experience *that* kind of wonder or fear); and another which is *absolute* because it might survive even if we think that we know everything about them.

## 7. Instructions for Awakening

The second aspect which I wish to highlight concerns the *conditions* that might favor or hinder the experience of existence. Although we do not find anything as precise and detailed as the indications we can infer from other authors, such as Heidegger<sup>14</sup> and Sartre<sup>15</sup>, Wittgenstein's work offers at least two important indications in this respect<sup>16</sup>.

First, Wittgenstein provides some useful observations on the phenomenology of seeing objects *sub specie aeternitatis*. In this experience, the object is seen from outside, with the whole as background (Wittgenstein 1961, eng. tr.: 83e). So, one practical indication is to shift one's focus from the object to the object *in the world*, where the world is apprehended as a *limited whole*, for in this way, when the mind focuses on the whole, the fact that the whole exists might be intuited. As he notes in the so-called Engelmann's remark (Wittgenstein 1977, 5-6)<sup>17</sup>, we rarely experience things from «*that point of view*» (*Ivi*), and yet good art can help us to experience things *sub specie aeternitatis*: «A work of art forces us - as one might say - to see it in the right perspective but, in the absence of art, the object is just a fragment of nature like any other» (*Ivi*).

---

<sup>13</sup> Another translation, the one proposed by (Churchill 1994), 397, could be: «The artistic wonder (*das künstlerische Wunder*) is that the world exists». See (Barrett 1990) 71-2 for discussion on the translation of this passage.

<sup>14</sup> In various places, Heidegger describes the conditions that favor the emergence of the awareness of the existence of beings. In addition to *What Is Metaphysics?* (1929), one can read, for example, the *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935) or the considerations on boredom in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (1983).

<sup>15</sup> The novel *Nausea*, by recounting the ways in which Roquentin comes to discover existence, provides valuable insights about ways to evoke and awaken awe for existence.

<sup>16</sup> For more on this topic, see (Pareyson 1979), (Pareyson 1992); see (Zanetti 2023) in which I present John Cage's insights on the obstacles to the experience of the existence of sounds.

<sup>17</sup> For an interpretation of this passage, see (Schulte 2020).

The second instruction can be extrapolated both from the *Lecture on Ethics* and from his comments on Renan's "Peuple d'Israël". Wittgenstein says that Renan is mistaken when he «supposes that scientific explanation could remove [heben] wonderment»<sup>18</sup> (*Ivi*: 8).

As though today lightning were more commonplace or less astounding than 2000 years ago» «In order to marvel human beings - and perhaps peoples - have to wake up. Science is a way of sending them off to sleep again. (*Ivi*)

The obstacle to the experience of wonder is what in the *Lecture on Ethics* he describes as the «scientific way of looking at a fact» (Wittgenstein 1965: 11). This diagnosis also applies to the sort of fear (perhaps the equivalent of what Coleridge describes as a sacred horror) that we can experience when we appreciate the miraculous existence of something. In a sense, primitive people have more *relative* fear and wonder, that is, the sort of fear and wonder that depend on ignorance of explanations of natural events. We, knowing more, have less fear and wonder of *this* kind. But neither our civilization nor our scientific knowledge can protect us from the sort of fear that is experienced when the whole - and everything in it - is seen as absolute mystery. «All the same it's true enough that the *spirit* in which science is carried on nowadays is not compatible with fear of this kind» (Wittgenstein 1977, eng. tr.: 5e).

## 8. Conclusions

In a famous conversation annotated by Waismann, Wittgenstein says:

To be sure, I can imagine what Heidegger means by being and anxiety.”<sup>o</sup> Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists. (McGuinness 1979, eng. tr.: 68)

If the present work has achieved its purpose, it should be clearer now in what sense Wittgenstein can say that he can imagine what Heidegger means by “being” and “anxiety”<sup>19</sup>.

I have not sought here to *directly* compare the philosophies of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, since, in my view, such a comparison requires, as a preliminary step, to have clarified what Wittgenstein himself means by “being” and “existence”, and in particular to have done so by searching his writings for traces of an *experiential* sensibility relating to the mystery of existence. If it is true that the experience of existence is, as both claim in different words, what is most sacred in us, then we must start from there.

## Acknowledgements

An earlier draft of this paper has been presented at XXVIII SILF Conference, in 2023, at the University of Calabria. I am grateful to all people in attendance for helpful

---

<sup>18</sup> This is also the translation suggested by (Cahill 1996: fn. 34).

<sup>19</sup> The interpretation provided here differs from other interpretations which, on my reading, commit what I have described as the ontological fallacy. I think that this is the case, for example, with the positions defended by McGuinness 1966, Cooper 1997, Pears 1987, Rump 2019, Oliva 2021, Borutti 2023, for whom what is marvelous is the encounter between language and the world. For instance, according to Borutti, what one marvels at is «the world's unsayable giving of itself in language» (Borutti, 2023: 38). But in my view even the world's unsayable giving of itself in language is an aspect of the *how* of the world. For a view broadly consonant with the one defended in this paper, see Churchill 1994.

comments and suggestions, in particular to Felice Cimatti, Stefano Oliva and Andrea Velardi for conversations on the topics discussed in this paper. Special thanks are due to Silvana Borutti and Luigi Perissinotto for their generous and insightful feedback on a previous version of this paper. The interpretation defended here takes inspiration from the work of Franco Bertossa and the research team of the ASIA Research Center, Bologna, to whom I am deeply grateful.

## References

- Barrett, Caryl (1991), *Wittgenstein on ethics and religious belief*, Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Berto, Francesco (2012), *Existence as a Real Property: The Ontology of Meinongianism*, Synthèse Library, Springer, Dordrecht.
- Borutti, Silvana (2023), «World and Form. Hermeneutic Notes on Wittgenstein's So-Called Realism», in *Paradigmi, Rivista di critica filosofica*, 1/2023, pp. 29-40.
- Camerlingo, Francesco (2011), *La questione del senso. Con Heidegger e Wittgenstein sull'enigma dell'esistenza*, Il Nuovo Melangolo, Genova.
- Churchill, John (1994), «Wonder and the End of Explanation: Wittgenstein and Religious Sensibility», *Philosophical Investigations* 17 (2):388-416.
- Cooper, David (1997), «Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Humility», *Philosophy*, 72, 279, pp. 105-23.
- Egan, David., Reynolds, Stephan., Wendland, Aaron (2013), eds., *Wittgenstein and Heidegger*, Routledge, New York.
- Fay, Thomas (1989), «Early Heidegger and Wittgenstein: The Necessity of a Comprehension of Being», *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 20:3, pp. 248-256.
- Fay, Thomas (1991), «The Ontological Difference in Early Heidegger and Wittgenstein», *Kant Studien*, 82 (3), pp. 319-328.
- Hadot, Pierre (2008), *The Present Alone is Our Happiness: Conversations With Jeannie Carlier and Arnold I. Davidson*, Stanford University Press.
- Heidegger, Martin (1929). *Was Ist Metaphysik*, Frederick Cohen, Bonn (*What is Metaphysics?*, tr. by D. F. Krell, in D. F. Krell (ed.) *Martin Heidegger: Basic Writings*, revised and expanded edition, London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 93–110).
- Heidegger, Martin (1935). *Einführung in die Metaphysik (An Introduction to Metaphysics)*, tr. by R. Manheim, New York: Doubleday, 1961).
- Heidegger, Martin, (1983). *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt, Endlichkeit, Einsamkeit*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt am Main. (*The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, transl. by W. McNeill, N. Walker, Indiana University Press, 1995).

Philipse, Herman (1992), «Heidegger's Question of Being and the Augustinian Picture of Language», in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 52 (2), pp. 251-287.

Horgby, Ingvar (1959), «The double awareness in Heidegger and Wittgenstein», in *Inquiry*, 2:1-4, pp. 235-264.

Kidd, Ian James (2018), *Reawakening to Wonder: Wittgenstein, Feyerabend, and Scientism*, in Jonathan Beale, Ian James Kidd (eds.), *Wittgenstein and Scientism*, Routledge, London, pp. 101-115.

Kevin, Cahill (1996), *Tractarian Ethics*, in Hans Sluga, David Stern (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Wittgenstein*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, pp. 96-125.

McDaniel, Kris (2009), *Ways of being*, in David Chalmers, David Manley, Ryan Wasserman (eds.), *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp. 290-319.

McGuinness, Brian (1966), «The Mysticism of the Tractatus», in *The Philosophical Review*, 75(3), pp. 305-328.

McGuinness, Brian (1979), ed., *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle: Conversations Recorded by Friedrich Waismann*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Meinong, Alexius (1904), *Über Gegenstandstheorie*, in A. Meinong, (1904), ed., *Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandstheorie und Psychologie*. Leipzig: J. A. Barth, pp. 1–51.

Mulhall, Stephen (2016), *Wittgenstein and Continental Philosophy*, in Hans-Johann Glock, John Hyman (eds.), *A Companion to Wittgenstein*, Wiley, Chichester, pp. 757–770.

Murray, Michael (1974), «A note on Wittgenstein and Heidegger», in *Philosophical Review* 83 (4), pp. 501-503.

Oliva, Stefano (2021), *Il mistico*, Mimesis, Milano.

Perissinotto, Luigi (1994), «Heidegger e Wittgenstein. Quarant'anni di studi», in *Bollettino della Società Filosofica Italiana*, 151, pp. 3-20.

Perissinotto, Luigi (2009), «Sui miracoli e il miracoloso. Qualche considerazione tra Hobbes, Spinoza, Hume e Wittgenstein», in *Filosofia e Teologia*, vol. 3, pp. 589-605.

Pareyson, Luigi (1979), *Stupore della ragione e angoscia di fronte all'essere*, in Luigi Pareyson, *Ontologia della libertà*, Einaudi, Torino, 1995, pp. 385-437.

Pareyson, Luigi (1992), *La «domanda fondamentale»: «Perché l'essere piuttosto che il nulla?»*, in Luigi Pareyson, *Ontologia della libertà*, Einaudi, Torino, 1995, pp. 353-384.

Quine, Willard Van Orman (1948), «On What There Is», *Review of Metaphysics* 2 (5):21-38.

Rump, Jacob (2019), *Not How the World is, but That It Exists: Wittgenstein on the Mystical and the Meaningful*, in Alex Kohav (ed.), *Mysticism and Meaning: Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, Three Pines Press, pp. 177-198.

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1938), *La Nausée*, Gallimard, Paris.

Scheler, Max (1954), *Vom Ewigen im Menschen*, Fourth edition, vol. 5 of Collected Edition, A. Francke AG, Berne (*On the Eternal in Man*, ed. B. Noble, SCM Press LTD, London, 1960).

Schulte, J. 2020, «Engelmann told me . . . » On the Aesthetic Significance of a Certain Remark by Wittgenstein», *Estetika: The European Journal of Aesthetics* 57 (1), 15–27.

Simmons, Byron (2022), «Ontological Pluralism and the Generic Conception of Being», *Erkenntnis*, 87 (3):1275-1293.

Tilghman, Benjamin (1991), *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics: The View from Eternity*, London: MacMillan.

Turner, Jason (2010), «Ontological Pluralism», *Journal of Philosophy*, 107 (1):5-34.

Van Inwagen, Peter (1998), «Meta-ontology», *Erkenntnis* 48 (2-3): 233-50.

Volpi, Franco (2001), *Nota introduttiva*, in M. Heidegger, *Che cos'è metafisica?*, Adelphi, Milano, pp. 11-34.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1921). «Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung», *Annalen der Naturphilosophie (Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, transl. by D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness, London: Routledge, 1961).

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1961), *Notebooks 1914-1916*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1965), «A Lecture on Ethics», in *Philosophical Review*, 74, 3-26

Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1977), *Vermischte Bemerkungen*, Suhrkamp Verlag, Frankfurt am Main (*Culture and Value*, edited by G. H. von Wright, H. Nyman, and A. Pichler, translated by P. Winch, Blackwell, Oxford, 1998).

Zanetti, Luca (2023), «L'esperienza dell'esistenza in John Cage», in *L'inconscio. Rivista Italiana di Filosofia e Psicoanalisi*, N. 14, dicembre 2022, 157-188.