

Article

A Particular Kind of Love: On Faith and Understanding

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Abstract

The article aims to make the case for an essential entanglement between faith and understanding, and to show how Wittgenstein's philosophy, like that of Socrates', was informed and/or underpinned by such an entanglement. Centrally, the article argues that Wittgenstein's critique of metaphysical uses of words and the subsequent turn from explanation to description in his *Philosophical Investigations* have crucial affinities with Socrates' claim, in the *Apology*, to "human wisdom". The first part of the article comprises a somewhat novel reading of Plato's *Apology*, while the second part focuses on Wittgenstein and on capturing the entanglement between faith and understanding shared by the two.

Keywords: faith; understanding; Wittgenstein; Socrates

1. Introduction

There are many points of comparison, of tension and conflict, and of kinship between philosophy and religion—broadly construed and particularly in the 'Western tradition'. One of these is the relationship between faith and understanding. A crude example: to the extent that 'understanding' is taken in epistemic terms and as representative of what philosophy aspires for, namely 'justified true belief', then the picture easily emerges in which religion is, in turn, (epistemically) founded on (unjustified) belief in certain dogmas or something resembling folklore. Religion is fideistic and rationally unfounded, while philosophy is committed to *episteme* and rationally grounded. However, this very setup, while certainly harbouring important historical, social, political and conceptual insights, has simultaneously constituted a dilemma, or an enigma, for philosophy itself—at least since the era of 'modern philosophy'. To more or less the same extent to which the question of whether belief in the existence of gods/God can be justified by reason has been the object of dispute, so has the self-grounding or the universal legitimacy of reason itself been a cause of philosophical worry and dispute. As we might put it, with a salute to Hegel (1997), the sceptical-cum-philosophical turn that liberates thought from the immediacy of 'common opinion'—i.e., from the naïveté of inherited normative frameworks—inevitably turns on and reclaims philosophy, i.e., rational discourse, itself. Consequently, philosophy is fated, it seems, to ask whether we are justified in believing in, having faith in, or committing ourselves to rational discourse, i.e., to the (rational) sense of the world, if we cannot ground this sense in reason alone/itself. —Perhaps in the end, we must simply wonder at the existence of the world. As a consequence, we seem also to lose any rational self-grounding principle, or rationally constituted privileged vantage point, from which to judge what constitutes 'true' and 'justified' rational behaviour. That explanations or justifications fall short at some point of rational discourse, in relation to the requirement of ultimate reasons/explanations, is a universal feature of reason—as Wittgenstein (2009, §1, p. 6e) reminds us.



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It is important to bear in mind, however, that such deadlocks arise precisely due to the conceptual setup, i.e., to the extent that ‘understanding’ is pictured in crude epistemic terms. In contrast, there is a lineage in (at least ‘Western’) philosophy, stretching back to its founding acts, as one might put it, where the aim of philosophy has been essentially ethical rather than epistemic. Not a rejection of *episteme*, or of rational discourse. Instead, a configuration in which the very sense of what is rational and what is not is understood as itself an ethical issue. In this configuration, rather than constituting a contrast *par excellence* to religion, philosophy has shared a mutual discourse with religion—call it the discourse on the perfection of the soul—and has in its critical habitus even been in the service of religion.

In this article, I want to provide a reading of two of the champions, as we might call them, of this latter, ethical, understanding of philosophy—and of religion, one might add—namely Wittgenstein and Socrates (or rather Plato’s Socrates, and particularly as depicted in the *Apology*). Because the scope of this article must be limited, I will not be able to focus on all the details and pathways that surely invite themselves along the road. They must be left unexplored. The hope is that I will be able to provide some new resources—however minimal—for our understanding of the relationship between faith and understanding, and, perhaps, between religion and philosophy.

2. Socrates and the Ethical Core of “Human Wisdom”

2.1. Human Wisdom and/as Piety

If one was to name a candidate for the founding act of philosophy—particularly a philosophy configured around the ethical—then Socrates’ *Apology* as depicted by Plato would be an obvious choice—and for good reasons. This is not a historical suggestion but rather concerns a genealogy *internal* to the discourse of philosophy. Be that as it may, it might at least be said that one would be astonished if there was a philosopher, or even a philosophy student, who had never read the *Apology*. We all know it, in other words. Yet I think—against all odds—that I have something if not new or novel, then at least something quite out of the ordinary to say about it. So, bear with me.

Socrates was, as is well known, sentenced to death on charges of corrupting the youth and of impiety. However, the official indictment which brought him to trial was, according to Socrates, foreshadowed by widespread rumours and allegations, falsely claiming that he was a wise man who “is guilty of wrongdoing in that he busies himself studying things in the sky and below the earth; he makes the worse into the stronger argument, and teaches these same things to others” (Plato 1997a, 19b)¹. Such a person, the allegation holds (according to Socrates), does “not even believe in the gods” (Ibid., 18c & 23d). Let it immediately be noted that the standard translation of the last of these allegations, namely that of not “believing in the gods”, is potentially misleading. For Socrates is not accused here, nor in the official indictment (see below), of not believing in the *existence* of gods. Rather, the allegation is that he does not correctly, i.e., according to official state custom, “acknowledge” the gods (Miller and Platter 2010, p. 26), “honour” (Ibid., p. 73; Giordano-Zecharya 2005, p. 329), “worship” (Giordano-Zecharya 2005, p. 329), “cultivate” (Whitmarsh 2021, p. 92), or “hold the right opinion of” (Giordano-Zecharya 2005, p. 329) of them. The reason for pointing out this will become clearer below, as we discuss the official indictment and Socrates’ response to it.

Socrates begins his defence, then, by addressing these foreshadowing rumours and allegations. As he is quick to point out, anyone who knows him will clearly recognise that he has never made claims to any knowledge of either the skies or the underworld, nor has he ever instructed or taught anyone anything, let alone received any money for it (Plato 1997a, 19e–20c). All of these allegations, which are the kinds of things “commonly said against all philosophers” (Ibid., 23d), are, Socrates contends, spread around in order to

cover up or to deflect the exposure—brought about by Socrates’ famous “examinations”—of a form of ignorance prevailing amongst the people of Athens, particularly amongst those reputedly wise and held in high esteem (Ibid., 23a–e).

The story of why and how such a reputation came about is well known: Socrates receives, through his friend Chaerephon, the message from the oracle at Delphi that there is no one wiser than Socrates (Plato 1997a, 21a). Socrates does not question the truth of this message, in fact, he takes the word of the god seriously, “[f]or surely [the god] does not lie” (Ibid., 21b). Nonetheless, Socrates cannot understand what the god could have meant as he is convinced that he is “not wise at all” (Ibid.). In order to test the enigmatic message of the god, Socrates ventures on a journey to examine the reputedly wise, only to find that those with the “highest reputation were nearly the most deficient”, and while some people had some form of knowledge or could create marvellous things, they could not account for the meaning of their creations and/or thought themselves knowledgeable in matters they in fact were ignorant of, i.e., did not understand (Ibid., 21c–22e). And now, Socrates begins to understand what the god must have meant: whereas those reputed for wisdom thought themselves wise and in possession of great and higher knowledge when they in fact possessed none of this, Socrates did not think that he knew, i.e., he *understood* that he did not know, what he did not know (Ibid., 21d). As opposed to “a wisdom more than human” (Ibid., 20e), such is “human wisdom” (Ibid., 20d & 23b), Socrates announces; this is the only form of wisdom he makes claim to, and it is what seems to be lacking in others.

It is, of course, not all too surprising that such a venture produced resentment and was taken as offensive, degrading, even threatening, not only by those directly subjected to Socrates’ unflattering examinations, but by the public sphere more generally insofar as, or to the extent that, the reputedly wise precisely represent the pride and self-esteem of the (anonymous) public; this is why the rumours of Socrates’ impiety, as obviously false as they might have been, spread with such ease. As noted, Socrates contends that it was in order to cover up and deflect the shame and embarrassment felt by those exposed as ignorant, as unable to account for their supposed “more than human wisdom”, that the accusations against him were fabricated.² And it is from these “vehement slanders” that the official indictment stems, to which Socrates now turns (Plato 1997a, 23e).

The official indictment, as reported in Plato’s *Apology*, more or less restates the rumours about Socrates discussed just now. It runs as follows: “Socrates is a wrongdoer first because he corrupts the young and does not worship the gods the city worships, but other new deities”³. Now having the opportunity to face concrete individuals, i.e., his official accusers, instead of the shadowy figures behind the rumours, Socrates is able to exercise a form of examination of his interlocutors resembling the kind we find in the Socratic dialogues of Plato⁴. And so, he begins by questioning Meletus (his main accuser) about the charges of corrupting the young. Here, Socrates’ defence, i.e., his examination of Meletus, deploys, as is quite customary for Socrates, somewhat strange propositions, which nonetheless have a decisive effect. This decisive effect stems not from the ‘truth’ of these propositions so much as from the fact that Meletus agrees and affirms that these propositions—e.g., that Socrates alone is the one who corrupts the young, whereas everyone else in the city benefits them (Plato 1997a, 25b)—are the kinds of things that inform and motivate the accusations. In other words, the unreflective ease with which Meletus affirms the queer, even absurd, propositions and the inconsistencies shadowing them, strongly suggests, or indeed reveals, that he really has not thought through his accusations at all, that they are most likely insincere, and that, as Socrates suggests, Meletus seems not at all to have “been concerned with these matters” (Ibid., 26b). In other words, it is Meletus rather than Socrates who has no *real* concern for the good of the young; Meletus is simply out to punish Socrates for the shame he has brought on those in high esteem.

Next, Socrates asks Meletus to affirm whether it is, as the official indictment states, by not worshipping the gods the city worships but other new deities that he, Socrates, supposedly corrupts the young, and Meletus affirms this (Ibid., 26b). But now Socrates—or rather Plato—does something unexpected. For instead of aiming to refute the official accusation of not properly worshipping the gods of the city, Socrates reformulates the accusation and asks Meletus if he does not in fact mean that Socrates does not believe, i.e., does not (really) think, that the gods exist at all (Plato 1997a, 26c; cf. Giordano-Zecharya 2005, p. 339)⁵. To which Meletus twice answers in the affirmative (Plato 1997a, 26c & 26e). But why this reformulation, and how does it serve Socrates' defence? The obvious reason is that now that Meletus has affirmed the reformulation of the indictment, which by its very grammar is in contradiction with the official indictment which stated that Socrates worships/believes in *other* gods/spiritual things, Socrates can without difficulty show that Meletus is (now) contradicting himself; as if Meletus was claiming that "Socrates is guilty of not believing in the gods but believing in gods" (Ibid., 27a). Yet, there is an additional motivation underpinning the reformulation; through it, Socrates is able to critically challenge the *conception* of piety inscribed in the official indictment by laying down what it entails to *really think/believe that the gods exist*, drawing an essential link between human wisdom and piety⁶.

No "prolonged defense" is needed, Socrates announces, against the official indictment. He will not be undone by Meletus or by his other official accusers, but rather by the "slanders and envy of many people". (Plato 1997a, 28a). In fact, what Meletus' weak, unreflective, and contradictory stance seems to indicate is that his accusations are underpinned by the same kinds of motivations that inform the rumours spread around; they are deflections of the shame and humiliation caused by Socrates' examinations of the reputedly wise. But why these responses of shame and humiliation? Or rather, what is so threatening about the exposure as to motivate the desire to abolish, to annihilate, Socrates? An offended ego, for sure. But the question is what the ego of the reputedly wise and of the social sphere more widely oversees and protects here? Alternatively, we might ask: what is the (existential) function of the social status/recognition, which the Socratic examination threatens?

2.2. Human Wisdom, Fear of Death and the Discourse of Justice

In what is arguably an important move, after having refuted Meletus' official indictment, Socrates now turns to the jury and, as it were, echoes back the underlying rationale of the collective resentment against him in a fashion that challenges the existential investments/stance underpinning the accusations: "Some might say: 'Are you not ashamed, Socrates, to have followed the kind of occupation that has led to your being now in danger of death?'" (Plato 1997a, 28b). Such an accusation might perhaps never have been uttered by Socrates' accusers, but the rationale behind it is certainly inscribed in the logic of the official indictment. For what Socrates is echoing back to his accusers is simply the threat of death implicit in the indictment, moreover, that it is his "occupation" of examining others and the shame and humiliation caused by it which informs the existential investments underpinning the accusations, rather than any sincere concern for Socrates' impiety. And hereby Socrates is able to introduce—as if coming from the mouths of his accusers—the interlinkages between the shame and humiliation experienced by his accusers, fear of death, piety, justice, and human wisdom.

Socrates' newly stated formulation of the underpinning motivation for the accusations and the indictment echoed back to the jury allows Socrates to unveil that behind the threat of death directed at him there lies a plea that Socrates ought to fear death in the same way as those offended by him, those that experience his examinations as threatening, and who have raised charges against him. In fact, the logic here seems to be that Socrates' accusers

want him to fear death as they do, because the fact that he apparently does *not* fear death is threatening to them—as if invoking *their own* fear of death. Yet, to follow such fear would, Socrates begins by observing, mean that he would have to abandon the post ascribed to him by the god through the enigmatic message delivered to him (Plato 1997a, 29a). Indeed, *if* he would submit to fear of death, which his accusers seem to want to force him to do, *then* he might have “*justly* been brought to [court] for not believing that there are gods” (Ibid., emphasis added). Ergo, Socrates is unjustly indicted, and certainly not behaving impiously. The irony and tension of this observation is, of course, that *believing* in the message delivered to him from the god, and acting in accordance, is not at all as such in conflict with customary practices, nor with the laws of the city. On the contrary, the oracle at Delphi was honoured as one of the most authoritative of the oracles. Consequently, Socrates’ piety, and the gadfly-like character (Ibid., 30e) of his function ordered by the god, seems to indicate that in the god’s care of the people—as Socrates is god’s gift to the city (Ibid.)—the god also reveals his dislike of the insufficient, impious, nature of the city’s dominant practice of “worship/belief”. If anything, what Socrates could be accused of—and what he in a sense also in fact seems to be accused of—is *excessively believing* in the god(s); he believes too much, has too much faith, by uncompromisingly searching for the meaning of the word of the god. As Socrates himself notes a bit later in the text, “I believe in them [the gods] as none of my accusers do” (Ibid., 35d). It is this excessive belief, this unwavering faith in the god, that is threatening to the esteem of the Athenian *polis*, Socrates accusers seem to be saying.

Then follows another decisive move. Earlier, Socrates had depicted his “human wisdom” as simply the virtue of not claiming to know what one does not truly know (Plato 1997a, 20d & 23b). But now, in conjunction with the ongoing discussion on fear of death, he qualifies it further, announcing an essential tie between fear of death and human wisdom—in the negative: “It is perhaps on this point [the question of fear of death] and in this respect”, Socrates announces, “that I differ from the majority of men, and if I were to claim that I am wiser than anyone in anything, it would be in this, that, as I have no adequate knowledge of things in the underworld [i.e., death], so I do not think I have” (Ibid., 29b). This announcement must, of course, be read against the backdrop of the preceding one:

To fear death, gentlemen, is no other than to think oneself wise when one is not, to think one knows what one does not know. No one knows whether death may not be the greatest of all blessings for a man, yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils. (Ibid., 29a–b)

Is Socrates/Plato saying: *if* human wisdom dictates that there is no rationally justified reason for *fearing* death, to fear death, i.e., to act as if one knew that it constituted the greatest evil, is, then, the *original sin* of the kind of ignorance the reputedly wise seem to be smitten with; the original sin of the kind of ignorance overshadowing or disavowing human wisdom? One thing seems at least to be clear so far: fear of death, if allowed to dominate one’s actions, easily works against, or makes one ignore, what is just. Socrates’ accusers do not only seem to indicate that it is a good thing to avoid death, even though this would mean abandoning the post ordered by the god. As noted, Socrates is continuously attempting to show that he is being indicted on charges that are unjust and fabricated. Ironically and paradoxically, if he was to be *justly* indicted, i.e., indicted on sincere grounds, it should be on charges of uncompromisingly following the command of the god and of uncompromisingly caring for his and his friends’ souls. Instead, he is being asked to avoid (the risk of) death by avoiding becoming (unjustly) convicted on unjust charges, which again would mean abandoning his post as philosopher and subjugating himself to unjust demands. As Socrates notes, such an abandonment of what is just, subjugating

oneself to injustice, is itself to act, not only in a cowardly way but unjustly, i.e., participating in injustice. Ergo, to fear death, i.e., to allow one's fear of death to rule one's choices and actions, is not only unjust and impious, but also contrary to human wisdom, which simultaneously implies that human wisdom is essentially concerned with the just, the good, with how one ought to live. That is, precisely because fear of death places safety (and the striving for social esteem-cum-recognition) before justice, it is contrary to human wisdom.

While all of this can more or less be directly derived from the explicit contents of the text, there seems, however, to be an even deeper link embedded in the logic of Socrates' apology between fear of death and injustice. Note that, in the explicit reasoning developed by Socrates, the rationale of the fear of death itself remains opaque, i.e., simply as a *cause* of injustice. Nonetheless, there are warranted reasons to think that Socrates/Plato is proposing that the *fear* in the fear of death is itself already a (displaced) acknowledgement of (one's) injustice, i.e., a (displaced) acknowledgement of a crime, a harm, towards the soul of both oneself and others.

As can be noted, there is a kind of double—one might say ironic—character to Socrates' critique of the fear of death. On the one hand, he is claiming that we lack any valid knowledge of whether death is a good or a bad thing—a claim that is undergirded by his examination of the reputedly wise, who in fact seem to lack any substantial understanding of how things really stand/what they really mean in speaking of life and death. In this sense, fear of death is unjustified, i.e., there is no real/actual *object of knowledge* informing the *fear* of death. One might obviously protest here and say, for instance, that what we fear in relation to death is being deprived of our intimate bonds to others. Or, alternatively, we might claim that what we fear about death is the great unknown. Yet, Socrates' radical point, or existential challenge, is that any such explanation or account always functions *as if* it was grounded on a 'knowledge' of the, as it were, object of death *as evil*, when—as far as Socrates has been able to discern—no one seems in fact to be in possession of such knowledge. And what is even more decisive in relation to Socrates' lamenting the *fear* in the fear of death, the supposed knowledge of the evil of death contains the supposed knowledge that suffering death is *worse* than committing or participating in injustice, as this is precisely what Socrates is being asked to do.⁷

On the other hand, however, while Socrates' accusers lack any real object of *knowledge* concerning death, they do in some real sense mean that one ought to fear death, i.e., that if they were in Socrates' shoes, they would fear death. So given that Socrates' accusers really do fear death there must be some, let us call it a 'picture' that organises the structure or logic of what is feared about death. In other words, something that *existentially* qualifies death as the "greatest evil". The crucial point here is, of course, that whatever this picture is it is not purely epistemic—as there is no object of knowledge to be found here. Rather, it has the form of what we might call a moral-existential conviction or belief. My proposal, for which I will provide some reasons below, is that Socrates—or perhaps rather Plato—is (ironically) implying that the fear of death exhibited by Socrates' accusers is informed and underpinned by a (secret, repressed) conviction or belief that they—those who fear death—*deserve* to be punished, and that death constitutes an eschatological event where this punishment will be realised. Put otherwise, the fear of death is a mark of a dissonance in the soul caused by a sense of one's own participation in injustice and evil, to which an eschatological event puts a limit. One of the telling signs that it is something like this Socrates—or Plato—has in mind is the famous remark towards the end of the *Apology* in which Socrates suggests that death "is one of two things: either the dead are nothing and have no perception of anything, or it is, as we are told, a change and a relocating for the soul from here to another place" (Plato 1997a, 40c). In the first case, death cannot constitute an evil, Socrates contends, since there is no evil to be perceived or experienced. If anything,

it would be a kind of eternal rest, that is, like a “dreamless sleep”; a true blessing (Ibid.). The second alternative, which is what they “are told” about death, i.e., what informs part of the collective imagination (and its conception of the realm of the gods), sets death precisely in relation to an eschatological event. Socrates recalls the saying that, arriving in Hades, the individual will find the “true jurymen” who, in contrast to those jurymen that Socrates is now facing, will judge only with regards to what is just, as they are just themselves (Ibid., 41a)⁸. Such a fate would not amount to any great evil—for the just. On the contrary, Socrates adds, what could be a greater blessing than to be surrounded by all the noble characters of the past and ruled by true justice (Ibid., 41a–b). For the unjust, however, the prospect of an eschatological event seems less inviting—as made explicitly clear in *Gorgias* (Plato 1997b)⁹.

2.3. The Cause of Injustice Is Simultaneously Its Effect

Fear of death—in the particular way in which Socrates’ accusers fear it and want Socrates to similarly do—contains at its very heart a picture of eschatology. That is, the fear of death is a kind of internal self-accusation by a superego which, ironically enough, fits the profile of the superego of the Athenian polis, i.e., the eschatological myth “they are told”. In Kafkaesque style (Kafka 1955; see also Toivakainen 2025a), it is the guilt of the unjust, of the wrongdoers, which unsuspectedly, unconsciously, calls upon the Law and its judgement.

But now, we need to come back to our question of how the event of philosophy, as portrayed in the *Apology*, is put in motion because of a critical challenge to the structures of social recognition and the resentment this critique generated. Wisdom, i.e., supposedly “more than human wisdom”, i.e., that which Socrates challenges as a result of the enigmatic message delivered to him from the god, equals reputation, esteem, honour, among the free men of the Athenian polis. Consequently, the exposure of a lack of more than human wisdom exposes the emptiness beneath the surface of reputed wisdom, i.e., the emptiness of that (or at least a crucial element of that) which organises the economy of social recognition. What Socrates exposes is that the supposed object of the other’s (i.e., the social gaze’s) desire is empty, an illusion. Indeed, it is as if the god sought precisely this exposure with the aid of Socrates’ labour. Moreover, what is clear is that the economy of social recognition, as it stands for Socrates’ peers, is in both potential and actual tension with justice. But what is the link here between the question of justice/injustice and the struggle for social recognition? The question invites, I would claim, two somewhat different possible readings.

Following what might be considered a somewhat standard understanding of Plato’s conception of the psychology of the human soul (e.g., Cooper 1999; Kamtekar 2017), at the base of the dissonance of the soul, at the base of all wrongdoing, is a yielding to the appetites, which are irrational, lack purpose or aim, and in and by themselves have no concern for what is just. Instead, what the appetites result in, if unchecked, is simply excess (cf. Plato 1997b). Let us now take this base picture and see how it would fit the logic, the matrix, that has been proposed so far. We begin, then, by positing the idea that an unjust person is one who is, at base, allowing the appetites to rule. Despite the appetites having no regard for what is just but only driven by a blind pursuit of, say, pleasure or the satisfaction of a need/drive—which, more often than not, means not only that one has no regard for justice but that one also is led to act unjustly—the human (rational) soul is nonetheless in some way and for some reason inescapably characterised by a sense of justice (cf. Plato 1997c). But guided by the appetites as such a soul is, it actively seeks to displace, to cover up, or to postpone this tension or dissonance. And voilà, through a collective endeavour, the structures of social recognition are construed in the service of precisely such an aim. Therefore, in the economy of social recognition such high-value signifiers as “wise” (i.e., the reputedly wise examined by Socrates) fulfil the function of covering up the disregard for justice, i.e., displacing or disavowing the tension in the soul. In short, the

economy of social recognition justifies the pursuit of the appetites rather than the dictates of the rational soul *qua* justice. And so, when a Socrates comes along exposing the lack of the object of knowledge supposedly possessed by the reputedly wise, this threatens to disrupt the organising principles of the economy of recognition and, consequently, to expose the displaced dissonance of the soul, i.e., the guilt arising through the disavowal of the sense of justice inherent to the rational soul. With the eschatological event at its very heart marking the inescapable limit to this postponement, to this displacement of the tension, death is the object of fear *par excellence* of the unjust—and thus the contrast *par excellence* to human wisdom. It is only logical that, refusing to respect the structure and economy of social recognition, Socrates is threatened with death; the guardians of social recognition are obliged to send him to this limit of displacement and postponement; they send him to where he—and the word of the god—belong in the structure of social recognition.

Such would be the psycho-logic of Socrates' accusers, i.e., of the enemies of human wisdom, following a somewhat standard conception of Plato's philosophy. But as said, I want to propose an alteration to this picture, modifying or qualifying the explanatory, or rather the descriptive chain, by proposing that the base appetite (the cause of sin, as it were) is itself internal to the logic of the striving for social recognition. Recall, once again, that the initial thing Socrates discovers and exposes in his interlocutors is that the object of the other's desire (i.e., the object of desire centrally structuring the economy of social recognition) is empty, an illusion. There is only the *appearance* of, say, wisdom (more than human wisdom), without any, as it were, substance backing it up. Yet something supports it. And what else can it be other than a collective investment in a wish/phantasy that mere appearance would substitute for, or constitute, the thing itself? But what thing? For surely it is not a hope that the mere appearance of, say, wisdom, would really be something like wisdom. Rather, it seems that the mere appearance-as-the-thing-itself constitutes a phantasmatic attempt to distil precisely the substance of recognition from wisdom. There is a phantasmatic attempt, in other words, to simply attain the recognition one fancies is tied to "wisdom" without having *to be* wise, without having to carry, so to speak, the burden of wisdom. The formula *the recognition attached to wisdom minus wisdom* equals nothing but esteem, reputation, power, influence, etc. In short, the formula seems to be expressive of a collective endeavour to produce something like *pure* recognition, i.e., it is expressive of a wish for the enjoyment of recognition as such.

The key here is to note that such an urge for pure recognition, i.e., for recognition predicated on the separation of appearance from the (burden) of the thing itself, is an urge for recognition independent of who one truly is, independent of—in fact, strictly separated from—the truth of one's soul (which in the case of the *Apology* would mean a soul that does not possess the kind of wisdom it professes to). This, I propose, ought to be read as the phantasmatic attempt to produce, simply by means of a performative act, a chimera, a replica, of unconditional recognition—i.e., unconditioned by who one (truly) is. Paradoxically, and thus phantasmatically, it is precisely by making recognition fully conditional—i.e., fully conditioned by collectively determined signifiers—that the subtraction of *a* self is performed, thereby making the attainment of recognition unconditioned by, i.e., separated from, *this* self, i.e., the self (the part of the self, one might say) that is subtracted, hidden, and disavowed. And here we begin to see, arguably, the advantage my modified account has with respect to what might be considered a more standard reading of Plato, as presented above. In the standard version, the appetites and the rational soul-cum-justice are only accidentally in strife with each other, suggesting that any injustice that might occur as a consequence of the rule of the appetites is *not* itself a response/reaction to justice. And fair enough, why would the desire for food or drink be unjust as such? But in my modified version, the base appetite of Socrates' accusers, i.e., the

desire for social recognition as presented above, is not a desire to satisfy any ‘natural’ need. Rather, the appetite they are driven by is already itself unjust—injustice *par excellence*, in fact—and not only contingently in conflict with what is just. Consider the formula of the social recognition Socrates’ accusers strive for: in demanding unconditional recognition, or love, from their peers they subtract a truth about themselves from their relation to the other and thus cut off their own responsibility from the dynamics of recognition-cum-love. That is, they only demand (unconditional) recognition/love from others (or from the *appearance of the other*) without any care for or attention to the responsibility the soul, the subtracted truth of the self, has for its own recognition of, and its love for, the other. The other is simply reduced to a means for the egoistic end of the fantasy of unconditionality—which, in turn, means that one reduces oneself, the self of *appearance*, to this very same instrumental object in relation to the other’s desire. This is the crux of the injustice of the kind of desire for social recognition Socrates’ accusers allow their lives to be steered by.

One might, of course, point out—in bad faith, I would say—that the above is no reason for thinking that the game of social recognition is unjust as such, even if it includes the subtraction of a dimension of ‘authenticity’ and responsibility. Everyone (at least the free men of Athens) participates in the game if not fully on equal ground, then at least with equal investments. And so, those who succeed in the game of recognition do so on just grounds—according to the rules of the game, so to speak. This would, in a sense, be a warranted observation. Yet, the obvious question still stands: if the game itself is just and there is no problem with it, then why are the accusations and the indictment raised against Socrates insincere, hiding damaged self-esteem, and underpinned by the formula of subtraction (discussed above)? Left unchallenged in the *Apology*, in *Gorgias*, [Plato \(1997b\)](#) allows Socrates’ interlocutors to question the very ground of the discourse of justice. After the failure of his two predecessors, Gorgias and Polus, it is finally Callicles who has the needed audacity-cum-integrity to voice the (supposed) constitutive cause of the dissonance caused by Socrates’ discourse of justice: the discursive dissonance exposed by Socrates between the alleged sense of justice on the one hand and the drive for recognition-cum-power on the other is simply the result of a slave morality that has taken hold of the people. In truth, Callicles proclaims, it is exclusively the strong, i.e., those with the audacity and the potency to simply fulfil their every need, who are the just ones; what they do is “by nature just” ([Plato 1997b](#), 483a–e). All pressures within the soul to act in accordance with what is just by custom is, in turn, simply the result of *ressentiment*, rather than of any inherent truth of the soul. Indeed, Callicles, like Socrates’ accusers in the *Apology*, seem to be saying that the economy of social recognition is as such just because it secretly serves what is “by nature just”, namely the will of the (supposedly) strong.

While it is clear that a Meletus could not have voiced such an audacious opinion at a trial—which is supposed to guard the customs of the people and the discourse of justice—the point made by Callicles in *Gorgias* certainly speaks to the resentful attitude against Socrates’ discourse of justice in the *Apology*. Yet, Callicles’ attempt in *Gorgias* to deny the primacy of justice for/in the human soul, replacing it with social esteem, runs into problems that have their source in what Socrates is proclaiming in the *Apology*. For what Socrates/Plato is able to make evident by following Callicles’ own expression of his desire is that the very desire for social recognition, for social power, which in the final analysis equals a one-sided, egoistic, demand for unconditional love, is itself underpinned by Callicles’ own anxious fear of becoming the victim of injustice, i.e., of becoming victim to the (logic driving the) other’s one-sided demand for unconditional recognition ([Plato 1997b](#), 510a–e; [Toivakainen 2023](#), chp 4). Moreover, the implicit logic of Callicles’ (base) fear portrays or imagines the other as someone without any regard for the reality of Callicles’ own desire for the other’s desire, i.e., Callicles’ desire that the other acknowledge

Callicles' desire and take responsibility for it. In other words, for Callicles, the attempt to secure one-sided unconditional recognition is the defence against, the wish to overcome or to make oneself immune to, the other's attempt to do the same, i.e., the other's disregard for Callicles' desire and their responsibility for it. Consequently, in striving to secure his place in the economy of social recognition, Callicles participates in, reproduces, the very act that comprises the constitutive violence against the truth of his desire; participation in the game of social recognition as the one-side demand for unconditional recognition is simultaneously both the cause and the consequence of injustice.

We can now say, then, that participating in the economy of social recognition *as expressed by Socrates' accusers and the indictment* is to participate in the very (imaginary, yet founding) act that disavows, or does violence to, the soul's desire. The subtraction of the 'true self' in the economy of social recognition, as the flip side of the one-sided demand for unconditional recognition-cum-love, is, in other words, the disavowal not only of one's desire for the other's love, but a disavowal of one's responsibility as an other for the other, i.e., as an other for the other-in-the-place-of-the-true-self (as opposed to 'the other' in the economy of social recognition, whose being is reduced to the function of providing recognition-cum-status). It is this intricate nature of the soul's desire, distorted by the formula of subtraction and the economy of social recognition (of Socrates' accusers), which constitutes the logic of justice and which cannot be abolished as the distortion game of recognition is itself predicated on—and must sustain—what it seeks to subtract. And it is, moreover, this reality of the soul's desire that has (the picture of) *death*, with its eschatological event and the soul's guilt at its core, as its ultimate point of displacement/postponement.

Human wisdom is not only the disownment of "more than human wisdom", or a disownment of a *knowledge* of death. It is also a queer form of 'positive' knowledge, namely the knowledge that a *just* person should not, has no reason to, and in fact will not, fear death *more than injustice*. For, what Socrates does claim to know, what he claims that we all know, is "that it is wicked and shameful to do wrong" (Plato 1997a, 29b). All of this he has learned, all of this is revealed to him through his interlocutors' responses to the god's message delivered to them through Socrates' unwavering service to the god.

3. Wittgenstein and the Ethical Core of the Essence of Human Language

Not unsurprisingly, a substantial amount has been written about the similarities—and also the dissimilarities—between Socrates and Wittgenstein, more often than not with a specific focus on the question of philosophical method and its links to ethics (e.g., Hosseini 2023; Perissinotto 2013; Rowe 2007; Sunday Grève 2025; Wallgren 2006). Much could be said about the question of method in the reading of the *Apology* (and the *Gorgias*) I have proposed; one could say that it perhaps comes closest to what might be framed as a psychoanalytic reading. Yet, while it certainly would be worthwhile to discuss the idea of method that my reading of Plato implies, and how this reading then might or might not shed light on, or be compared with, Wittgenstein's method, we must refrain from such an endeavour. Instead, I should like to highlight and focus on a specific kinship between Socrates/Plato and Wittgenstein, namely, one centred on the issue of what is entailed in an exposure of the lack of an object of knowledge. In other words, I shall propose that the struggle for—and the structure of the economy of—social recognition of Socrates' accusers, as portrayed in the previous section, has a quintessential kinship with what Wittgenstein calls (and critiques as) metaphysical uses of words (Wittgenstein 2009, § 116, p. 53e). As in the case of the struggle for social recognition in the *Apology*, the urge for metaphysical knowledge or explanations delivered through metaphysical uses of words

signals a secret, hidden, defensive urge to disavow or to repress, an inescapable ethical reality that informs and underpins the subject's relation to the other.

3.1. From Explanation to Description

The character of Socrates is not an easy piece to swallow, at least as he is explicitly portrayed in the *Apology*. No (reported) signs of doubt or disbelief, no struggles with faith, nor any (reported) serious difficulties with conflicting desires, cravings, or passions. Only unwavering determination—and then full calmness before death (even Jesus suffered moments of anxiety and sorrow). Can this figure, or this image, of Socrates, without any apparent psychological complexity, be anything but the *ideal ego*—in the psychoanalytic sense (e.g., Fink 2016)—of Plato? Alternatively, Socrates seems to function as Plato's postulate of *the good person*; it is Socrates' (ideal) goodness that guarantees the soundness, the truth, of his rational discourse (cf. Toivakainen 2023, chp. 4).

While contemporary academic philosophy might be said to be committed to intellectual integrity and responsibility in its pursuits of conceptual clarification, it cannot, unfortunately, be said to have preserved, *as an essential part of its self-understanding*, the ethical call for the perfection of the soul so essential to Socratic philosophy. In academic philosophy we can, and for the most part do—do we not?—concern ourselves with metaphysics, philosophy of language, social philosophy, aesthetics, philosophy of religion, and even ethics, without caring much, *as integral to the very conceptual work itself*, about the states of our souls. This kind of abandonment of the care of the soul and the contentment with 'purely' intellectual integrity was, arguably, unacceptable for Wittgenstein and an essential part of his discontent with the academic milieu at Cambridge¹⁰. How can we think to gain any clarity if we do not see the working in philosophy as a "working on oneself"! (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 16e). Unlike (the ideal ego character of) Socrates, however, Wittgenstein was a tormented soul—a genius, perhaps, but far from an ideal ego. And because for Wittgenstein, as for Socrates, philosophy was essentially tied to the perfection and the salvation of the soul, because ethics and logic were one, the torments of Wittgenstein's soul were internal to his (practice of) philosophy as well. Whereas Socrates reportedly wanted nothing more than to continue philosophising indefinitely (Plato 1997a, 41 b), Wittgenstein was *tempted* to understand the aim of philosophy as somehow inherently negative, ultimately leading to a point where one could stop doing philosophy and finally find peace.¹¹ The salvation of the soul was to some extent—perhaps in his darkest moments—pictured by Wittgenstein as a salvation from thinking philosophically.

However, the *Philosophical Investigations* (henceforth *PI*) bears no witness to such a salvation. Quite unlike the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1961), *PI* does not provide us with an exit point from philosophy, from philosophical thought. Certainly, the therapeutic aspiration is there, together with great promises (e.g., Wittgenstein 2009, § 133, pp. 56e–57e). Yet, philosophical reflection seems not to be able to stop reiterating, rewriting, itself; can we even picture a final, dissolving, remark, comparable to the *Tractatus*, to end *PI*? (cf. Toivakainen 2023, chp. 5). Wittgenstein to Maurice Drury: "You know I said I can stop doing philosophy when I like. That is a lie! I *can't*." (Drury 2017, p. 145, fn. 7). Did this mean that Wittgenstein simply failed to show, in *PI*, how the repetition of philosophical questioning is brought to a halt, even to a definitive end? Alternatively, did Wittgenstein fail, existentially, to let go of the pull of philosophy? Or instead, does *PI* bear witness to a struggle with the *temptation* of getting rid of the practice of philosophy?

Without any substantial arguments backing it up here (cf. Toivakainen 2023, chp. 5), I shall simply claim that *PI* both struggles with and resists the temptation of overcoming philosophy or philosophical thinking. If philosophy indeed is a disease, then it is a disease coextensive with the human as such. Moreover, what I shall attempt to do is to draw

attention to the ethical significance of the resistance against any endpoint to philosophy. Certainly, one important aspect here is that the image of, the urge for, an endpoint to philosophical thought undermines the open-endedness of being, of life, of sense and meaning. There is, however, something else involved also in ‘the reality of’ sense and meaning that not only constitutes these as open-ended but also as grounded in an irreducible ethics lacking any solutions or exit points. It is precisely here that I want to identify a crucial affinity, or a kinship, with Socrates/Plato.

The key for me is, as noted, the event of an exposure of a lack of an object of knowledge pertaining to, in Socrates’ case, reputed wisdom and, in Wittgenstein’s case, the metaphysical uses of words. If for Socrates/Plato, the dissonance of the soul caused by the disavowal of the soul’s constitutive desire results in a failure to say, to do or to live as one really wants to—as expressed in *Gorgias* (Plato 1997b, 466e)—the urge for a “crystalline purity” (Wittgenstein 2009, §107 & §108, p. 51e) internal to the metaphysical fantasy/hubris of knowledge—i.e., metaphysical uses of words—is similarly diagnosed by Wittgenstein as derailing. What we are in need of, Wittgenstein suggests, is a complete reconfiguration of “our whole inquiry around [...] on the pivot of our real need” (Ibid., §108, p. 51e). Or; “The civic status of a contradiction, or its status in civic life—that is the philosophical problem.” (Ibid., §125, p. 55e).

So, what is metaphysical uses of words, what is “crystalline purity” referring to? Well, it is—apropos of, Wittgenstein’s own earlier work *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1961)—the ideal of “a final analysis of our linguistic expressions” (Wittgenstein 2009, §91, pp. 47e–48e), the ideal of “a pure intermediate between the propositional *sign* and the facts” (Ibid., §94, p. 48e), or even the attempt “to purify, to sublimate, the sign itself” (Ibid.). To put it in other terms, it is the search for the ultimate reference for signification, for the founding act of signification, where the metaphysical urge wants, and feels compelled, to locate the “essence of human language” (e.g., Ibid., §1, §92, pp. 5e, 48e). However, while Wittgenstein certainly aspires to reconfigure our philosophical self-understanding and “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (Ibid., §116, p. 53e), it would, I shall try to argue, be a mistake to read *PI* as indicating that the very question of the “essence of human language” is itself misplaced, and that the very question of the ultimate reference of signification is as such a form of confusion or nonsense. Rather, despite the metaphysical urge attached to the question of the essence of human language, the question of the ultimate reference of signification is absolutely central to Wittgenstein, and not only in a negative sense (cf. Toivakainen 2025b).

The characteristic trait of the metaphysical urge identified by Wittgenstein is that, under its spell one, is driven to pursue an understanding of meaning—and, consequently, of the essence of human language—*by way of explanation*, i.e., essentially as an epistemological project. We want to explain, to exhaustively analyse, the whole chain of signification, finding at the end of this chain a ‘pure’ referent, a founding event, a pure object of knowledge, if you will. And it is this urge that the *PI* again and again shows ends up in an *impasse*. As we learn already in the very first remark, “explanations come to an end somewhere” (Wittgenstein 2009, §1, p. 1e). In contrast to explanations, Wittgenstein proposes that “description alone must take its place” (Ibid., §109, 52e). The thing with description as opposed to explanation—specifically in this context—is that description in a sense by definition leaves untouched the ‘first cause’, the final analysis or ultimate reference, whereas the urge for explanation cannot, it seems, stop anywhere short of transforming the ultimate cause into an object of knowledge. The quintessential *impasse* of explanation cropping up in various forms throughout *PI* with respect to the metaphysical project-cum-urge is that any attempt to explain, or any attempt to give a final analysis of, the ultimate reference of signification would be like *speaking* outside of any language game—i.e., a nonsensical

idea. “In giving explanations”, Wittgenstein reminds us, “I already have to use language full-blown” (Ibid., §120, p. 54e). Note again, however, that this is not a rebuttal of the idea of the ‘first cause’ of signification; the nonsensicality of the *metaphysical* project-cum-urge does not expose the first cause, the ultimate reference of signification, as nonsensical, in the sense of being insignificant to us or a confusion in itself (cf. [Toivakainen 2025b](#)). It simply implies that sense and meaning exceed knowledge and explanations. In fact, it implies that the very condition for knowledge is the *withdrawal* of the first cause of signification as an object of knowledge precisely because knowledge presupposes meaning and sense.

Description, in the sense proposed by Wittgenstein, and as a kind of therapeutic remedy and as a contrast to explanation, does not involve any attempt, or any urge, to speak outside of language. Perhaps one might say that in *describing* our uses of words, even the most primordial or constitutive forms of it, we are committed to language and to signification. A simple example of Wittgenstein’s, call it *method* of description: In remark 5, one of (the many) voices in *PI* notes, or reminds us, that when children learn the most basic forms of uses of words, they are taught this—obviously—not by way of explanations of definitions (or rules) but by way of training ([Wittgenstein 2009](#), §5, p. 7e). This point reverberates throughout *PI*, for instance in the famous ‘rule following paradox’ (Ibid., §201, p. 87e) where we are reminded that the sense and understanding of words cannot be grounded on, and cannot ultimately rest on, interpretations (of explanations of definitions). Rather, the rule following paradox simply shows us that our “grasping a rule [...] is exhibited in what we call ‘following the rule’ and ‘going against it’.” (Ibid.) To follow something or someone, and to find out when one fails to do so, is precisely what we learn, and teach, in the training referred to in *PI* §5. This does not, of course, *explain* anything. It is simply a description, a preliminary description, of what is involved in entering a life with language. As adults, we must teach children the uses of words without explanations—and this is also how *we* have, once, been taught the uses of language.¹²

Yet surely, this is not where we are privileged to stop our investigation. Yes, we teach and learn to follow rules, to follow the customs of a language community, fundamentally without explanations or interpretations. But how, how is it possible? These are of course driving questions, and ones that the metaphysically oriented mind think to be innocent, comprising a sincere desire for truth. But what exactly is it that we want to know here? Well, exactly this: how can we understand each other, i.e., how can we share meaning at all (is it not in the end, say, ‘private’?); what *is* meaning and sense? Fair enough. But consider what the presupposition of *this* very desire for knowledge is: it presupposes that we, from the outset, do *not* understand each other, i.e., that there is no fundamental communion or attunement between us in which things always-already have a form of (proto)meaning and sense (cf. [Toivakainen and Aldrin Salskov 2025](#)). In other words, in desiring an ultimate explanation or final analysis of signification, we seem to first and fundamentally picture a state of (absolute) non-understanding, non-meaning and lack of sense between self and other (adult and infant), and then a shift, a quantum leap to a kind of creation, or event, *ex nihilo* of meaning and sense. Consequently, understanding and meaning, sense, needs to be accounted for *in relation to a complete absence of sense*: the form of the problem is that of origin *as such*. Alternatively, it thinks that there must be a special act or process, somehow performed by us, which initiates, grounds, inaugurates sense and meaning. What is this act, this process of founding? And *voilà*, we are caught in an *impasse*, forced into the phantasmatic point where we would need to speak outside of language.

So where do we end up, then? Is our predicament an inescapable scepticism about meaning and understanding? In a sense, yes. But again, this is only insofar as we presuppose that sense, meaning, and interpersonal understanding are *not* already *given* from the very start. Can philosophy accept such a thing? How could it, would it not imply giving up

on the holy search for truth, for knowledge about the first cause, the ultimate reference—to give up on the struggle for something more than human wisdom? It is not that Wittgenstein is banning this question, this desire for a final analysis or ultimate explanation. If anything, *PI* continuously allows for such a desire to search for its fullest expression. Only that the precondition for the very sense of an explanation of the ultimate reference of signification, namely a state or being outside of meaning and understanding, fails to be articulated, imagined, pictured, thought.¹³ And it is precisely here that we can see why we need to give up on explanation and take to description. Take the example of ‘primitive’ forms of language training and acquisition, namely ostensive training—which is central to the opening scene, the *Urszene* of *PI*, the so-called ‘Augustinian picture of language’ (Wittgenstein 2009, §1, p. 5e). Quite early on in *PI*, it already becomes clear that the very sense of ostensive training, not to speak of ostensive definitions, presupposes that the stage for the practice of ostension is already set. Without any prior interpersonal understanding, without any prior sense of (what) the other (is doing)—i.e., without any prior sense of each other—no amount of ostensive training could establish anything—any interpretation would be as valid as the next one (cf. *Ibid.*, § 201, 87e). On what basis should, could, the infant understand the pointing of a finger towards an object as *that* very determinate pointing (and object) simply on the basis of the pointing itself—that is, the pointing as a *picture* of a founding act *prior* to the meaning and understanding it is supposed to found/ground? As Wittgenstein reminds us, internal to our *descriptions* of constitutive language learning and teaching, an “*Übereinstimmung*”, a communion or attunement¹⁴ in “judgements” and/or “form of life” between the infant and the adult, between self and other, is presupposed/given (*Ibid.*, §241; §242, pp. 94e–95e). When, say, eyes meet between two people, between an infant and a grownup, when they touch each other, do not the infant and the grownup understand that they are looking *at each other*, that they are being touched *by each other*? That is to say, does not the infant respond to precisely *these* very things, i.e., to the other’s, say, look and touch, because these *are internal to the very way in which the infant and grownup are addressed by each other* in these instances?¹⁵ When we *describe* signification, we will always be leaning on, include, and presuppose (as an inescapable given) forms of address between people. And at the point of the origin of our description—at the point of the ultimate reference of signification—we will (have to) acknowledge that we address each other *as such*, that we are as such significant to each other; that the other’s very presence bears an inescapable significance-cum-sense as such. In the words of Levinas, “the face [of the other] is meaning all by itself” (Lévinas 1985, p. 86).

3.2. The Address of the Other as Revelation

For human beings—as for any finite being with a beginning, with a coming-into-being/existence where being already *is*—there is no founding/grounding act of signification, nor any exhaustive, ultimate explanation or analysis of it. The preconditions for meaning and understanding—which in themselves already constitute forms of (proto)meaning and understanding (cf. Toivakainen and Aldrin Salskov 2025)—are radically, even absolutely, *given* to us in the givenness of the address between self and other. Obviously, this means, logically speaking, that something is, indeed, the cause of it, or the reason behind it. However, the *hubris* of, let us call it, a scientific *qua* metaphysical mindset is that it thinks it can create a discourse that escapes the very preconditions of language, that is, escape the fact that the very possibility of meaning and understanding is the necessary *absence* (not the non-existence) of the ‘first cause’ or ‘ground’ of meaning as an object of knowledge, the *absence* of the absolute same-self signifier. Strangely enough, this very *hubris* has the structural traits of, call it repression or disavowal, since what is escaped, i.e., repressed or disavowed, in not accepting the necessary withdrawal of the ‘first cause’ is the

address between self and other. But where, then, does this leave the first cause, the ultimate reference of signification?

The classical accusation that the attempt to penetrate the secret of God is blasphemy might contain a profound truth. But the reason for this is not that the search for knowledge of God trespasses into holy and/or unauthorised territory. Wittgenstein is not, I contend, condemning the metaphysical urge or temptation for its transgression. Indeed, in *PI*, he allows the search for metaphysical knowledge to rewrite itself over and over again—so that we might, at some point, stumble on, encounter, our “real need”. Knowledge of God *qua* the ultimate referent of signification (as an object of knowledge), is not *prohibited* for humans. It simply lacks sense, i.e., conditions of possibility. The blasphemy consists, rather, in that the urge to situate God-cum-first cause as an object of knowledge is a distortion, a displacement, of the, let us call it, reality of (the living) God.¹⁶ Does this mean, then, that God/the ultimate referent is and remains a mystery, an enigma? In a sense, yes. But this does not mean that God is not also, and in a sense precisely thereby, the living word, the very reality of reality. While the first cause, the ultimate reference of signification, is (‘as itself’) absent as an object of knowledge, it thereby nonetheless manifests or reveals itself as/in the givenness of the address of and to the other. One might even say, inspired by Diamond (2005), Franks (2005), and Mulhall (2011), that the address of the other as such is a *revelation* of God, of the ultimate reference of signification. God speaks directly to us, if you will, in our hearts and minds through the way(s) in which we—as speaking beings—are constituted in the address of and to the other.

As argued by, amongst others, Backström (2007, 2019), Nykänen (2002, 2018), Toivakainen (2023), and Westerlund (2022), the address of and to the other as such speaks of love; we are constituted in and through bonds of love. I will not reiterate these claims and arguments here. While I do believe, for reasons already put forth in this article, that Wittgenstein, particularly in *PI*, acknowledges the fundamental reality of the address of the other, there are no explicit identifications in *PI* between the necessary *Übereinstimmung* between self and other, on the one hand, and love on the other. Or are there? This depends on what we take to be ‘explicit’. For there are, certainly, constant *reminders* of how our uses of language are tied to the ways in which we are inescapably addressed by others. This is exemplified in, for instance, the following quote: “Just try—in a real case—to doubt someone else’s fear or pain!” (Wittgenstein 2009, §303, p. 108e). The frequently occurring concern for pain and torment or suffering in Wittgenstein’s writings (and conversations), not least in *Culture and Value* (Wittgenstein 1980), bespeaks the care for, the concern for, and the love for, the other inherent in the address as such. To doubt someone else’s fear or pain—when the other is not faking it, when nothing in one’s relationship to the other gives reasons for doubt—is to deny the way in which we are addressed by the other, to deny that we are moved and touched by the other, and, consequently, to generate philosophical confusion (‘how *can* we know for certain?’)—and more horrifically, to create the conditions for justifications of evil. It is a “particular kind of love” (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 46e) between humans that keeps our hearts open to each other—to the address of the other. “Hate between men”, Wittgenstein contemplates, “comes from our cutting ourselves off from each other.” (Ibid.). And then, with a seriousness of tone and conviction, Wittgenstein says the following to his friend Maurice Drury: “It is my belief that only if you try to be helpful to other people will you in the end find your way to God.” (Drury 2017, p. 105). Love and care for others is to answer to the word of God—as it was for Socrates as well.

4. Coda: Understanding Redeemed as Understanding

What take Socrates (more precisely, Plato’s portrayal of Socrates) had on religion, on religious belief, is certainly a more complicated question than what this article aspires

to address (e.g., [McPherran 1996](#); [Smith and Woodruff 2000](#)). The minimal thing I have wanted to say is that whatever it was, it was coextensive with his philosophy, i.e., with his life of philosophy. And insofar as this was the case, the institutional religious practice, the ‘piety’, of the *Athenian polis* was subject to his (and the god’s) critical examinations.

It is quite clear that Wittgenstein was not a religious person insofar as this would mean that he could have subscribed and subjected himself, blindly as it were, to an established religious institution or teaching. Any religious devotion that would limit or downplay his philosophising was not, arguably, an option for him—and the same ought certainly to be said of Socrates. As Wittgenstein noted to Drury, “I think one of the things you and I have to learn is that we have to live without the consolation of belonging to a Church” ([Drury 2017](#), p. 104). For Wittgenstein, just as for Socrates, it was essential “to feel free to discuss anything with anyone” (*Ibid.*, 96), something he seemed to have thought no existing organised religious institution would have allowed for—and something Socrates came to find out at a high price. On the other hand, the idea that religious belief, religious symbolism, and particularly belief in God, could and should be rationally grounded was consistently lamented by him. (e.g., *Ibid.*, pp. 96, 100). Instead, a “proof of God’s existence ought really to be something by means of which one could convince oneself that God exists” ([Wittgenstein 1980](#), p. 85e). Yet what can bring about such a conviction, what can “force this concept [God] on us”, are existential encounters with/in life—and, as Wittgenstein adds in his typical manner, “e.g., sufferings of various sorts.” (*Ibid.*, p. 86e). And if we think of Socrates’ declaration that his relentless examinations of his fellow Athenians, i.e., philosophy, was a service to the god—and thereby the god’s gift to the city—we might sense a kinship in spirit with what Wittgenstein had to say in 1949:

I have had a letter from an old friend in Austria, a priest. In it he says he hopes my work will go well, if it should be God’s will. Now that is all I want: if it should be God’s will. Bach wrote on the title page of his *Orgelbuchlein*, ‘To the glory of the most high God, and that my neighbour may be benefited thereby.’ That is what I would have liked to say about my work ([Drury 2017](#), p. 142).¹⁷

Yet, more important than such comparisons—although the issue is certainly connected—is the internal relation, the existential entanglement, as one might put it, between faith and understanding, which both Socrates/Plato and Wittgenstein bear witness to. Both share the following formula: the struggle for understanding is the struggle against the soul’s resistance towards understanding, or as Wittgenstein puts it, the struggle against “our urge to misunderstand” ([Wittgenstein 2009](#), §109, p. 52e). In both Socrates’ and Wittgenstein’s case, philosophy is a pursuit of an understanding that is in a sense already there, something that “is always before one’s eyes” ([Wittgenstein 2009](#), §129, p. 56e), rather than constituting a hunt for “new facts” ([Wittgenstein 2009](#), §89, p. 47e) or for a “new discovery” (*Ibid.*, §109, p. 52e; §126, p. 55e). What I have tried to argue, and highlight, is that for both Socrates and Wittgenstein the understanding that is ultimately resisted is essentially, ultimately, tied to the reality, to the weight of the reality of the address as such between self and other. In Socrates’ case, it is clear that one can only carry the truth of the soul by taking responsibility for it. But both Socrates’ and Wittgenstein’s case also show us that responsibility has another side to it. I do not mean a negative side, or a distorted side. Rather, I am referring to the entanglement between responsibility and faith. The understanding, the truth of the soul, and the address between self and other—all this is already there. Yet, while we cannot undo it, its reality nonetheless requires that we own up to it, redeem it—this is what it means that we can disavow it. Not redeeming it, not taking responsibility for it, is to not have faith in it. One might even say that it is as if the lack of faith signalled a sense of disappointment; as if the reality of the address was not enough, as if it lacked; and as if it was in need of a ground constructed on terms defined by,

or construed by, us. Or; as if the god, or God, has not provided us with what we need, as if the god's, or God's, care was insufficient. We might say that understanding is always redeemed through responsibility-cum-faith, i.e., redeemed through "a particular kind of love", *as* understanding.

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Notes

- ¹ I will use the standard reference style by Stephanus number, e.g., (19b), when referring to Plato's works.
- ² Socrates also adds that the young people following him around had the custom of exercising the same method of questioning as he had used. This, in turn, gained Socrates the reputation of instructing and thereby corrupting the youth (Plato 1997a, 23c–d).
- ³ It should be noted that I am not here following the standard translation which I otherwise deploy in the article. Instead, for reasons alluded to above, I have chosen to use Giordano-Zecharya's (2005, p. 338) translation of *Apology* (24c), in which she uses the term "worship" instead of "believe in". The standard translation I otherwise make use of in this article has the indictment read "Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods in whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things" (Plato 1997a, 24c). The central point here is that the official indictment of impiety, like that of the rumours, is not one of atheism in the sense of a disbelief in the (ontological) existence of the gods. Rather, Socrates is accused of being a "god-offender" (Giordano-Zecharya 2005, p. 336), of replacing the gods of the Athenian *polis* with other, new, gods.
- ⁴ For a good overview of the Socratic method of inquiry see Vlastos (1991) and Wallgren (2006).
- ⁵ Here again I am using Giordano-Zecharya's translation of Plato (1997a, 26c). As Giordano-Zecharya notes, Plato transforms the expression of the indictment *nomizein tous theous* ("to worship the gods") into *nomizein tous theous einai*, that is, "to think [in this sense to believe] the gods do not exist". The addition of *einai*, i.e., "to be", "to exist", semantically transforms the ritualistic-socio-political sense of the indictment not only into an ontological question, but introduces the idea of actually believing, really thinking that something exists, as opposed to honouring a custom/practice (Giordano-Zecharya 2005, p. 339; see also Miller and Platter 2010, p. 73). It is, perhaps, also important to note that the standard translation in fact captures this Platonic innovation just as clearly. If, according to the standard translation, the official indictment reads "Socrates is guilty of corrupting the young and of not believing in the gods whom the city believes, but in other new spiritual things" (Plato 1997a, 24b), the transformation that happens in 26c, "whether you [Meletus] mean that I do not believe in gods at all", makes it clear that Plato has changed the very sense of the accusation. Notably, this transformation of the indictment is only found in Plato's account of the events and not for instance in Xenophon's (see Giordano-Zecharya 2005).
- ⁶ As Giordano-Zecharya suggests, in contrast to Ancient Greek religiosity, "Socratic religiosity *iuxta* Platonic understanding contains an outstanding degree of Christian 'anticipation'" (Giordano-Zecharya 2005, p. 349).
- ⁷ This point is strongly reiterated in, and constitutes one of the main pillars of the *Gorgias* (Plato 1997b), where as in the *Apology*, Socrates is claiming that what we do in some sense know, i.e., what is part and parcel of human wisdom, is that it is better to suffer death than to be unjust (cf. Toivakainen 2023, chp 4).
- ⁸ Again, the same point is reiterated in *Gorgias* (Plato 1997b).
- ⁹ In the *Gorgias* Socrates recalls an eschatological tale at the end of the dialogue, where those who are judged to have been unjust suffer a terrible punishment either in order to be rid of all their evil (a purgatory) or, if unredeemable, as warning signs to those who contemplate evil deeds.
- ¹⁰ An example of this would be Wittgenstein's remark to his friend Maurice Drury: "There is no oxygen in Cambridge for you. It doesn't matter for me, as I manufacture my own oxygen" (Drury 2017, p. 110).
- ¹¹ The desire to bring philosophy to an end is present already in the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1961) and in Wittgenstein's apparent conviction that he had solved the problem(s) of philosophy. The *temptation* to bring philosophy to an end, to find exit points from its grip—and its lures—is also a central *theme* in the *Philosophical Investigations*, as manifest, for example, in: "The real discovery is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to.—The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring *itself* in question." (Wittgenstein 2009, e.g., § 133, pp. 56e–57e). See also Drury (2017, p. 102). However, as will be pointed out, in *Philosophical Investigations*, this temptation is also problematised and resisted.

- ¹² For a discussion on the relation between the normative structures of ‘adult’ language and the (in contrast to adult language) non-normative meanings inherent in the responsiveness of infants see [Toivakainen and Aldrin Salskov \(2025\)](#).
- ¹³ [Wittgenstein \(2009, §261, p. 99e\)](#) is a brilliant example of this. See also [Toivakainen \(2023, pp. 124–27\)](#).
- ¹⁴ See [Toivakainen \(2025b\)](#).
- ¹⁵ For an illuminating discussion on this topic see [Backström \(2019, pp. 233–36\)](#).
- ¹⁶ Consider, for instance, this remark made by Wittgenstein to Drury: “It is a dogma of the Roman Church that the existence of God can be proved by natural reason. Now this dogma would make it impossible for me to be a Roman Catholic” ([Drury 2017, p. 100](#)).
- ¹⁷ Cf. the printed forward to *Philosophical Remarks* ([Wittgenstein 1975](#)). While the preface to *PI* lacks any reference to God, there is a short, yet clear reference to the work being written to the benefit of Wittgenstein’s fellow human beings; written with a care for their souls: “I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own.” ([Wittgenstein 2009, preface, p. 4e](#)). In other words, Wittgenstein invites those that can, or are willing, open, to read him in the right spirit to take on the existential struggle of thinking—what it means to think.

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