Welcome to the Jungle:
The Problem of Language in Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein[1]

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The problem of language is one of the great motivational forces behind the writings of both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. After clarifying this problem, the author endeavors to sketch the solutions offered by these two diverse philosophers. In the case of Wittgenstein, this takes the form of tracing the development of his notion of a "language-game." By contrast, a consideration of Kierkegaard raises the question of the deceptiveness of any solution. In what sense the expression of immediate experiences in language can be read as a "neat trick" is ultimately left for the reader to decide.

"A philosophical book might be entitled 'the wonders of the jungle'."
Ludwig Wittgenstein[2]

"There is much talk nowadays about flesh and blood being man's enemy, but I am more and more inclined to look upon language, the ability to speak as a still more dangerous or as an at least equally dangerous enemy of man."
Sören Kierkegaard[3]

The history of philosophy of the present century will, if accurately written, show the dominance of analytical philosophy with its central focus on the problem of language. What has seldom been recognized is that analytical philosophy comprises

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[1] A Swedish version of this paper has appeared in the Danish periodical **Philosophia** 21 (1992): 167-176.

[2] WITTGENSTEIN, L.: **Notes for Lectures on 'Private Experience' and 'Sense Data'**, 1935-36, 5:8.

[3] KIERKEGAARD, S.: **Papirer**, XI^2 a 128, n.d., 1854.

two quite distinct and, for the most part, opposing branches. One group of philosophers, commonly called analytic philosophers, emphasize logical and/or linguistic analysis and clarification. The seminal chief of this tribe, in which it goes without saying further discriminations are necessary, is Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). The other group of philosophers, who are not only not recognized as analytic philosophers but are oftentimes not even regarded as philosophers, emphasize existential analysis and clarification. The seminal chief of this tribe is Sören Kierkegaard (1813-1855).

This paper is a thought experiment aimed at thinking with these 'seminals'.[4] Before I begin, however, a caveat is requisite. This is not a comparison. A comparison would be of little use between philosophers of two completely different ages and nationalities with two different religious backgrounds. Indeed, the idea of a comparison itself implies that two persons can be 'made equal' (cfr. Latin *comparare*), and of what value would such a prejudicial attempt have for the philosophical community? I would appear ridiculous if I attempted to describe what Stanley Cavell has already noted as a hallucinatory similarity between Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein in his article entitled, "Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy."[5] Nor shall I discuss one writer's influence on the other, regardless how deep Wittgenstein's admiration was for Kierkegaard.[6] For however interesting it is to note that Wittgenstein said that Kierkegaard was 'by far the greatest philosopher of the nineteenth century', to

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[4] The play on words in this sentence was obvious when I originally read this paper at a Centennial Wittgenstein Conference at the Florida State University (April 1989). At Florida State the students are called 'seminoles'.

[5] CAVELL, Stanley: "Existentialism and Analytical Philosophy," **Daedalus** 93 (1964), 946-974.

[6] GALLAGHER, Michael P.: "Wittgenstein's Admiration for Kierkegaard," **The Month** 39 (1968), 43-49.

write about a supposed influence of one thinker on another seems more a task for the humanities than it does for philosophy. To repeat, while points of comparison may surface in what follows, my central purpose is not to compare these two writers.[7]

In keeping with the idea of a thought experiment, my aim is to attempt to think with the seminal chiefs concerning the problem of language. I shall endeavor to clear a path through the jungle by taking the writings of Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard as my starting point. Yet this is only one path, I suspect that many more are possible, and some may be clearer and some more trodden than others. Wittgenstein writes in the **Philosophical Investigations** that *"language is a labyrinth of many paths."*[8] The reader and interpreter do well to keep this in mind, for one can easily get lost in the jungle of Wittgensteinian aphorisms and Kierkegaardian pseudonyms.

The broad conception of the question which this paper is concerned with answering is: Is there a solution to the problem of language? Before one can approach this question, however, the problem of language itself must be understood and made plain. For it is only through clarifying what the problem of language is that a satisfactory solution may be found. The importance of thinking with Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard is that they are the recognized sowers of the weighty thoughts that follow them. This, then, constitutes the focus of my paper.

I think it will be easily conceded that the problem of language is taken to heart by both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein. The question Wittgenstein grapples with throughout his career is: How can I understand my language and its relation to my

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[7] For a comparative approach see CREEGAN, Charles L.: **Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard,** Routledge, London-New York, 1989.

[8] WITTGENSTEIN: **Philosophical Investigations,** Oxford, 1953, I, sec. 203. Hereafter abbreviated as **PI.**

world, which includes immediate experiences and sensations? While the answer we read in the **Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus** is fundamentally different than the one given in the later **Philosophical Investigations** —the one I shall priviledge in this paper— the big picture remains the same. A sketch of the big picture shows the world set against language with the problem pointing to where one would expect to find the relation between language and the world. Provided that there is a relationship between language and the world, the question then becomes: How can one understand this relationship?

That which serves as the relation between language and the world is that which needs to be understood in order to solve the problem of language in Wittgenstein. Put briefly, the wonderful answer is: language-games. What, then, is a language-game and how does it link language to reality? It sounds so simple. Is this too good to be true? In what follows I shall attempt to, albeit much too hastily, sketch Wittgenstein's development of the notion of a language-game and interpret its importance for his later philosophy.

In notes dictated to his class in Cambridge during 1933-34, known as **The Blue Book**, Wittgenstein tells us that language games *"are ways of using signs simpler than those in which we use the signs of our highly complicated everyday language."*[9] The example he gives involves the use of words, which is one case of operating with signs. At this stage he does not attempt to answer the general question, "What are signs?" This might lead one to think that a language game could be possible without the use of words. It seems, however, that this is not the case, for Wittgenstein explains that, *"language games are the forms of language with which a child begins to make use*

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[9] WITTGENSTEIN: **The Blue and Brown Books,** Oxford, 1958, p. 17.

of words. "[10] In studying simple forms of language we also find activities, gestures, and reactions which can be built upon to make more complicated forms of language, such as our everyday language.

In the beginning of the notes dictated during 1934-35, known as **The Brown Book,** we find a more detailed example of how language games are to be understood. Here too the example of a language game includes words, which are names of things or numerals taught demonstratively, gestures, questions, and answers. This example goes to show that language games are *"complete in themselves, as systems of human communication"*[11] regardless how primitive or simple they may be. Furthermore, it is only by understanding the *whole language game*, i.e., all that is involved in a language and its use as an activity, that one can come to an understanding of the meanings of words through understanding their roles played in a language game.[12] From this it follows that the relation of the name of an object to the object itself is constituted by *"the whole of the usage of the name in a language game."*[13]

Finally, the notion of a language-game is more fully discussed in the **Philosophical Investigations.** Here Wittgenstein straighforwardly states that *"the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life."*[14] What is more important for understanding the problem of language, however, is that in these later investigations we find the frequently discussed problem of a private language. This is

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[10] WITTGENSTEIN: **The Blue...,** p. 17.

[11] WITTGENSTEIN: **The Blue...,** p. 81.

[12] Cfr. WITTGENSTEIN: **The Blue...,** p. 108.

[13] WITTGENSTEIN: **The Blue...,** p. 172.

[14] **PI,** I, sec. 22.

closely related to the puzzle of solipsism, and in interpreting Wittgenstein, one can argue that the basic reason for Wittgenstein's rejection of the possibility of a private language is the necessary publicity of language-games. While Wittgenstein does not see the concept of language-game as having a definable essence, it is nonetheless characterized by the capacity to be publicly understood. This is clear in his notes composed during 1935-36, known as **Notes for Lectures on 'Private Experiencies' and 'Sense Data'**, where we read:

Does the solipsist also say that only he can play chess? (5:5)

The conception of solipsism does not extend to games. Another person can play chess as well as I.

I.e., when we play a language game we are on the same level. (5:69)

Furthermore:

You say you have an intangible impression. I am not doubting what you say. But I question whether you have said anything by it. I.e., what was the point of uttering these words, in what game? (4:4)[15]

Here we see that if the individual solipsist's experience of reality, i.e., the world of immediacy, is to be expressed, it must be done so through a common medium. This medium is a language-game. The question then becomes: Is the immediate, private experience somehow contained within its expession in a language-game? Or, is it lost the moment it gets expressed in language?

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[15] These translations are by Merrill Hintikka and Jaakko Hintikka in their **Investigating Wittgenstein**, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1986, p. 242.

An important part of Wittgenstein's so-called 'private language argument' is his 'beetle in the box' argument. In the **Philosophical Investigations** he writes: *"The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a something."*[16] This argument has no doubt been responsible for the controversy surrounding whether or not Wittgenstein rejects the possibility of private experiences together with his rejection of the possibility of a private language. I think that Wittgenstein clearly does not deny that even in the realm of philosophical thought beetles, flies, lions, and other creatures of the jungle exist. Indeed, he saw his aim in philosophy as showing *"the fly the way out of the fly-bottle."*[17] His task is to show that private experiences and sensations are not *nothing*, although, philosophically speaking, they are not *something* either.[18] What then are they? What is the status of these creatures who philosophically exist somewhere between being and nothingness? Is not Wittgenstein rejecting that our language could ever bring out that which is unique, namely real immediate experience? In **Notes for Lectures on 'Private Experience' and 'Sense Data'**, he writes:

*"Surely," I want to say, "if I'm to be quite frank I must say that I have something which nobody has."—But who's I?— Hell! I don't express myself properly, but there's **something**! You can't deny that there is my personal experience and that this in a most important sense **has no neighbor**. —But you don't mean that it **happens** to be alone but that its grammatical position is that of having no neighbor. (5:7)*

In Merrill and Jaakko Hintikka's study **Investigating Wittgenstein** we meet with the interpretation backed by much

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[16] **PI**, I, sec. 293.

[17] **PI**, I, sec. 304.

[18] **PI**, I, sec. 304.

supporting evidence that, concerning private experiences, *"the received view is not just wrong, but diametrically wrong."*[19] The deepest reason for this statement is that those philosophers who have been partial to the 'received view' have misunderstood Wittgenstein's change of position in October 1929. The Hintikkas write:

...in replacing a phenomenological basis language by a physicalistic one Wittgenstein did not want to alter the ontological status of phenomenological objects, including private experiences. The world we live in remained for him a world of phenomenological objects; but we must talk about them in the language we use to talk about physical objects. The real purpose of Wittgenstein's 'private language argument' is to show how people manage this neat trick.[20] What strikes me in this passage is the interesting statement that "the real purpose" of the 'private language argument', and hence language-games which serve as the basis for the 'private language argument', is considered to be a "neat trick." I take it that here 'trick' is not meant in its primary sense of a deception, cheat, ruse, or treachery, but instead, in its minor sense of a knack or a method or process of doing something successfully. I bring this out not to question the authors' choice of words, but rather, to show a point worthy of philosophical debate. On one interpretation Wittgenstein's central notion of language-game serves as the basic link between reality and language. This is the understanding of 'trick' in its minor sense, which means we can successfully express our immediate, private experiences by playing a language-game that forms the basic semantical relationship between language and the world. This is to say, our immediate experiences are somehow contained within our

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[19] HINTIKKA, M. and J.: **Investigating Wittgenstein**, p. 246.

[20] HINTIKKA, M. and J.: **Investigating Wittgenstein**, p. 247.

language. This idea is captured in a letter to Paul Engelmann, where Wittgenstein writes:

*"And this is how it is: if only you do not try to utter what is unutterable then **nothing** gets lost. But the unutterable will be —unutterably— contained in what has been uttered."*[21]

An opposing interpretation, understanding 'trick' in its primary sense, is that the notion of language-game is a deception. We simply cannot express our immediate experiences in language, and we still are without a clear understandable link between language and reality. Contrary to what Wittgenstein wrote in this letter mentioned above *everything* gets lost when we speak. Language-games are deceptive and, maybe, dangerous when understood as the wonder cure to the problem of language. I turn now to Kierkegaard, no stranger to deception.

In Kierkegaard's first pseudonymous work, **Either/Or**, the first 'proper' essay following the "Preface" and the "Diapsalmata" is entitled "The Immediate Stages of the Erotic or the Musical Erotic." Here we find a characterization of language as well as an attempt to stretch the limits of language to describe a musical piece, i.e., Mozart's **Don Juan**. By contrast, Wittgenstein writes in **Zettel** that *"understanding a musical phrase may also be called understanding a language."* We must be careful here, however. This simply means that hearing a sentence and hearing a musical phrase are comparable, as the media of language and music both address the ear. This does not, however, mean that the thinking of a sentence is comparable to the singing of a musical score.[22] Certainly it is not.

Kierkegaard, under the persona of 'A', the aesthete, sharpens the distinction between music and language. He writes:

"But what follows from maintaining that wherever

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[21] ENGELMANN, Paul: **Letters from Wittgenstein,** Oxford, 1967.

[22] Cfr., **PI**, I, sec. 22.

*language ceases, I encounter the musical? This is probably the
most perfect expression of the idea that music everywhere limits
language.*"[23]

In an interesting passage reported by Friedrich
Waismann Wittgenstein says:
*"...we do run up against the limits of language.
Kierkegaard too saw that there is this running up against
something and he referred to it in a fairly similar way (as
running up against paradox). This running up against the limits
of language is ethics."*[24] Indeed, Kierkegaard explained that the
immediate quality of sensuousness can only be expressed in
music. *"In its mediacy, and as reflected in something other than
itself, it comes under language, and becomes subject to ethical
categories."*[25] (A parenthetical note: Readers of **Fear and
Trembling** will remember Johannes de Silentio's discussion of
'the teleological suspension of the ethical'. This is, in effect, a
teleological suspension of language, for Abraham could not do
otherwise than remain silent before Sarah, Eliezer, and Isaac
about his plan to sacrifice his only son. That is to say, any public
expression for Abraham's private experience and activity would,
by its very nature, abrogate Abraham's immediacy. He was
therefore justified in keeping silent.)

Music is the proper medium through which immediacy
can be expressed; language cannot express immediacy. But why
is this? It is because language is 'the house of thought' and
involves reflection. *"Reflection"*, Kierkegaard writes, *"destroys
the immediate, and hence it is impossible to express the musical*

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[23] KIERKEGAARD: **Either/Or,** V. I, trans. David F. Swenson and Lillian
Marvin Swenson, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1959, p. 68.

[24] WAISMANN, Friedrich: **Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle,** Oxford,
1967, pp. 68-69.

[25] KIERKEGAARD: **Either/Or,** V. I, p. 63.

in language."[26]. For by immediate we understand the indeterminate, uncertain, unexplained, and obscure.

In a posthumous work entitled **Johannes Climacus, or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est** that Kierkegaard never completed, he raises a question not unrelated to Wittgenstein's central problem. He asks, *"What must the nature of existence be in order for doubt to be possible?"*[27] Kierkegaard's analysis might be interpreted as giving similar grounds for the rejection of a purely phenomenological language as in Wittgenstein. In a draft of **Johannes Climacus**, Kierkegaard writes:

"In immediacy, then, everything is true; but cannot consciousness remain in this immediacy? If this immediacy and that of animals were identical, then the problem of consciousness would be canceled, but that would also mean that man is an animal or that man is inarticulate. Therefore, it is language that cancels immediacy; if man could not talk he would remain in the immediate.

This could be expressed, he [Johannes Climacus] thought, by saying that the immediate is reality, language is ideality, since by speaking I produce the contradiction. When I seek to express sense perception in this way, the contradiction is present, for what I say is something different from what I want to say. I cannot express reality in language, because I use ideality to characterize it, which is a contradiction, an untruth."[28]

A sketch of the big picture Kierkegaard is discussing here will show language not only set against the world, but in contradiction to the world of immediacy. Thus an intrinsic difficulty and tension is present in Kierkegaard's writings. His

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[26] KIERKEGAARD: **Either/Or,** V. I, p. 68.

[27] KIERKEGAARD: **Philosophical Fragments and Johannes Climacus or De Omnibus Dubitandum Est,** trans. Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1985, p. 166.

[28] KIERKEGAARD: **Philosophical Fragments...,** p. 255.

concern is to analyze 'existence', and yet this is unthinkable. In Kierkegaard's philosophical *magnum opus* **Concluding Unscientific Postscript** he writes:

"Existence, like movement, is a difficult category to deal with; for if I think it, I abrogate it, and then I do not think it. It might therefore seem to be the proper thing to say that there is something which cannot be thought, namely, existence.

The only thing-in-itself which cannot be thought is existence, and this does not come within the province of thought to think."[29]

The problem of language in Kierkegaard, therefore, is also a problem of writing. (Certainly this can also be said of Wittgenstein, but in my opinion it is more striking in Kierkegaard.) How can the reality of existence, immediacy, inwardness, or subjectivity, to use Kierkegaard's terminology, be expressed in language? Because reality is contradicted by ideality there can be no direct communication of the truth, hence Kierkegaard is forced to use 'indirect communication'. Kierkegaard clearly explains this as his principal methodological claim in the **Concluding Unscientific Postscript,** which he originally planned to entitle "Logical Problems", and further in his posthumous **The Point of View for My Work as an Author.** Thus, I think Stanley Cavell is right in noting that Kierkegaard's *"forced to"* means something close to *"logically forced to"* use indirect communication.[30] Remember that Kierkegaard seriously doubts the philosophical maxim that the internal is the external, or that by understanding the public expression one can understand the private experience, for he is aware of the complete contradiction between the internal and the

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[29] KIERKEGAARD: **Concluding Unscientific Postscript,** trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1941, pp. 274 and 292.

[30] CAVELL.: **Existentialism and Analytical...,** p. 965.

external. Kierkegaard 'shows' this contradiction in **Either/Or**.

For Wittgenstein, however, *"the internal is not only connected with the external by experience, but also logically,"* and this is clearly in line with the big picture I have sketched for him. The connection Wittgenstein can be interpreted as making is that public expressions and private experiences are connected through language-games. Whether or not this connection or relationship is ineffable is not the primary question. The primary question is does this relationship exist, and does it solve the problem of language? Is the ineffable contained within the effable, or is it contradicted by the effable? Kierkegaard maintains that the tension of the contradiction cannot be diminished, and to think otherwise would be a deception. Thus we return to the interpretation of language-games as 'tricks'. In what sense shall we understand this word?

In closing, I think no one will deny that my attention to Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard is experimental. But what are the results? It seems that the positions which could be taken are as follows: one can accept Wittgenstein's solution to the problem of language, i.e., language-games; one can accept Kierkegaard's answer, as I do, but this is really a non-solution for the problem remains, hence 'indirect communciation'; one can argue for an alternative solution from either Wittgenstein or Kierkegaard, suggesting that perhaps Wittgenstein or Kierkegaard has been misinterpreted;[31] or, one could argue for a completely different solution, suggesting that both Wittgenstein and Kierkegaard failed in their attempts to solve the problem of language. At any rate, if I have established no more than a framework for discussion between readers of Kierkegaard and interpreters of

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[31] If one takes this line with regard to a misinterpretation of Wittgenstein, then he or she must at least acknowledge that the fault lies with the Hintikkas, for it is essentially their interpretation that I have followed, since it presents the greatest contrast to Kierkegaard.

Wittgenstein I will deem my experiment successful. The risk I have taken in this endeavor is that by presenting interpretive 'big pictures' the depth and complexity involved in the works of each philosopher have unfortunately been slighted. Of this inadequacy I am fully aware, and for this reason I can hardly end by proclaiming 'the wonders of the jungle'. So I conclude where I began, with a salutation, "Welcome to the Jungle".