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WITTGENSTEIN ON MIRACLES

In this essay, three passages are illustrated and analysed in which Wittgenstein discusses the theme or question of the miracle: a passage from the Notebooks 1914-1916; a longer and more articulate passage from the Lecture on Ethics; finally, a diary entry published under the title Movements of Thought. The aim of the present contribution is to understand the significance of these references to miracles, that Wittgenstein makes at different stages and moments of his philosophy, and to show that what Wittgenstein says about miracles and the miraculous is closely linked to his way of seeing and practising philosophy – as distinct from science and its causal explanations.

INTRODUCTION

Miracles are a theme that appears repeatedly in Wittgenstein's writings¹ and throughout the course of his philosophical journey. This in no way means that the outlines of a theory of

¹ Abbreviations for works by Wittgenstein: CV = L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Culture and Value*, ed. by G.H. von Wright and H. Nyman, trans. by P. Winch, revised edition of the text by A. Pichler, Blackwell, Oxford 1998; LE = L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Lecture on Ethics*, ed. by E. Zamuner, E.V. Di Lascio and D. Lewy, Verbarium-Quodlibet, Macerata 2007; MT = L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Movements of Thought: Ludwig Wittgenstein's Diary, 1930-1932 and 1936-1937*, ed. by J.C. Klagge and A. Nordmann, trans. by A. Nordmann, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham/Boulder/New York/London 2023; NB = L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, ed. by G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, second edition, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1976; OC = L. WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*, ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright; trans. by D. Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1969; PI = L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte, revised fourth edition by P.M.S. Hacker and J. Schulte, Wiley-Blackwell, Oxford 2009; PO = L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, ed. by J.C. Klagge and A. Normann, Hackett, Indianapolis 1993; TLP = L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. by M. Beaney, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2023.



miracles can be drawn from Wittgenstein's remarks on miracles. This is not only because such remarks are few, mostly brief, scattered here and there, and often little more than hints, but also because Wittgenstein's intention was certainly not to sketch out an (epistemological, semantic or metaphysical)² theory of miracles.³

One comes closer to Wittgenstein's real intentions when one observes that the reference to miracles (or, perhaps better, to that way of looking which consists in looking at a thing or an event as a miracle) is for him a tool of philosophical work and a good term of comparison,⁴ especially when his aim is to lead us to recognise that there are ways of looking (including the philosophical way of looking) that are different from the "scientific way of looking" (LE, p. 167), which is absolutised, as it were, by what in 1930 Wittgenstein had called "the prevailing European and American civilisation" (CV, p. 8).

In this essay I will attempt to analyse some of the main passages where Wittgenstein explicitly refers to miracles,⁵ and I will try to highlight the relationship between his remarks and some of the themes and issues at the centre of his philosophical work. Obviously, one can expect there to be differences, even notable ones, between remarks that, despite having the same

² Taylor distinguishes the *epistemological* question ("Is it reasonable to believe that miracles occur?") from the *semantic* question ("What do we mean by 'miracle'") and from the *metaphysical* question ("Does God exist?") which arises for all those, philosophers and theologians, who believe that "part of the answer to the semantic question is 'an event caused by God'" (J.E TAYLOR, *Hume on Miracles: Interpretation and Criticism*, in "Philosophy Compass", II, 2007, 4, p. 611)

³ Besides, it would be exceedingly strange to find in Wittgenstein any kind of theory (or sketch of a theory) of miracles given that Wittgenstein always refused to ascribe a theoretical task or goal to philosophy (or, at least, to philosophy as he understood and practised it) a theoretical task or objective. As he writes in one of the most famous passages of the *Philosophical Investigations*, referring to himself but also to all those who identify with his philosophical method: "And we may not advance any kind of theory" (PI, I, §109).

⁴ I cannot adequately develop this point here. For some indications, in keeping with our reading, see E. VALERI, *What of the proposition 2.2 after the Tractatus? Wittgenstein and the many ways 'we make to ourselves pictures of facts'*, in "Revista de Filosofia Aurora", XXXIV, 2022, 63, pp. 105-122.

⁵ In this essay I will not analyse the passage from *On Certainty* in which Wittgenstein refers to miracles in a context in which the fundamental role that certain propositions play in our "world-picture" (*Weltbild*) is at stake (see OC, §95). Let us assume that "Animals do not speak our language" is one of them. Well, Wittgenstein wonders, how we would react "if the cattle in the fields stood on their heads and laughed and spoke comprehensible words" (OC, §513)". On §513 of *On Certainty*, see V. ALDRICH, *Something really unheard-of*, in "Philosophy and Phenomenological Research", 44, 1973, pp. 528-538 and L. PERISSINOTTO, *Miracles, Hinges, and Grammar in Wittgenstein's On Certainty*, in A. COLIVA-D. MOYAL-SHARROCK (eds.), *Hinge Epistemology*, Brill, Leiden/Boston 2016, pp. 72-93.

subject (miracles), belong to such different and distant moments of Wittgenstein's philosophical journey. However, as I will try to show, the attitude that drives Wittgenstein to use miracles philosophically, so to speak, is much less varied than the passage of time and the changes that occurred in his philosophy over time would lead us to believe.

THE MIRACLE OF ART: CÉZANNE'S APPLES

Wittgenstein's first reference to the idea of the miracle (*Wunder*) is to be found in the *Notebooks 1914-1916* towards the end of Wittgenstein's annotations of 20 October 1916. Probably following some remarks on art and the work of art made a few days earlier (19 September and 7 October 1916), Wittgenstein writes that "[a]esthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That there what there is" (NB, 20. 10. 1916).⁶ I should note immediately that this passage is not taken up in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, where the word "miracle" never appears. There is no doubt, however, that this remark in the *Notebooks 1914-1916* resembles closely what can be read in the *Tractatus* concerning the mystical: "Not *how* the world is, but *that* it is, is the mystical" (TLP, prop. 6.44). Obviously, it would take a whole essay to highlight the links between the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*' references to the mystical (in TLP, prop. 6.44, where "the mystical" appears in its noun form, and in TLP, prop. 6.45, where the reference is to "mystical feeling") and its possible antecedents in the *Notebooks 1914-1916*. Therefore, I will limit myself to pointing out one point and one issue that still deserves further investigation, and to devote myself here to a more detailed analysis of the *Notebooks 1914-1916*. But at least two things must be emphasised. The first is that the mystical of the *Tractatus logico-Philosophicus* certainly has something to do with the miracle spoken of in the *Notebooks 1914-1916*, especially since in the mystical (and in mystical feelings), as in the miracle of the *Notebooks 1914-1916*, there is nothing mysterious and, so to speak, veiled or secret. On the contrary, there is the mystical or mystically felt precisely when we recognise (see and feel) that "[t]hings are right before our eyes [us], not covered by any veil" (CV, p. 8). The second point is that there is an obvious correspondence between prop. 6.45, where we read that the mystical feeling is "[f]eeling the world as a limited whole", and the way of looking at and feeling things "from outside" rather than "from the midst of them", i.e. from within the world, which, as we shall see, is described in the *Notebooks 1914-1916* (NB, 7. 10. 1916).

Perhaps one way of understanding this passage from the *Notebooks 1914-1916* on the miracle of art (or in art) is to ask when or for whom it is not a miracle that the world exists. The answer we find in Wittgenstein is twofold. First, he suggests that there is nothing miraculous about a thing or event when it is measured, as it were, against our needs and desires. An apple is something that can satisfy our hunger, or a commodity that the greengrocer sells at the market. Rain

⁶ "Das künstlerische Wunder ist, daß es die Welt gibt. Daß es das gibt, was es gibt". Here, the English translation introduces an adverb, "aesthetically", which does not correspond to Wittgenstein's annotation, where he speaks of "künstlerische Wunder", which is better translated as "artistic miracle" or "miracle of art" or "in art".

is something that can surprise us and give us a cold, or ward off the threat of drought. Of course, there is nothing wrong with eating an apple or selling apples at the market. Just as there is nothing wrong with fearing or hoping for rain. What we must recognise, however, is that in both cases, the apple and the rain, it is we, that lump of fears and hopes, needs and desires that we are, who impose ourselves, so much so that we could go so far as to say that we do not see the apple, but what satisfies our hunger or what we put on sale at the market; just as we do not see the rain, but what can give us a cold or combat drought.

These considerations lead to a second point that Wittgenstein emphasises, namely that a thing or event ceases to be a miracle when it becomes an object of interest and scientific investigation. For example, when an apple is classified by botanists or when physicists explain what kind of natural phenomenon rain is and what causes it. Again, there is nothing wrong with asking a physicist why it rains or a botanist what an apple is. But what Wittgenstein wants to remind us is that, immersed in these classifications and explanations, we are in a sense no longer seeing the apple or the rain. To illustrate this point, we can here make use of an image that Wittgenstein will use some years later, in 1941 to be precise: “People who are constantly asking ‘why’ are like tourists, who stand in front of a building, reading Baedeker, and through reading about the history of the building’s construction etc. etc. are prevented from *seeing it*” (CV, p. 46).

As is evident here, in the annotations to the *Notebooks 1914-1916*, the word “miracle” does not refer to any extraordinary event. It does not refer to any of those unheard-of things mentioned in *On Certainty*: houses gradually turning into steam for no apparent reason; cattle in the fields standing on their heads and laughing and speaking intelligible words; trees gradually change into men and men into trees (see OC, §513). None of these things. The miracle of which Wittgenstein speaks has to do, we might say, with the most ordinary, simplest and most familiar things, that is to say, with what “is always before one’s eyes” (PI, I, §129), even though, as Wittgenstein will repeat over the years, it is precisely this that is most difficult to notice.⁷ Well, what the passage from the *Notebooks 1914-1916* on which we are commenting suggests is that art, “the artist way of looking at things” (20. 10. 1916), is one of the ways in which we can notice what is so difficult to notice, both in the affairs of life and in scientific research.

For example, there is nothing extraordinary about an apple, even though I may feel a strong desire to eat a sweet, juicy one. After all, if I don’t have an apple to eat, I can eat a pear or a peach with just as much pleasure. Of this apple I have here before me, I could say that it is only an apple, that it is “[a]s a thing among things”, it is as insignificant as anything else (NB, 8. 10. 1916). But does the same apply to art, to the “artistic way of looking at things” (NB, 20. 10. 1916)? For example, is it the same with the apples that appear in countless still lifes by Paul Cézanne? Wittgenstein’s few and sometimes somewhat elusive remarks suggest that his answer is negative. For the artistic way of seeing, he notes, everything is “equally significant” (NB, 8. 10. 1916).

⁷ “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one’s eyes)” (PI, I, §129).

Applied to the example of Cézanne's apples, this means that for Cézanne as an artist⁸ an apple was not "one among the many things in the world", but, as he saw it, his world, in comparison to which "everything else paled" (NB, 8. 10. 1916).⁹

It is not easy to disentangle these remarks, in which one can perhaps detect echoes and influences of Schopenhauer and Otto Weininger,¹⁰ not least because they are dizzyingly concise and often fall by the wayside, so to speak. What is clear, however, is that Wittgenstein is here establishing a link between art and ethics, between good (and beautiful)¹¹ artworks and a good life, observing how neither looks at objects "from the midst of them", as is the usual way (in

⁸ Indeed, Cézanne was not always an artist. On many occasions an apple must have been a fruit he wanted to eat or bought at the market.

⁹ The example Wittgenstein uses (see NB, 8. 10. 1916) is not that of the apple, which I have used, but that of the stove. I chose the apple because it gives me a clearer reference to the painting of Cézanne and his still lifes with apples. However, I would like to mention here that there is a painting by Cezanne, now in the National Gallery in London, with the exact title "The Stove in the Studio", which could serve well to illustrate Wittgenstein's remarks. It is, however, a painting from 1865 and certainly less well known than the still life with apples.

¹⁰ There are many clues that confirm that during the months when Wittgenstein was jotting down his reflections on art and ethics, he was reading (or at least thinking about) Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea* (Schopenhauer's name appears in the notes of 2 August 1916) and Otto Weininger's *On Last Things*. Indeed, many of the annotations of 12 October 1916 and 15 October 1916 are variations on the pages of *On Last Things* devoted to "Animal Psychology" (see D.G. STERN, *Weininger and Wittgenstein on 'Animal Psychology'*, in D.G. STERN-B. SZABADOS (eds.), *Wittgenstein Reads Weininger*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2004, pp. 169-197).

¹¹ At first, Wittgenstein (see NB, 19. 9. 1916) calls an artwork not beautiful but good, thereby emphasising the link between art and ethics and showing a reluctance to use the adjective "beautiful" in the field of aesthetics and art that will return in the following decades. Later, however, he admits that "there is certainly something in the conception that the end of art is the beautiful" (NB, 21. 10. 1916). Indeed, after acknowledging that artistic seeing consists essentially, looking at "the world with a happy eye", he adds that "the beautiful is what makes [one] happy" (NB, 21. 10. 1916). Obviously, it should not be forgotten that the happiness Wittgenstein of which speaks is not that which can be achieved by fulfilling our desires and satisfying our needs. Both from the notes of 13 August 1916 and, above all, from prop. 6.43 of the *Tractatus* it is clear that, according to Wittgenstein, "[t]he world of the happy is a different one from that of the unhappy", even though the world can be and remain exactly the same as far as the facts are concerned.

everyday life and in science), but “from outside”, i.e. “*sub specie aeternatis*” (NB, 7. 10. 1916).¹² Here, to look at an object “from the midst of it” means, as it were, being with it in space and time (see NB, 7. 10. 1916). An apple is that which stands some distance away from me on the fruit basket, where I put it after buying it at the market, and which will either be good and tasty when I start to eat it or sour or not quite ripe. And I could go on. I can acquire a lot of new scientific knowledge about it, for example, I can use it in many different ways, depending on my tastes, interests and needs. On the contrary, to look at an object “from outside” means, so to speak, to realise that it is there and, in this sense, to have eyes only for it. It means not seeing that object in the world (*in* space and time), but seeing it as the world (*with* space and time) (NB, 7. 10. 1916 and 8. 10. 1916). Therein lies the difference between the apple I buy at the market and eat and Cézanne’s apple. In one sense, for example that of botanical classification, it is the same apple. Nothing has changed. But for the person who looks at it as Cézanne looked at it, it has become something entirely different. And it is as if they were seeing it for the first time. In fact, it is really the first time they see it.

One must resist the temptation to infer too much from these annotations, which are and remain provisional notes, in part tied to the contingency of the readings and stimuli that Wittgenstein received from time to time.¹³ Here, at the end of this section, it suffices to emphasise how Wittgenstein’s remarks are marked or imbued with a strongly anti-dualist attitude. For example, art cannot be distinguished from science or everyday life, because it has to do with different things or events than science has to do with or we have to deal with in everyday life. In a sense, Cézanne’s stove or apples are the same as the stove seller’s stove or the same apples that the botanist studies and classifies. What changes is not the stove or the apples, but the way in which we look at one or the other; the way in which a stove or apples come “to have meaning” for us (PO, p. 129). In this connection, it may be useful to recall a passage from “Remarks on Frazer’s *Golden Bough*” I have just quoted, concerning fire and the impression it can make. As Wittgenstein notes, it is very easy to see how fire could “make an impression on the awakening mind of man”. However, this does not mean that “just fire must make an impression on everyone”. It may well be that someone is not impressed by fire at all, but is impressed by something else. “For no phenomenon is in itself particularly mysterious (*geheimnisvoll*), but any of them can become so to us, and the characteristic feature of the awakening mind of man is precisely

¹² It should be noted that in NB, 7. 10. 1916 Wittgenstein seems to suggest that what is seen *sub specie aeternitatis* in the case of art is the object, whereas in the case of the good life it is the world. In this sense, art can be part of the good life, but not identified with it.

¹³ Here I would like at least to draw the attention to the annotation with which the day of 8 October 1916 ends: “For it is equally possible to take the bare present image as the worthless momentary picture in the whole temporary world, and as the true world among shadows”. Here Wittgenstein is not talking about things (of stoves or, as here, of apples) but about images (*Vorstellungen*), but the point remains the same. In any case, we have here a hint of a phenomenological theme, the immediacy of present experience, on which Wittgenstein will reflect at length when he returns to philosophical work in 1929.

the fact that a phenomenon comes to have meaning to him (*ihm eine Erscheinung beteutend wird*)” (PO, p. 129). Here Wittgenstein, commenting on Frazer, is talking about the customs and ceremonies of so-called “primitive” peoples, but it is clear that what he is saying is closely related to some of the things he says about art in the *Notebooks 1914-1916*, but also, as we shall see a little better later, to many of the things he will not cease to think and say about philosophy and its method.

TALKING COWS AND MEN WITH LION HEADS: EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS AND MIRACLES

Perhaps the text in which Wittgenstein dwells longest on the theme of the miracle is the *Lecture on Ethics*, a lecture, in English, “delivered [in 1929] to an audience not exclusively composed of philosophers” (“Introduction” to LE, p. 9).¹⁴ It should also be emphasised that it dates from the months of Wittgenstein’s return to Cambridge and to philosophising, and that it is placed at a stage when Wittgenstein was still under the influence of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, although he was beginning to realise the “grave mistakes” that he had made in it (PI, p. 4).

What interests us here is the question that Wittgenstein poses at a certain point in his lecture and which could be summarised as follows: is it enough for something extraordinary to happen, i.e. for an event to occur “the like of which we have never yet see” (LE, p. 165), for us to be justified in speaking of a miracle? Certainly, as Wittgenstein acknowledges, it is precisely this, the occurrence of something extraordinary, that, “in ordinary life”, is called or would be called a “miracle” (LE, p. 165). But not only in ordinary life. For example, in chapter xxxvii of *Leviathan*, which is devoted to “miracles, and their use” Hobbes tells us that the first condition for people to regard an event as a miracle (or a wonder) is that it should be “strange”, that is, that it should be an event “such, as the like of it hath never, or very rarely been produced”. For instance, “if a horse, or cow spoke, it were a miracle; because both the thing is strange, and the natural cause difficult to imagine”.¹⁵

Of course, if this is how we want to use the word “miracle”, no one can prevent us from doing so; nor is this Wittgenstein’s intention. Rather, his aim is to convince his audience (and us with them) to look at miracles and the miraculous differently. To do this, he invites his audience (and us) to imagine that such an event has happened. For example, “[t]ake the case that one of you suddenly grew a lion’s head and began to roar” (LE, p. 165). Who would not say that this was an extraordinary event? Who would deny that this event “is as extraordinary a thing as I can imagine” (LE, p. 165)? In any case, our surprise would be great; such an event would leave us paralysed and speechless.

¹⁴ Here I quote from the diplomatic and standardised version of MS 109a, which differs somewhat from TS 207, which can be read in printed form in PO, pp. 36-44.

¹⁵ T. HOBBS, *Leviathan*, ed. by J.C.A. Gasking, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1996, p. 233.

But let us now ask ourselves how we would react once we had recovered from the surprise. Obviously, the reactions of each of us could be very different. In short, it is not possible to predict how each of us will react and how we will behave. Wittgenstein, for his part, imagines this possible and plausible reaction: “what I would suggest is to fetch a physiologist and have the case scientifically investigated and if it were not for being afraid of hurting him I would have him vivisected” (LE, p. 165). It is not difficult to admit that this would probably also be our reaction.¹⁶ In any case, it would probably be the reaction of people who are used to looking to science for an explanation of events, even the strangest and most extraordinary ones. It would be the reaction of people who, in the words of Max Weber, live in an era (the era he calls the era of the “disenchantment of the world”) that is characterised not so much by a “growing understanding of the conditions under which we live” as by the “conviction that if *only we wished* understand them we *could* do so at any time. It means that in principle, then, we are not ruled by mysterious, unpredictable forces, but that, on the contrary, we can in principle *control* everything by means of *calculation* (durch *Berechnen*)”.¹⁷ We could insist on these connections between Wittgenstein and Max Weber, which have one of their common roots in Tolstoy’s reflections on the meaning of science.¹⁸ But what is important to emphasise here is the way in which Wittgenstein comments on this reaction (“to fetch a physiologist”), which seemed so natural to us. If, faced with someone who suddenly grows a lion’s head, we are prompted to fetch a physiologist to try to explain what on earth could have happened, then this event immediately ceases to be a miracle, ceases to be something miraculous; “for it is clear that looking at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared unless what we mean by miraculous is merely that a fact has not yet explained by science” (LE, p. 165). But in this (relative) sense, a miracle is only an event that “we have hitherto failed to group [...] with others in a scientific system” (LE, p. 167); an event to which we have, so

¹⁶ Of course, our reactions may vary with depending on the circumstances. For example, if this were to happen in a theatre during an illusionist’s performance, it would certainly not occur to us to call a physiologist, let alone think about vivisection.

¹⁷ M. WEBER, *Science as a Vocation*, in ID., *The Vocation Lectures*, trans. by R. Livingstone, Hackett, Indianapolis 2004, pp. 12-13.

¹⁸ Max Weber repeatedly acknowledges the importance of Tolstoy for his own reflections on science and its meaning. See, for example: “Let us consider that process of disenchantment that has been at work in Western culture for thousands of years and, in general, let us consider ‘progress’, to which science belongs both as an integral part and a driving force. Can we say that it has any meaning over and above its practical and technical implications? This question has been raised on the level of principle in the works of Leo Tolstoy” (M. WEBER, *Science as a Vocation*, cit., p. 13). There is little doubt that Wittgenstein was interested not only in Tolstoy, but also in some of Tolstoy’s considerations that had impressed Max Weber. See, for example, CV, p. 25. Many useful observations in this regard can be found in C. TEJEDOR, *The Early Wittgenstein on Metaphysics, Natural Science, Language and Value*, Routledge, London/New York 2014.

to speak, attached “a label inscribed ‘Awaiting Explanation’”.¹⁹

Note that by this Wittgenstein does not at all mean to suggest that science has proved that there are no miracles or, if we really do not want to give up talking about “miracles”, that there are only miracles in the relative sense, where in this relative sense a miracle is simply “a hitherto unknown kind of event” (LE, p. 167). In short, a miracle, in the relative sense²⁰ of the term, is something that science, with the present state of its knowledge and experimental methods, is not yet able to explain. Inexplicable here means not yet explained.²¹ For what would it mean to prove that there are no miracles? All that science can do is to try to explain what we do not yet have an explanation of (and may not even have a glimpse of). But what this shows is precisely that “the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle” (LE, p. 167). In short, it is not that science has proven that there are no miracles; the point is that if we were to look at an event as a miracle, it would cease to be science. A scientist cannot look at an event as a miracle and still be a scientist recognised by the scientific community to which he or she belongs.²² In short, let us repeat, in the eyes of science, no event, however strange it may seem to us, is “in itself a miracle in the absolute sense”; or, to put it a little differently, there is no event that is in itself “more or less miraculous than the other” (LE, p. 167). In this regard, Wittgenstein recalls that he once heard a preacher in a Cambridge church say that miracles were

¹⁹ B. RUNDLE, *Why there is Something rather than Nothing*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 2004, p. 28.

²⁰ Here we seem to echo that passage from Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* in which we read that “miracles are only intelligible as in relation to human opinions, and merely mean events of which the natural cause cannot be explained by a reference to any ordinary occurrence, either by us, or at any rate, by the writer and narrator of the miracle” (B. SPINOZA, *Theologico-Political Treatise on Theology and Politics*, in ID., *The Chief Works of Benedict De Spinoza*, vol. I, trans. by R.H.M. Helwes, George Bell and Sons, London 1891, p. 84).

²¹ This reduction of the unexplained to the not-yet-explained is in itself obvious. As Wittgenstein wrote more than ten years later in his *Lecture on Ethics*: “What a curious attitude scientist have -: ‘We still don’t know that; but it is knowable & it is only a question of time till we know it!’ As if that went without saying” (CV, p. 46).

²² And yet, some might object, there are, for example, Christian scientists who believe in the miracle of the Eucharist. But it is not as a scientist that he believes (whatever this “believing” means), so much so that the problem is precisely how the scientist and the religious believer can coexist in the same individual. From this point of view, it may be interesting to quote this autobiographical observation by Hilary Putnam: “Those who know my writings from that period [from the early 1950s onwards] may wonder how I reconciled my religious streak, which existed to some extent even back then, and my general scientific materialist worldview at that time. The answer is that I didn’t reconcile them. I was a thoroughgoing atheist, and I was a believer. In simply kept these two parts of myself separate” (H. PUTNAM, *Jewish Philosophy as Guide to Life: Rosenzweig, Buber, Levinas, Wittgenstein*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington/Indianapolis 2008, p. 49).

always happening. It was enough to look at “the tiny little seed from which a tree grows” (LE, p. 167).²³ In this, it must be admitted, the preacher was not alone, as similar observations are often used for apologetic purposes. Yet, Wittgenstein insists, “[t]his is wrong for is this more miraculous that a stone falls or in fact anything which happens *whatever happens!*” (LE, p. 167).

It is difficult not to detect here an echo of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, in which we read, among other things, that “[i]n the world everything is as it is and happens as it happens; there is no value in it [...]. For all happening and being-so is accidental (TLP, prop. 6.41), although it would not be wrong to say that this way of looking at things goes far beyond the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and its sphere of influence. We cannot go into all these issues here. Let us simply ask, with reference to the *Lecture on Ethics*, what, according Wittgenstein, would be a miracle in “an absolute sense” or, as he also says, in “a deep sense” (LE, p. 167). The answer, which is quite obvious, is that it would be exactly the miracle that Wittgenstein had evoked with regard to art in the *Notebooks 1914-1916*: what is miraculous in an absolute or deep sense is “that the world exists. That there is what there is” (NB, 20. 10. 1916). There is a miracle in this non-relative sense, he repeated almost 15 years later, when we wonder at an event not because of its strangeness and rarity,²⁴ “but because what has happened has happened whatever has happened” (LE, p. 167).

All this shows that what Wittgenstein calls “miracle” (in the absolute sense) is closely related to the experience he had earlier called “to wonder at existence of the world” (LE, p. 155).²⁵

²³ This episode of the preacher does not appear in TS 207 published in PO.

²⁴ For Hobbes, among the things that make people wonder are, as we know, things that strike them as strange because they have never happened before, or have happened only rarely. Rarity is not enough, however; for example, “there are many rare works produced by the art of man; yet when we know they are done, because thereby we know also the means how they are done, we count then not per miracles” (T. HOBBS, *Leviathan*, cit., p. 233).

²⁵ It is necessary here to give a brief indication of the context and manner in which Wittgenstein comes to speak of this experience in the *Lecture on Ethics*, namely the experience he calls “to wonder at the existence of the world”. What Wittgenstein is trying to explain to his audience is what he means “by absolute or ethical value” (LE, p. 153). This is necessary because in ethics we (Wittgenstein included) are always “tempted to use such expressions such as ‘absolute good’, ‘absolute value’, etc.” (LE, pp. 152-153), even though “[o]ur words as we use them in science are vessels capable only to contain and convey meaning and sense, natural meaning and sense” (LE, 149), they always have to do with “relative value and relative good, right etc.” (LE, p. 151). To this end, Wittgenstein tries to remind his audience of some typical situations in which he would make use of these expressions; in particular, situations in which he would be inclined to use the adjective “absolute”. He describes the first of these experiences by saying that “when I have it I wonder at the existence of the world” (LE, p. 155). The second experience is what might be called “the experience of feeling absolutely safe”. It is the state in which one says to oneself ‘I am safe nothing can

In that earlier context he had pointed out that to wonder at the existence of the world is not to wonder because the world is so rather than because it could be otherwise. It is not, in short, that wonder which I may feel on seeing that the sky is blue and not, as I would have expected, cloudy; or on meeting a dog much larger than the dogs of its breed; or on discovering that a house in which I lived many years ago, and which I thought had been pulled down, still exists (see LE, p. 157). When I wonder at the existence of the world, I am not wondering “at the world round me being as it is” (LE, p. 157), but at his existence “whatever it is” (LE, p. 157). In this sense, the experience of wondering that the world exists can be “equally well described as the experience of looking at existence as a miracle” (LE, p. 169). After all, it was precisely in order to explain the absolute sense in which he spoke of wondering at the existence of the world that Wittgenstein had at some point begun to speak of the miracle and to distinguish between a relative and an absolute sense of the term.

However, we need make a clarification here. In the literature on miracles (especially, but not only, in the theological field), this step is often taken. It is said: there are certainly extraordinary events for which science can only acknowledge that it is not yet able to give an explanation. But perhaps science would do better to acknowledge that they are so extraordinary, so “unusual and unexpected”,²⁶ as to be scientifically inexplicable. And we would do better, especially when these events occur in particular contexts, for instance when they can be attributed “a religious significance”,²⁷ as in the case of the miracles of Jesus narrated in the Gospels to “look beyond the physical”²⁸ and to seek for them “a non-natural cause”,²⁹ such as the action or

injure me whatever happens” (LE, p. 155). “A third experience [...] is the experience of feeling guilty” (LE, p. 163), whatever one has done or failed to do.

²⁶ D. BASINGER, *Miracles*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, p. 1.

²⁷ To Wittgenstein’s example of the man who grows a lion’s head, many would object that this is an event which is unrelated to the context in which it occurs and to which, unlike, for example, the miracle of Lazarus’ resurrection, it is impossible to attribute any religious significance. Indeed, in the literature on miracles it is widely (though not unanimously) held that “[i]n order to be miraculous, an event must be experienced as religiously significant” (J. HICK, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Oneworld, Oxford 1973, p. 51). It has been objected, among other things, that this ends up making the determination that an event is a miracle “an entirely subjective matter” (D. CORNER, *Miracles*, in *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2017, section 9, <https://iep.utm.edu/miracles/>, 18 May 2024).

²⁸ B. RUNDLE, *Why there is Something rather than Nothing*, cit., p. 28.

²⁹ M. LUCK, *Defining Miracle: Direct vs. Indirect Causation*, in “Philosophy Compass”, XI, 2016, 5, pp. 267.

intervention of God.³⁰ Well, this is certainly not the way Wittgenstein sees it, because for him it is basically indifferent whether the cause sought is natural or non-natural (supernatural); what he wants to emphasise is that where an explanation is sought (be it natural or non-natural), everything miraculous disappears (see LE, p. 165). In this sense, for Wittgenstein, asking God for an answer is not so different in its underlying impulse from asking the physiologist. We could say that this God to whom we turn for an explanation is like that God whom Heidegger, following in Pascal's footsteps,³¹ calls "the God of philosophy", or more precisely "the God of onto-theo-logy". To this God, he writes, man "can neither address prayers nor offer sacrifices"; before this God he "can neither fall on his knees in reverence nor [...] produce music or dance".³²

We can summarise what has been said so far by noting that, according to Wittgenstein, not only is an extraordinary event not a miracle as such, even if it can be called "a miracle" in a relative sense, but also that the miraculous character of an event has nothing to do with its strangeness or rarity. But we can also add that, both in the *Notebooks 1914-1916* and in the *Lecture on Ethics*, it is not primarily miracles in the religious sense or with religious significance that Wittgenstein has in mind, even though looking at an event or the world as a miracle is something that, according to Wittgenstein, has to do not only with art and ethics (and, as we shall see, with philosophy), but also with religion, or rather with an attitude towards the world that

³⁰ See D. BASINGER, *Miracles*, cit., p. 2, and M.P. LEVINE, *Philosophers on miracles*, in G.H. TWELTREE, *The Cambridge Companion to Miracles*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2011, pp. 303-305.

³¹ I am referring, of course, to Blaise Pascal's famous *Mémorial* in which the God of philosophers and scientists is contrasted with the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (see B. PASCAL, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. III, édité par J. Mesnard, Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1964-1991, pp. 19-56).

³² M. HEIDEGGER, *Die onto-theo-logische Verfassung der Metaphysik*, in ID., *Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 11: *Identität und Differenz*, Vittorio Klostermann, Frankfurt a. M. 2006, pp. 51-80, p. 77; my translation. There are some annotations now collected in *Culture and Value* that indirectly refer to this distinction between the God of philosophers and the God of believers. One of them concerns the difference between believing in God and believing in Him: "'I never before believed in God' – that I understand. But not: 'I never before really believed in Him'" (CV, p. 61). In a later annotation he writes that his difficulties with religion have nothing to do with whether or not he believes in God, but with his inability to "kneel to pray": "I cannot kneel to pray, because it's as though my knees were stiff. I am afraid of dissolution (of my own dissolution) should I become soft" (CV, p. 63). But this annotation from 1937 is also very interesting in this respect: "I am reading: 'and no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by Holy Ghost' [*I Corinthians*, 12, 3]. And it is true: I cannot call him *Lord*; because that says absolutely nothing to me. I could call him 'the paragon', 'God' even or rather: I can understand it when he is so called; but I cannot utter the word 'Lord' meaningfully. *Because I do not believe* that he will come to judge me; because *that* says nothing to me. And it could only say something to me if I were to live *quite* differently" (CV, p. 38).

Wittgenstein does not hesitate to call “religious”, even if not in a doctrinal or institutional sense of the term.

What Wittgenstein is especially interested in emphasising in his *Lecture on Ethics* is that there is no way of describing “significantly” (LE, p. 171) experiences such as the experience of wondering at the existence of the world; that is, “that the verbal expression which we give to these experiences is nonsense” (LE, p. 155). The reason for this follows directly from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. If it makes sense to say that the sky is blue, it is because one can imagine that it is not blue; that it is, for example, cloudy. Put differently, “The sky is blue” only makes sense if its negation also makes sense. It follows then that “it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world because I cannot imagine it not existing” (LE, p. 157). I do not know whether this is enough to prove what Wittgenstein wants to prove. I believe, however, that Wittgenstein has something like this in mind, that is, that he wants us to recognise (or admit) that the existence of the world is not something that we discover in the same way as we discover that there is a star that we have never observed before; nor is it something that we need special instruments to discover, unlike a star that we cannot see with the naked eye, but we can observe with a more or less powerful telescope. After all, it should not be forgotten that there is no science, neither physics nor biology nor any other, which, before beginning its investigations and experiments, takes care to ascertain that the world exists.³³ What experiment could actually establish that the world exists, given that instruments, experimenters, experimental results etc. are already *in* the world whose existence it is supposed to ascertain? Hence, Wittgenstein is prompted to conclude his *Lecture on Ethics* by observing that the “nonsensicality” of an expression such as, say, “How extraordinary that the world exists” (LE, p. 155) is its “very essence”³⁴ and not something provisional that could later be remedied by finding a “significant expression” for it (LE, p. 171).

There is no need to over-interpret this text, which is, after all, the text of a lecture, even though, like everything Wittgenstein wrote, it was written with great seriousness and care. One thing, however, should be noted at the end of this section also because it concerns a theme that appears here, but which, as it were, marks Wittgenstein’s philosophising from beginning to end. We might put it this way: looking at the existence of the world as a miracle means setting aside (suspending, as it were) any (scientific or metaphysical) claim to explanation; or, perhaps better, looking at the world and its existence without feeling the need or desire for an explanation. This, it should be noted, is by no means a rejection of science. It is not the work of science that Wittgenstein criticises, but what he calls “the [...] modern worldview”, which is based on “the illusion that so-called natural laws are explanations of natural phenomena (TLP, prop. 6.372). One might

³³ This is a theme that Wittgenstein would take up and explore twenty years later in *On Certainty*.

³⁴ It should be noted here that this talk of “nonsensicality” as the “very essence” of an expression will later be considered by Wittgenstein to be wrong and misleading: “When a sentence is called senseless, it is not, as it were, its sense that is senseless. Rather, a combination of words is being excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation” (PI, I, §500).

almost say that Wittgenstein's aim, an aim that radically distinguishes him from the *Vienna Circle*,³⁵ is to rid science of this modern worldview, which elsewhere (in the "Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*") he calls "the foolish superstition of our time" (PO, p. 129). A scientist who is not subject to this superstition is, it seems to be fair to say, one of Wittgenstein's ideals and reflects the attitude of his forays into the field of scientific research.³⁶

But what is perhaps most remarkable is that the way in which Wittgenstein understands miracles and the miraculous is closely related to the way in which he understands and practises philosophy. We could almost say that for philosophy, too, the crucial experience is that of looking at things and events as miracles. As in the great Western philosophical tradition, then, for Wittgenstein wonderment lies at the origin of philosophy. It is not, however, that wonderment which arises from our ignorance and inability to explain and which is therefore destined to disappear as our knowledge increases and our explanations become more refined. As Wittgenstein notes in a 1930 annotation, it is not so much those who wonder who are primitive, but those who believe that "scientific explanation could enhance wonderment (*Staunen*)" (CV, p. 7). For example, we know much more about lightning today than we did 2000 years ago. Just open any physics textbook and we can immediately learn that lightning is an electrical phenomenon etc. But does this perhaps mean that lightning today is "more commonplace or less astounding than 2000 years ago" (CV, p. 7)? Indeed, we might be tempted to think that it is easy to wonder at something, something within everyone's reach, whereas it is difficult, sometimes very difficult, to explain it, so much so that we have to rely on scientists to do it. Against this temptation, Wittgenstein wants to convince us that often the most difficult thing, especially when under the influence of "the modern [...] worldview" (TLP, prop. 6.372), is to wonder or to let things and events strike us. It is therefore no coincidence that "Let yourself be *struck* by..." (PI, II, xi, §334) is an invitation that constitutively belongs to Wittgenstein's philosophical method.

This is the background to a somewhat controversial passage in the *Philosophical Investigations*. Here Wittgenstein writes: "Don't take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure, absorb us. / ('Don't take it as a matter of

³⁵ It is worth recalling that the *Vienna Circle* had entitled its programmatic manifesto (1929) dedicated to Moritz Schlick *Wissenschaftliche Weltauffassung* (The Scientific Conception of the World or Scientific World-Conception). This manifesto can be read in O. NEURATH, *Empiricism and Sociology*, ed. by M. Neurath e R.S. Cohen, Reidel, Dordrecht/Doston 1973, pp. 299-318.

³⁶ During his lifetime, Wittgenstein engaged in actual scientific research on some occasions. For example, in 1943 he took an active part in a research group (led by Dr. R. T. Grant) on the study of wound shock and its treatment, and made significant contributions. But, as is well known, in his youth, particularly in 1908, he became interested in questions of flight and possible advances and innovations in the then pioneering field of aeronautics. And in 1913 he conducted experiments on rhythm in Charles Meyer's laboratory in Cambridge. But we could also mention his idea (in the 1930s) of studying medicine to become a psychiatrist, or his experience as an architect between 1926 and 1928 in planning and supervising the construction of his sister Margarete's house in Vienna.

course’—that means: puzzle over this (*Wundere dich darüber*), as you do over some other things which disturb you. Then what is problematic will disappear, by your accepting the one fact as you do the other)” (PI, I, §524). Fogelin has quite rightly drawn attention to this passage, claiming that the procedure Wittgenstein describes in his parenthetical remark “is just the reverse of explanation”: “In an explanation we often try to remove the strangeness of something by showing how it is derived from (or fits in with) things that are not strange. Wittgenstein suggests that instead we should be struck with the strangeness of the familiar and in this way the original case will lose its exceptional character. Thus instead of eliminating the contrast between the strange and the obvious by making everything obvious, Wittgenstein would have us eliminate this contrast by recognizing that everything is strange”.³⁷ As the context makes clear, Fogelin has no sympathy for this sort of “commitment to inexplicability”, which he finds frustrating, to say the least,³⁸ although he recognises how important it is for understanding Wittgenstein’s attitude and method. Indeed, he observes that in Wittgenstein’s texts “we are continually denied explanation just where we want it – told that the story is over before it gets interesting”.³⁹

It is certainly to Fogelin’s credit that he has drawn attention to this passage, even though he thinks that it underlies a sort of metaphysical commitment (of a vaguely nihilistic tenor) “to the inexplicability of things” and “to the brute multiplicity of the phenomena of the world”.⁴⁰ Whether our previous considerations are correct or plausible is not the issue here. Rather, what Wittgenstein is interested in is making it clear that, if one can look at things or at things as objects of explanation and scientific enquiry (which, by the way, is not bad or wrong, but also not impossible either), then philosophy’s way of looking is different from that of science, but also from that of metaphysics, and in any case has nothing to do with the explicability (or inexplicability) of things and events.

WATER AND WINE: SERVANTS AND DISCIPLES AT THE WEDDING FEAST OF CANA

The third occurrence of the miracle theme that we will consider here is found in an entry in Wittgenstein’s diaries of 1930-1932 and 1936-1937 published under the title *Movements of Thought*. This annotation presumably dates from 6 May 1931. We are therefore not far removed from the years and above all, as we shall see, from the atmosphere of the *Lecture on Ethics*. The most interesting thing, however, is that the miracle to which Wittgenstein refers here is not such a bizarre event as the lion’s head suddenly growing on a human body, but one of the miracles narrated in the Gospel, indeed one of the most “private”, so to speak, miracles of Jesus: the miracle at the wedding feast of Cana narrated in *John 2:1-11*. This is not too surprising when one

³⁷ R.J. FOGELIN, *Wittgenstein*, second edition, Routledge, London/New York 1987, p. 209.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ R.J. FOGELIN, *Wittgenstein*, cit., p. 210.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 209.

considers that, among Wittgenstein's texts, these diaries are the ones in which the annotations on religious themes, on Christianity, on Kierkegaard, etc. are the most numerous and the most intense.

In his annotation, Wittgenstein begins by quoting Dostoevsky and those pages of *The Brothers Karamazov* in which he recounts what the evangelical story of the transformation of water into wine evokes in Alyosha. As is well known, this story "provides a mystical experience of never-ending joy to Alyosha" (MT, editor's note 98). Now, what Wittgenstein asks is what one must do in order to understand "as Dostoevsky did the miracles of Christ, such as the miracle at the wedding of Cana". The answer is that "[i]f one wants to understand as Dostoevsky did the miracles of Christ [...], one must consider them symbols" (MT, p. 48). But what exactly is Wittgenstein suggesting?

What Wittgenstein observes, first of all, is that "[w]hat is magnificent" (*das Herrliche*) in this Gospel story is not and cannot be the transformation of water into wine. Certainly, such a transformation is an extraordinary thing, something "astounding at best" and, as is obvious, "we would gaze in amazement at the one who could do it, but no more" (MT, p. 48). What is significant here is precisely this final addition "no more". In short, what is magnificent is certainly not that "Jesus provides wine for the people at the wedding". At most, this shows his generosity and his compliance with his mother's wishes. But what is magnificent is not even that he provides it "in such an unheard of manner". Of course, there is no doubt that this is something "extraordinary" and "unprecedented" (MT, p. 48). Indeed, when has one ever heard of water poured into a jar being turned into wine, and excellent wine at that?⁴¹ But even this is not enough to explain what is magnificent about this episode nor the "never-ending joy" that, according to Dostoevsky, it gave Alyosha.

What Wittgenstein means by this "no more" is that what really counts – what makes this action a miracle – is not its extraordinary and unprecedented character, but rather "the spirit in which it is done". It is this spirit that is the truly miraculous or marvellous (*das Wunderbare*)⁴² and that "gives this action content and meaning". For this spirit, "the transformation of water into wine is only a symbol (as it were) a gesture", although, of course, it is a gesture that "can only be made by the one who can do this extraordinary thing". Wittgenstein puts it this way: "The miracle must be understood as gesture, as expression if it is to speak to us" (MT, p. 48).

One thing above all deserves to be emphasised here, namely that Wittgenstein does not at all say: "In reality, there was (can be) no transformation of water into wine; nevertheless, John's

⁴¹ That it is an excellent wine is testified to by the master of banquet who, amazed that good wine is served at the end, tells the bridegroom that he does not know whether to praise him or underline his naivety: "Everyone brings out the choice wine first and then the cheaper wine after the guests have had too much to drink; but you have saved the best till now" (*John* 2: 9-10).

⁴² "There is a nearly untranslatable play on words at work here. The German for 'miracle' is 'Wunder', and therefore, '*das Wunderbare* (the wonderful)' means also 'the miraculous'" (MT, editor's note 99).

story is religiously significant if we understand it as a symbol”;⁴³ but rather he says: “If it is not understood as a symbol, that extraordinary action will never be a miracle”. Put just a little differently, for Wittgenstein the problem is not that water cannot be turned into wine, or that no one can perform this action, so we had better not think that John told us something that really (historically) happened, and instead consider the religious or spiritual significance of his story. After all, as we have seen, Wittgenstein seems to readily admit that if the miracle is a gesture, it is a gesture that “can only be made by the one who can do this extraordinary thing” (MT, p. 48). One might almost say that if Jesus had not been able to transform water into wine, there would have been no miracle, even though this act is not enough to have a miracle.

Are we then to conclude that Wittgenstein thinks that such extraordinary events as the instantaneous transformation of water into wine can happen, or that anyone can perform such extraordinary actions, or ones even more extraordinary than what Jesus did at Cana? Actually, this is not the point that Wittgenstein is interested in, nor, for that matter, does he care to question the claim that something so unheard-of happened or could happen.⁴⁴ From this point of view, it is worth mentioning here that in an annotation from 1937, certainly inspired by Kierkegaard, he remarks that “[q]ueer as it sounds: the historical accounts of the Gospels [thus also the miracle accounts] might, in the historical sense, be demonstrably false and yet belief lose nothing through this” (CV, p. 37). This means, among other things, that it makes little sense, from Wittgenstein’s perspective, to try to shake faith by claiming that the Gospel accounts of miracles cannot be historically true, because nothing that is recounted there (blind and crippled people being healed; water being turned into wine; the dead being resurrected) could have happened. But at the same time it also makes little sense to try to support them by claiming that Christianity is founded “on a historical truth” (CV, p. 37), i.e. that these events not only can happen, but did happen.

Against these two opposing but supportive attitudes, Wittgenstein affirms that a miracle is

⁴³ We could perhaps say that, from this point of view, Wittgenstein’s attitude is very different from that which characterises an important part of Protestant theology, and that in any case he is not driven by any, shall we say, ‘demythologising’ intention.

⁴⁴ Indeed, there is an annotation from 1944 in which Wittgenstein seems to ask what we are asking here. After saying that “[a] miracle is, as it were, a *gesture* which God makes”, Wittgenstein gives an example: one might think, for example, that “when a saint spoke”, God caused the trees around him to bow “as if in reverence”. At this point, he wonders whether he believes this can happen. His answer is “I don’t” (CV, p. 51). But again, the point is not so much whether it is possible to believe (in a scientific sense) that trees bow in reverence. What Wittgenstein wants to emphasise is that someone can be so impressed by the words and life of a saint as to believe that the trees have bowed; that is, to the point of “sensing the miracle in it” (MT, p. 48). Wittgenstein, for his part, confesses that he is “not so impressed” (CV, p. 52). In short, the point here is not so much whether one can believe (in a scientific sense) that trees respond to a man’s words, but whether he (Wittgenstein) can sense the miracle in the movements of the foliage.

“only an extraordinarily strange fact” unless it is performed by someone who does it in “in a marvelous spirit” (MT, p. 48). Therefore it is not indifferent who performs the miracle; in short, “I must, as it were, know the person [who performs the miracle] already before I can say that is a miracle. I must read the whole of it already in the right spirit in order to sense the miracle in it” (MT, p. 48).

Let us try, then, to reread the story of the wedding feast at Cana following in the light of Wittgenstein’s suggestion. It is evident that what happened at the wedding feast of Cana in Galilee, according to the Gospel account, is an extraordinary event: water cannot become wine, and excellent wine at that. And it is also evident that, if we had to give reasons for this “cannot” of ours, we would appeal to our knowledge and experience, to science in a word, although, inexperienced as we mostly are, we would not know how to explain why water cannot turn into wine. Nor would most of us know how to explain how wine can turn into vinegar. Besides, if the event at Cana were not so strange and exceptional, why would John have told us about it in his Gospel? Let us try to take John’s account literally. The jars that had just been filled with water now contained wine. What must the servants who had thus filled the jars have said when they saw wine pouring out of them? They knew, unlike the master of the banquet, “where that wine came from”, for it was they whom Jesus had ordered to fill the jars with water. However, John does not describe their reaction. Strangely, he only tells us how Jesus’ disciples reacted: that miracle “was the first of the signs through which he revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him” (*John* 2: 11). What is worth emphasising here is that the servants saw everything there was to see, so to speak, but only the disciples believed, or only the disciples are said to have believed. Perhaps some of the servants thought of an imposture; some thought it was a neat trick arranged between Jesus and the bridegroom; some thought it was an act of magic; some perhaps thought of nothing at all, tired from a long day’s work or worried about their future. In any case, the servants did not believe, even though they knew and had seen; only the disciples believed, because, as Wittgenstein says, they could “read the whole thing in the right spirit”. Not the servants, but only the disciples could “sense the miracle in it” (CV, p. 48).

The conclusion we can draw from this Wittgensteinian rereading of the wedding feast at Cana is that no event, however extraordinary, can lead us to faith. Faced with the most extraordinary event, we can react (or not react) like the servants who served at the wedding feast at Cana. It is not enough for water to be turned into wine for our lives to be transformed in the sense of faith. Of course, many problems arise here, be they exegetical, philosophical or theological. What is clear, however, is that Wittgenstein never ceased to think that a miracle (in art as in ethics or religion) is something radically different from an extraordinary event.

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