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OF BIT OFF TONGUES: PAUL'S HEAVENLY ASCENT IN SECOND CORINTHIANS 12:2-4 VIS-À-VIS WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT

Of Bit Off Tongues: Paul's Heavenly Ascent in Second Corinthians 12:2-4 Vis-à-vis Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Language

By Moses Y. Mikheyev

In Second Corinthians 12:2-4, Paul relates a mystical experience in which he was caught up into the third heaven. In relating this experience, Paul assumes that his audience would have found his language *intelligible*. If so, in what ways was—and is—his language intelligible? In the first chapter of this study, I guide my readers through the text while engaging with modern New Testament scholarship, providing parallel accounts of ancient heavenly ascents. In the process, I demonstrate that the rhetorical force of Paul's argument hinges on the element of the subjective; that is, Paul's contemporaries were both familiar with and experienced such "mysticism." In the second chapter of this study, I look at the function of words, such as "heaven," in Paul's relating of his experience. I then apply Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, focusing on the *Tractatus* and *Philosophical Investigations* in particular, to mystical religious experiences. I conclude this project by arguing that while the experience, as related to us using human language, is inexpressible, the words employed function as "limits" on what can and what cannot be said; that is, in showing us what cannot be communicated, Wittgenstein's philosophy, nonetheless, illuminates and expands our understanding of Paul's comment that he "heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell."

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> For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sounds, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever.
>
> —"The Great Gatsby," F. Scott Fitzgerald

Preface

In Second Corinthians 12:2-4, while defending his apostolic authority, Paul resorts to "boasts of weakness" followed by a boast involving a heavenly ascent to the "third heaven." During his "mystical" experience—"whether in body or out of body I do not know"[1]—Paul heard things that were "inexpressible," which he was not permitted to speak.

In relating a heavenly ascent to his congregants, Paul assumes that his congregants would understand, believe, and *relate to* his experience—in other words, they would find his argument intelligible. *That was then, this is now.* How do I, as a 21st century human, reading this text thousands of years later, make sense of Paul's language? The heavenly ascent, as I read it today, makes no sense to me. It makes no sense because I have never been to heaven myself. In fact, I have not only never been to heaven, I have never had any kind of "mystical" experience, seen visions, or had any encounters with angels and demons.

When I look at Paul's contemporaries, and compare his account of a heavenly ascent with other Greco-Roman, Jewish, and Christian accounts, I see that his experience is not unique: many ancients had been to heaven. In looking at these parallel accounts while reading Paul, I realize that my understanding of the world and how it works is entirely

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[1] My translation.

different than theirs. Recognizing this difference in worldviews, presents a hermeneutical challenge for the modern interpreter of this text: how do I make meaning from a text that was addressed to people who think the world works in a different way than I do? In addition, how do I, as a modern reader, understand the language of the text? That is, how do I read phrases like "third heaven" and understand them?

In the first chapter of this paper, I will first situate Paul's argument within its 2 Cor. 10-13 context, bringing in modern New Testament interpreters, who will allow us to critically examine the text by exposing us to various technical arguments. Then, I will argue that Paul's mystical experience was a boast, serving as a reminder that he was an authoritative figure for the Corinthians and a true apostle. Moreover, I will argue that Paul understood his preaching of "the gospel" to be grounded in divine revelation, such as a mystical experience, not being of "human origin." I will then place Paul's heavenly ascent experience in its ancient context, looking for parallel texts that would help illuminate our understanding of such mystical experiences as they were understood and discussed in the past. That is, ancient sources suggest the language governing mystical religious discourse was taken literally by Paul's contemporaries, who were, in fact, having similar mystical experiences; whereas moderns, living thousands of years later, are reading the text in a world in which such heavenly ascents and mystical experiences are less common. I will further argue that Paul, indeed, heard "inexpressible things"—things one could not express using human language even if one tried; furthermore, these "inexpressible things" were *also* "unutterable" due to their sacred nature. Modern and ancient readers understood these "inexpressible things" differently. I will then argue that the Corinthians would have been familiar with such mystical experiences *subjectively* and, in addition to this, would have been familiar with heavenly ascent tales from various ancient sources. Finally, I will argue that the

rhetorical force of Paul's mentioning his heavenly ascent, mystical experience hinges on the subjective experience of the Corinthian congregation; that is, the argument only holds water because Paul supposes they, too, have had similar experiences, were well-versed in them, and could, therefore, to a limited extent, find his argument intelligible. By implication, then, the language used in 2 Cor. 12:2-4 is made intelligible in light of certain realities, such as experiencing mystical trances, accepting a particular worldview in which angels and demons have an ontological reality, participating in—as I will later show[2]—in particular language-games, etc. Apart from these realities—realities that many moderns simply cannot accept—the rhetorical force of Paul's argument fails, and his language ceases to be intelligible.

In the second chapter, I will argue that Wittgenstein's philosophy of language helps us understand the complex ways in which humans use language. Using Wittgenstein's philosophy as applied to this text, I will argue that the modern interpreter is not in a position to understand and/or relate to this text—the idea that one could bridge a gap that spans two thousand years by the sheer force of *reading a text* is an illusion. I will support my argument by first examining Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* while using its more positivistic elements to help illustrate the inherent difficulties that arise when dealing with abstract concepts like "third heaven." I will then proceed to show how Wittgensteinian language-games illuminate our understanding of *relating to* mystical experiences. Next, I will argue that language-games themselves are a "form of life," inextricably connected to a *living* human experience. I will then proceed to argue that the idea of being able to relate to someone living thousands of years ago is sustained by the Cartesian myth of the soul. I will argue that mind-body dualism allows the modern interpreter to be deceived into thinking that a detached ego is able to shed its inherent biases, culture, and language and step into the shoes of another, in however

[2] Chapter Two of this thesis will deal with Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. In that chapter, I will further explicate this idea and how it relates to our reading of Paul's letter.

limited a fashion. In place of this myth, I will show how Wittgenstein's rejection of it—and its replacement of it by the view that the soul is best expressed by means of the human *body*—allows us to deeply appreciate the complex intertwining that exists between language and living, human activity. Finally, I will consider the possibility of a private language in which a mystical experience, such as Paul's, could find its expression. I will argue against the tenability of a private language. Moreover, I will argue in favor of the possibility that private experiences exist that cannot be expressed using a public language.

Human communication is inherently connected to living human beings, being intertwined with the human body, human community, culture, and a particular language (such as Greek or English, for example). Since the way language is communicated and understood is inherently tied to *living* human beings, the death of a particular community of humans—in which a given language was used and understood—marks the death of our ability at lucidly understanding it. Attempts made at understanding a text written thousands of years ago, in a language not our own, will forever remain elusive. And, in such a way, Paul is justified in saying that he "heard things" which he was not "permitted to speak." In the following pages, I attempt to articulate the various problems one encounters when attempting to make intelligible a text that seems to evade all intelligibility. In doing so, my hope is to show not only what *cannot* be said about mystical experiences—such as Paul's—but also what *can* be said.

Chapter One: Paul's Heavenly Ascent in 2 Cor. 12:2-4: Its Background, Context, and its Modern Interpreters

Introduction

The heavenly ascent found in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 occurs at a pivotal point in Paul's defensive argument making up 2 Cor. 10-13. After being forced into a game of boasting, Paul recounts in the most ironic of ways all of the troubles he has faced while attempting to preach the gospel. It was Paul who, on behalf of preaching the gospel to them, "suffered" at their hands. He never charged them money for preaching; instead, he humbled himself and presented it "free of charge" (11:7). However, in his absence (10:11), so-called "super-apostles" have snuck in and had begun to deceive his congregants, possibly preaching "another Jesus" (11:4). After listing off his sufferings, and recognizing them as "things that show my weakness" (11:30), Paul succumbs to the pressure put on him to boast (12:11), and reluctantly relates a mystical experience that resulted in a heavenly ascent.

Second Corinthians Context: Paul the Boaster—Pauline Irony and "Boasts of Weakness"

In Second Corinthians 10-13, we come face-to-face with a Paul who appears distressed and on the defensive regarding his standing with the Corinthian community. We find him "appealing" (παρακαλῶ) to his Corinthian congregation (10:2). The verb παρακαλῶ would have reminded his first-century audience of language a general would use when "appealing"

to his troops.[3] It seems apparent to Paul that some "super-apostles" (11:5) have found their way into *his* congregation, stirring up controversy and dissent. Not only were his opponents commending themselves (10:12), they considered Paul to be "unimpressive" (10:10). In fact, Paul's opponents styled themselves as more spiritual than Paul—for it was they who were experiencing "visions and revelations of the Lord" (12:1).

Tit for tat, Paul goes on the defensive. "Are they Hebrews?" he asks, "So am I" (11:22). "Are they servants of Christ [διάκονοι Χριστοῦ]? I am more" (11:23). Paul attempts to correct the perception the Corinthian congregation embraced under the influence of these so-called "super-apostles." Are they really "servants of Christ"? Paul does not give us an answer, except his rather bold, "I am more." If they are "servants of Christ"—which is highly suspect, since it is clear that even his calling them "super-apostles" is rather sarcastic and ironic—he believes that he is, in a sense, *better* than they. Dieter Georgi points out that the term employed here— διάκονοι—conveys more than just the generic "servants [of Christ]"; instead, "in Hellenistic times [the term] frequently meant responsible, fateful representation."[4] By implication, then, Paul is asking that *if* they are "responsible, fateful representations" of Christ, *then he is more so*. In other words, it is Paul who is the fateful representation of Christ. (His comment in 1 Corinthians 11:1 supports this exposition—"Imitate me, as I also imitate Christ.")[5]

In 10:17, a passage loosely referencing Jeremiah 9:22-23—"*Thus says the Lord: Do not let the wise boast in their wisdom, do not let the mighty boast in their might, do not let the wealthy boast in their wealth; but let those who boast boast in this, that they understand and know me, that I am the Lord…*"—Paul makes every effort to boast in matters that were inherently related to his

[3] For additional arguments in favor of military language in Paul, see Manuel A. Bagalawis, "Ministry As Warfare: An Exegesis of 2 Corinthians 10:2b-6," *AJPS* 3, no. 1 (2000), 12-13.
[4] Dieter Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 279.
[5] Holman Christian Standard Bible.

vision of the crucified Lord (see Phil. 2:6-11). Christ—the heavenly king—did not embody the kind of arrogance that earthly kings would normally embody; instead, Christ "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:7). Imitating Christ, then, Paul tries to boast only in things that are inherently related to "the Lord." He boasts about "labors," "imprisonments," "floggings," being "shipwrecked" (11:23-29)—it is such things that Paul "boasts" about. "Unlike the good fortunes, strong bodies, and intelligent minds that typify the heroes of praise, Paul boasts instead of his misfortunes, weakened body, and distress of mind. Instead of victorious naval battles or safe travels, he suffers adverse circumstances…"[6] Just when Paul wants to finish comparing himself to these "super-apostles," he decides to, nevertheless, move on to "visions and revelations."

At this point in the letter, Paul is already knee-deep in what he, only moments earlier, had called "foolishness" (11:1); by chapter 12, Paul is climactically headed towards the end of his foolish "boasting" (10:8, 13; 11:10, 16-18). Paul strategically places his *greatest* boast last, meandering his way to it slowly. If the "super-apostles" thought they had "visions and revelations" to share with the Corinthian congregation, Paul surely had "more." Paul shares with the Corinthian congregation an ecstatic experience he had involving the "third heaven," "paradise," and "inexpressible things" (12:2-4):

> I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise and heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell.

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[6] B. J. Oropeza, *Exploring Second Corinthians: Death and Life, Hardship and Rivalry*, Rhetoric of Religious Antiquity, Number 3 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 641.

Paul is *boasting* about an experience he had fourteen years ago. It is a rather foolish boast, says he, but, nonetheless, the Corinthians had brought him to it.

But is Paul, in fact, boasting? One recent biblical scholar argues that Paul is not boasting.[7] Instead of making it to the seventh heaven or the throne of God, Paula Gooder argues, Paul "only" made it to the third heaven, having had his heavenly journey abruptly interrupted by a "messenger of Satan." In Gooder's reading of the text, Paul's description does not end where other such "heavenly ascent" accounts normally end: at the *throne of God*.[8] In addition to this, argues Gooder, Paul likely embraced the cosmology found in *2 Enoch 3-22 [A]*. Therefore, she argues, Paul's final "boast" is just like all of his previous boasts: a "boast of weakness." (That is, it is not really a boast, but an admission that even Paul was not able to make it to the seventh heaven.) But is this reading of the text plausible? I do not think so. Paul is not belittling heavenly ascents or making fun of them. For Paul, the heavenly ascent was an experience he cherished, as I will now show.

First, Gooder must *presuppose* that Paul was (a) *aware* of *2 Enoch* (and related texts; and (b) that Paul *accepted* their cosmology. Nowhere does Paul mention a belief in seven or ten heavens; the only commentary we have regarding Paul's cosmology occurs here in 2 Corinthians 12 (and it certainly sounds like a *three-level* model).[9] In addition to this, there was

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[7] Similarly, Schmithals argues that Paul's heavenly ascent was not something he was boasting about [Walter Schmithals, *The Theology of the First Christians*, trans. O. C. Dean, Jr. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 129]. However, Schmithals engages the text in a wholly different manner, arguing, instead, that Paul's opponents were Gnostics who boasted in such mystical things as revelations and visions, while Paul himself did not entirely approve of them. "And if his opponents boast of their 'visions and revelations,' he too can be of service with such things, yet only in the context of a fool's speech, for he regards the fact that he was once transported into paradise as an unusual distinction but not as proof of his apostolic status (2 Cor. 12:1-10)" (Ibid.).

[8] Paula R. Gooder, *Only the Third Heaven? 2 Corinthians 12:1-10 and Heavenly Ascent*, LNTS 313 (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 190-211.

[9] "[F]or Paul the third heaven and paradise are the same place, or that paradise is located in the third heaven. Here Paul's perception of the celestial order is in harmony with the cosmology of *2 Enoch* (8:1-8) and the *Apocalypse of Moses* (40:2). For Paul, the third heaven may be the highest, though the tendency in later apocalyptic literature is to add heavens" (William Baird, "Visions, Revelation, and Ministry: Reflections on 2 Cor 12:1-5 and Gal 1:11-17," *JBL* 104, no. 4 [1985], 655.

vast disagreement as to how many heavens there were, making it all the more difficult to assume Paul accepted one model over another. "Some include five (3 Bar. 10-11; Apoc. Zeph. 1:1), seven (LAE 35.2; b. Hag. 12b), or ten (2 En. 3-22 [J])."[10] Second, in Paul's context, various apocalyptic traditions already spoke of three heavens (T. Levi 2.7-3.10; LAE 37.5; Apoc. Mos. 37.5, 40.1; 2 En. 8.8 [J,A]).[11] Why should we believe that he *did not* accept a three-level model over and against a five-, seven-, or ten-level model? Third, is Paul really making a "boast of weakness" in 2 Cor. 12:2-4? And is it necessary to assume that a "boast of weakness" implies "failure to make it to the seventh heaven"? If Paul, indeed, was making a boast of weakness, why did he fail to speak about this boast, as he did in the previous cases, in the first person? Why did Paul distance himself? Was it not because this "boast" was of a different sort? I think so. Paul was actually making a *legitimate boast* about going to the third heaven, a heaven that was, in his mind, the *climax* of his heavenly ascent. It was here that Paul made it to what he called "Paradise" (12:4).

Moreover, Paul's heavenly ascent ended in hearing things that even he could not share with his congregants—words so holy they could only be called "inexpressible things" [ἄρρητα ῥήματα]. (This is why, for *fourteen years* [!], the Corinthians had not heard of Paul's heavenly ascent.) What sort of revelation did Paul receive that he could not disclose its contents to his congregants? If the *point* of the boast was to show his Corinthian congregants that even he, Paul himself, *failed* to make it to the seventh heaven, is it not rather strange that Paul was, at the same time, *able* to receive a revelation that he deemed *too heavenly* to disclose?

On this note, Georgi correctly notes:

> Paul defines the receiving of ἄρρητα ῥήματα as the climax of his ecstasy. They belonged to the repertory of motifs of Hellenistic mysticism. Paul

[10] Oropeza, *Second Corinthians*, 665.
[11] Ibid.

> claims that—in contrast to himself—his opponents had not done justice to the unsaid and inexpressible character of those heavenly words. No human being was allowed to make them known, yet they apparently communicated them. Paul, on the contrary, keeps a distance from that experience. His peculiar style is partly related to the arcane and private nature of the experience.[12]

Paul, then, shares with the Corinthians an experience he had which was rather *positive*. Tabor asserts, "[Paul] does not reject such experiences; indeed, he must show that he has them 'more than you all' (2 Cor. 14:18)."[13] However, he *does* resort to a "boast of weakness." He resorts to it when he writes, "Therefore, to keep me from being too elated, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to torment me, to keep me from being too elated" (12:7). If Paul, as Gooder suggests, failed to make it to the seventh heaven, making his entire boast an ironic boast of weakness, why, then, does God allow a "messenger of Satan" to "torment" him in order to prevent Paul from being "too elated"? Would Paul be "too elated" for having failed to make it to the seventh heaven? Gooder's claim, *in light of the text itself*, is a rather wrong-headed interpretation that fails to hold water upon careful examination. *Contra* Gooder, in 2 Cor. 12:2-4 Paul made a heavenly ascent into the third heaven, which is to be identified with Paradise, a place where God allegedly resides. While there, Paul heard things he could not express, things that were too holy to disclose. Finally, to prevent Paul from thinking too highly of this *privileged experience*, God sent a messenger of Satan to torment Paul. In a succinct comment on this particular issue, Morray-Jones writes, "Nowhere does he [i.e., Paul] contest the validity of such experience [i.e., heavenly ascents]

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[12] Georgi, *The Opponents of Paul in Second Corinthians*, 282.
[13] James D. Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul's Ascent to Paradise in its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts*, Studies in Judaism (New York: University Press of America, 1986), 30-1.

in principle: indeed, to do so would be to undermine the very basis of his own apostolic claim."[14]

Another scholar, M. D. Goulder, has recently argued, in a rather ingenious manner, that Paul's heavenly ascent was (a) not, in fact, Paul's own but a friend's and (b) the heavenly ascent was mentioned by Paul only to reveal how opposed he was to the mystical practice. In Goulder's reading of the text, Paul maintained a distinction between "revelations" [ἀποκαλύψεις] and "visions" [ὀπτασίας]. Paul had many revelations but not any visions. In fact, in a rather bald-faced paragraph, Goulder states:

> Where Paul can compete is in αποκαλύψεις ["revelations"], the second category of heavenly experiences, incursions of the divine on earth—in fact he has had so many such experiences that God gave him the stake in the flesh to slake his pride. But the ὀπτασίαι ["visions"] were a most dangerous claim. Once it is accepted that a man has been to heaven, and has been given a message by an angel, his power is virtually unlimited. That is why Paul insists that his friend heard ἄρρητα ρήματα α ουκ εξόν άνθρώπφ λαλήσαι ["inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell"]; and why in early mediaeval Judaism adepts could hear the angels sing, but not speak.[15]

According to Goulder, Paul never made a heavenly ascent, and he never boasted about it. What he did do, instead, was relate the experience of some friend while denouncing it. The arguments given in favor of this view come from a variety of sources. For example, Goulder cites Johannine literature as being somewhat representative of early Christianity's stance regarding heavenly ascents. John 1:17 relates, "No one has ever seen God." The idea that

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[14] C. R. A. Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1-12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate—Part 2: Paul's Heavenly Ascent and Its Significance," *HTR* 86 (1993), 273.
[15] Michael Douglas Goulder, "The Visionaries of Laodicea," *JSNT* 43, (1991), 19.

someone could ascend to heaven and see God runs contrary to some of the writers of the New Testament. Jesus tells Nicodemus "No one has ascended into heaven" (John 3:13). Moreover, in the Deutero-Pauline letter, First Timothy, "Paul" writes regarding God that he "alone is immortal" and "lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see" (1 Tim. 6:16).[16] From passages such as these, Goulder concludes, in regards to heavenly ascents, "The riches of glory are not in heaven: they are in the saints, in us who believe, in Christ's indwelling in our hearts, and we should be to the praise of his glory. It is all very down-to-earth and Pauline, and remote from the raptures and ecstasies of the Jewish-Christian adepts."[17] Attempts to "see" God and have a heavenly journey are attempts to be an "elitist."[18] And Paul has no need for elitism within his churches. But is this a cogent argument in light of evidence to the contrary? For example, it is entirely possible that Paul never saw God; instead, as the text states itself (!), he had a "revelation *of*[19] the Lord" (2 Cor. 12:1; cf. 1 Cor. 9:1—"Am I not an apostle? Have I not *seen* Jesus our Lord?"). To equate Jesus with God is wholly unnecessary—and Goulder's entire argument hinges on this point. In addition to this, the dichotomy proposed by Goulder between ἀποκαλύψεις and ὀπτασίας is not supported by any external evidence; he creates the dichotomy by his

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16 Ibid., 20.
17 Ibid., 24. Italics original.
18 Ibid., 22.
19 I am reading Κυρίου in the phrase ἀποκαλύψεις Κυρίου ["revelations *of* the Lord"] as an *objective genitive*, as against reading it as a *subjective genitive/genitive of authorship* (in which case the translation would be "revelations *from* the Lord"). In favor of my position, which is the minority position, is C. R. A. Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1-12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate—Part 2: Paul's Heavenly Ascent and Its Significance," 268, n. 12. A. Plummer, who essentially errs on the side of calling Κυρίου in our passage here a "subjective genitive," nonetheless backtracks on his comment by further stating that "the subjective genitive would here be more certain, if αποκαλύψεις stood alone…but ὀπτασίαι Κυρίου cannot be thus resolved"; because "a revelation may be made without anything being *seen*" but "[o]n the other hand, not all visions are revelations" (*The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1903], 192. Italics original). Paul Barnett notes that the objective genitive is the view of most commentators; however, he further points out that Hughes argues in support of the view that Paul intends "both an objective and subjective sense" (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997], 558, n. 10).

interpretation of the passage, while supporting the interpretation by resorting to the presumed dichotomy—an entirely circular argument.

As we have seen, in 2 Cor. 10-13, Paul is "boasting" to his congregants in the face of opposition. However, he does not merely boast in the usual sense; rather, he *inverts* boasting in accordance with what he believes his Messiah, Jesus Christ would do (Phil. 2:6-11). Instead of boasting of strengths and accomplishments, Paul boasts in his failures and weaknesses; hence the scholarly phrase "boasts of weakness." For example, in the ancient Roman world, a prize was awarded to the first soldier who had scaled a wall during a military conflict. Such a one received the *corona muralis*. With that in mind, it has been suggested that Paul wrote 2 Cor. 11:32-33 in the most self-deprecating and ironic of spirits: instead of *going up* a city wall, as a brave soldier would have done, Paul, instead, under the eyes of King Aretas, was *let down* from a city wall *in a basket*! Judge writes: "[E]very man in antiquity would have known that the finest military award for valour was the *corona muralis* for the man who was first up the wall in the face of the enemy…[consequently,] Paul's point is devastatingly plain; he was first down."[20]

Paul, then, after boasting in his weaknesses (2 Cor. 11:16-33), followed by a legitimate boast of a heavenly ascent (2 Cor. 12:2-4), *returns* to his earlier boasts of weakness by reminding his audience that, despite his awesome experience, the Lord allowed a messenger of Satan to torment him (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

[20] Cited in J. A. Loubser, "Paul and the Politics of Apocalyptic Mysticism: An Exploration of 2 Cor 11:30-12:10," *Neotestamentica* 34 (2000), 193.

Paul and "The Gospel": Of Non-Human Origins and Revelations

For Paul's argument to have rhetorical force, Paul assumes his readers have certain subjective experiences he can appeal to. For example, in his epistles, when Paul's apostleship is doubted, Paul resorts to reminding his congregants and critics that it is in "the Gospel" alone that his claims are grounded. "But even if we or an angel from heaven should proclaim to you a gospel contrary to what we proclaimed to you, let that one be accursed!" (Gal. 1:8). What does the term "gospel" convey in Paul's epistles?[21] First and foremost, for Paul, "the gospel" is "not of human origin" (Gal. 1:11), and so, cannot be reduced to the "merely human" (1 Cor. 3:4). Second, the gospel—while being proclaimed by a human—not only is it *not* human but is also, in fact, given by a "revelation of Jesus Christ" [ἀποκαλύψεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ](Gal. 1:12); it is that which only "God has revealed" [ἀπεκάλυψεν ὁ θεὸς] (1 Cor. 2:10). For Paul, then, the gospel is not something one could simply learn about or hear about; it must be, in some sense, conveyed to a human by *supra-natural* means.[22]

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[21] In this paper, when discussing "Pauline" epistles, I will be referring to the seven genuine epistles that scholars have by and large accepted as having had come from Paul. The literature on Paul's genuine letters is vast. Allow me to simply cite none other than Rudolf Bultmann himself on this matter. "As sources for Paul's theology only the undoubtedly genuine letters of Paul may serve: Rom., I-II Cor., Gal., Phil., I Thess., Phlm." (*Theology of the New Testament*, vol. 1, trans. Kendrick Grobel [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951], 190.

[22] I am disagreeing with William Baird, "Visions," who writes, concluding his assessment: "What do these exegetical observations imply for Paul's understanding of revelatory experience as ground for ministry? Negatively, they indicate that Paul refuses to found his ministry on private, ecstatic religion—even though he can claim religious experiences of that sort" (661). This is an entirely wrong-headed claim. Paul's ministry is, in point of fact, grounded in the supra-natural revelation of Jesus Christ and nothing less. To fail to miss this point is the textbook definition of *eisegesis*. For Paul, the supra-natural revelation of Jesus Christ comes with ethical implications. The two are inseparable. When Paul criticizes ecstatic experiences, such as those occurring in the Corinthian congregation (1 Cor. 12-14), he does so because the ethical dimension implied by a genuine revelation of Jesus Christ is wholly lacking. The Corinthians are practicing "sexual immorality" (5:1), getting "drunk" (11:21), speaking in tongues and yet full of "jealousy and quarrelling" (3:3), lacking in "love" (13:1), etc. Paul is *not* against ecstatic experiences or revelations of Jesus or visions as such; he *is* against so-called "revelations" that do not produce ethical results. My position has more in common with Gordon D. Fee, who writes: "Having purposely turned the insurgents' boast in their accomplishment on its head by 'boasting' in his still greater 'accomplishments' for Christ in the form of every manner of weakness, he now turns to their (apparent) boast in Spiritual experiences, especially those of a truly extraordinary kind…The unfolding of the narrative shows that *Paul is not denigrating experiences such as the one he describes*; what he finds uncomfortable is talking about them at all—because for him they are personal and private—and especially therefore making

According to Paul, what exact *means* did God use to accomplish this feat of "gospel transmission"? In Galatians, Paul rather adamantly reminds his congregants—who, like the Corinthians, were being "bewitched" (3:1), and so, were "turning to a different gospel" (1:6)—that "[i]t was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly exhibited as crucified" [οἷς κατ' ὀφθαλμοὺς Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς προεγράφη ἐσταυρωμένος] (3:1). How could the Galatians have seen Jesus "publicly exhibited as crucified"? Surely, Paul does not mean that his congregants were present at the Crucifixion! This strange phrase, while being interpreted by some scholars as "vivid language" used within the context of "metaphor" construction,[23] could also be taken at face value: the Galatians *did*, in fact, *see*—whether with their physical eyes or in a mystical trance, I do not know—Jesus Christ crucified. "The Galatians…have experienced the crucifixion firsthand, and therefore they, like Paul, live in the reality of such an experience."[24] In effect, then, Paul seems to be suggesting by way of blunt reminder, that the Galatians themselves had received the gospel by supra-natural means: Paul was commissioned by Jesus Christ to preach "it" to them, and this "preaching" involved some form of mystical experience in which the congregants beheld a crucified Christ. In the blunt words of Thurston, "Whether we are comfortable with it or not, the N[ew] T[estament] church had wide experience of what modern psychologists might call 'paranormal' experiences."[25]

If Paul expects his Galatian congregation to have the capacity *to relate* to such "mystical experiences," is Paul also expecting his Corinthian congregation to relate likewise? Schmithals argues that Paul's opponents in the Corinthian congregation, whom he identifies

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them some kind of criterion for authentic apostleship" (*God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* [Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994], 348; italics mine, added for emphasis).

[23] Richard Manly Adams, "'The Israel of God': The Narrative Rhetoric of Paul's Letter to the Galatians," (PhD diss., Emory University, 2012), 271, n. 182.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Bonnie Bowman Thurston, "'Caught Up To the Third Heavens' and 'Helped By the Spirit': Paul and the Mystery of Prayer," *SCJ* 11 (2008), 224.

as Gnostics, were, in fact, capable of mystical experiences.[26] "[T]he Corinthian Gnostics knew and practiced ecstatic raptures."[27] If the Corinthians could not relate to out-of-body experiences, heavenly ascents, and the hearing of "inexpressible things," Paul's words incontestably would have fallen on deaf—and rather perplexed—ears. Therefore, in order for Paul's rhetorical language to work within the context of the critical opponents[28] he faced in 2 Cor., it is best to assume that both Paul and his congregants *experienced* and *knew of* such things as heavenly ascents, appearances of Jesus Christ, etc.

Elsewhere, Paul is adamant about his having seen the Lord. In 1 Cor. 9:1, for example, he rhetorically asks, "Have I not *seen* [ἑόρακα] Jesus our Lord?" Tabor correctly notes, "Here and in 1 Cor. 15:8-10 he [i.e., Paul] is concerned to show that his office as an apostle stems from his vision of the resurrected Christ…"[29] In a similar vein, Schmithals writes, "The fact that Paul did not separate or even distinguish between the calling to the apostolic office and the visionary 'revelation of Jesus Christ' has been rightly established by many investigators."[30] Therefore, it makes perfect sense when Paul was "remind[ing]" the Corinthians of "the gospel (1 Cor. 15:1), that he, again, called to mind the

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[26] The significance of Paul's mystical experience and its relation to the experiences the community at Corinth had is correctly picked up by James Buchanan Wallace, who writes: "When one examines not only Paul's construal of Christian experiences but also those he assumes his converts to have undergone, one discovers that his ascent to heaven is not completely unlike certain aspects of the communities' experiences. These threads of connection between Paul's experience and his communities' experience have often been ignored" (*Snatched into Paradise (2 Cor 12:1-10): Paul's Heavenly Journey in the Context of Early Christian Experience* [Berlin: De Gruyter, 2011], 30).

[27] Walter Schmithals, *Gnosticism in Corinth: An Investigation of the Letters to the Corinthians,* trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 210.

[28] For a list of scholars who argue that Paul's readers were also his opponents, see Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1-12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate—Part 2: Paul's Heavenly Ascent and Its Significance," 269, n. 14.

[29] James D. Tabor, *Things Unutterable,* 20.

[30] Walter Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 26. Schmithals goes on to reference G. Sass, H. Schlier, and J. C. Margot in his footnote (n. 28). Later on, Schmithals will argue that even if Paul's own sense of apostolic authority was not to be grounded in visions and revelations, his opponents, however, viewed such things as an "essential characteristic sign of apostolic authority (Ibid., 37). The point here is that, in the ancient, first-century world of Corinth, Christians (at least some of them) were already entrenched in the belief that an *apostle* becomes such only by means of divine approval, approval which involves "visions and revelations of Jesus Christ." And these "visions and revelations" were by no means metaphorical!

"seeing/appearing"[31] of Jesus Christ. "Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me [ὤφθη κἀμοί]." While the verb ὁράω ["to see, behold"] only occurs in four contexts in the seven authentic Pauline letters, in every case it could be taken to mean "a seeing with the [physical] eyes."[32] In many cases, when Paul is faced with opposition or when he is simply reminding his listeners of "the gospel," he resorts to grounding his version of the gospel in a "revelation of Jesus Christ." In addition, it seems that such "revelations" were *not* to be taken "metaphorically"; as in Galatians 3:1 and 1 Corinthians 15:5-8, Jesus Christ was being either "publicly exhibited" or making "appear[ances]" to his devotees. For Paul, the gospel was inherently tied to a revelation of Jesus Christ. "Christ is himself the revealed gospel…Christ reveals and what he reveals is nothing other than himself."[33]

In 2 Cor. 12:2-4, Paul is, by way of forced irony, "boasting" about a mystical experience he had some fourteen years ago. The point of mentioning this fact had a lot to do with Paul's idea of what it meant for God to "reveal" the "gospel" to a human being: "the gospel" was grounded in *experience*. It was not of human origin, but of divine origin. It was not something man could concoct using earthly materials like an alchemist; instead, the gospel was entirely *supra-natural*. "Paul is pressed to boast of his revelations precisely because his opponents were making claims on the basis of their own ecstatic experiences." Like Paul, the Corinthians, along with the so-called "super-apostles," were living in a "world of magic and mysticism."[34]

At the end of his fiery dispute with the opponents he faced in 2 Corinthians 10-13, Paul did what he did in Galatians and even in 1 Corinthians: he resorted to mystical,

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[31] ὤφθη is the aorist indicative passive third person singular verb of ὁράω ["to see"], which could be translated, being in the *passive* voice, "to be seen."
[32] The verb only occurs in Romans 15:21, 1 Corinthians 9:1; 15:5-8, and 1 Thess. 5:15.
[33] Schmithals, *The Office of Apostle in the Early Church*, 31.
[34] Tabor, *Things Unutterable*, ix.

subjective experience. He reminded them that it was ultimately God who appointed Paul as their "authority" (10:8).[35] His mystical experience further endowed his life with a stamp of divine approval: he had been to the "third heaven" and back; he had heard things that no man could express, even if one tried. Paul was certainly better than the so-called "super-apostles." And, precisely, because he was better than they, he would, staying true to the Pauline spirit, end on a self-effacing note, a "boast of weakness." After relaying the mystical experience, Paul would go on to discuss the "messenger of Satan," his prayers to the Lord, and the Lord's response. And what was the Lord's response? "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness" (12:9). Even while boasting—boasting which was, albeit, forced upon him by his opponents—Paul found room to express the Christian ethic of inversion. As in the Philippian hymn, so in 2 Cor.: a Christian is one who, like Christ, has "emptied himself" (Phil. 2:7).

Paul could appeal to subjective experiences in order for his argument to have rhetorical force. But this alone did not carry the weight of his argument. In addition to subjective experiences, Paul wrote to an ancient audience who was inundated in heavenly ascent texts. It is to these parallel texts that I now turn.

Heavenly Ascents in the Ancient World

In his commentary, B. J. Oropeza writes, "Parallels to Paul's heavenly ascent in ancient Mediterranean discourse are legion."[36] The concept of an out-of-body experience or simply a journey into the afterlife was not unheard of in the ancient Greco-Roman world. Already around 380 BCE, in Plato's *Myth of Er* (*Rep.* 10.614A-621C), he relates a tale regarding a

[35] For a similar exposition, see Tabor, *Things Unutterable*, 33-35.
[36] Oropeza, *Exploring Second Corinthians,* 660.

soldier who died during a battle only to have his body remain un-decomposed for ten days. On the twelfth day, the soldier awakened on his funeral pyre to tell of his mystical journey into the afterlife, how he witnessed the sorts of judgments our souls faced when we died, how they would be punished, and the reincarnation that was to follow.[37] Likewise, Plutarch relates how a certain Thespesius had an out-of-body experience (*Sera* 22-23 [563D-568A]). Plutarch writes:

> For when his sense first left his body, it seemed to him as if he had been some pilot flung from the helm by the force of a storm into the midst of the sea. Afterwards, rising up again above water by degrees, so soon as he thought he had fully recovered his breath, he looked about him every way, as if one eye of his soul had been open.[38]

Thespesius was, allegedly, an evil man who was prone to "leading a debauched and intemperate life." He inquired of the Oracle if his life would get better at some future point. The Oracle replied that it would be better with him if he died. In a strange turn of events, he ended up falling off of a precipice, and died. Three days later, as he was about to be buried, he ended up coming to himself, in turn, relating his vision of the afterlife. After the mystical experience, which is strikingly similar to the *Myth of Er*, Thespesius began leading a life so exemplary, his peers found him to be interesting simply by virtue of the fact that they could hardly believe "the cause of so great an alteration." In other words, the journey into the afterlife turned an evil man into a most just person, being deemed a miracle in and of itself. The ethical change served as empirical proof that *something* did happen to Thespesius; and that *something* was probably the journey into the afterlife he so claimed he had.

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[37] Oropeza, *Exploring Second Corinthians*, 667.
[38] Plutarch, *Plutarch's Morals*, trans. William W. Goodwin (Boston: Little Brown, 1874).

In another text, Apuleius's *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass),* dating back to 170 C. E.,[39] the protagonist Lucius, after having accidentally turned himself into a donkey by means of magic, is restored to human form by the goddess Isis. Towards the end of the novel, Lucius is inspired to join her cult. "I had determined to demand participation in the rites more insistently than usual, on the grounds that it was now my due (11.22)."[40] During the initiation process, Mithras, the high priest, showed secret books to Lucius.

> After the ceremony of opening had been celebrated with the prescribed ritual and the morning sacrifice had been completed, he brought out from the secret part of the sanctuary some books inscribed with unknown characters. Some used the shapes of all sorts of animals to represent abridged expressions of liturgical language; in others, the ends of the letters were knotted and curved like wheels or interwoven like vine-tendrils to protect their meaning from the curiosity of the uninitiated (11.22).[41]

After this, Lucius was bathed in the baths, had the priest perform the cleansing "purifactory sprinkling" (11.23).[42] After the purification rite involving a bath, the priest led Lucius back to the temple where he found himself at the feet of the goddess. At this point, Lucius was given instructions "too holy for utterance" (11.23).[43] The words were not necessarily incomprehensible. In the words of Wallace, "Nothing in the text suggests that they cannot be comprehended; rather, they are to be guarded as too sacred to be revealed to the uninitiated."[44]

Apuleius continues:

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[39] For this date, see Wallace, *Snatched into Paradise,* 71, n. 118.
[40] Apuleius, *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass), Volume II: Books 7-11*, ed. and trans. J. Arthur Hanson, Loeb Classical Library 453 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 277.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Ibid., 279.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Wallace, *Snatched into Paradise,* 73.

> Perhaps, my zealous reader, you are eager to learn what was said and done next. I would tell if it were permitted to tell; you would learn if it were permitted to hear. But both ears and tongue would incur equal guilt, the latter from its unholy talkativeness, the former from their unbridled curiosity. Since your suspense, however, is perhaps a matter of religious longing, I will not continue to torture you and keep you in anguish. Therefore listen, but believe these things are true (11.23).[45]

What is it that occurred to the protagonist Lucius that was so holy, something so strange that he was not permitted to talk about? Apuleius writes that Lucius had some sort of heavenly ascent experience. "In the middle of the night I saw the sun flashing with bright light. I came face to face with the gods below and the gods above and paid reverence to them from close at hand" (11.23).[46] As to what else he had seen, had heard or had experienced, *that* Apuleius fails to pontificate on. Like Paul, Apuleius recognizes the inherent problems with discussing something that, as in his protagonist's case, simply *should not* be discussed.

Having briefly looked at Greek texts, I would now like to turn my attention to two texts that have even more in common with Paul's heavenly ascent: some rabbinic advice on inducing a mystical journey from *Hekhalot Rabbati* and *The Ascension of Isaiah*. These parallel texts, from centuries before and after Paul, confirm Oropeza's comment that such parallels are, indeed, "legion."

Ancient Jewish sources, like the Greek texts, betray knowledge of heavenly ascents. One such tale comes to us from rabbinic literature, being allied with "merkabah

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[45] Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, 279.
[46] Ibid.

mysticism."[47] According to Morray-Jones, in *Hekhalot Rabbati*, Nehunyah b. ha-Qanah reveals to his fellow peers how to "make the visionary journey possible" in which the mystic finds himself in the presence of the throne-chariot [*merkabah*] of God.[48] Ferguson succinctly writes, "The ascent was an ecstatic vision in an altered state of consciousness but without the mystic's loss of individuality."[49] The mystical journey was made possible by implementing what seemed to be, in the words of Morray-Jones, "a magical, apparently autohypnotic, method of inducing trance."[50] The mystic must say specific things at specific times in a specific manner. For example, ha-Qanah recommends adjuring the Prince of Countenance "a hundred and twelve times."[51] In addition to this, if a mistake is made—that is, if the mystic adjures the Prince more times or less—"his blood is on his own head."[52] Once in trance, the mystic is taken through seven palaces and is given the names of the guardians of the gateway, and these guardians "only allow the traveler to pass if they are shown the correct magic seals," seals having "magical names of God."[53]

In these mystical, rabbinic texts, lengthy portions are devoted to what appear to be "ecstasy-inducing hymns and prayers."[54] In order for the ascent to occur, the mystic must be able to induce himself into a trance by methodical means. Finally, on the journey to the "throne-chariot (of God)," the mystic must regurgitate ecstatic prayers taught by angels.

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[47] C. R. A. Morray-Jones, "Paradise Revisited (2 Cor 12:1-12): The Jewish Mystical Background of Paul's Apostolate; Part 1: The Jewish Sources," *HTR* 86:2 (1993), 177. Many other scholars believe Paul's experience had similarities with *merkabah* mysticism, see, for example, Michael J. Gorman, *Apostle of the Crucified Lord: A Theological Introduction to Paul and His Letters* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004), 328; J. W. Bowker, "'Merkabah' Visions and the Visions of Paul," *JSS* 16 (1971): 157-73.
[48] Ibid., 180.
[49] Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 511.
[50] Ibid., 181.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Ibid., 181-2.
[54] Ibid., 182.

Already in the mishnah-lemma *m. Hag.* 2.1 there is the command not to discuss the *merkabah* "with an individual, unless he were wise and understands [understood] from his (own) knowledge."[55] In other words, the text suggests that discussing the *merkabah* with a group of people, in general, was forbidden. Morray-Jones has called this "the *merkabah* restriction."[56] Is this akin to Paul's hesitance to discuss his own heavenly ascent? While it is difficult to find agreement on the date of these texts—were these traditions in circulation in the first-century?—it is safe to conclude that Paul's heavenly ascent was not, by any means, entirely unique.[57] The rabbinic texts suggest that others—either during Paul's lifetime or possibly afterwards—were (a) experiencing heavenly ascents and (b) having hesitancy in discussing the *merkabah* (similar to Paul's hesitancy in discussing the "inexpressible") with others. Moreover, the Babylonian Talmud—along with *Song of Songs Rabbah*, the Jerusalem Talmud, and the Tosefta—recollects a tale beginning with "four men went into *pardes*."[58] Paul was not the only one, at least in the ancient Jewish world, to have been to "Paradise"/*pardes*.[59] In the words of Robert M. Price:

> [T]he motif of a visionary journey to heaven or paradise must have been well-known to the apostle. Much of the contemporary apocalyptic literature known to us deals with the ascension into heaven of various ancient patriarchs and prophets including Enoch, Ezra, Baruch, Moses, and Levi. They return to divulge what they have seen and heard. They have learned "secrets" pertaining to the end of the age, the hierarchy of angels, astronomy,

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[55] Ibid., 185.
[56] Ibid., 187.
[57] Ibid., 184-185. "[T]he *merkabah* restriction is an ancient unit of tradition that was inherited by the rabbis of the first century CE from the apocalyptic tradition…" (Ibid., 187).
[58] Ibid., 210-11.
[59] See Oropeza, *Exploring Second Corinthians*, 666. "The text makes better sense if Paul reached his intended destination in the third heaven, which he equates with paradise, and his reluctant boast in 12:1-6 has to do with reaching this grand level" (Ibid.).

> and calendar-lore. In our passage, as elsewhere in his correspondence, Paul evidences familiarity with this world of ideas.[60]

When it came to mystical experiences, heavenly ascents, and other related phenomena, Paul was speaking from "familiarity with this world of ideas." In paradoxical fashion, however, instead of openly "divulging" secrets, Paul hesitates much like the *merkabah* mystics. Ancient readers would have taken the heavenly ascent, and the things disclosed during it, literally. The experience was not seen as metaphorical or symbolic.

Next, I want to consider the pseudepigraphal writing known as *The Ascension and Martyrdom of Isaiah*.[61] The sections relevant to our analysis of 2 Cor. 12 are found in 6:1-11:4. In chapter 6 of the work, the text describes a scene in which Isaiah is summoned into the presence of Hezekiah. While in the king's palace, Isaiah begins to pray "in the Holy Spirit" and enters what seems to be a mystical trance.

> And as he was speaking in the Holy Spirit in the hearing of all, he became silent and his mind was taken up from him and he saw not the men that stood before him. Though his eyes indeed were open. Moreover his lips were silent *and the mind in his body was taken up from him*. But his breath was in him; for he was seeing a vision (6:10-12).[62]

An angel then visits Isaiah from the seventh firmament (6:13), indicating that what Isaiah is about to see is, literally, "not from this world" (v. 15); and, perhaps further implying, that what is about to be described cannot be fully communicated to those inhabiting *this* (i.e., earthly) firmament. Those around Isaiah did not hear anything, for they were not granted

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[60] Robert M. Price, "Punished In Paradise (An Exegetical Theory On 2 Corinthians 12:1-10)," *JSNT* 7, (1980), 34.
[61] The following citations from *The Ascension* are taken from R. H. Charles, *The Ascension of Isaiah* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1900).
[62] Italics mine.

access to such divine mysteries. However, a few in the king's court were deemed worthy by God to have these mysteries disclosed to them. Why? Because "these also were doers of righteousness, and the sweet smell of the Spirit was upon them" (v. 17). The text suggests, as we've already seen in the rabbinic "*merkabah* restriction," that not everyone could be made privy to divine revelations, mystical trances, heavenly ascent content, etc. Those who were able to *hear* such things and understand such things were those who had "the sweet smell of the Spirit" upon them.

Isaiah goes on to relate how his vision of a "glorious angel" (7:1) could not be conveyed. "I cannot describe the glory of that angel" (v. 2). After this glorious vision, the angel alludes to Isaiah leaving his earthly body; and when he does leave the body, Isaiah will come to know the name of the angel; however, the angel also adds Isaiah will not be able to recall the name "because thou wilt return into this thy body" (v. 4). That is, while Isaiah's "mind is taken up," he will have access to the angel's name, but once he is back "down," he will no longer remember the name.

On the way to the seventh heaven, Isaiah passes by the "angels of Satan" (v. 9). In addition, along the way, the text states that Isaiah was "undergoing (successive) transformation" (v. 10) as he was getting nearer and nearer to God's throne. Eventually, Isaiah makes it to the seventh heaven, which has the throne (the equivalent to the *merkabah*) in it. Along the way, strange sensations Isaiah allegedly experiences. For example, once he is in the seventh heaven, Isaiah hears praises sent up to God that "are not only heard, but seen" (10:5). (How does one *see* sounds? Is this like reading music or…?) While Isaiah was in the seventh heaven, he received a *revelation*. At this point in the manuscript, the text has

certainly suffered at the hands of Christians.[63] The revelations include a "prediction" regarding the life and death of Jesus Christ (9:26). The point, however, is that secrets are disclosed in the presence of the throne of God. Here, in the highest of highest heavens, Isaiah is made privy to things no man had ever heard. In summarizing the main points of the text, Tabor reduces them to roughly ten:

1. A mortal is taken up to the highest heaven.
2. The ascent is an extraordinary privilege.
3. The way is fraught with danger and can only be successfully undertaken through divine permission and power.
4. There is a great distance between the earthly and heavenly realms with increasing beauty and splendor (or danger for the uninvited) as one moves up, and an increasing sense of alienation from the world below.
5. The ascent itself is a transforming experience in which the candidate is progressively glorified.
6. The climax of the journey is an encounter with the highest god.
7. One is given secret revelations, or shown mysteries.
8. The ascent is followed by a return to the world below to live on as a mortal.
9. What is seen and heard can be selectively passed on to those who are worthy.
10. The one who has ascended faces the opposition of lower spiritual powers upon his return.[64]

As can be seen from the above points, Isaiah's journey has many parallels with Paul's own. In the ancient world—whether parts of this text (or all) were written *after* Paul's

[63] Tabor, *Things Unutterable*, 85. "The *Ascension of Isaiah*, sections which are dated to the first and second centuries C.E…." (Ibid.).
[64] Tabor, *Things Unutterable*, 87.

account is not entirely the concern of this paper—there was an abundance of heavenly ascent texts. From Plato to Plutarch, from ha-Qanah to *The Ascension of Isaiah*—from the Greeks to the Jews to the Christians—heavenly ascents were part and parcel of *that* world. Paul's heavenly ascent in 2 Cor. 12 is no different. It is a product of its religious environment. "The text presupposes that world of magic and mysticism, apocalyptic hopes, multiple realms of heaven populated with angels and demons, and reports of visions and revelations."[65] If ancient readers read the text literally, understanding it to relate an authentic, if not physical, journey into heaven, how does this text make sense to a modern reader who, as is almost certainly the case, does not share such assumptions? One way of making this intelligible is by taking Paul's comment on the "inexpressibility" of the experience seriously. It is to this comment that I now turn.

The Mystical Experience as Inexpressible and Unutterable

When Paul related his heavenly ascent, mystical experience, he used the aorist passive participle ἁρπαγέντα ["having been caught up"] from the verb ἁρπάζω ["to be caught up"] to describe how he got to the third heaven/paradise.[66] In addition to this verse, this verb only occurs in 1 Thes. 4:17 within the Pauline corpus. Loubser comments that the participle could "refer to shamanic rapture, achieved through self-discipline and exercise or induced by fasting and praying over long periods (cf. Apoc. Mos. 37:5; Wisd. Sol. 4:11)."[67] If this is the case, Paul is certainly placing his experience *within* the mystical, heavenly ascent tradition. Additionally, Paul is likely familiar with the heavenly messages such experiences were usually

[65] Tabor, *Things Unutterable*, ix.
[66] Ibid., 194. "'Third heaven'…is most likely a semantic equivalent of 'paradise'…" (Ibid.).
[67] Ibid., 193.

accompanied by. Paul says that he did, in fact, hear things, but he could not relate nor disclose the contents of *his* heavenly message.

In doing so, it appears that Paul is implementing another feature in his argument with his opponents: the element of anti-climax. Instead of offering them a total rebuttal, something they could, in turn, respond to, Paul, by way of further irony, gives them ἄρρητα ῥήματα ("inexpressible things"). That is, now the opponents in Corinth cannot *respond* to Paul's claims; all they must do is accept what he said as true (cf. 2 Cor. 11:31; 12:6)—for they *cannot* respond to an *unexpressed* argument! "Thus far no parallels of the phrase *arrheta rhemata* have been found—this may be a newly coined expression, but it clearly indicates a mystical experience that defies definition."[68] However, "[t]he word ἄρρητα is found here only in Biblical Greek, but is fairly common in classical Greek of sacred names, mysteries, etc."[69]

Loubser argues that the phrase *arrheta rhemata* conveys at least three things: "the revelations (a) are not human achievements in the first place, (b) cannot be objectified, and (c) cannot be communicated."[70] It is very likely that Paul tried to convey a *both/and* rather than an *either/or* sense when employing this "newly coined expression"; that is, instead of reading the phrase as meaning "unspeakable" (KJV) *or* "inexpressible" (NIV), the phrase should be taken to convey both senses: what Paul heard was *both* "unspeakable" (as "the *merkabah* restriction" relates) *and* "inexpressible." Even if Paul could express using human language what he had heard, he would not do so. Equally, Oropeza writes:

> When ἄρρητα ["inexpressible" or "unutterable"] is coupled with οὐκ ἐξὸν ["not permitted"], the nuance of inexpressible words might capture the meaning of the former term and impermissible the latter term in the sense of

[68] Ibid., 195. Italics original.
[69] Plummer, *The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, 197.
[70] Ibid.

> being too sacred to speak. These dual aspects are captured well in 2 En. 22.1-3 [J], where Enoch in the tenth heaven sees the 'face of the Lord,' whose being is incomprehensible and face is not to be talked about.[71]

Oropeza's claim further supports my argument that here in the midst of Paul's argument regarding his experience, the words he hears are (a) inexpressible and (b) unutterable. Tabor likewise concludes, "To be taken up to heaven, to hear and see things 'impossible to express,' and which 'one is not permitted to utter,' was a privilege of the highest order."[72] A short anecdote from Philo relates a story of "men biting off their tongues to avoid disclosing 'ta arréta.'"[73] All that going to show the unutterable nature of *the unutterable*!

In addition to seeing Paul's boasting as endorsing mystical experiences, some scholars, like Loubser, argue that Paul was also offering a biting critique. *Contra* Loubser, Paul is offering a critique of heavenly ascents/mystical experiences akin to his rather caustic statements made in 1 Cor. 12-14 regarding *glossolalia*.[74] Instead, for Paul, while the heavenly ascent is a cherished sacred experience—something one could, in fact, *boast* about—Paul is given a "messenger of Satan" to *inhibit* such boasting. Yes, the mystical experience was something to be proud of; however, a "messenger of Satan" would not allow it.

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[71] Oropeza, *Exploring Second Corinthians*, 662.
[72] Tabor, *Things Unutterable,* 21.
[73] Ibid., 122.
[74] Loubser, "Paul and the Politics," 198. "This defence [of "boasting in weaknesses"] amounts to a critique of mystic-apocalyptic experience. While not denying such experiences completely, the apostle relativises them by introducing the critique of weakness, of the cross. However, his primary aim is not against mystic experiences as such, but against those boasting of it. In this regard, *his critique of revelations and dream oracles does not differ substantially from his critique of wisdom and glossolalia in 1 Corinthians*…" (Ibid., *italics mine*). I disagree with his final sentence; I do not think that Paul's *critique of glossolalia* is being, similarly, employed here. That would, in essence, reduce Paul's mystical experience to something "pathetic" and "derogatory," resulting in a Paul being persecuted by a "messenger of Satan" for gaining the ability to boast about…an epic failure? That makes no sense within the context of 2 Corinthians, 1 Corinthian's rhetoric notwithstanding.

The Rhetoric of Mystical Religious Experience and the Function of Language: Paul's Heavenly Ascent as a Test Case

As we have seen, 2 Cor. 10-13 forms a relatively tightly packed pericope within the epistle. In the pericope, Paul was combatting opponents who had infiltrated his Corinthian congregation, making claims that they were vis-à-vis Paul "super-apostles." Paul's apostleship was under attack; his reputation on the line; his presence and form of speech maligned. After having resorted to "boasts of weakness," Paul found himself in a tight spot: should he move on to "visions and revelations of the Lord"? He chose to do so. In a critical point in his argument, Paul brought into the discussion an experience he had regarding a "heavenly ascent." He related how he, speaking of himself in the third person, was caught up to the third heaven—namely, Paradise—and how he heard "inexpressible things."

What rhetorical effect did Paul expect having related to his Corinthian audience (a) a heavenly ascent and (b) having heard "inexpressible things"? Did Paul expect the Corinthians to relate to his heavenly ascent or, at the very least, find it intelligible? That is, did they, too, have similar experiences?

In addition to this, what rhetorical purpose would the mere mention of the "inexpressible" serve? Paul mentions the fact that he heard things, but, for inexplicable reasons, refuses to disclose *what* he heard. Did he hear something that *could*, in theory, be communicated using human language to his congregation and chose not to? (That is, Paul heard something that *could be expressed using human speech* but the contents of the message were confidential and private, not to be shared with anyone else, being "unutterable.") Or, instead, did Paul truly hear things that were "inexpressible," things which no human could articulate using language?

As the above exposition has shown, Paul expected his Corinthian congregation to relate to his "heavenly ascent" because such "mystical" experiences were *common* for his congregants. In other words, the Corinthians would have been familiar with such "heavenly ascents" based on *subjective experience*, especially in light of other mystical experiences related to us by Paul in Galatians and 1 Corinthians. In addition, it is possible that the Corinthians would have been familiar with other ancient texts that discussed such experiences (1-2 Enoch, Apoc. Zeph., 3 Bar., Test. Levi., Asc. Isaiah, etc.). These texts would have been used to promote the normality of "heavenly ascents."

Moreover, Paul's mention of "inexpressible things" allowed him to maintain a level of superiority over the so-called "super-apostles"—unlike them, he could not disclose the contents of his revelation for the contents were (a) sacred/unutterable *and* (b) inexpressible. Paul's heavenly ascent was meant for Paul and Paul alone. This is why, even after having served the Corinthian congregation for years, he had failed to share his experience with them. The rhetorical effect of using this language was to create a certain distance between Paul and his congregants. He was, after all, their "paren[t]" (12:14); he was the one who felt a "divine jealousy" for the "chaste virgin" he was going to present in marriage to Christ (11:2). The distance created here was to remind the Corinthians of a *spiritual hierarchy* in which Paul functioned as the more prominent figure, one who *first* preached the gospel *to them*; they, on the other hand, did *not* first preach it to him (10:14).

If, indeed, mystical experiences were rather common for Paul and his congregations, and his congregants could be adjured to recall these experiences, how do others—such as moderns—relate to Paul's comments in 2 Corinthians 12:2-4? That is, if Paul's rhetoric is dependent upon a personal, *subjective* experience of either (a) "the gospel"; or (b) the "publicly exhibited" and "crucified" Christ; or (c) other such "mystical experiences," how do

others, who have never had such experiences, understand Paul's language? That is, in reading this text, how am I persuaded? Is it possible for us to (a) relate to Paul's language; and (b) be persuaded by it *without* the related *subjective* (and usually *mystical*) experiences? And if we cannot relate to the experience, because we have not had one, is it possible to find the language in 2 Cor. 12:2-4 *intelligible*?

I have argued thus far that the Corinthians understood Paul, in however limited a fashion, because they lived in an environment that was not as hostile to heavenly ascents, mystical experiences, etc., as we are today. Contemporaries of Paul would have found his language somewhat ordinary by virtue of being familiar with heavenly ascent stories, visions, prophecies, and their own mystical experiences. The words employed by Paul were words that were *used* in that ancient world. They were not merely talked about in academic articles written by detached and neutral armchair theologians. The Holy Spirit, in its infinite array of manifestations, was a *living reality* for Paul and his contemporaries (i.e., the audience hearing or reading his letter). When Paul mentioned a "third heaven," this was not the "third heaven" discussed at a *Society of Biblical Literature* meeting; this was the other-worldly place that people, like Paul, actually *visited*.

As we have seen, from Plato's *Myth of Er* to Isaiah's ascent into the various heavens, the ancient world was familiar with heavenly ascents. Paul could talk about a heavenly ascent because his audience would have found his language intelligible. He was not, as it were, writing to them about quantum mechanics and the double-slit experiment. In fact, they did not merely find his language intelligible; they could be adjured to recall their own various experiences of Jesus Christ. Contemporaries of Paul spoke his language, were familiar with books he had read, participated in his cultural biases, and could ask him to visit them if the need so arose. Whether Paul was joking or being serious, this he could have clarified in

person. For example, maybe Paul was, in fact, making fun of heavenly ascents as he was poking fun at the phenomenon of glossolalia in 1 Corinthians 14:19? It is entirely possible for Paul to have been asked by his readers to clarify what he was doing in 2 Cor. 12. Was he boasting about his experience? Or was he making fun of such experiences? Or was he, as Gooder suggested, describing a failure to reach the seventh heaven, and, hence, articulating a "boast of weakness"?

Language involves more than just words, signs that point to something else. Language involves the use of the human body with its various facial expressions, tones of voice, hand gestures, etc. Language, then, cannot simply be reduced to a text. A text as complicated as ours cannot be fully appreciated unless we critically examine the ways in which language functions; the ways in which it shows us what *can* and what *cannot* be said. It is to Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, and how it can illuminate our understanding of this text, that I now turn.

Chapter Two: Wittgenstein's Philosophy and Paul's Mysticism

The "Early" Wittgenstein: Using the *Tractatus* to Navigate Mystical Experiences

In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein penned, by means of aphorisms structured around seven principle propositions,[75] a philosophical text mostly concerned with language's relation to logic,[76] philosophy, and mathematics. For the sake of clarity and brevity, I will mostly reflect on sections of the *Tractatus* that, either directly or indirectly, help us navigate the tempestuous waters of mystical experiences. In his own preface to the text, Wittgenstein succinctly summarized the book's purpose: "[w]hat can be said at all can be said clearly; and whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent."[77] In other words, Wittgenstein wants to show his readers what *can* and what *cannot* be said. By analyzing language in this way, Wittgenstein is able to expose flaws in our perception of language and how it works, while also providing the necessary insight to understand what is actually going on when humans communicate. In the words of John Hyman, the text "presents an austere view of human language, even a repressive one, for it denies the intelligibility of much of what we

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[75] The seven principle propositions—assigned the natural numbers 1-7—are as follows (Ogden translation): 1. The world is everything that is the case. 2. What is the case, the fact, is the existence of atomic facts. 3. The logical picture of the facts is the thought. 4. The thought is the significant proposition. 5. Propositions are truth-functions of elementary propositions. (An elementary proposition is a truth function of itself.) 6. The general form of truth-function is $[\bar{p},\bar{\xi},N(\bar{\xi})]$. This is the general form of proposition. 7. Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

[76] Due to the nature of my inquiries, I will mostly ignore Wittgenstein's engagement with logic (which makes up the bulk of the *Tractatus*). Simply put, it is beyond the scope of my paper to engage with the text in such a manner. As it is, I'm mostly concerned with Wittgenstein's texts in so far as they relate to *language*. For a succinct introduction to the *Tractatus* that does the polar opposite—i.e., mostly ignores Wittgenstein's philosophy of language and deals almost solely with logic—see H. O. Mounce, *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: An Introduction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981).

[77] Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Preface," *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (Mineola: Dover Publications, 1999), 27.

say…"[78]Or, as Bertrand Russell originally interpreted it, Wittgenstein "was concerned with the conditions for a logically perfect language."[79] But how does one move from an imperfect language to a perfect language? According to Pasquale Frascolla, one of the main purposes of the work

> is to establish the limits of the thinkable. Such an undertaking, however, cannot be carried out in a direct way, which is to say it cannot be done by thinking of those limits since this would mean that it would be possible to also think of what is beyond those limits, which is absurd (absurd because in order for thought to establish the limits of the thinkable, one must be able to think of that which is beyond that limit, or to think of the unthinkable).[80]

By limiting what can be said within language, we can, as it were, move a little closer to a more perfect—a more "clear"—language.

When Paul related his mystical experience to the Corinthians, he undoubtedly presupposed their ability to either *comprehend* or *relate to* his experience. That is, his words were not thought to be nonsensical; at the very least, he must have thought they made *some* sense to his audience (i.e., his words were *intelligible*). Two issues are at stake here for us: (1) On the one hand, there is the question of how his *contemporaries* understood his language; (2) on the other hand, there is the question of how we, *moderns*—living thousands of years later—understand Paul. As we shall see, one way of addressing these two separate yet related questions is by way of establishing the existence or non-existence of "objective referents." If Paul mentions a noun, such as "third heaven," does the noun refer to some objective thing

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[78] John Hyman, "The Gospel According to Wittgenstein," in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Robert L. Arrington and Mark Addis (New York: Routledge, 2001), 4.
[79] Michael Potter and Peter Sullivan, "Introduction," in *Wittgenstein's Tractatus: History and Interpretation*, eds. Peter Sullivan and Michael Potter, Mind Association Occasional Series (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.
[80] Pasquale Frascolla, *Understanding Wittgenstein's Tractatus* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 9.

that could be verified? The "early"[81] Wittgenstein, author of the *Tractatus*, generally saw language as being heavily dependent on objective reality; that is, human language was thought to employ signs that stood-in for the objective objects they were referring to (e.g., the word "chair" [a sign] was thought to have a relationship to an objective thing [the "chair" in reality] whose existence could be verified independent of its subjective observer). Returning to our two questions, when Paul mentioned "third heaven"—within the context of a mystical, heavenly journey—how did his peers relate to the noun? Were they able to verify his use of the noun "heaven" to confirm that they, too, were talking about the same place? And, in addition to this, do we, as moderns, understand Paul when he mentions the "third heaven"? How do we know that Paul is, indeed, talking about *the same place we have in mind*?

If the "early" Wittgenstein is correct, then "[t]he name means the object" and "[t]he object is its meaning" (3.203).[82] In such a way, there is established a direct relationship between the objective world of objects and human language. This is akin to the view of language the ancient Hebrews held—for in Hebrew the word *dabar* meant both "word" and

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[81] This dichotomy between an "early" and "late" Wittgenstein is maintained in this paper for several reasons. First, this is still a popular way of reading Wittgenstein (for example, see Anat Biletzki and Anat Matar, "Ludwig Wittgenstein," in *The Stanford's Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Fall 2016 Edition], ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL=http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2016/entries/wittgenstein/. So, while being slightly simplistic, it is still a relatively helpful distinction if it is not treated *ex cathedra*. Second, and most importantly, Wittgenstein himself maintained this dichotomy. He wrote, "Four years ago, however, I had occasion to reread my first book (the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus)* and to explain its ideas. Then it suddenly seemed to me that I should publish those *old* ideas and the *new* ones together: that the *latter* could be seen in the *right* light only by *contrast* with and *against* the background of my *older way of thinking*" (Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Preface," in *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. and eds. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, rev. 4th ed. [Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009], 4; italics mine for emphasis). Some call the transition from "early" to "late" Wittgenstein a "transformation," see John Hyman, "The Gospel According to Wittgenstein," in *Wittgenstein and Philosophy of Religion*, 4. Other writers go even further and claim that Wittgenstein actually *rejected* his earlier work, see Felicity McCutcheon, *Religion Within the Limits of Language Alone: Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion*, Heythrop Studies in Contemporary Philosophy, Religion & Theology, ed. L. P. Hemming (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2001), 14-15.

[82] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 37.

"thing."[83] In a similar vein, then, the word "heaven," to be communicated with *sense*, must *refer* to some *objective place*. "Objects I can only *name*. Signs represent them. I can only speak *of* them. I cannot *assert them*. A proposition can only say *how* a thing is, not *what* it is" (3.221).[84] However, Wittgenstein is not so naïve as to believe that *how* the object appears to us is to be identified with the *what* of the object-in-itself (i.e., in Kantian language, the *phenomenon* is never to be identified with the *noumenon*). (A black cup before us reflecting the wavelength that we perceive as the color black is not in-and-of-itself "black.")[85] Resorting back to our initial inquiry—how does one relate to Paul's use of the term "heaven"?—we begin to see that an *objective place* called "heaven" cannot be *referred to* or pointed out so that one's conception of it may be further clarified. The *what* of "heaven" remains elusive and inaccessible to objective and empirical inquiry. But—and this *must* be noted carefully—*nothing* is said about the *how* of "heaven." That is, the *what* of "heaven" may be called the object-in-itself (in this case being *a physical*[86] *place*) while the *how* of "heaven" may be called

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[83] See Anthony C. Thiselton, "The Supposed Power of Words in the Biblical Writings," in *JTS* 25 (1974), 286. Thiselton goes on to criticize this simplistic view of language, writing, "The whole phenomenon of performative language which we have discussed above is alone sufficient to show that many uses of language fall into *neither* categories outlined by von Rad. In terms of the modern study of philosophy of language, we need only point to the fact that virtually no specialist today would accept an ideational theory of language and meaning as an adequate, or even perhaps correct, account of it all. The ideational theory is simply, as D. M. High has pointed out, a crudely referential theory of meaning, made even more problematic by bringing in further questions about private mental states and inner psychological experiences. Wittgenstein, Black, Alston, and many others insist that language is not merely an instrument to convey inner thought. We must make, Wittgenstein urges, 'a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose; to convey thoughts…' The functions of words are as diverse as the different functions of a row of tools. No single theory of language, whether in terms of 'reference', 'use', or any other simplified slogan, is adequate. The question 'what is language?' needs to be answered in *many* ways" (Ibid., 297-8; italics original). Thiselton, in my opinion, correctly captures the spirit of Wittgenstein: the communication and reception of language is a very complex system that functions in an inter-related manner with other complex systems.

[84] Ibid., 38. Italics original.

[85] In fact, if we did not have eyes capable of color vision—and no such creatures like us existed on earth—the cup *in a world without color-perceiving-beings* would "have" no color at all.

[86] I am using the term "physical" quite loosely here. It is entirely possible that Paul—along with his contemporaries—thought about heaven in an entirely *different* sense. It may be the case that "whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know; God knows," Paul conceived of heaven as possibly being a non-physical place; that is, to experience heaven one could do so *apart* from the physical body, a body whose sensory apparatuses were necessarily dependent on a physical, objective reality.

the human, subjective *perception* of the imagined[87] place. In such a way, then, it may still be *possible* to speak about a place called "heaven" if the term employed is thought to be a *non-physical* place. The focus would presumably be on the *how* of "heaven": *how have human beings employed the term "heaven" in ordinary language discourse?* As we shall later see, it is precisely this *how* that will drive Wittgenstein's later philosophy of language, as developed in his *Philosophical Investigations*. For now, I will focus on the more "positivistic"[88] elements of his *Tractatus*.

At the very beginning of his *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein strove to articulate a holistic philosophy of language that encapsulated the entirety of human language; he, as it was, wanted to make human language *clear, precise, and simple*. Many problems, in his view, arose due to misunderstandings grounded in language itself. "Philosophy should make clear and delimit sharply the thoughts which otherwise are, as it were, opaque and blurred" (4.112).[89] Because, he thought, "[e]verything that can be said can be said clearly" (4.116).[90] The goal of a philosophy of language was to make language meaningful and easily understandable.

> It should limit the thinkable and thereby the unthinkable. It should limit the unthinkable from within through the thinkable. It will mean the unspeakable by clearly displaying the speakable (4.114-115).

If a human being were employing words, he should, at the very least, make some sense to his or her listeners. What Wittgenstein was doing in the *Tractatus* was attempting to cut away all

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[87] The underlying presupposition here goes as follows: in the ancient past, Paul and his contemporaries were having *experiences* of heavenly ascents—whether real or imagined, I do not know. Today, however, many moderns would—I assume—make no such claims regarding heavenly ascents; that is, moderns would *imagine* a place called "heaven" whenever the term would be employed (their *relation to* the term "heaven" would not be informed by a personal, subjective experience of a heavenly ascent).

[88] That the *Tractatus* has been interpreted along positivistic lines is no secret, see Justus Hartnack, "The Tractatus and Logical Positivism," in *Wittgenstein and Modern Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 36-47. It is also no secret that Wittgenstein himself never claimed to be a "logical positivist."

[89] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 52.

[90] Ibid., 53.

the fluff that had encrusted itself around language's relatively elementary kernel. He was trying to point out to human beings words they *could not* speak. *The abstract* could not be articulated, according to the early Wittgenstein. "Ethics is transcendental" (6.421).[91] Why? Because in ethics one had no way of referring to something objective. And if there were no objective referents, how would another human being understand you? And how would you know that you were, indeed, talking about the *same* thing? (Here it is obvious that the language itself allowed for human beings to talk about, argue over absolute nonsense—the very thing Wittgenstein was attempting to "cut away" from language.) For example, when employing the term "good" in an ethical debate, how would another person understand your use of the term? Is there a place he or she could go *to see, touch, taste, smell, or feel* the "good"? What if the person in question *really* wanted to understand you, how would you *really* know that you were being understood? And so, "[i]t is clear that ethics cannot be expressed" (6.421).[92] What Wittgenstein suggests here is simple: stop arguing about things you cannot talk about *clearly*. You are arguing *precisely because* language cannot be used to speak the unspeakable. In such a way, Wittgenstein's early philosophy of language was "delimit[ing]" the words one could use in conversation.

The world around us is real in the sense that it is open to objective verification by others. That is, my experience of the world around me, when in question, could be informed by others' experience of that very *same* world. If I thought I saw a chair in front of me while on narcotics, I could ask someone nearby to *verify* whether such a chair was, in fact, in front of me. The world *as it is* exists independent of my own existence. "Empirical reality is limited by the totality of objects" (5.5561).[93] A good philosophy of language does not limit what can

[91] Ibid., 105.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid., 87.

be expressed in a given language *on its own*; the world as it is *also* limits what we can or cannot say. Our experience of empirical reality is limited to what *really* exists out there. If unicorns are not a part of that reality, then our language should not, in theory, contain a word for something that does not exist. Introducing such a word into our language would only complicate things by introducing room for misunderstanding. Our language, then, should function as *an accurate picture of reality*. "The picture is a model of reality" (2.12).[94] If reality had no unicorns, our pictorial model of reality—something done by means of language—should not have room for unicorns.

In addition to this, Wittgenstein was also acutely aware of how my own subjective understanding of language influenced my engagement with the world around me. "That the world is *my* world, shows itself in the fact that the limits of the language (*the* language which I understand) mean the limits of *my* world" (5.62)."[95] In its more basic sense, "*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world" (5.6).[96] As a human being who exists in the 21st century, I have a certain vocabulary, a certain view of the world, a view shaped in some way by the world around me. While Paul wrote in Greek to the Corinthians—a language they shared in common—he never expected to have his writings read by English-speaking people living thousands of years later.[97] But here we are reading his work, attempting to understand it, to bridge a gap that spans two thousand years. Is it possible for me to understand Paul's

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[94] Ibid., 33.
[95] Ibid., 89. Italics original.
[96] Ibid., 88. Italics original.
[97] See 1 Thessalonians 4:17 where Paul mentions himself ("*we* who are living" [ἡμεῖς]) amongst those who will be taken up when the Lord returns. He did not expect the world to exist past his own lifetime; hence eliminating the implication that he was writing for some "future generation," namely, "us." Lüdemann's comment on this matter is reflective of the scholarly consensus: "The next problem to be solved is how Paul relates the above union with Christ to the fate of those who survive until the parousia. This question is dealt with in vv. 15-17 which contain an answer parallel to that given in v. 14. Vv. 15-17 clearly imply the survival of the majority of Christians (including Paul) until the parousia so that the problem of the relation of the dead to the survivors at the parousia is reinforced" (Gerd Lüdemann, "The Hope of the Early Paul: From the Foundation-Preaching at Thessalonika to I Cor 15:51-57," *PRS* 7 [1980], 197).

language? Do I have the vocabulary necessary to begin "speaking" with Paul? It appears that Wittgenstein would suggest as a tentative answer the following: no. Why? "The world and life are one" (5.621).[98] As we will see later on, the later Wittgenstein further developed this view of the robust *inter-relatedness* of language and bodily existence (e.g., "life"). The world that Paul inhabited *is not* my world; his language *is not* my language. While it is certainly possible that Paul's contemporaries better related to Paul's use of the phrase "third heaven"; we, on the other hand, fare much worse.

As the *Tractatus* progresses, it moves from its positivistic beginnings—where objects have some clear relationship with the signs [words] being used to describe them—towards a rather elusive and mystical ending. Wittgenstein begins to recognize the absurdity of some of his own comments. If "reality" must be used to shape our language, what "reality" shapes our logic? Is there a "logical object" out there in the real world that we could use to verify that what we indeed are speaking about is "true"? "There are no 'logical objects'" (4.441).[99] The positivists were keen on enforcing their *principle of verifiability*. "[E]verything that is not empirically verifiable is meaningless."[100] Such a form of positivism implied a troubling dilemma for the religious: "[i]f we cannot mean what we say unless we have a way of verifying it, the constraints upon what we assert as true or false may drive us to remain within the limits of empiricism and, in religion, silence us altogether."[101] But the principle *itself* was not "empirically verifiable." There was no "empirical object" (akin to Wittgenstein's "logical object") to which they could appeal to in order to ground their claims. Wittgenstein was aware that his claims could not be verified in the ordinary sense; that is, in order to

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[98] Ibid., 89.
[99] Ibid., 61.
[100] Richard Creath, "Carnap's Program and Quine's Question," in *Carnap Brought Home: The View From Jena*, eds. Awodey and Carsten Klein (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 281, n. 1.
[101] Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 130.

provide an explanation for his logical comments on language, one must step outside of language itself—or, at the very least, one must resort to another language, an "ideal language" that was *outside* the language in need of explanation. "To be able to represent the logical form, we should have to be able to put ourselves with the propositions outside logic, that is outside the world" (4.12).[102] But one cannot explain language using language—for the explanation resorts to using the thing-itself that is in need of being explained! "That which expresses *itself* in language, *we* cannot express by language" (4.121).[103] Felicity McCutcheon lucidly explicates this position: "We are embedded in the language in which limits find their expression. We cannot step outside our language (or thought) in order to gain a clear view of its limits and so we must come to see them *within* language and thought."[104] In addition, some things, like pictures, cannot be explained; they must simply be shown. "What *can* be shown *cannot* be said" (4.1212).[105] The logic of language—as developed by Wittgenstein—mysteriously could not be grounded. The one thing Wittgenstein could do was *show* how his *Tractatus "*made sense" of reality; how it corresponded to reality by portraying an *accurate picture* of it. But why *this* picture was accurate and not *that* one—that could not be e*xplained*; it could only be *shown*.

And so, in the most inexplicable of manners, Wittgenstein gave his final principle proposition: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent" (7).[106] He provided no "commentary" on this proposition. Keeping his word, he remained silent. One could apply this to our second question in the following manner: *"Why ask about Paul's experience of heaven—and our relation to it thereof—when one must simply remain silent?!"*

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[102] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 53.
[103] Ibid.
[104] McCutcheon, *Religion Within the Limits of Language Alone*, 16. Italics original.
[105] Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 53. Italics original.
[106] Ibid., 108.

But is that a necessary response? (And it is certainly one valid response.) Despite Wittgenstein's initial silence in the *Tractatus*, years later, in a posthumously published book, he would return to the subject, breaking his silence. I will now turn to the *Philosophical Investigations*, keeping before our eyes the two questions posed earlier.

The "Late" Wittgenstein: *Philosophical Investigations*, Language-Games, and Forms of Life

Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* ended on a rather mystical note: that which could not be expressed must simply be passed over in silence. However, even Wittgenstein could not refrain from keeping quiet. In the Preface to his *Philosophical Investigations*, he wrote:

> Four years ago, however, I had the occasion to reread my first book (the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) and to explain its ideas. Then it suddenly seemed to me that I should publish those old ideas and the new ones together: that *the latter could be seen in the right light only by contrast with and against the background of my older way of thinking.*[107]

Wittgenstein was admitting now that his "older way of thinking" had to be modified and interpreted in light of his "new" ideas.[108] What were these "new" ideas? It is to this that I now turn.

Wittgenstein realized that his early work did not satisfactorily *see through* the problem of ordinary human language. Too much of his *Tractatus* was concerned with a purity of thought that did not seem to exist in the real, living world. He had, as McCutcheon put it,

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[107] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 4. Italics mine.
[108] In the Preface, he continues to write even more bluntly: "I could not but recognize grave mistakes in what I set out in that first book [i.e., the *Tractatus*]" (Ibid., 4.).

"completely abandoned the idea that in order for an expression to be meaningful there must be something strict that determines its meaning."[109] Human beings inhabited a very complicated world, a world full of *life* and *living* things. Humans did not merely use words (which stood-in for objects alone); instead, humans used more complex forms of communication involving facial expressions, tone of voice, hand gestures, inflection, etc. In other words, human communication was not to be reduced to logic and words; rather, human communication involved what Wittgenstein began to call "language-games" implemented within a particular "form of life." In the next few sections I will explore in further detail Wittgenstein's original idea of "language-games" and "forms of life." Furthermore, I will demonstrate how these two ideas shape our understanding of what it means to say that (a) Paul's contemporaries understood Paul's religious mystical experience; and that (b) we, moderns, understand Paul's language. As we shall see, Wittgenstein's "late" philosophy of language is both illuminating and critical; that is, he shows us what *can* and what *cannot* be said about mystical religious experiences.

Language-Games

Beginning with a citation from Augustine's *Confessions*—in which Augustine assumes children learn language by associating *word-sounds* with *objects*—Wittgenstein points out how flawed this understanding of language really is. Summarizing Augustine's view, Wittgenstein writes: "Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands" (§1).[110] However, Wittgenstein does not agree with Augustine's explanation of language by means of a *theory of association*. Language is not entirely about

[109] McCutcheon, *Religion Within the Limits of Language Alone*, 75.
[110] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 5.

association. For example, how does one explain the word "game" and how it is used in language? It's not as if a child learns that a "game" always looks like *this* or *that*. There is no dogmatic logic behind what constitutes a "game." There is no "object" one could point to and say, "Here, this is what all objects which are called 'game' look like." The child does not simply *associate* the word "game" with some "objective object" found existing in reality. Instead, in Wittgenstein's *later*[111] view, the word takes on meaning in complex ways.

> Consider, for example, the activity that we call "games." I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, athletic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: "They *must* have something in common, or they would not be called 'games.'"—but *look and see* whether there is anything common to all. – For if you look at them, you won't see something that is common to *all*, but similarities, affinities, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!—Look, for example, at board-games, with their various affinities. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost.—Are they all '*entertaining*'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball-games, there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared. Look at the parts played by skill and luck, and at the difference between skill in chess and skill in tennis. Think now of singing and

[111] I call this the "later" view because it is slightly more nuanced than his view in the *Tractatus*. There, he was trying to understand the nature of language by looking for hard and fast lines demarcating a language featuring precise definitions. As his *Philosophical Investigations* come to show, this is simply not the way language—real, living language—works.

> dancing games; here we have the element of entertainment, but how many other characteristic features have disappeared! And we can go through the many, many other groups of games in the same way, can see how many similarities can crop up and disappear. And the upshot of these considerations is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: similarities in the large and in the small (§66).[112]

Whereas a straightforward and indisputable logic was articulated in the *Tractatus* (a logic and clarity which tried to leave no room for doubt and ambiguity), in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein is admitting that no such clarity and hard line-drawing actually exists; in other words, we use words "without a *fixed* meaning" (§79).[113] We don't even have a clear and lucid definition of "game." In fact, as the above excerpt reveals, there is no such clear-cut definition to be found anywhere in the world or in our language.

But *ambiguity* is not the only feature found in language-games. Language, as Wittgenstein is keen to point out, functions much like a game. That is, there are different ways in which *words*, like chess pieces, are *employed*. "The question 'What is a word really?' is analogous to 'What is a piece in chess?" (§108).[114] Words, once employed, must be implemented within a particular language-game. For example, the word "run" may mean different things within different language-games. It is possible that it is a command; that is, it is a command to "run"—for one is in danger. It may also be a term being employed during the beginning of a race; that is, the term merely means something along the lines of "ready, set, go." It is also entirely possible that the term is merely employed by a teacher reading a short story to his or her students (maybe the term occurs in a section the teacher is reading).

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[112] Ibid., 36. Italics original.
[113] Ibid., 42. Italics original.
[114] Ibid., 52.

Words, then, cannot be understood apart from their living context, a context which Wittgenstein called "a form of life" (§23).[115]

A few of the language-games humans play, per Wittgenstein, are as follows:

> Giving orders, and acting on them—Describing an object by its appearance, or by its measurements—Constructing an object from a description (a drawing)—Reporting an event—Speculating about an event—Forming and testing a hypothesis—Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams—Making up a story; and reading one—Acting in a play—Singing rounds—Guessing riddles—Cracking a joke; telling one—Solving a problem in applied arithmetic—Translating from one language into another—Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying (§23).[116]

Words occur in this rich plurality of language-games. To understand human language is not merely to be able to associate X-word with Y-object; rather, the process of understanding involves many more mechanisms. Language and the understanding of it is much like a living thing. "[T]o imagine a language means to imagine a form of life" (§19).[117] And so, it is to this separate yet related concept ("form of life") that I will now turn my gaze.

Form of Life

For Wittgenstein, language was not just something that happened in the natural world *sans* human beings; no, language—its communication and reception thereof—occurred *in life*. "Giving orders, asking questions, telling stories, having a chat, are as much a part of our

[115] Ibid., 15.
[116] Ibid., 15.
[117] Ibid., 11.

natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing" (§25).[118] Language can only be understood when it is spoken of in relation to *living* and *acting* human beings. Apart from the buzzing humdrum of human activity, language does not exist.

> Consider this further case: I am explaining chess to someone; and I begin by pointing to a chess piece and saying "This is the king; it can move in this-and-this way", and so on.—In this case we shall say: the words "This is the king" (or "This is called 'the king'") are an explanation of a word only if the learner already 'knows what a piece in a game is'. That is, if, for example, he has already played other games, or has watched 'with understanding' how other people play—*and similar things*. Only then will he, while learning the game, be able to ask relevantly, "What is this called?"—that is, this chess piece. We may say: it only makes sense for someone to ask what something is called if he already knows how to make use of the name (§31).[119]

On the one hand, Wittgenstein is arguing that our understanding of language is tied to human activity (in this case, playing a game). On the other hand, he is arguing that there is more going on than mere association; to name a chess piece and its moves presupposes that one *already knows* what a game-piece is.

What is disturbing about philosophers, according to Wittgenstein, is that they live in a world full of ideals. They live "under the illusion." In its place, he argues, philosophers and laymen alike should look at the world around them when "doing" philosophy.

> We are under the illusion that what is peculiar, profound and essential to us in our investigation resides in its trying to grasp the incomparable essence of language. That is, the order of existing between the concepts of proposition,

[118] Ibid., 16.
[119] Ibid., 19. Italics original.

> word, inference, truth, experience, and so forth. This order is a *super*-order between—so to speak—*super*-concepts. Whereas, in fact, if the words "language", "experience", "world" have a use, it must be as humble a one as that of the words "table", "lamp", "door" (§97).[120]

Instead of pretending that there is something supernaturally profound about words like "life" and "experience," Wittgenstein suggests we look into the real world, the existential doghouse of human reality. It may be more helpful for us to look not at what a word is theoretically supposed to mean in some ideal language, but how a word is actually *used* in the real world. "[W]e are dazzled by the ideal" (§100) to such an extent that the "idea is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at" and it "never occurs to us to take them off" (§103).[121] In essence, then, "we must stick to matters of everyday life" (§106)[122]—and life gives rise to many such mundane "forms of life." And *language* itself is one of them.

Paul's Mystical Experience vis-à-vis Wittgenstein: How Do Proximal Contemporaries and Distant Moderns Relate to Paul?

If language is a form of life—budding with facial expressions, inside jokes, tone of voice, etc.—how could moderns, living thousands of years after Paul, understand Paul's language? Understandably, those living closest to Paul—his own contemporaries—would have been more attuned to Paul's choice of words, his particular expressions (if there were any), and his language. A contemporary of Paul's would have, at the very least, spoken his language and

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[120] Ibid., 49.
[121] Ibid., 50.
[122] Ibid., 51.

would have read the stories about heavenly ascents. But we moderns, as distant from Paul as the moon is from the sun, nonetheless, try to bridge the gap. And how do we "bridge the gap"?

Wittgenstein insisted that language is more than just association. It is not just substituting the English phrase "third heaven" for the Greek phrase "τρίτου οὐρανοῦ." It is more than just saying, "X-word could also mean Y-word." In addition to this—from his earlier, *Tractatus* days—he could ask: what do you mean by "third heaven"? Is there a physical place we could all go to in order to behold this "third heaven"? Could we wander the streets, point to nearby objects, and ask: "Is that a street paved with gold or diamonds?" How does one *know* what one is talking about?

A contemporary of Paul's—such as his audience in 2 Corinthians—would have been familiar with heavenly ascents. Such "journeys" would have been deemed relatively mundane and commonplace. Moreover, as I have argued earlier in the paper, Paul's audience would have had subjective experiences too; they would have been familiar with the *reality* of Paul's mysticism. In fact, Paul did not even need to establish the reality of his experience; he merely had to mention it. The language-game in which the phrases "third heaven," "paradise" and "out of body" occurred would have been, theoretically, presupposed and understood by his contemporaries. They would have known whether Paul was, in fact, boasting or joking. (Maybe he, in fact, *was* mocking heavenly ascents in 2 Cor.?)

But even they would not have known which "third heaven" Paul went to. Could one of the Corinthians ask Paul a question such as: "On such-and-such a street, near the intersection that is found near God's mansion, what color were the bricks?" That is, could any of Paul's own contemporaries *verify* Paul's terms? Unless we posit the reality of Paul's audience members as also having had mystical experiences, there is no reason for us to

suppose that his audience, in fact, knew what he was talking about. (What they "knew" would be mere guesswork.)

And what are we to make of Paul's language as a "form of life"? Isn't it possible that the Corinthians misunderstood Paul's epistle when they first received it? Isn't it possible that they requested him to read it aloud to the congregation? Maybe Paul visited the congregation, sat down in the middle of them, and read from his letter. And, maybe, he even smiled when he read the words "third heaven." Or maybe he grew quiet, with the hairs on his neck standing, as he read, "Whether in the body or out of the body, I do not know."

Where does that leave us, the moderns—the ones reading this letter, in translation, with no particular intonations, no smiles from Paul, and no inside jokes? Could we verify Paul's "third heaven"? Could we relate to Paul's experience without having had our very own? Was Paul even writing *for us*? One could, as I have done, look at the commentaries, learn Greek, and use *words* to describe *other words*. That is, one could look at τρίτου οὐρανοῦ and translate it as "third heaven." One could then look in the commentaries for what the phrase meant in, say, the first-century (reading *The Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah* in the process). But what just happened here? Is this a "form of life"? Did you *experience* a third heaven? Did you come any *closer to* experiencing a third heaven? In other words, was any gap really "bridged" when you read the commentaries? It is akin to describing the aroma of coffee. No matter the translations one reads, the commentaries one attends to, *the reading* has *no effect* on the *experience of smelling coffee*.

> Describe the aroma of coffee!—Why can't it be done? Do we lack the words? And *for what* are words lacking?—But where do we get the idea that such a description must, after all, be possible? Have you ever felt the lack of

> such a description? Have you tried to describe the aroma and failed? (§610).[123]

This brings us to another issue that is very important to Wittgenstein. It is the issue I call "the myth of the soul." It is commonly assumed that there exists a detached ego, a first-person "I" that is independent of his or her body. This "I" is mythologically called "the soul." It is with this "I"—so the thinking goes—that a person is able to observe his or her life from a neutral perspective. That is, the ego is able to view the world from a dimensionless point. If this is assumed, then it is, by implication, further assumed that one could *relate to* Paul because one could *detach oneself* from his or her language-games, various forms of life, particular culture, and *step into* the shoes, in however limited a manner, of Paul. The thinking goes that, if a soul exists independent of the human body, then one could, in theory, remove all (or most) of the surrounding culture, language, biases, and understand—*really understand*—another human being living thousands of years ago.

But is this really the case? Are humans able to detach themselves in such a manner? Are we able to free ourselves from our inherited tendencies, cultural baggage, and biased perspectives? Does a soul exist? Wittgenstein believed that the idea of a soul was a myth. And it is to this myth—and how it shapes our way of *relating-to-others*—that I now turn.

The Myth of the Soul: To Lose One's Soul and Gain Another's?

The idea that the first-person "I"—colloquially known as either the "soul," "inner most being," "ego," the "will," the "self" or the "mind"—exists in some inexplicably separated state from the human body goes back to Descartes. Already in Descartes, one finds the

[123] Ibid., 167. Italics original.

strange fiction that human beings are not really human beings *qua* human beings; they are something "more"—and this "more" is usually identified with "the soul." The implication is that one does not merely *look and see* a human body; rather, one must somehow *look past* the visible, the known, and presuppose some magical unknown, some elusive and hidden *soul*.

Descartes, after having attempted to doubt everything, concluded with the following remark taken from his *Second Meditation*:

> At last I have discovered it—thought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist—that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking. At present, I am not admitting anything except what is necessarily true. I am, then, in the strict sense only a thing that thinks; that is, I am a mind, or intelligence, or intellect, or reason…a thinking thing [*res cogitans*].[124]

The "I am" is identified with "a thinking thing." But why is the body relegated to the dustbin of useless existence? Why is the human body not given proper attention? Is it even possible for a mind to exist independent of a human body; or, vice versa, for the human body to exist independent of a human mind?

The Cartesian mind-body dualism implies that a human being, who is to be identified with the "I think," could truly exist functionally apart from its own human body, its surrounding world, and other humans. In this view, within the human individual, buried beneath bones, sinew, skin, and blood cells, there lies a thing—which none have, to this day, been able to identify—called *the soul*. In the Cartesian sense, this human soul, according to Fergus Kerr, is a "disembodied self"[125] that "is free to survey the world from no point of

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[124] René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy; with Selections from the Objections and Replies*, Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy, trans. John Cottingham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 18.
[125] Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 20.

view."[126] In fact, Timothy E. O'Connell, who compares the soul to an onion (!), conveniently summarizes this view by means of a rather humorous analogy.

> In an appropriate if homely image, then, people might be compared to onions. Like onions, they are comprised of myriad layers beginning at the surface and moving to the center. None of these layers can stand by itself, yet each has its own identity. At the outermost layer, as it were, we find their environment, their world, the things they own. Moving inward we find their actions, their behavior, the things they do. And then the body, that which is the 'belonging' of a person and yet also *is* the person. Going deeper we discover moods, emotions, feelings. Deeper still are the convictions by which they define themselves. And at the very centre, in that dimensionless point around which everything else revolves, is the person himself or herself—the I.[127]

According to O'Connell, then, the human soul—which he calls "the I"—is to be found at some "dimensionless point." This is *the soul* that is able to exist apart from a particular community, culture, language, and *living world*. It is this *soul*—this "I"—that is thought to be able to transcend time and space. It is this *soul* that is able to traverse thousands of years back into history and relate to a human being who no longer exists, whose entire living world, culture, and language have died along with him. The *myth of the soul* continues to sustain these absurd implications.[128]

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[126] Ibid., 18.
[127] Timothy E. O'Connell, *Principles For a Catholic Morality*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 67. Also cited, less fully, in Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 20.
[128] Others have also pointed out this Cartesian problem, for a more cogent discussion, see Ian Burkitt, "Bodies of Knowledge: Beyond Cartesian Views of Persons, Selves and Mind," in *JTSB* 28 (1998), 67. "For Merleau-Ponty, consciousness was not the product of some disembodied mind located somewhere outside the material world, beyond time and space; nor was it simply the result of a body reacting to its surroundings. Instead, consciousness is part of the active relationship between humans and their world, so that prior to the Cartesian

Wittgenstein was deeply opposed to this view of the first-person "I." According to students, Wittgenstein "spoke of trying to convince the class of 'just the opposite of Descartes' emphasis on I.'"[129] Instead, Wittgenstein argued that "[t]he human body is the best picture of the human soul" (II, §25).[130] In Descartes, one must assume the existence of detached ego, one that lurks in the shadows of a person's human body like the notorious "ghost in the machine." Contrary to this almost derogatory view of the human body, Wittgenstein boldly writes, "if one sees the behaviour of a living being, one sees its mind" (§357).[131] The human mind is inextricably linked to the human body; the two are inseparable. To separate the creature from his or her mind, from his or her particular language, culture, and living world—is an impossibility, for Wittgenstein. On the contrary, observing the human being in action, in daily life, is really observing the human's soul.

The problem with the Cartesian view—one Wittgenstein is adamant about debunking—is it further implies that human beings are rather like the deity. "The individual seems to be free to put what construction he will upon the surrounding world. The supposition is always that one is able to view the world from somewhere else—as if one were God, perhaps."[132] If the human soul is really something hidden from sight, something one cannot really "see," then surely the human being—as a first-person "I"—becomes rather impenetrable. And this impenetrability is also akin to the hiddenness of God in classical theism! In a strange turn of events, the Cartesian project produces implications far more sinister than Descartes could have ever intended.

'I think', there is an 'I can', a practical cogito which structures not only our relationship to the world, but also the ways we think about it."

[129] Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 43.

[130] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 187.

[131] Ibid., 120.

[132] Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein*, 16.

If throughout conversation human beings must always assume that there is something "deep down" that is *different from* the actions we see coming from the human individual before us, this creates problems for how we relate to one another. One must always assume that what one sees *is not really what one is seeing*. "[T]he disembodied self has problems relating to people," writes Kerr.[133] For how could humans relate to one another if *the Other* is so impenetrable and so hidden from sight?

Against this Cartesian interpretation of the human being—in which the body is severed from the mind—Wittgenstein wishes to *reorient* his readers to a different view. The first-person "I" is inextricably linked to the body; the body is linked to other bodies; and all of these bodies form a cohesive whole inhabiting a *living* world. These human bodies communicate with one another employing words that are played in various language-games; these language-games themselves forming a part of a "form of life." Kerr succinctly writes that, for Wittgenstein, "language is the conversation that is interwoven with the characteristic activities of human life."[134] In Wittgenstein's own words:

> The idea of reading a thought more directly is derived from the idea that thought is a hidden process which it is the aim of the philosopher to penetrate. But there is no more direct way of reading thought than through language. Thought is not something hidden; it lies open to us.[135]

Yet it does not end there: the human soul lies exposed to us by the language it uses—and the language itself can incorporate actions. "Words are also deeds" (§546).[136] In more than one way, then, can human beings *see* the "soul" of another.

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[133] Ibid., 20.
[134] Ibid., 30.
[135] Ibid., 44.
[136] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 155.

If, as Wittgenstein suggests, human beings are inextricably tied to their human bodies, what sort of implications does that have for our two questions? Could a contemporary of Paul's relate to his mystical experience and understand it? And, could a distant modern, far removed from Paul, understand and relate to Paul's language and mystical experience?

The implications should be obvious by now. If human beings are not detached egos wandering the world in the most uninhibited of manners, then neither are they detached from their language, their culture, their world-views, and their inherited genetic tendencies. If this is, in fact, the case, then it becomes increasingly difficult to sustain the fairytale that someone living today—thousands of years after Paul—could really *understand* him. If Wittgenstein is correct, then language is a *living thing* that is tied to its community and the *living beings* that use it. The loss of a language—its double entendres, its primordial *vorlagen*, its nuances—means the loss of a culture; and the death of a culture, implies the death of our ability to sustain its vocabulary. It is immensely easier to believe a contemporary of Paul's understood him—in however limited a fashion—than it is to believe that a modern person, speaking a foreign language, understands him.

These implications are important for our study because they shed light on what *can* and what *cannot* be done using language. There have been hundreds of books and articles *written* on Paul's heavenly ascent in 2 Corinthians. The goal of the authors, I would assume, would have been to make the text more *intelligible*. Wittgenstein's emphasis on language as being tied to the human body does not *negate* such studies *per se*; what it does is show us how limited they really are. The thousand-page commentary you read on mystical experiences does not, as it were, include a two-way ticket to the "third heaven" and back. The myth of the soul, existing as an independent entity within a shell of the human body, once accepted,

contributes to the belief that reading a text allows one to bridge thousand-year gaps. The "soul," free from all of the limiting factors involved when a human body is taken into consideration, is free to believe that "it" is able to move around like an eternal god, here one second and in Paul's shoes the next. Against this view stands Wittgenstein's own position: "the human body is the best picture of the human soul." If we are really "trapped" in a particular culture, a particular time, and a particular place, then it becomes much more difficult to believe that one could "move," as it were, from one's own place in the world into the shoe's of another. No matter how many texts are read, the human body remains present in the *present*. It does not move. Whatever is occurring in the present, affects *that* human body. The human body, then, sets *limits* upon what *can* and what *cannot* be understood and imagined.

However daunting Wittgenstein's critique may seem at this point—from the positivistic elements found in his *Tractatus* to the language-games, forms of life, and anti-Cartesian ideas found in his *Philosophical Investigations*—there is one last matter Wittgenstein's philosophy of language offers us that I would like to consider, and that is the issue known as "the private language argument." It is to this problem that I now turn.

Of Beetles and Bogus: The Private Language Argument

Is it not possible that human beings have a *private* language for their *private* experiences? For example, is it not possible for Paul to have experienced something that he could not put into words? In fact, he explicitly says this when he writes that he "heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell" (2 Cor. 12:4). Wittgenstein argues that a "private language" *qua* language is impossible; such a thing cannot exist. However it may be, I will

argue that while a *private language* may be nonsensical, having a *private experience* need not be. I will first examine Wittgenstein's arguments against a private language before making my case in favor of the possibility that private experiences—experiences one could *not* express *within* language—are, theoretically, possible.

Wittgenstein asks us to entertain a thought-experiment:

> If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word "pain" means—must I not say *that* of other people too? And how can I generalize the *one* case so irresponsibly? Well, everyone tells me that he knows what pain is only from his own case!—Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a "beetle." No one can ever look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle.—Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.—But what if these people's word "beetle" had a use nonetheless?—If so, it would not be as the name of a thing. The thing in the box doesn't belong to the language-game at all; not even as a *Something*: for the box might even be empty.—No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is (§293).[137]

If our ordinary, public language has a word for "beetle," the way the word functions is—in a strange way—independent of whether beetles really exist. In addition, language is never private, it is always public; it presupposes the existence of at least two human beings engaging with one another, trying to communicate *something*. One could substitute "mystical experience" in the place of "beetle." How would I know that the "mystical experience" in

[137] Ibid., 106. Italics original.

your box is actually similar—or identical to—the "mystical experience" in *my* box? In fact, how do I know that when you *use* the phrase "mystical experience," you have it in your box? (What if, in fact, your box is *empty*?) Again, the additional point is that words have currency by means of the ways in which they are *used*.

Returning to the issue of whether a private language is possible at all, Wittgenstein asks us to imagine another scenario:

> "What would it be like if human beings did not manifest their pains (did not groan, grimace, etc.)? Then it would be impossible to teach a child the use of the word 'toothache'."—Well, let's assume that the child is a genius and invents a name for the sensation himself!—But then, of course, he couldn't make himself understood when he used the word.—So does he understand the name, without being able to explain its meaning to anyone?—But what does it mean to say that he has 'named his pain'?—How has he managed this naming of pain? And whatever he did, what was its purpose?—When one says "He gave a name to his sensation", one forgets that much must be prepared in the language for mere naming to make sense. And if we speak of someone's giving a name to a pain, the grammar of the word "pain" is what has been prepared here; it indicates the post where the new word is stationed (§257).[138]

Even when we try to teach language, much of what we are trying to do involves a community of human beings. Language is a communal activity; it is about X-person relating to Y-person; it is about communicating *something*. Even if one were to imagine a solitary "genius" capable of inventing a private language for himself, what purpose—what *use*—

[138] Ibid., 98.

would it serve? If the solitary genius cannot communicate his private experiences using some private language, what purpose does the language serve? Isn't it completely nonsensical and pointless? Why choose the word "pain" for *painful experiences* when one could choose something also meaningless like "alkdfhasdgnk" (or some other combination of sounds). In fact, *why even bother to name the experience at all*? *That* is Wittgenstein's point. Private language is nonsensical; even if it were theoretically possible, it would *serve no function*.

But where does that leave *private experiences*? Is it possible to have a private experience *without* a private language? I believe this can be the case. Wittgenstein's point is that a private language is impossible. However, he does not suggest that private experiences are impossible. In fact, it is entirely possible to experience something so rare (such as a mystical experience) that one is left at a loss for words when trying to articulate it. Paul's ascent to the third heaven is, arguably, such a case in point. That is, Paul experienced something that he knew could not be put into human words, because the *vocabulary*—a familiar vocabulary used by the public—was simply *not there*. And so, all Paul could do was state the obvious: I heard "inexpressible things."

Philosophical Remarks Within a Penultimate Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Paul's mystical experience in 2 Cor. 12:2-4 was of such a nature that only a contemporary of Paul's could have had some *limited* way of relating to it. That is, only a contemporary would have been familiar with Paul's language-games, choice of words, manners of expressions, etc. Moreover, I have argued that moderns, living thousands of years later, could not relate to—or, in a less limited sense, find intelligible—Paul's mystical experience on the grounds that: (a) the language-game Paul was playing is not clearly known

to us; (b) the language he used, articulated within a particular form of life, is now dead; and (c) an anti-Cartesian view of the first-person "I," one that strongly supports the inter-relatedness of *the soul* and the *living human body*, limits the ways in which we think we can relate to people living thousands of years ago. Furthermore, I argued that while a private language is impossible, it does not necessarily eliminate the possibility of human beings having private experiences, much like Paul's.

So where does that leave us? If contemporaries of Paul had a modest advantage over us by virtue of the fact that they would have known Paul physically (his manners of speech, tone of voice, etc.) and used his language (within a particular culture), does that mean they alone could have understood Paul? Having examined Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, and having applied it to 2 Cor. 12:2-4 in particular, I believe I am now in a position to articulate several ways in which we could approach this issue.

The first response I will call "the positivistic approach." In this approach, Wittgenstein's earlier work, the *Tractatus,* is interpreted in a manner implying that religious language, with no objective referents, is meaningless. That is, if one is using words that have no grounding in objective reality, one is saying *nothing*. Paul's uses of the phrases "third heaven" and "out of body" are meaningless because there is no "third heaven" we could examine with our empirical senses. And there is "certainly" no experience *outside* the human body, so all such language is fantastical.

The second response I will call "the agnostic approach." In this approach, the more uncertain and non-dogmatic elements in Wittgenstein's (mostly) later work are emphasized. Wittgenstein lends himself to this interpretation when he writes:

> If you say that he sees a private picture before him, which he is describing, you have at any rate made an assumption about what he has before him. And

> this means that you can describe it or do describe it more closely. If you admit that you *have no idea what kind of thing it might be that he has before him*—then what seduces you into saying, in spite of that, that he has something before him? Isn't it as if I were to say of someone: "He *has* something. *But I don't know* whether is it money, or debts, or an empty till (§107).[139]

The response to Paul's mystical experience would go something like this: "I do not really understand Paul's language, and I know that I do not. I also do not know what Paul means when he uses phrases such as 'third heaven.' It is possible that such a heaven exists, but I've not been there, so I would not know."

The third response I will call "the know-it-all approach." In this approach, the individual claims that she is, nonetheless, certain that her reading of the text brings her closer to Paul's experience; in fact, Paul's words are so familiar to her, that she claims to understand and be able to relate to Paul. For her, the text bridges the millennia-old chasm, allowing her to be able to relate to the words.

The fourth response, one that I argue in favor of, I will call "the bit off tongues approach." In this approach, the severity of Wittgenstein's criticisms are given their due weight. How language functions is taken into grave consideration. That some words are now, as it were, *inaccessible* to us, forces us to become acutely aware of *the problem of relation-to-others*, especially those *others* who had existed thousands of years ago. In this approach, the text is read *and understood* in a very limited fashion. That is, words are understood to have meaning not only when they have objective referents, but in the way in which they are *used*. However, their use is employed within a particular, living language, with its own language-games, forms of life, cultural baggage, and assumptions. The individual is not seen as a

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[139] Ibid., 107. Italics mine.

Cartesian, "detached ego" that could, willy-nilly, transpose itself into another universe by sheer think-power. (Here one could imagine the sort of detachment that one assumes when reading ancient texts with the goal of "stepping into the other's shoes" in mind.) Cultural biases cannot be removed simply by some "I" who thinks he can observe the world and read texts from a "dimensionless point." The first-person "I" is as much an "I" existing *within* a particular community as it is existing *as*[140] a particular human body. To imagine a human soul as existing without a human body is like imagining a private language existing without the concept of inter-subjective human relations (language, as a matter of fact, could only occur *within* the context of *living* community and human fellowship). Therefore, the death of a language, as it was used in real life by real human beings with real voices and real facial expressions, marks the death of our ability at *really* understanding it. The Paul we read about today is a dead Paul. And the *dead* Paul is not the *real* Paul. To imagine that we have access to this human being who once lived thousands of years ago is a great illusion: it is an impossibility. To imagine that we could somehow come closer to smelling coffee by reading about it is a grammatical fiction. In other words, our language, which we have shaped by our particular *uses* of it, has, in an inter-dependent manner, contributed to the ways in which we see the world wrongly. The point Wittgenstein has been trying to make was "[t]o show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (§309).[141] We are stuck in a trap of grammatical illusions. We use words that have little to no meaning at all. We pretend that some detached ego exists. We think that arguing someone into smelling a cup of coffee actually works (!). We pretend that words have cut-and-dried meanings attached to them (one should recall Wittgenstein's attempt at trying to define "games"). There are, in fact, a thousand ways in

[140] Here I originally wrote "*within* a particular human body," further perpetrating the Cartesian myth of the soul. I had to go back and correct my use of language, since it too is shaped by all kinds of grammatical illusions and deceptions.
[141] Ibid., 110.

which we pretend to know what we are talking about. Wittgenstein's other point, in my opinion, is to really show us "the limits of language." At the very least, after having read Wittgenstein, one should seriously consider how limited language really is. We cannot, as it were, say everything there is to be said in an effective way. To go back to Paul, it is entirely possible that some things *cannot* be said. Or, to cite Wittgenstein again, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent." Like the mystics of old, who witnessed God's glory, the only sane response, when dealing with the unsayable, is to cut off one's tongue.

Conclusion: What *Can* Be Said Regarding that Which Refuses to Remain Unsaid?

At the beginning of this study, I situated Paul's comment in 2 Cor. 12:2-4 within its context, looking at various hermeneutical challenges which arose as we critically examined the text. I argued that Paul's ascent into heaven was, indeed, a "boast," a supernatural event that occurred in his own life, of which he was proud. I showed how, for Paul, the rhetorical force of his heavenly ascent narration hinged on *the subjective*; that is, the Corinthians themselves were familiar with mystical experiences, and were themselves practitioners of such ascents. In addition to the subjective experiences, the ancients—particularly, the Corinthians—would have likely been familiar with other ancient accounts of heavenly ascents. Having argued for the centrality of subjectivity in finding Paul's arguments to be convincing and intelligible, I then turned to Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. Beginning with the *Tractatus*, I showed how limiting Wittgenstein's philosophy could be. Language, instead of being detached from reality, is actually grounded, in many ways, *in* reality.

It is a picture of reality. Words are the paint we use to paint the picture. How was Paul's heavenly ascent to the "third heaven" *understood*—or, at the very least, found *intelligible*—by either contemporaries or moderns? How did one verify whether or not one was talking about the same "third heaven"? I argued that, in fact, neither Paul's contemporaries nor modern readers of his text could verify Paul's place of visitation.

For Wittgenstein, at least in the *Tractatus*, the emphasis was on whether or not the picture being painted represented reality *accurately*. Did Paul's use of the phrase "third heaven" display that place—whatever it may have been—accurately? But what did it mean for something to be accurate? Having examined some of the problems associated with attempts at trying to accurately depict reality, I then turned to Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In the *Tractatus*, I argued, Wittgenstein craved a purity of thought that resulted in a pure language free of confusions and deceptions; however, by the time of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he realized how ambiguous and messy language really was in the *living* world. The living world in which communication occurred was much more complicated than initially assumed. Facial expressions, tone of voice, flying hand gestures, and inside jokes—all of these were inextricably involved in human communication. Language was weaved into the buzzing of human activity. Given this reality, I argued that Paul's contemporaries had a better chance at finding Paul's mystical experience intelligible than moderns; they would have been familiar with Paul's language-game. Was Paul boasting about heaven? Was Paul making fun of heavenly ascents? We, moderns, no longer knew the language-game he played. Related to the issue of language-games, I also examined Wittgenstein's notion of a "form of life." Both of these separate yet related concepts grounded language—as a means of human communication—in *life*.

After I had looked at how human beings employed words in life, I then turned to the problem of "the myth of the soul." I argued that Wittgenstein's philosophy is anti-Cartesian and, therefore, pro-human-body. That is, Wittgenstein did not make a distinction between the soul and the body. I then argued that it is a Cartesian view of *the self* which paved the way for the illusion that one could, as it were, step into the shoes of Paul and "understand" him thousands of years later. In debunking this view, I demonstrated that there are inherent limits to what one can and cannot *imagine*; if one cannot view the world from a "dimensionless point," one cannot possibly bridge a thousand-year chasm and imagine Paul's heavenly ascent. One is bound—in an almost infinite amount of ways—to the living, human body; one is bound to the *present*.

Finally, I entertained the possibility of a private language. I argued, in agreement with Wittgenstein, that a private language was impossible. However, I suggested that private experiences were possible. Since private experiences are possible—without the possibility of finding expression within a *public* language—I argued that some experiences, then, like Paul's heavenly ascent, are "inexpressible." In such a way, I brought the argument full circle: Paul "heard inexpressible things, things that no one is permitted to tell." In saying that something was inexpressible, Paul *was* saying something; he was *not* telling us absolutely nothing. In the words of Wallace, "Theology can neither explicate the experience itself, nor can it put these highest mysteries into human language."[142] Much like Wittgenstein, when a mystic relates words concerning the inexpressible, the mystic is really using language to "delimit"—to place a hedge around—that which cannot be said. In fact, this sort of "delimiting by means of

[142] Wallace, *Snatched into Paradise*, 1.

word-overuse" is reflected in the Jewish dictum: "Whereof one cannot speak, one must say everything."[143]

In today's world, mystical religious experiences, such as those that Paul and his congregants had, may not *tell* us something but rather *show* us something: there are things that cannot be said. In essence, then, the distinction between a modern and a contemporary of Paul's vanishes as one begins to look at the experience not from the perspective of what one *can* "get" from either hearing it or reading about it, but what one *cannot* "get" from it: one never really knows what Paul *is* talking about. It should come as no surprise, then, that even the author himself—our very own Wittgenstein—in the words of Russell, had "become a complete mystic"[144] later in life.

Wittgenstein paid homage to St. Augustine by beginning his *Philosophical Investigations* with him. And so, I find it only appropriate to conclude this work by ending with a citation from Augustine's *On the Trinity*. "[I]t is, therefore, clear that something can be knowable, that is, it can be the object of knowledge, and yet it may not be known; but it is impossible for something to be known that is not knowable."[145]

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[143] Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Particulars of Rapture: Reflections on Exodus* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 15.
[144] Cited in Genia Schönbaumsfeld, "Kierkegaard and the Tractatus," in *Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, 59.
[145] Augustine, *On the Trinity: Books 8-15*, trans. Stephen McKenna (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 38.

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