

## Marcus Steinweg

### God Is the Nonexistence of God

In a letter to Roger Laporte dated September 24, 1966, Maurice Blanchot described his “primal scene” (*scène primaire*) as the experience of a depopulated heaven, an experience that confronts an infinity he sketches as empty infinity:

*„I was a child, seven or eight years old, I was in an isolated house, near the closed window, I looked outside—and at once, nothing could be more sudden, it was as though the sky opened, opened infinitely toward the infinite, inviting me with this overwhelming moment of opening to acknowledge the infinite, but the infinitely empty infinite. The consequence was estranging. The sudden and absolute emptiness of the sky, not visible, not dark—emptiness of God: that was explicit, and therein it far exceeded the mere reference to the divine—surprised the child with such delight, and such joy, that for a moment he was full of tears, and—I add, anxious for the truth—I believe they were his last tears.”<sup>1</sup>*

Emptiness of the sky: emptiness of the absolute. Infinite emptiness that marks the here and now of the one world, its truth unfounded in any further truth. World without superior intelligibility. It is nothing but this nothing-of-truth, nothing but this dearth of meaning.

Truth is one name of this dearth or withdrawal or withholding of meaning. Not even non-meaning escapes the economy of a plenitude whose negative complement it remains. This emptiness, however, points up the inconsistency of the logic of meaning as much as that of non-meaning. It indicates a limit that no non-meaning is capable of absorbing, controlling, or representing. Blanchot called it the outside (*dehors*), of which Deleuze says that it is “farther away than any form of exteriority.”<sup>2</sup> Absolute outside: emptiness that erodes and delimits any interior and any exterior:

*“The sky [...] suddenly open, absolutely black and absolutely empty, revealing [...] such an absence that all has since always and forevermore been lost therein—so lost that therein is affirmed and dissolved the vertiginous knowledge that nothing is what there is, and first of all*

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Blanchot in an unpublished letter to Roger Laporte, September 24, 1966. A German translation of this letter has been published in Blanchot, “[...] absolute Leere des Himmels [...]]. (Aus einem Brief an Roger Laporte)“, in: *Die andere Urszene*, ed. Marcus Coelen, Zurich and Berlin: diaphanes 2008, 19.

<sup>2</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Seán Hand, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 122.

*nothing beyond.*”<sup>3</sup>

Blanchot describes the experience of emptiness as a “feeling of happiness” that assails the subject as a “ravaging joy.”<sup>4</sup> Joy of an opening that opens toward its closure, so infinite is this emptiness that contains not the least positivity. An emptiness that closes the space of the beyond. The event of this closure coincides with, as Foucault puts it, “an absolute opening through which language endlessly spreads forth, while the subject—the ‘I’ who speaks—fragments, disperses, scatters, disappearing in that naked space.”<sup>5</sup> Now we know that Blanchot, rather than making the subject disappear, thinks it as the scene of infinite self-deconstruction. By undelimiting it toward the outside, he renders it the subject of the outside, in the sense of this double genitive, which calls upon us to think the subject as a *sub-ob-ject*. That is why the joy of confronting the emptiness is the joy of a subject to which “a level of itself”<sup>6</sup> is revealed. This is an empty subject of emptiness: an *originarily emptied-out cogito*. A subject that affirms itself as the subject of an empty sky, without divine substratum, without transcendent meaning. A subject without subjectivity because it is the movement of this experience that remains incessant: a subject without return to itself, beyond self-mediation and self-appropriation **constituting** a present. An empty subject because it experiences emptiness as the absent ground and absent telos of its existence. As the desert of a freedom that is so incommensurable that it cannot be experienced *as such*.

The absence of meaning, the nonexistence of god, the emptiness should not lead to a self-satisfied celebration of the subject’s own abandonment, for they mark nothing but a being-free of the subject that far transcends the binary opposites of freedom and necessity. “This is what is at stake in an ‘atheism,’” as Nancy puts it in an essay about Blanchot, “that owes it to itself to deny itself the position of the negation it proffers, and the assurance of every sort of presence that could substitute for that of God—that is, the presence of the signifier of absolute signification or signifiability.”<sup>7</sup> The emptiness is not there in order to be filled, the empty heaven not so it can be peopled with humans who replace God by switching roles with him. In this play, God would be the *ens creatum* of a man who conceives himself as *creator*, one who knows to keep a distance between himself and his creations. He would be Nietzsche’s *higher*

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986, 72.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, “Maurice Blanchot: The Thought from Outside,” trans. Brian Massumi, in *Foucault/Blanchot*, New York: Zone Books 1987, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Maurice Blanchot, unpublished letter to Roger Laporte; cf. Blanchot, “[... absolute Leere des Himmels ...]. (Aus einem Brief an Roger Laporte)“, 20.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “The Name *God* in Blanchot,” trans. Michael B. Smith, in *Dis-Enclosure. The Deconstruction of Christianity*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 86.

*man*, who can neither laugh nor dance, so heavy is the burden he inherits from the dead god.<sup>8</sup>

The play and the seriousness to which the absence of God calls us cannot consist in the perversion of previous certainties (and be they certainties of faith), in an inversion of what now reveals itself to be unacceptable. The inversion, the negation is itself what is unacceptable. This is the first certainty of philosophy: that the inversion must itself be transversed, that the negation can be not merely negated but pursued beyond the negation of negation, exported into a nowhere that is entirely of this world and nonetheless presents a white spot on the map of disclosed realities, or a sort of hole. “*Gottes Feh!*,” the “absence of God” (to use Hölderlin’s words), marks the puncturedness of man, renders him a subject that encircles this hole and receives all essential impulses—whether they encourage him to think, to act, to judge—from the touch of this absence. To exist means to touch upon the absence of ontological prescription, as in love, which moves the subject to affirm, without grounds and beyond its motivations, what is groundless.

The nonexistence of god is the index of the nonexistence of a program that would prescribe where the subject is moving and whence it is coming. In the space of this nonexistence, the subject arises as the subject of a self-invention that remains in touch with objective unfreedom (with its status as a determined subject) without entirely assimilating to it. It articulates the factual impossibility of such assimilation, for there is forever something that escapes the movement of identification and adequation to the determiners.

This escaping is what Blanchot called disappearance: the subject does not disappear as a self-transparent *ego cogito* in order to identify itself as the product of a fabric of determiners. It acknowledges itself as the agency that punctures even this texture. It understands that it escapes both the realistic temptation of confining it to, and the idealistic attempt to render it immune to, the given state of affairs. It is never where realism and idealism attempt to locate it. It is the elsewhere itself, this movement that cannot be arrested because it describes a trajectory of escape that does not come to a standstill: “This is why the most precious gift of philosophy is, for Blanchot, not even in the operation of the negation of the existence of God, but in a simple shrinking away, a dissipation of that existence. Thought does not think unless it be from this point of departure.”<sup>9</sup>

It is the desert of this “absenting of meaning,”<sup>10</sup> this empty sky, that Nietzsche and Heidegger call upon us to think as, respectively, a growing desert and a now fundamental abyss: as the

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for Everyone and No One*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, London: Penguin, 1961, part four.

<sup>9</sup> Nancy, “The Name *God* in Blanchot,” 87.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 86 (translation modified).

point of departure of any thinking that, instead of being religion or science, remains oriented toward the intractability of its reality by accepting the encouragement of this intractability to a freedom that urges it beyond its certainties toward the domain of truth. It is here that one of the oldest distinctions philosophy has proposed for its own definition situates itself: the distinction between meaning and truth, which names the rift between certainties of fact and their incommensurability.

In a lecture at a colloquium in Nancy's honour held by the *Collège international de philosophie* in 2002, Badiou invoked this distinction to mark the difference between Nancy's and his own thinking. A distinction that mirrors that between finitude and infinity, between a thinking that conceives itself as a *finite thinking of the finite* and one that conceives itself as a *finite thinking of the infinite*.<sup>11</sup> Ultimately, the challenge is probably to trace the interferences between these two positions; for the thinking of the finite Nancy developed by drawing upon Heidegger and Derrida—who, each in his way, turned toward the infinite—acknowledges its infinity, just as Badiou's insistence on infinity can be interpreted as aiming at a more precise conception of simple finitude (it is tempting to say: of *bad finitude*).

To break away from the thinking of the end and of finitude, as Badiou demands, means to turn to the incommensurable antagonism between finitude and infinity in the invention of a dialectics that differs from Hegelian dialectics by remaining negative, yet so as to affirm its negativity—to affirm itself as *negative dialectics*. This affirmation of an aporetic compossibility of finitude and infinity, of meaning (Nancy) and truth (Badiou) is what philosophical thinking shares with the thinking of a love that situates itself nowhere else but in this conflict that no thinking knows how to reconcile.

We encounter this conflict in all philosophies that elude the choice between realism and idealism by affirming the compatibility of concept and life. Infinity of the concept, despite its historicity; finitude of life, despite its incommensurability: these do not delineate an alternative, for the “tension” between the two positions is “*internal* to philosophy.”<sup>12</sup>

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What is reality? How does the subject hold itself in it? What does it mean to love in the here and now of the one world, if we consider how elementarily what we call love remains tied up with the Christian tradition, which allows us to distinguish the concepts of *agápe* and *éros*?

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<sup>11</sup> Alain Badiou, „L'offrande réservée“, in: Francis Guibal & Jean-Clet Martin (eds.), *Sens en tous sens. Autour des travaux de Jean-Luc Nancy*, Paris 2004, S. 13-24.

<sup>12</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Philosophical Chronicles*, trans. Franson Manjali, New York: Fordham University Press, 2008, 12.

Christianity, with its imperative of charity, forms a backdrop from which one does not depart by marking one's contemplations as atheistic. As Nancy has shown, we stand within the horizon of Judeo-Christian monotheism as long as we maintain—in reference to categories such as justice, the universal, the individual—the “motif of an infinite transcendence surpassing man”; and no thinking that does not wish to be obscurantist can afford to forgo seeking clarity regarding this nexus by analyzing the alliance between atheism and theism.<sup>13</sup> Yet this alliance is already that between immanence and transcendence. It calls upon us to think a concept of reality that ultimately amounts to a contentious union of both orders. The constitution of reality, like that of the subject, like the reality of love, requires the antagonism between the two orders, which we can describe as that of the finite and that of the infinite.<sup>14</sup> Hegel's dialectics brings this antagonism back as a philosophical contention that compels him to reject both options—a simple materialism and a simple idealism—alike (Hegel's term for this rejection is *absolute idealism*). Persistent at the heart of reality is an element that is explicit to it. It is decisive that we situate this incommensurable (which we can easily enough call *God* or, as Levinas does, the wholly other, *tout autre*) within the immanence expanded by its implicit transcendence rather than retroactively re-theologizing it. To do the latter would be to trust in a *pure transcendence*, one that would be at a total distance from a *pure immanence*. Yet transcendence does not mark a higher reality; nor does immanence mean the dimension of what is controlled and known. The alliance of both registers refers to their intertwinement, which remains the difficult inheritance of the history of metaphysics: “The infinite is no longer beyond (*au-delà*). What has long been known—that God is dead—means: the infinite is no longer found in a *radical* beyond.”<sup>15</sup> It is the name of the truth of finite reality, its *ontological distraction*.

Reality is not simply a matter of fact. Its status as incommensurable reveals that it is expansive and distract. Toward what does reality open, to what does it expand, with respect to what does it distract itself? How to think a world without transcendence and yet not substitute for it a phantasm of immanence that negates the possibility of thinking something new,

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<sup>13</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “A Deconstruction of Monotheism,” trans. Gabriel Malenfant, in *Dis-Enclosure*, 32.

<sup>14</sup> Part and parcel of the infinity of love—which names its punctual intensity, not its temporal extension—is that the loving subject is *not immortal = finite*. The finitude of its life gives meaning to the infinity of love. I love, I die: this certainty can give rise to love, to the feeling of touching upon *the limit of life = its infinity*. The ontological dimension of love resides in the problematic X, which marks the status of the subject as intractable, its incommensurability. We ought not to presume that it has any sort of sublime meaning; it is nothing but the reverse of the subject's reality, which interferes with the real in *problematic* fashion.

<sup>15</sup> Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, *L'esprit du nihilisme. Une ontologique de l'Histoire*, Paris 2009, 80–1. Belhaj Kacem's concept of a pure emptiness (*vide pur*), which, thus his claim, inscribes itself upon Blanchot's, Deleuze's, and Foucault's concept of the outside (*dehors*) as its limit to the extent that even that which is most outside (*le plus 'extérieur'*) is part of this emptiness, fails to take into account the fact that Blanchot, Deleuze, and Foucault described the outside not in categories of the interior and the exterior, since it marks the other of interiority and exteriority—the ontological emptiness.

negates freedom and decision, autonomy and the consistency of the subject? How to back out of the alternative of finitude and infinity, reality and ideality, the possible and the impossible? How to think an opening that opens toward something not-given—toward the nothing itself—; how to affirm this opening toward closure without depriving it of its characteristic openness? How to think an opening that is not one?

If the entire onto-theological tradition, at least in the orthodox reading, has privileged an onto-theology of two worlds over the alternative of immanence, if there is in it a turn in faith toward a beyond and toward a life after life, then its structure can be identified as that of an opening toward an opening rather than that of an opening toward closure.

This second opening, as Nancy notes, would be “not outside the world, although it is not inside it either; it is not an other world, nor is it a beyond-the-world, since it opens this world to itself.”<sup>16</sup> It bends reality back toward its real. It shows that the separation between reality and the real runs through reality itself, through its heightened immanence, which folds itself into both universes, the universe of the constituted immanence of the space of facts on the one hand, the universe of its implicit-transcendent inconsistency, which cannot be represented within it, on the other hand. It is this folding-within-itself that permits us to think an opening that takes place nowhere but within closedness, whose limits do not open toward new spaces (by marking the transition into them) because they articulate the inexistence of these spaces as the interiority of transcendence.

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*Opening toward closure.*—It is well known that the problem of the opening is a motif that reaches from Rilke and Heidegger into contemporary philosophy. In his *Logiques des mondes*, Badiou criticizes any recurrence to the open whose point amounts to no more than a tolerance that believes itself to be “democratic,” or at least humble and eager to learn, while purchasing with its openness toward anything at all the alibi for its asthenia.<sup>17</sup> This is an openness for the open, for realities and possibilities that are of this world because they form part of it, as social, cultural, political options. The subject experiences them as familiar even when they appear uncanny to it. To be open for possibilities is one thing. An opening toward the ruination of the texture of options, by contrast, demands of the subject that it move toward an emptiness that can easily make it lose its step, for it evokes the truth of its abidance in the

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<sup>16</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “A Faith That Is Nothing at All,” trans. Bettina Bergo, in *Dis-Enclosure*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Alain Badiou, *L'être et l'événement*, vol. 2: *Logiques des mondes*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006, 583–4.

world, the ontological unconcludedness/ inconclusiveness of its reality.<sup>18</sup> Opening toward closure is opening toward inconclusiveness, because it makes appear, amid the possible and familiar, what is *unfamiliar* and *differently possible*. Possible beyond the possibilities, so new, so unexpected, and so unfamiliar that it is experienced as terrifying and dangerous rather than as an opportunity.

True opening is opening toward closure, toward emptiness and absence. It is a rupturing of the texture of options toward its implicit outside, toward the naked *there is (il y a)* or, as Wittgenstein puts it, toward the miracle of the “existence of the world.”<sup>19</sup> An opening not toward the world *as* it is, as a world of facts, but toward the miracle *that* it is.

The subject extends itself toward this outside that opens its possibilities by delimiting them. Instead of misapprehending itself as a self-conscious *cogito* in the chaos of *there is* in order to draw out of itself the ground of its desire and its love, it immerses itself in a water without ground:

*“It immerses itself in it without immersing itself. It neither bathes nor swims in the depths (of which, incidentally, it is afraid.) But it immerses its thoughts in this unthinkability that is the obscure, closed, and nonetheless movable mass of the ductile and plastic water. This ‘I’ that arrives on the edge of the lake arrives at once from the mountains and from the woods: the lake opens before it like a crater (that is perhaps its antiquity), like a very old rift of the earth in the domain of its solid rock and its oldest vegetation. This is a mouth at once open and closed, in which the previous state of the world manifests itself: a state without transcendence, without form, all in all without expression. Or it is like an eye that does not see, an eye that is turned toward the sky that reflects itself in the water—the sky, and not the ‘I.’”<sup>20</sup>*

The picture Nancy offers of the world and the subject evokes the *ontological indifference* Heraclitus, Nietzsche and Heidegger, Axelos and Deleuze have described as becoming (“world-game”), as the nakedness of the *there is*. Via Levinas and Blanchot, this picture reaches into a contemporary thinking that must measure itself against the incommensurable, which may be the sea or the empty sky that no longer needs a witness. It is within the horizon of this horizonlessness that the subject seizes its abandonment as the precondition of a possible self-uprighting that can live the contact with an other as *love*.

In a text that describes the approach to a lake by letting the subject experience the water and

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Slavoj Žižek, “Materialism, or the Inexistence of the Big Other,” *lacanian ink* 29 (Spring 2007), 154.

<sup>19</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics” [1930], *The Philosophical Review* 74 no. 1 (January 1965), 3–12.

<sup>20</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, „Das liegende Auge“, in *Vernetzt*, ed. Krystian Woznicki, Berlin 2009, 164.

its shores, Nancy approaches the “point” where “delimitation and opening become indistinguishable.” The water rests in a basin, it is delimited by the banks of its shores, by soft beaches and bare rocks. “The question must no longer be one of deciding between the finite and the infinite, between delimitation and opening,” Nancy says, as though to remind us that there is no alternative to the indistinguishability or *originary contention* between *léthe* and *alétheia*.<sup>21</sup> The opening reaches into a closure that is an originary forgetting of the world. Yet a minimum of light and consciousness attests to it, an almost-nothing-of-evidence. Heidegger called this minimal evidence *Erschlossenheit*, disclosedness. Even the originary forgetting needs to be lighted, exposed to light, in order to appear as such. What is concealed must be unconcealed. It manifests itself in the latency of that-which-withdraws, in an absence that is *there*.

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What does thinking mean if not an opening toward the dimension of that which *cannot be possessed*, a dimension Badiou’s thinking addresses as *truth*? The history of philosophy is full of examples that demonstrate that to think—i.e., to be a subject and to live as a subject—requires a transgression of *dóxa* as much as of naked interest (the interest of survival). Thinking presupposes an emancipation of the subject from its vital basis; it articulates a distance from the vegetative imperatives that reduce the subject to its body. But, it will be said with Spinoza, there is nothing but the body; man is nothing but a part of (material) nature.<sup>22</sup> And yet it is Spinoza himself who lets the difference between *natura naturans* (chaotic-indifferentiated and creative nature = God) and *natura naturata* (created, disciplined, and constituted reality) through the very body of the subject. The subject marks the threshold separating the two orders of infinity and finitude, of ideality and corporeality. It is the porous membrane between them.

Not to contest the notion that “thought is the body itself” does not mean to trust in an “intact ‘matter’”<sup>23</sup> that demands the substitution of a thinking of immanence for that of transcendence. The challenge is, rather, to affirm the conflict between transcendence and immanence as the aporetic compossibility of the impossible. Neither can thinking be reduced to the body nor the body to thinking, for their cooperation is the evidence of the real.

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<sup>21</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Die Annäherung*, Köln 2008, S. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethics*, part IV, prop. 4 (for instance in *Complete Works*, trans. Samuel Shirley, Indianapolis: Hackett 2002, 324).

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, Paris: Éditions Métailié, 2006, 101–2.

“All living things have as their imperative for survival the pursuit of their own interests,” Badiou writes. “Thought is the one and only uniquely human capacity, and thought, strictly speaking, is simply that through which the human animal is seized and traversed by the trajectory of a truth.”<sup>24</sup> The trajectory of a truth of that which is without representation in the field of constituted realities because it marks a radical novelty. To think would mean to open oneself toward the emergence of the new, to redefine one’s reality and oneself as a subject in the confrontation of the incommensurable.

Rifted into the experience of groundlessness, the subject faces the necessity that it readjust its trust in the world. The inconsistency of its realities, be they social, cultural, or political, grows into an inconsistency of its trust in them. Still, there is, as Wittgenstein says in his fragments on certainty, no alternative to trust.<sup>25</sup> Even the most determined distrust, the most radical doubt rest on a trust and its affirmation that remain their precondition.

In *Die Verführbarkeit des Philosophen*, Hans Blumenberg tells an anecdote about Niels Bohr, who affixes a horseshoe above his front door. Asked whether he really believes in it, he responds that “people told him it works even if one doesn’t believe in it”:

*“That is more than a paradox. It lends expression to an expectation religions and their theologians have since time immemorial expended great efforts to satisfy—efforts so successful that reformators and philosophers were able to contradict them most impressively in this very point: that nothing depended on the substance, and everything on faith and conviction.”*<sup>26</sup>

The example of the quantum physicist who believes even when he doesn’t believe demonstrates the structure of all trust, which trusts only because there are no grounds for trust. It demonstrates the groundlessness that is a feature of trust as much as belief. That there are no grounds means simply: that is why I have ample grounds ... to believe, to love, to trust. There is no contradiction between believing and not believing, between trusting and not trusting, between loving and not loving. Or: there is in each of these cases a contradiction that is not one.

In a letter to Moore dated October 1944, Wittgenstein—responding to a lecture by Moore on “certainty”—insists that “logic isn’t as simple as logicians think it is,” and that “contradiction

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<sup>24</sup> Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker, London: Verso, 2005, 97.

<sup>25</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, trans. Denis Paul, G.E.M. Anscombe, New York: Harper&Row, 1972.

<sup>26</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Die Verführbarkeit des Philosophen*, Frankfurt a. M. 2000, S. 131.

isn't the *unique* thing people think it is. It isn't the *only* logically inadmissible form and it is, under certain circumstances, admissible."<sup>27</sup> Under which circumstances? Under circumstances that confront the subject with the incommensurable, which the early Wittgenstein calls the unspeakable and mystical because it adumbrates the dimensions of the ethical and the aesthetic. In touching upon the inconsistency of the world of facts, in experiencing the limitations of the "historical proof-game," which, as Wittgenstein protests, "is irrelevant to belief"<sup>28</sup>—a belief he identifies with love and, in the book on certainty, with trust—the subject opens itself toward the non-contradictory contradiction that non-belief implies belief, that non-trust implies trust, that non-love implies love.

At the point where they touch upon their own uncertainty, belief, love, trust cannot be questioned further. Instead of discarding them logically, we must accept them, for they refer to a *blurring* that is part of the reality of the subject.

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<sup>27</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Letters to Russell, Keynes and Moore*, ed. G.H. von Wright, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974, 177.

<sup>28</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, trans. Peter Winch, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980, 32e.