

A linguistic source for the myth of the *Summum Bonum*, and how it should be played

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I will not cease from Mental Fight,
Nor shall my Sword sleep in my hand
Till we have built Jerusalem,
In England's green & pleasant Land.

-William Blake

We have all come across expressions of the *summum bonum*, “the highest good.” It has been what is believed or presumed to lie before us in eternity, the end of all ends, the goal of all desire, Bunyan’s “Celestial City,” the Zoroastrian walled garden of Paradise, the Judaic Garden of Eden, the Islamic “seventh heaven,” the Greek Elysium, the Buddhist Nirvana, the Norse Valhalla, Blake’s and Parry’s “Jerusalem,” “a green hill far away.”

For some it is the cessation of all longing: for others the highest happiness. There is a discrepancy here, for, if one thinks of becoming freed from all longing in the sense of having no motivation whatsoever, then one no longer has desires to pursue, but one can just as well conceive of being freed from all longing as the result of having all desires satisfied. One definition, derivable from Buddhism, indeed sees it as the highest happiness, but this, rather than being the achievement if all that one has longed for, is what results from active renunciation of that longing.

This final “Holy City” would seem to embody a perfect society based on the ultimate judgement of divine law, all words matched to all referents in purity of truth, all souls assigned to their appropriate place, even if, as in some religions, that place be an eternity in hell—which could be termed a *summum malum*. To ensure this balance of justice, the evil are seen as immortal as the good. Not all religions, of course, reserve an eternal place for the damned: Buddhism and Hinduism, for example, stage a series of new births in which the soul can purgatorially advance

towards the ultimate purification.

The poetic impulse, deriving, as will be argued, from the nature of communication between differing human beings, has produced a wide range of mythical imaginings of this state of bliss. To take one example: seeing the holy place as a “green hill,” a citadel upon a mountain, or a heaven above the clouds employ the metaphors of height and light combined, with the connotations of a panoramic viewpoint, of a peak achieved after long and painful effort of climbing higher, of light as revealing all distinctions everywhere, exposing all concealments, thus sharing the deity’s omniscience.

Plato and Aristotle differ as regards the path to this highest good. For Plato, as for Socrates, the guide to it, implied in the assumption of godlike omniscience, is knowledge, knowledge of the rational and its systematic order. For Aristotle, mere knowledge as such was insufficient—it had to be braced with action, virtuous action in accordance with our engagement with ethical challenges in practice. But both projected knowledge and virtue are seen as aiming at a finally achievable Good for both citizen and city. Thomas Aquinas identified the final Good with God in whom every soul’s desires would find the happiness of satisfaction. Immanuel Kant interlocked the belief in God with a moral order that issued in a *summum bonum*. The Utilitarians identified it with the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Some modern economists view it as the putative goal of happiness for the Rational Individual.

Then there are political forms of it. Take the utopianism of the vulgar Marxists, or more degenerate forms such as evidenced by the stupor of the drunkards in Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s satirical painting “The Land of Cockaigne,” or the extreme right-wing in Greece at the moment, calling their party “Golden Dawn,” or worse, Anders Breivik’s myth of a future Norway, racially pure.

What can such ethical analyses have to do with language? Does it not seem blasphemous to trace the holiest of aims to a feature of human communication? It seems to some as just another covert attempt at a reduction of the sacred by means of rational explanation, an Enlightenment ploy typical of the aggressive atheism that has emerged over the past decade? Worse, it looks as if such a claim lays itself open to the accusations of relativism and solipsism, and so can be summarily dismissed as covertly importing the anarchy of “postmodernism.”

My purpose here is to relate a hypothesis about language common to a wide range of thinkers.⁽¹⁾ It is also implicit in Michael Tomasello’s and Eric Gans’s insistence on the “joint attentional scene” requisite for language to come into being (Tomasello 2003; Gans 1995). I have already made plain the key features of this hypothesis in

my two recent articles in *Anthropoetics* (Wright: 2008b, 2012), but to connect it to the theme of the *summum bonum*, let us take the sociologist Alfred Schutz's formulation; it can be found in the first volume of his collected papers of 1962, entitled *The Problem of Social Reality* (Schutz: 1962, 11-12).

I should like to work towards it via a look at a claim of the philosopher Daniel Dennett, one of the aggressive atheists. It concerns a feature of evolutionary advance. Dennett describes what is called by biologists the "Baldwin Effect." It arises from the fact that members of natural species have different "wirings," as he puts it, in their responses to stimuli, and this is what allows a species to adjust to changes in the environment, for those with what subsequently turns out to be an inadequate set of criteria for the new circumstances die off. Dennett draws a little diagram of a pack of upright rods, each representing a species-member, with a group that tops all the others, with one particularly successful member out-topping them all (Dennett 1992: 186-8). What Dennett also acknowledges is that the environmental niche may change. However, what he does not make clear is that the successful group, made up of members each with a slightly different set of criteria, that were for a time responding adaptively to "an object" in the world outside them, are now winnowed out anew because that "object" is no longer what "it" was. So nature's scheme is best described, not as selecting and holding to "given objects," but, rather, allowing for *the tracking of rewarding features of the continuum as they metamorphose*. These features may obviously not respect any singularity that might be attributed by us to the original choice of any one of the group: after all, to give a specific example, after the passage of time some members of it remain alive because they had been identified as "prey" that had not previously been recognised as such, prey that had been insignificant in its numbers before the change but became so after it. This analysis is consonant with the German philosopher Siegfried Schmidt's insistence that living beings are faced, in the Heraclitean flux of the real, with ever-changing processes rather than logically distinct entities (Schmidt 2007).

At any time, any species will present a fuzzy set of responses to external stimuli, so that one cannot speak of "one" object to which the species as a whole is tuned but rather of a number of overlapping ones constituting the perspective of each member of the species. When changes occur in the environmental niche, animals are severely limited in their ability to communicate such changes. Some higher animals are able to pass on new and valuable aspects of the world to others, such as those Japanese monkeys that discovered the pleasantness of dipping one's food in the sea to enhance the taste, but, of course, it is not by using language that they have done so.

Now human beings in one sense are no different from animals in that they also gain

by passing on updatings of the shifting world, but, in language, they have a much more evolutionarily efficient mode of doing it. It is plain that one talks only when one wishes to update other members of the species, when one thinks one has discovered that what has been *taken to be* one thing common to all as a guide to action has turned out not to be so (of course, there is no certainty in such a conviction). Or one asks a question, which is plainly a directing of the other onto the portion of the world about which one requires updating (or one gives or obeys a command, which is a way of obtaining action directly to produce change in such a portion). It has to be conceded that, exactly like other animals, we are faced, not with securely identified entities which will conveniently never unexpectedly change their entityhood or criterial qualities, but features of the continuum that cannot be depended upon to reward our desire, Schmidt's processes that present subtly different versions of "themselves" to each observer. We have to try to track the changing sources of pleasure and pain so that they may be met with appropriate action.[\(2\)](#)

Note that this perceptual *relativity* is not to be equated with *relativism*: one can agree with Nietzsche that each of us has his or her own unique perspective on the real without that necessitating the imputation of a selfish distortion as tainting one's private selection. The temptation to view our relativity as involving relativism arises out of what cannot be avoided, a needful strategy within communication that Alfred Schutz and the others thinkers mentioned in Footnote 1 have delineated for us.

Schutz discerned that the two participants in the minimal communication situation are *taking it for granted* that they have both focussed on the same area of concern, one that draws in the motivations of both of them (their fears, desires, pains, pleasures). There is an immediate oddity here for the would-be informant believes that he or she knows more than the hearer, from which it follows that, paradoxically, they are *not* focussing on precisely the same portion of the real. Indeed, the updating, if successful, may produce a complete abandonment of the boundaries of the putative single object, qualitatively or spatio-temporally. In the words of Dinnaga, a sixth-century Buddhist philosopher: "Even 'this' can be a case of mistaken identity" (quoted by Matilal: 1986, 332). David Woodruff Smith is a philosopher who has directed his attention to illusory situations, but it never occurs to him that the singularity of what is focused upon might be impugned; he believes, with his mentor Edmund Husserl, that there is always a "determinable x" in the real awaiting selection. It is true that *for each person* there is an apparently singular determinate x that is selected, but it is not true that it is the same for each (conjurers know this well) (Husserl: 1973, 72; Woodruff Smith: 1989). The "determinate x" is a creation of the *pragmatically required* mutual hypothesizing of singularity.

So, to spell out the Schutzian insight, for two partners in dialogue to obtain a rough-and-ready mutual fix on a portion of the real, a *partial* overlapping of their differing selections, they have to behave as if they have a *perfect* one. The psycholinguist Ragnar Rommetveit puts it thus: we “take a *perfect* intersubjectivity for granted in order to achieve a *partial* one” (Rommetveit 1978: 31). In Schutz’s own words it constitutes a “reciprocity of perspectives,” or “the idealization of the interchangeability of the standpoints,” the taking for granted that, if I were in your shoes, your standpoint would seem to be the same as mine, and you and I see “things” with the same typicality.

To delve deeper here we must ask what “reciprocity of perspectives” and “idealization of the interchangeability of standpoints” mean in this context. We might start with the word “standpoint.” What is a standpoint?—one’s *inclination*, *bent*, or *bias*, in other words, one’s current habit of intention, one’s desire, one’s motivation, one’s attitude with regard to forthcoming action. And what is Schutz therefore detecting in the situation of human communication? That the two participants mutually *assume*, that is, hypothesize together that their inclinations, intentions, attitudes as regards the portion of their sense-fields that they also take to be similarly attended to are, as regards this portion of the real, relevantly the same. The convergence of what each is attending to is presumed to be ideal—did not Schutz use the word “idealization” of the match of the two standpoints?

The phrase “reciprocity of perspectives” can be similarly analysed, where “perspective” can be taken to mean the same as “standpoint.” Do not both use the common metaphor of a physical place from which a particular view may be had?—as of two people together on a mountain observing the same landscape. The image also illustrates Tomasello’s and Gans’s phrase for this situation, the “joint attentional scene.”

Once this tentative superimposition of the *differing* selections from the real continuum has been thus pragmatically assumed, speakers, believing that they can update their hearers about the fuzzy overlap, proceed to add to it a predication that transforms it in some way, altering its supposedly agreed criteria of identification. This is strictly an a-logical move because it invades the perceiving of the agreed “focus” of their perspectives, proposing a substitution of the former “entity” with a version presumed to be superior as a guide to action.

An example is called for. Readers familiar with the theory may excuse my using one that I have employed before, largely because it illustrates how radical the updating can be while an apparent link to the original interpretation is preserved. It makes plain why a mutual hypothesis of common single reference is needed and why it does not actually exist. In the following scenario Speaker A knows that her view of a

region of the real is different from that of Hearer B, yet both have to begin the statement with the assumption that they are talking about a single definable entity, knowable in the same way to both of them. They end up acknowledging that “it” was not singular.

Listen to this interchange. It takes place between two birdwatchers who are busily counting birds (bird-counting takes place regularly in Britain under the auspices of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds):

A: That bird you just counted.

B: Well, what about it?

A: It was two-and-a-bit leaves.

The advantage of two heads being better than one is well demonstrated by this little interchange. What was taken to be a single entity at the start ended up by being seen later as “two-and-a-bit.” A could not have brought B’s attention to the part of the real she was concerned about unless they had both behaved as if there were a singular referent, “the bird,” in front of them. The last line constitutes the transforming clue, the predication.

Worthwhile here examining is what is meant by the simple pronoun “it” in its two appearances in the dialogue, and then you will see how the language game is *played*. One can compare this mutual, hopeful projection of logical singularity to a catalyst in a chemical combination: it enables the process of improvement of reference to go through, but the projection of a coincidence of attention itself is unchanged by that process—so here for the birdwatchers, the idea of a common focus of attention moved easily on to help in the rearrangement of their purchase on the real—the “it” as “one” bird as the “common” focus becoming “two-and-a-bit” leaves as the “common” focus. Strict enumeration of the “entities” so selected from the continuum is obviously shown to be part of the interpretations and not of the continuum itself (for the theory of perception that is consonant with this analysis, see Wright 2008a, 341-66). That is why any statement partakes of the nature of a lie in containing a virtual contradiction of the initial mutual agreement (for a more detailed discussion of this paradoxical similarity see Wright on the Paradox of the Cretan Liar, 2005: 127-8).

The same sequence is discernible in actual games. To give an example. In chess when one player plays a gambit, to his opponent (he hopes) the move appears as a mistake, a lapse in defence; for the player who made the move he has tempted the opponent to make a self-defeating move (the word “gambit,” incidentally, comes from the late Latin *cambiare* “to exchange,” related to the word “change” itself).

It is also the pattern of a joke. In a joke the hearer is encouraged by clues to an opening context to attach a harmless meaning to some word or phrase; by the time the joke is over a countervailing clue will have been presented, preferably one which brings with it an emotional shock. Take one of the “100 funniest jokes heard at the 2012 Edinburgh Festival”:

When I die I want my remains to go to my iPod, my iPhone and my laptop. I want to be left to my own devices. (Gareth Richards) Clearly the sequence that is ambiguated is “I want to be left to my own devices” in which two pairs of meanings centering on *being left to*, and *my own devices* are induced to deliver the key rival meanings of the whole statement. Both these phrases have clues which produce the rival meanings. For the former, [*being left to*], (a) the context of making a will, in which *to leave to* has the specific meaning of stating to whom the whole or parts of the legacy are to go; and (b) the context of expressing a wish of how one wants to be treated after a particular moment in one’s life, such that “wanting to be left to one’s own devices” has the meaning of wishing to be undisturbed, left alone, so that one can pursue a course of action entirely of one’s own choice. For the latter, [*devices*], (i) the context of gizmos is clearly indicated by the list ‘my iPod, my iPhone and my laptop’; and (ii) the context is one in which the speaker is stating his wishes about how he is to be treated by others after a particular moment, namely, to be left without any interference to choose which of his projects he prefers to act upon.

What gives the joke its power is, of course, the allusion to death and someone’s wishes about how his existence is to be regarded after it. This is a matter of solemn concern, which has, no doubt, occurred to many of us with its attendant sad feelings. The answer, that he, as the legacy itself, wants to be left to his gizmos, is what transforms this dark reminder to a lighthearted piece of nonsense, which, as nonsense, invites further imaginings—such as, since he has spent lengthy hours of fascinated enjoyment with his gizmos, he wants to return something to them for their kindness!

The match with Statement is clear: the hearer of the joke is forced to switch from familiar sad associations to a playful engagement with nonsense (for more on nonsense, see Wright 2005, 56-9), and, in so doing, moves from his first unthinking agreement with the speaker to a surprising second one, one that retains its sound-link with the first.

Now it is here that a hint of something relevant to the *summum bonum* makes itself felt. What is it really that they are both idealizing when they take up this imaginary focus of the Statement? One is immediately tempted to say the meaning and reference of their words. But we have said that utterances are made with the

intention of updating the other, so his mutual hypothesis rides on the partners in dialogue acting as *if* their desires match and consequently their versions of “the entity”—the object or person or self.

Analytic philosophers of the 20th century have drawn attention to a peculiar fact about intention and meaning. Joel Feinberg has called it “the Accordion Effect”:

This well-known feature of our language, whereby a man’s actions can be described as narrowly or as broadly as we please, I propose to call the “accordion effect,” because an act, like the folding musical instrument, can be squeezed down to a minimum or else stretched out. (Feinberg 1964: 146) To give an example. For example, you decide to stop working and have a cup of tea. The action is not only describable by saying that you were thirsty, for your choice of tea is a reflection of your being fond of that drink, and perhaps of your being English or Indian. But one could add that without the drink you would not be in so good a state for going on with your work, nor can one deny that it contributes to your state of health and state of mind, and that without that health you would not be able to continue with all your deeper intentions, perhaps today the writing of a novel which is to highlight the unsatisfactory conditions of people condemned to the underclass, and also to bring them to political notice just before an election, which brings in your intentions vis-à-vis the society you are a member of, etc., etc.

Feinberg gives part of the answer to the questions surrounding this odd feature of language in that almost unnoticed little interjection “as we please.” The accordion is stretched out by our providing wider and wider explanations of the intentional context. But there is a question that Feinberg did not ask: Is there the assumption that there is some *one* fixed fully open position, which, although a few of the bellow pleats are tattered, still represents a “totality” of understanding which touches the world securely at its fully extended edges?

In spite of their temptation to see the real as created by language, when it is only our *selections from the real* that are in part guided by the real, the perfect singularity of any entity can be seen to be only a mirage of this final agreement, which is itself delusory, since, because of the inescapable perceptual relativity, there can be no merging of all our desires that would find focus on or locus in some “one” thing, self or person. After all, in our analysis of the linguistic dyad, did not we accept that each is only *taking for granted* that they each have picked out the very same distinct “referent”? What is certain is that we are choosing *from* the real; existence is still there within our familiar perceivings, and, equally undeniably, immediate within our very sensations. Sensation is real experience, regardless of what “perceptions” it or may not be divided up into in the service of motivation. [\(3\)](#)

What does stubbornly exist is the sensing itself, the flux of sensory experience. ‘We’ become sharply aware of this non-objectified experience precisely when another observer updates “our” objectifying; “one” undergoes a sudden surprise which enforces a re-ordering of a perception, which amounts to a change of selfhood, a redirection of motivation. There is no solipsism in this, no relativism—on the contrary, “one” is pitchforked into another “one” altogether in an instant of ethical transformation. “One” is thus compelled in spite of “one’s” earlier self to admit to:

- (i) the existence of the ever-present external non-objectified real which has produced the variations in “one’s” sensory experiences;
- (ii) the existence of those sensory experiences-as-experiences regardless of what interpretations we cast upon them;
- (iii) the existence of the other agent who has brought about this change;
- (iv) the inescapable tentativeness of “one’s” self-construction; and
- (v) the reality of the motivation experiences-as-experiences both before and after their transformation.

“One” is like Pip hearing Magwitch’s revelation.

We thus *sense* the real but *know* only our mutually evolved hypothetical “entities,” which, as nets, we routinely throw over the real so often that we take them for real. However, our mutually agreed objects and persons can suddenly betray us when the real breaks into these cosily habitual understandings, those that Melvin Pollner has called the deliverances of “mundane reason” (Pollner 1987). Existence and objectivity philosophically come apart. It is hubristic to believe that all one has selected from the real is fully known, and that all one’s language-partners know it the same way.

What has this to do with our present topic? Well, since the two participants in the dialogue were apparently idealizing the identity of their understandings, how far down—and one can add, how far forward in time—does the imagining of this purported, hypothetical, indeed, *fictive* perfect match of intentions go? It’s obvious that our knowledge of the other is limited and so one cannot by any means imagine all the distal hopes and fears of our interlocutor—in addition, we cannot see into the future; there soon comes a point where our plain ignorance of the other and the world produces a vague boundary beyond which there is no reliable evidence to

support the notion of a harmony of intentions.

This vagueness demands more than a complacent trust. Since the generality of the argument must embrace the possibility of a mismatch of intentions, perhaps to the point of a comic or tragic disparity of them, every utterance is open to the sudden discovery of a clash of desires, one completely unexpected since “an idealization of the interchangeability of standpoints” was being employed by each, however habitually. Great expectations, as in Charles Dickens’s novel, are liable to being disappointed. One can generalize further—all statements are in this are to be compared with stories. Perception, because of the action of others upon it, is a matter of narrative.

It is essential to see that a mere blind trust is worthless: it can only disguise our own self-regarding belief in the accuracy of our own interpretations. Nevertheless, we are severely tempted to believe that, in spite of undiscerned consequences of possible new implications in our words, our intentions and those of the people around us do finally come together in some ultimate pulling out of the accordion of shared intention—a *summum bonum* in which all dissension is shown to be hidden agreement.

It is not surprising then that if, for example, the entity of a nation is instituted through the imagination, as Cornelius Castoriadis has argued, producing “imagined communities” as Benedict Anderson describes them, expressions of a *summum bonum* for the nation and its citizens are valuable and not uncommon (Castoriadis 1987; Anderson 1991). But this does not take away their imaginary nature. What is preserved is the performance of that fiction by those *who are aware that it is a fiction*. What is imagined does not exist objectively, but a faith-based acting-out of that collaborative drama does have an existence and extension through time, one that sometimes is apparently in tune with the real, sometimes disturbingly inadequate.

It is exactly like a play on stage in that what is represented does not exist, *but the play-as-a-play does have a historical reality apart from what is being played*. Another way of putting it is to say that what is imagined does not exist *but the process of imagining itself does*. In the extraordinarily intricate and subtle interplay of neurons within the heads of the collaborators so imagining within the drama—dramatic or social—must be a real material base for its creation, which makes it in principle, if not in act, explicable by science. And that imagining relies on a faith that goes beyond the present interpretation of the utterance, and that faith can only prove itself by accepting a special set of demands.

If faith and not blind trust is to be our principle of knowing, what must be squarely

faced up to are the following possible implications:

- (1) that the hoped-for harmony of wills in the imagined *summum bonum* can be shown to be out of key with the real outside the language presumed so far to be common to all speakers;
- (2) that, consequently, it is out of key with the real imaginings of each speaker, which have their bases in the real, in spite of all the promises and sworn commitments so far made;
- (3) that the agreements both in short-term aims and in the farthest *summum bonum* can no longer be hypothesized in a secure “taking for granted”—to put it plainly, because the *granting*, a renunciation of opposition, is plainly revealed to be only *taken for*, that renunciation being only a hypothesis which makes the hypothesis indeed “an *idealization* of reciprocity”(compare the use of the phrase in “I took the entrance to the mansion *for* the left turn”);
- (4) that the whole apparatus of counting existing “entities” in the real, common both to the moral aspects of our social and individual behaviour and to our knowings of self and others, also to the bases of objectivity in science (at the core of which mathematics is believed by many of us to lie) is rendered uncertain, in Ernst von Glaserfeld’s phrase, only “viable until further notice” (Glaserfeld 1984: 25).
- (5) that this argument, as was feared at the start, seems to conclude with the dismissal of all truth and objectivity, all moral universals, to a realm of fiction, and, hence, betrays itself to be no more than a version of subjective idealism.

In the worst case, are the partners in dialogue thus to be left with an irresolvable war of wills? Has the anarchy which those who feared that the relativity was only a mask for relativism warned us against now burst out from within this specious argument? We should have to admit that there can be no such perfect “reciprocity,” no merging of all our desires that would find focus on some “one thing, self or person,” no *summum bonum*. Even God, often characterized as “the One,” is here presented only as a valuable myth.

This is the very obstacle that opponents of social constructivism are sure they have detected inside the theory, and yet it is in his very place that their stance reveals itself as *unethical*. This refutation of their position has not as yet been answered.[\(4\)](#)

This ceases to be a surprise when the full consequences of the Schutzian pact are brought into the open. The key to understanding lies in the co-signatories to the pact fully acknowledging that radical conflicts of interpretation can ensue even

when they have entered into the “idealization of reciprocity.” It was necessarily implied in the insistence earlier that *faith* and *not blind trust* was implicit in the agreement. A way of making this clear is to recognize what is really required when taking part in a game—and the language-game is no different. The game must be played *seriously*.

This paradox is easily demonstrated. Take a group of children playing “The Federation against the Borg,” their play inspired by *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. One child acting as a Borg is to be brought down by a “phazer-on-kill”; however, as soon as this happens to him, he refuses to fall down and bursts into tears. His companions in the game cry “We’re not playing—you won’t be dead!”—and justifiably, as he has obviously stopped playing. In a dramatic play you are not suddenly to step out of your part because the “plot” does not favour you. We think it comic for the poet John Clare who, while watching the Trial Scene in *The Merchant of Venice* in a performance in Peterborough, jumped up from his seat when Portia accused Shylock and shouted “You villain! You murderous villain!” It parallels the story of the Southerner in the States who actually ran up onto the stage to stop Othello murdering Desdemona. They were both taking the scenes as literally true.

This marks the difference between faith and blind trust in the idealization of reciprocity. When, subsequent to their initial agreement in speech, a mismatch in reference occurs between users, then the partners in language are faced with a comic or tragic outcome. The resolution of the clash depends crucially on how the original pact was regarded: the person who relied on blind trust will immediately believe that he has been betrayed. In the comic situation he will not find the ambiguity funny, but, significantly, refuse to compromise, that is, to accept the minor sacrifice that is required of him: witness Molière’s Alceste in *Le Misanthrope*. In the last scene of the play, Alceste, although all misunderstandings are now out in the open, will not accept the comic correction, even at the price of losing his beloved. In the tragic situation he will believe that he has been deliberately “played false,” as we say, refusing to sacrifice any of his commitment in the pact.

But what of those who have great affection for each other, who love each other? Then the challenge to their faith—which never really expected an advance towards a *summum bonum*—but only played that expectation, that hope—will now face up to the sacrifice demanded.⁽⁵⁾ Of course, the faith does not necessarily imply a complete abandonment of will, for both should be willing to yield up some degree of what they each value. It will be the task of all involved to find a resolution that gives place to their hopes, although that may not be possible. Selfless martyrhood is not the inevitable outcome, but, if it were to be so, the “martyr” would not be expecting “a reward in heaven” but only the hope that his or her example would contribute to the future happiness of the language community. One has to add that, as with some

of those who took the place of others in the Auschwitz gas-chambers, their personal heroism may never be known, only, hopefully, the fact that such selfless acts took place.

It is vital to keep in mind the fact that neither in this scenario took the pact *literally*, but were aware from the start that absolute agreement was *played*. Faith contains nothing of a hope of personal reassurance, only an aesthetic, one might call it a *spiritual* confidence—without sliding into occult credulity.

One aspect of the theory that should aid in the acceptance of this dark conclusion is its presentation of the Self as no more than a social construction. We need others to talk to us in order to bring us into being, and, once established in childhood and youth, to maintain our sense of self. There is no unique self which is beyond transformation, its desires guaranteed by some metaphysical law of the universe.

So those who laud a pure “sincerity,” an undeviating “loyalty,” the fixity of “their word,” will have to accept that, in a true faith, such ideals are to be played, not believed.

Similarly, all those poetic projections of a *summum bonum* must be seriously entered into without any final commitment to the literal meaning of their tropes. We have to make appeal to our poetic nature—to our poets, novelists, composers, musicians, dancers, actors, costume designers, pageant organizers, painters, sculptors, architects, to render the drama of our social life a glorious fiction to aid us in our faith. We must engage in narrative transformations of all kinds, adhering to these performances without any trace of belief, but with faithful courage in the face of inevitable risk. The trouble in the past has been that, in taking the myths literally, the would-be religious, like John Clare in the theatre, were not playing.

As Wordsworth’s “Immortality Ode” makes plain in spite of its author, the glimpse of the *summum bonum* which we believed that we caught in childhood, has to be firmly regrounded in real play as we grow older, learning from the children who know how to do it; that what we imagined in childhood so intensely can be replayed again with the same vividness as a genuinely imagined “splendour in the grass”; and, as he emphasized himself, the wonder is awakened at its freshest when we feel

. . . those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a Creature

Moving about in worlds not realized

in other words, when the real invades “the shades of the prison-house.”

* * *

I began my talk in Tokyo with the playing of a recording of the last verse of Parry’s choral setting of William Blake’s “Jerusalem,” a glorious evocation in religious terms of a *summum bonum* of English patriotism. Then at the close I played, in sharp contrast, a current popular song which, on one level, accepts the non-existence of a *summum bonum* promised by a romantic relationship (the “place far away” mentioned in the second line), but on another level, as expressed in the music of the passionate and poignant refrain, asserts its imagined value in spite of the loss. It is called in a bold paradox, appropriately for our topic here, “Forever is Over.” The singers are a pop group called “The Saturdays.”

I was caught in a place far away
From the light
What I saw I couldn’t face
So I closed my eyes
Wish I could turn back the page
Re-write my point of view
Save all the time you waste
(got to get gone, gone)
Don’t let it escalate
Don’t fight, it’s just no use
There’s nothing left to say
Got to get gone, gone, gone
Forever is over
And my heart’s not gonna fight
Forever is over
And I’m no longer afraid
Cuz if I don’t get out now
I may never escape
Your power is fading away
And I’m getting so stuck to the place
I belong
Forever is over
Over, over, over, over . . .

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Notes

1. The philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche (1968, 289, 307); William James (1977 [1907], 139, 333-4, 433, 449-61); Fritz Mauthner, (1923, II, 117); Josiah Royce (1976 [1899], I, 73, 586); Roy Wood Sellars (1969 [1916], 57); C. I. Lewis (1929 [1916], 21); F. C. S. Schiller (1902, 103-4; 1929, 163-64, 223; and Humberto R. Maturana and Francisco J. Varela (1980, 32-3); the linguists Alexander Bryan Johnson, (1968 [1836], 72); and Sir Alan Gardiner (1932, 80); the psychologist Hermann von Helmholtz (1977, 140-2); the sociologist Alfred Schutz (1962, 3-47); the social theorist Theodor Adorno (1973), 14); and the psycholinguist Ragnar Rommetveit (1978, 31). [\(back\)](#)
2. For a thorough exploration of the notion of vagueness see Kees van Deemter, 2010. [\(back\)](#)
3. For sufferers from agnosia (the inability, while patently sensing —and perhaps most vividly — to recognize anything), the fields of all the senses as such (that is, apart from our interpretations) remain stubbornly existent. There is no need for a Berkeleyan god to guarantee the existence of 'things' when there are none to perceive. [\(back\)](#)
4. I have recently expressed the core of this argument within the confines of the philosophy of perception, but no one so far has thought to counter it (Wright 2008a: 341-66). There have been attempts to defend constructivism against these accusations of relativism and solipsism (Rom Harré 1986 and Anthony Holiday 1988) but they do not analyse the notion of trust on which they specifically rely. [\(back\)](#)
5. As Othello did not. [\(back\)](#)