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Wittgenstein's Mystical Will and Catholic Theology: A Continental Philosophy Approach to the Transcendental Dimensions of Human Action

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Abstract

This article explores Ludwig Wittgenstein's conception of the will through close engagement with his primary texts, the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus, Notebooks 1914–1916, and Philosophical Investigations, demonstrating profound resonances with Catholic mystical theology and social teaching. By integrating insights from Peter Tyler's analysis of mystical strategies, Richard McDonough's defense of Wittgenstein's persistent mysticism, and the grammatical Thomism of Herbert McCabe, David Burrell, and Fergus Kerr, this study shows how Wittgenstein's distinction between empirical and ethical will enriches Catholic theology in three crucial ways: First, it provides a philosophically rigorous account of the transcendental dimensions of moral agency that avoids both determinism and Pelagianism. Second, through Wittgenstein's analysis of language-games and forms of life, it offers resources for articulating how Catholic doctrine operates within distinctive practices of prayer, sacrament, and ethical commitment. Third, by revealing the grammatical constraints on God-talk, it strengthens the apophatic tradition's emphasis on divine transcendence while grounding concrete ethical action in subsidiarity and solidarity. Drawing upon Continental philosophy's emphasis on responsibility and transcendence, this article demonstrates that Wittgenstein's mystical philosophy, far from being merely speculative, provides essential conceptual tools for contemporary Catholic theological method and pastoral practice.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; mysticism; catholic theology; continental philosophy; Teresa of Avila; grammatical Thomism; will; transcendence; apophatic theology

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1. Introduction

Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical corpus presents a paradoxical relationship between the mystical and the rational that has long intrigued scholars of both philosophy and theology. The concluding proposition of his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (Wittgenstein 1974)—"What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence" (Tractatus 7)—has often been misread as a positivistic dismissal of theological discourse. However, when understood within the context of his complete philosophical development, from the wartime notebooks through the Philosophical Investigations (Wittgenstein 2009), this silence reveals itself as the overflowing fullness of meaning rather than its absence.

Recent scholarship has increasingly recognized the theological dimensions of Wittgenstein's philosophy, particularly his sustained engagement with mystical themes. Tyler (2011) has demonstrated uncanny parallels between Wittgenstein's compositional strategies and those employed by Teresa of Avila, showing how both authors use language not

merely to convey information but to effect transformation in their readers. McDonough (2019) has argued persuasively that Wittgenstein's mysticism persists from the Tractatus through the Philosophical Investigations, albeit in increasingly subtle forms. Meanwhile, the tradition of grammatical Thomism developed by McCabe, Burrell, and Kerr has shown how Wittgensteinian insights about language illuminate the Thomistic understanding of divine transcendence and analogical predication (Hewitt 2019).

This article contributes to these dialogues by examining how Wittgenstein's conception of the will—developed through his wartime crisis and articulated across his corpus—resonates with and enriches Catholic mystical theology and social teaching. The argument proceeds through three movements: First, through close textual analysis of Wittgenstein's primary works, I establish his distinction between empirical and ethical will within the broader context of his mystical philosophy. Second, I demonstrate how this distinction resonates with Catholic mystical theology, particularly through Tyler's analysis of mystical strategies and the grammatical Thomist understanding of language and divine transcendence. Third, I explore how these insights contribute to contemporary Catholic theological reflection on human dignity, subsidiarity, and solidarity as articulated in Catholic Social Teaching, demonstrating what Catholicism gains from the Wittgensteinian position.

2. Wittgenstein's Mystical Understanding of the Will: Primary Textual Analysis

2.1. The Genesis of Wittgenstein's Mystical Philosophy in the Notebooks

Wittgenstein's reflections on the will emerged from a profound personal and philosophical crisis during World War I, documented in his Notebooks 1914–1916 (Wittgenstein 1961). The notebook entry of 4 July 1916—"I am completely powerless"—marks not philosophical despair but the threshold of a transformative insight. In the entries leading to this moment, Wittgenstein grapples with how human agency relates to a world governed by causality: "How can man be happy at all, since he cannot ward off the misery of this world? Through the life of knowledge" (Wittgenstein 1961).

This "life of knowledge" represents not merely epistemic achievement but a fundamental reorientation of the self's relationship to existence. The notebooks reveal Wittgenstein working toward what would become his mature distinction between empirical and ethical will. On 29 July 1916, he writes: "In order to live happily I must be in agreement with the world. And that is what 'being happy' means." Yet he immediately recognizes that such agreement cannot be achieved through causal intervention in the world's facts.

The influence of Tolstoy's The Gospel in Brief, which Wittgenstein carried with him throughout the war, proves crucial here. As Nieli (1987, pp. 83–141) documents, Tolstoy's emphasis on the ethical will's independence from worldly outcomes profoundly shaped Wittgenstein's understanding. The notebook entry of 8 August 1916 crystallizes this insight: "The world is given me, i.e., my will enters into the world completely from outside as into something that is already there. . . That is why we have the feeling of being dependent on an alien will."

2.2. The Tractatus: The Distinction Between Empirical and Ethical Will

The Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus transforms these notebook insights into systematic philosophy. Proposition 6.373 states: "The world is independent of my will." This apparent paradox—that the will has no effect on the world—resolves when we understand Wittgenstein's distinction between two aspects of willing.

The empirical will belongs to psychology, consisting of observable mental states and behaviors describable through natural science: "The willing subject exists only as a problem" (Tractatus 5.631). This empirical will operates within the realm of facts and remains subject

to causal determination. It is the will studied by psychology and neuroscience, the will that forms intentions and initiates bodily movements.

However, Wittgenstein recognizes a more fundamental dimension: the ethical will, which operates beyond the realm of facts entirely. As he writes in the Notebooks (Wittgenstein 1961): "If good or evil willing affects the world, it can only affect the boundaries of the world, not the facts." This crucial formulation reveals the mystical dimension of Wittgenstein's understanding: the ethical will operates not by changing what happens but by transforming how what happens is experienced and valued.

This transformation occurs through what Wittgenstein calls a change in "the boundaries of the world." The Tractatus states: "The world of the happy man is a different one from that of the unhappy man" (6.43). This difference is not psychological but ontological—a fundamental alteration in the subject's mode of being-in-the-world. The ethical will constitutes what Wittgenstein calls the "will to live", which he identifies with God: "In order to live happily I must be in agreement with the world. And that is what 'being happy' means. I am then, so to speak, in agreement with that alien will on which I appear dependent. That is to say: 'I am doing the will of God'" (Wittgenstein 1961).

McDonough (2019) emphasizes that this conception of will as operating "otherwise than being" anticipates Levinas's notion of the ethical relationship that precedes ontology. The will to live is not a fact about the world but the condition under which the world can have significance at all. It represents the fundamental orientation toward existence that gives life meaning and value.

2.3. The Persistence of Mysticism in the Philosophical Investigations

Many commentators, following Nieli (1987), have argued that Wittgenstein's later philosophy abandons the mysticism of the Tractatus in favor of "ordinary language". However, McDonough (2019, pp. 681–702) demonstrates convincingly that mysticism persists in the Philosophical Investigations, albeit in more subtle form.

The key textual evidence appears in Philosophical Investigations (Wittgenstein 2009, §272), where Wittgenstein explicitly affirms: "The essential thing about private experience [privaten Erlebnis] is really not that each person possesses his own exemplar, but that nobody knows whether other people have this or something else." Far from denying private or mystical experiences, Wittgenstein here acknowledges their reality while specifying their logical grammar. The restriction concerns not the existence of such experiences but the impossibility of using demonstrative language ("this") to refer to them publicly.

McDonough (2019, pp. 688–92) shows that this restriction actually clarifies the nature of mystical ineffability more precisely than the Tractatus. The demonstrative "this" functions in our language through public criteria embodied in shared forms of life. To say "this experience" requires contextual determination that private experiences, by definition, lack. Thus Wittgenstein does not deny mystical experience but rather specifies why such experience resists propositional articulation while remaining expressible through other linguistic forms—poetry, allegory, metaphor.

This analysis illuminates Philosophical Investigations (Wittgenstein 2009, §119) reference to the "limits of language": "The results of philosophy are the simple everyday truths which we obtain when we run our head up against the limits of language." The "bumps" we receive at these limits reveal dimensions of experience that cannot be captured in factual propositions yet remain fundamental to meaningful existence. Wittgenstein's later philosophy thus provides a more sophisticated account of the mystical than his earlier work, one that specifies the grammatical constraints on mystical discourse without eliminating its possibility or significance.

3. Mystical Strategies and Catholic Theology: Peter Tyler's Analysis

3.1. The Return to the Mystical: Performative Discourse and Transformation

Tyler's (2011) groundbreaking study demonstrates that Wittgenstein and Teresa of Avila employ similar "mystical strategies"—compositional approaches that seek transformation rather than mere information. Both authors recognize that genuine spiritual insight requires not just intellectual apprehension but fundamental reorientation of one's way of seeing and being.

Teresa's Interior Castle provides a striking parallel to Wittgenstein's method. Rather than systematic theological argument, Teresa invites readers into a transformative journey through the metaphor of the soul as a crystal castle with many mansions. This approach mirrors what Wittgenstein calls effecting a "change of aspect" (Wittgenstein 2009, II. xi). Tyler (2011, pp. 133–89) identifies four key features of these mystical strategies:

Performative discourse that enacts rather than merely describes transformation. Teresa's writing does not just tell readers about mystical prayer; it performs the movements of contemplative attention. Similarly, Wittgenstein's philosophical method aims not to provide theories but to change how we see: "The work of the philosopher consists in marshalling recollections for a particular purpose" (Wittgenstein 2009, §127).

Apophatic elements that acknowledge the limits of ordinary language. Teresa describes the prayer of union as involving "não atendar a cosa que decir" (being unable to find anything to say), paralleling Wittgenstein's recognition that "what we cannot speak about" points toward the most significant dimensions of human existence (Tyler 2011, p. 156).

Embodied approaches that engage the whole person, not merely the intellect. Teresa's emphasis on mental prayer as requiring imaginative participation and Teresa's detailed attention to bodily states in prayer mirror Wittgenstein's insistence that language-games are embedded in forms of life involving practical activity: "What has to be accepted, the given, is—one could say—*345*" (Wittgenstein 2009, §345).

Paradoxical formulations that disrupt conventional thinking patterns. Teresa's paradoxes ("I die because I do not die") parallel Wittgenstein's philosophical paradoxes ("The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity" Wittgenstein 2009, §272, §129).

3.2. Wittgensteinian Analysis of Teresian Mystical Theology

Tyler's detailed analysis of Teresa's compositional strategies through a Wittgensteinian lens reveals how mystical discourse operates. In the Interior Castle, Teresa uses spatial metaphors not as literal descriptions but as grammatical scaffolding that enables readers to orient themselves in spiritual life. The seven mansions do not represent actual spatial locations but mark different "grammatical positions" in the language-game of contemplative practice.

Wittgenstein's concept of "pictures" (Bilder) illuminates how Teresa's metaphors function. A picture, for Wittgenstein, is not merely decorative but constitutive—it determines how we see possibilities: "A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably" (Wittgenstein 2009, §272, §115). Teresa's castle-picture provides a new way of seeing the soul's journey, one that enables practitioners to recognize and articulate experiences that resist literal description.

Tyler (2011, pp. 171–203) demonstrates that Teresa's apparent difficulty in finding words for mystical experience reflects not cognitive deficiency but grammatical precision. When Teresa writes "I wouldn't know how to explain it, nor would I know how to describe it", she is not confessing failure but performing the apophatic recognition that mystical experience operates in a different logical space from factual discourse. This parallels

Wittgenstein's distinction in the Tractatus between saying and showing: "What can be shown, cannot be said" (4.1212).

4. Grammatical Thomism: Language, Will, and Divine Transcendence

4.1. The Grammatical Thomist Tradition: McCabe, Burrell, and Kerr

The tradition of grammatical Thomism, pioneered by Herbert McCabe and David Burrell and articulated by Fergus Kerr, provides a crucial bridge between Wittgensteinian philosophy and Catholic theology. As Hewitt (2019, pp. 80–95) explains, these thinkers recognize deep affinities between Thomas Aquinas and Ludwig Wittgenstein regarding language, anthropology, and the relationship between humans and the world they inhabit.

McCabe's central insight concerns the grammar of the word "God". Following Wittgenstein's principle that meaning is use, McCabe argues that we understand "God" not primarily through defining God's nature (which Aquinas insists we cannot know) but through examining how the word functions in the language-game of Christian life (McCabe 2002, p. 215). The word "God" enters our language through radical questions about existence itself: Why is there something rather than nothing? This question's uniqueness constrains how "God" can meaningfully function grammatically.

Burrell (2010, pp. 75–91) extends this analysis to the doctrine of creation. The Creator-creature distinction is not a relation between two things within the world but marks a grammatical boundary. As Burrell demonstrates, God cannot be understood as "some sort of thing existing alongside the world" without contradicting the very grammar that introduces the term "God" into our language. This parallels Wittgenstein's insight that the mystical concerns not how the world is but that it is: "It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists" (Tractatus 6.44).

Kerr (1997) emphasizes how this Wittgensteinian approach to Aquinas avoids the pitfalls of both metaphysical realism and fideistic anti-realism. The grammatical approach recognizes that theological language has its own distinctive grammar, embedded in practices of prayer, sacrament, and ethical commitment, without claiming direct epistemic access to divine reality. As Kerr writes: "Theology as grammar" means recognizing that Christian doctrines function as rules for speaking about God rather than descriptions of a metaphysical entity.

4.2. Practical Knowledge and the Grammar of Action

The grammatical Thomist engagement with Wittgenstein illuminates Anscombe's Thomistic critique of Wittgenstein on intentional action. Following Aquinas, Anscombe (2000, p. 87) argues that practical knowledge is causa rerum intellectarum—"the cause of what it understands". This suggests that human intentional action participates in the structure of divine creativity, whereby God knows creatures by creating them.

However, McCabe's grammatical approach shows how this Thomistic insight can be integrated with Wittgensteinian analysis. When Anscombe says intention is "the desirability-characterization of a desired and intended action which forms the reason for doing it" (Schwenkler 2019, p. 19), she is specifying the grammar of intentional action—how the concepts of intention, desire, and reason fit together in our language-game of explaining human behavior.

The key grammatical point concerns how the ethical will operates. Unlike causal determination, where an earlier event brings about a later effect, practical knowledge constitutes action in the very moment of acting. As Wittgenstein notes in a conversation with Anscombe: "The decision is complete when I am acting on it" (quoted in Schwenkler 2019, p. 19). This does not mean the decision causes the action but that decision and action share a grammatical space—they are internally, not externally, related.

This grammatical analysis illuminates the Catholic tradition's emphasis on the will's capacity to embrace the good. The will's orientation toward the good is not a psychological fact about desire but a grammatical feature of how we use the concept "will" in ethical discourse. To speak of someone as willing something is already to characterize their action under the aspect of the good, even when that characterization is mistaken. This parallels Wittgenstein's recognition that the ethical will operates through transforming the subject's relationship to existence itself.

4.3. Divine Simplicity and Apophatic Theology

Hewitt (2019, pp. 85–89) demonstrates how grammatical Thomism strengthens Catholic apophatic theology through Wittgensteinian linguistic analysis. The doctrine of divine simplicity—that God contains no composition—flows from the grammatical constraints on introducing the word "God". If God contained composition, that composition would require explanation, contradicting the claim that God is self-sufficient and not subject to explanation from outside God.

This grammatical necessity parallels Wittgenstein's recognition that certain concepts have their meaning determined by their role in our language-games rather than by reference to objects. Just as Wittgenstein shows that "number" does not refer to a special kind of entity but marks a formal concept determined by rules of arithmetic, so "God" does not refer to an entity within the world but marks the transcendent ground of existence itself.

McCabe (2010, pp. 20–22) emphasizes that this does not make God "less real" than creatures. Rather, it specifies that "God's reality" and "creaturely reality" belong to different logical categories. God is not a thing among things but the reason there are things at all. As McCabe provocatively puts it: "God makes no difference to anything—not because God is impotent, but because God is the reason why there is anything to make a difference to."

This grammatical approach provides philosophical rigor to the Catholic mystical tradition's emphasis on divine transcendence while grounding ethical action in concrete forms of life. It shows how theological language operates through practices of prayer, worship, and ethical commitment without claiming to comprehend divine essence.

5. What Catholicism Gains: Theological Enrichment Through Wittgensteinian Analysis

5.1. Beyond Determinism and Pelagianism: A Grammar of Grace

Catholic theology has long struggled to articulate the relationship between divine grace and human freedom in ways that avoid both determinism (where human action is merely divine causation) and Pelagianism (where human effort achieves salvation independently of grace). Wittgenstein's distinction between empirical and ethical will, interpreted through grammatical Thomism, provides conceptual resources for navigating this difficulty.

The key insight concerns recognizing that divine grace and human action operate in different grammatical spaces. Divine grace is not a causal force competing with human agency but the transcendental condition enabling human action to have meaning and direction toward the good. This parallels Wittgenstein's insight that the ethical will operates "at the boundaries of the world"—not by causing particular events but by constituting the very possibility of meaningful action.

McCabe's grammatical analysis clarifies how this works. When we say "God's grace enables me to choose the good", we are not describing a causal mechanism where divine power moves human will. Rather, we are articulating the grammatical truth that willing the good is possible only within the framework of existence grounded in divine love. Just as Wittgenstein's ethical will presupposes the "will to live" that he identifies with God, so

Catholic theology's understanding of grace presupposes that human agency participates in divine agency without being absorbed by it.

This provides the doctrine of secondary causation with philosophical precision. Human actions are genuinely causal—they bring about real effects in the world. Yet they remain creaturely actions, possible only within the space opened by divine creative love. The agent's practical knowledge constitutes the reality of action itself (as Anscombe shows), yet this constitution occurs within the transcendental horizon established by grace.

5.2. The Grammar of Sacramental Practice

Wittgenstein's analysis of language-games embedded in forms of life illuminates how Catholic sacramental theology operates. McCabe's (1999) essay "Eucharist as Language" demonstrates this application brilliantly. The doctrine of transubstantiation, often caricatured as claiming a "chemical" change in bread and wine, actually articulates the grammatical rules governing how the Christian community speaks about and relates to the Eucharist.

McCabe shows that transubstantiation does not describe a change in physical properties but specifies that the reality of what is present in the Eucharist is determined by its role in the language-game of Christian worship. Just as Wittgenstein demonstrates that meaning is use, McCabe argues that the "substance" of the Eucharistic elements is determined by their use in the community's form of life.

This does not make the Eucharist "merely symbolic". Rather, it recognizes that "reality" and "symbol" are not opposed categories but complementary aspects of how things mean. The Eucharist is supremely real precisely because it accomplishes what it signifies—making Christ present through the community's participation in the sacrifice of the Mass. This reality operates in the grammatical space of sacrament, not the grammatical space of physical causation.

Tyler's analysis of mystical strategies illuminates how sacramental participation effects transformation. The sacraments do not merely signify grace; they perform the reorientation of the participant's relationship to God and neighbor. Like Teresa's contemplative exercises or Wittgenstein's philosophical method, sacramental practice brings about "changes of aspect" that constitute new ways of being in the world.

5.3. Subsidiarity and Solidarity: The Social Ethics of the Mystical Will

Contemporary Catholic Social Teaching, particularly as articulated in Benedict XVI's (2009) Caritas in Veritate, gains philosophical depth from Wittgensteinian analysis of the ethical will. The principles of subsidiarity and solidarity presuppose an understanding of human agency that transcends merely calculative ethics while remaining concretely engaged with social structures.

Subsidiarity "respects personal dignity by recognizing in the person a subject who is always capable of giving something to others" (Benedict XVI 2009, paragraph 57). This principle resonates with Wittgenstein's understanding of the ethical will as fundamentally oriented toward transcendence of mere self-interest. The capacity for genuine giving presupposes what Levinas calls the "otherwise than being"—the ability to respond to the Other in a way that transcends calculation and reciprocity.

Burrell's (2010) analysis of "distinguishing God from the world" illuminates how subsidiarity avoids both individualism and collectivism. Neither the isolated individual nor the totalizing state can be ultimate because both exist within the transcendental horizon opened by divine creative love. Subsidiarity recognizes that human communities at every level—family, association, locality, region, nation—participate in the common good without any single level exhausting or controlling it.

Solidarity represents "first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone" (Benedict XVI 2009, paragraph 38). This universal responsibility mirrors the structure of Wittgenstein's ethical will, which operates not through particular choices but through a fundamental orientation toward existence that acknowledges the intrinsic value of others.

The concept of "little goodness" (la petite bonté), developed by Levinas in dialogue with Vasily Grossman's insights about resistance to totalitarian systems, bridges Wittgenstein's mystical philosophy and Catholic social theology (Burggraeve 2006). This "little goodness" operates through small acts of responsibility that transcend systematic approaches to ethics or politics.

Wittgenstein's understanding of the ethical will resonates with this concept. The ethical will does not seek grand transformations but operates through what Wittgenstein calls the "decision" that is "complete when I am acting on it". This decision is not a psychological event but the expression of a fundamental orientation toward responsibility that transcends particular outcomes.

In Catholic theological terms, this points toward the tradition's understanding of virtue and spiritual transformation. The theological virtues—faith, hope, and charity—operate not as strategic calculations but as fundamental orientations that transform the subject's relationship to God and neighbor. Like Wittgenstein's ethical will, they achieve their effects not by causing external changes but by transforming the agent's mode of being.

5.4. Environmental Ethics and Integral Ecology

Pope Francis's (2015) Laudato Si' calls for "integral ecology" integrating environmental, social, and spiritual dimensions. The mystical dimensions of Wittgenstein's philosophy offer resources for this integration. The recognition that ethical action ultimately concerns not merely external outcomes but fundamental orientations toward reality itself resonates with Francis's approach to ecological conversion.

The encyclical emphasizes contemplative attention to creation as essential for proper environmental ethics: "The universe unfolds in God, who fills it completely. Hence, there is a mystical meaning to be found in a leaf, in a mountain trail, in a dewdrop, in a poor person's face" (Francis 2015, p. 233). This contemplative stance parallels Wittgenstein's recognition that "what is mystical" concerns not how things are but that they are—the sheer givenness of existence.

Grammatical Thomism clarifies how this contemplative stance grounds concrete ethical action. The recognition that creation is gift rather than resource follows grammatically from understanding God as creator rather than manufacturer. McCabe's insistence that "God makes no difference" paradoxically means God makes all the difference—not by intervening in particular processes but by constituting the very possibility of meaningful existence and action.

Francis's critique of the "throwaway culture" gains philosophical depth from Wittgensteinian analysis. The reduction of things to mere resources for use reflects a grammatical confusion—treating entities within the world as if their meaning were exhausted by their function for human purposes. Wittgenstein's analysis shows that things can have meaning in multiple overlapping language-games, not just instrumental ones.

6. Mysticism and Theological Method: Integrating Spiritual and Academic Rigor

6.1. The Phenomenology of Responsibility

Continental philosophy's emphasis on the phenomenology of ethical responsibility, particularly as developed by Levinas, provides methodological bridges between Wittgen-

steinian philosophy and Catholic theological reflection. Levinas's analysis of the face-to-face encounter as the fundamental ethical experience resonates with Wittgenstein's understanding of the ethical will as operating beyond factual description (Purcell 2006).

The ethical encounter with the Other, according to Levinas, involves a responsibility that precedes any conscious decision or calculation. This "prevenience of grace," as Purcell (2009) terms it, operates through what Levinas calls "saying" rather than "said"—the performative dimension of language that establishes ethical relationship rather than conveying information.

This phenomenological insight illuminates the Catholic tradition's understanding of conscience and moral discernment. Vatican Council II's (1965a) Gaudium et Spes (16) describes conscience as "the most secret core and sanctuary" of the human person, pointing toward dimensions of moral experience that transcend psychological description yet remain fundamental to human existence. The Wittgensteinian–Levinasian analysis shows how this transcendence operates—not as escape from concrete existence but as the condition for meaningful ethical action.

Tyler's analysis of mystical strategies demonstrates how this phenomenology informs theological method. The Catholic mystical tradition recognizes that genuine knowledge of God involves not merely intellectual apprehension but transformative participation in divine life itself. This parallels Wittgenstein's recognition that philosophy's task is not to produce theories but to effect changes of aspect that enable us to "see the world aright".

6.2. Transformational Theology: Beyond Propositional and Experiential Models

The integration of Wittgensteinian and mystical–theological insights suggests a model of theological method that transcends the opposition between propositional and experiential approaches. Grammatical Thomism shows that theological claims are neither mere descriptions of metaphysical facts nor subjective expressions of religious feeling, but grammatical rules embedded in forms of life.

This transformational model recognizes that theological discourse aims primarily at forming persons in Christian life rather than conveying information about divine realities. The Creed, for example, does not primarily describe God's nature but performs the Christian community's identity and orientation. To recite the Creed is not merely to assent to propositions but to locate oneself within the language-game of Christian practice.

Tyler (2011) demonstrates how this transformational understanding operates in mystical theology. Teresa's Interior Castle does not convey information about mystical experiences but invites readers into contemplative practice that may enable such experiences. Similarly, Wittgenstein's Tractatus and Philosophical Investigations aim not to provide theories of language but to transform how readers see meaning and use.

Contemporary Catholic theology's retrieval of spiritual and mystical sources, evident in figures like Hans Urs von Balthasar and the nouvelle théologie movement, reflects recognition that theological method must integrate academic rigor and spiritual transformation. Wittgenstein's philosophical insights, particularly his recognition of the limits of propositional language and his emphasis on transformational "pictures", provide resources for this methodological integration.

7. Contemporary Implications and Applications

7.1. The Grammar of Interfaith Dialogue

Wittgenstein's approach to religious discourse offers resources for Catholic engagement with religious pluralism. His recognition that religious language operates through "pictures" that bring about "changes of aspect" suggests ways of understanding religious

diversity that respect both the distinctiveness of traditions and their potential for mutual enrichment.

The Catholic tradition's emphasis on the universality of divine grace, expressed in Vatican II's recognition of elements of truth and holiness in other religious traditions (Vatican Council II 1965b, p. 2), can be integrated with Wittgensteinian insights about the grammar of religious language. Different religious traditions employ different "pictures" and participate in different "forms of life", yet these differences need not imply incommensurability.

Grammatical Thomism's distinction between God's transcendent reality and our language about God provides a framework for interfaith dialogue. Since we cannot comprehend God's essence, our various languages about God function as different grammatical systems for orienting ourselves toward the transcendent. The question becomes not "which description of God is correct?" but "which forms of life most faithfully embody response to divine grace?"

This approach avoids both religious exclusivism (claiming only one tradition has access to truth) and indifferentism (treating all traditions as equally valid expressions of a common core). Instead, it recognizes that different traditions may offer genuine insight into different aspects of the human relationship to the divine, while acknowledging that Christian revelation provides distinctive resources for articulating how God's self-comm unication in Christ transforms human existence.

7.2. Pastoral Theology and Spiritual Formation

The Wittgensteinian-mystical approach has direct implications for pastoral theology and spiritual formation. If theological language functions primarily to transform rather than inform, then catechesis and spiritual direction must attend carefully to the performative dimensions of Christian discourse.

Tyler's analysis of mystical strategies suggests that effective spiritual formation requires not just teaching doctrines but inviting participation in practices that enable "changes of aspect". The sacraments, liturgical prayer, works of mercy, and contemplative practice function not as optional supplements to doctrinal instruction but as the primary contexts in which Christian language gains its meaning.

This challenges purely intellectualist approaches to catechesis that treat faith formation as primarily about learning correct propositions. While doctrinal content remains essential, the Wittgensteinian analysis shows that doctrine functions as grammar for Christian practice rather than description of metaphysical realities. To understand "Jesus is Lord", one must participate in the form of life where this confession shapes action, not merely assent to a proposition.

Grammatical Thomism's emphasis on the limits of God-talk also has pastoral significance. It guards against the presumption that we can comprehend divine reality through theological formulations, fostering appropriate humility before the mystery. As McCabe emphasizes, our language about God always points beyond itself toward the transcendent reality we cannot grasp. This recognition should characterize both theological scholarship and pastoral practice, maintaining the tension between the knowability and unknowability of God.

7.3. The Ethics of Technology and Contemporary Life

Wittgenstein's analysis of language-games and forms of life illuminates contemporary ethical challenges posed by technology. The reduction of human relationships to digital interactions, the commodification of attention through social media, and the displacement of embodied practices by virtual experiences all reflect what we might call "grammati-

cal confusions"—treating concepts that gain meaning in one language-game as if they functioned identically in radically different contexts.

The concept of "friendship" in social media, for example, borrows from the language-game of embodied relationships while operating in a fundamentally different form of life. Wittgenstein's method of "grammatical investigation" reveals how such conceptual transfers distort both the original concept and our understanding of the new practice. Genuine friendship involves commitments, vulnerabilities, and mutual presence that social media "friendship" cannot replicate.

Catholic social teaching's emphasis on subsidiarity and solidarity provides resources for resisting technological reductionism. Subsidiarity recognizes that human flourishing requires participation in communities at multiple scales—family, neighborhood, church, civil society—each with distinctive goods that cannot be collapsed into digital networks. Solidarity reminds us that our responsibility to others cannot be fulfilled through technological mediation alone but requires embodied presence and concrete action.

The mystical dimension of Wittgenstein's thought also challenges the technological reduction of reality to quantifiable data. His insight that "what is mystical" concerns not how things are but that they exist points toward dimensions of experience—wonder, gratitude, the sense of gift—that resist digitalization. Catholic theology's sacramental worldview, seeing creation as shot through with divine presence, provides an alternative to the technological stance that treats the world as mere resource for manipulation.

8. Conclusions: The Mystical Will and the Grammar of Faith

This analysis of Wittgenstein's conception of the will and its resonances with Catholic mystical theology and social teaching yields several significant conclusions for contemporary Catholic theological reflection.

8.1. The Transcendental Structure of Human Agency

First, Wittgenstein's distinction between empirical and ethical will, interpreted through grammatical Thomism, provides Catholic theology with a philosophically rigorous account of the transcendental dimensions of human agency. This account avoids both deterministic reduction (treating human action as merely caused events) and Pelagian voluntarism (treating human effort as self-sufficient for salvation).

The ethical will operates through participation in transcendental dimensions of existence that ground rather than compete with natural causation. This parallels the Catholic doctrine of grace as elevating nature rather than replacing it. Human actions remain genuinely causal and free, yet they occur within the horizon opened by divine creative love. The grammatical analysis shows how this works: divine grace and human freedom operate in different logical spaces, not as competing causal forces but as complementary aspects of the unified reality of human action oriented toward the good.

What Catholicism gains here is conceptual clarity about how to speak of grace and freedom without falling into incoherence. The grammatical approach reveals that apparent contradictions in theological discourse often reflect genuine paradox rooted in the transcendental structure of reality rather than logical confusion. The agent's practical knowledge constitutes action (as Anscombe shows), yet this constitution occurs within the transcendental framework established by grace.

8.2. The Grammar of Mystical Discourse

Second, Tyler's analysis of mystical strategies, integrated with Wittgensteinian philosophy, demonstrates the importance of transformational approaches to theological discourse.

Both Wittgenstein and Teresa of Avila recognize that the most significant truths require "changes of aspect" rather than merely additional information.

The Catholic mystical tradition's emphasis on the integration of intellectual and spiritual dimensions finds philosophical support in Wittgenstein's recognition that understanding involves not just grasping propositions but seeing connections, recognizing patterns, and participating in forms of life. Mystical discourse operates through performative language that enacts transformation rather than describing states of affairs.

What Catholicism gains is a sophisticated account of how mystical language functions without claiming that mystics have direct epistemic access to divine reality. The grammatical approach shows that mystical discourse uses language in distinctive ways—through metaphor, paradox, and apophatic negation—that are appropriate to its subject matter. The ineffability of mystical experience reflects not cognitive deficiency but grammatical precision about the limits of propositional discourse.

This strengthens the apophatic tradition by showing how negative theology operates. When we say God is "not this, not that", we are not describing divine attributes but marking the grammatical boundaries of meaningful God-talk. God transcends all creaturely categories not as a super-entity beyond our reach but as the transcendent ground of existence that cannot coherently be treated as one being among others.

8.3. The Social Grammar of Catholic Ethics

Third, the Continental philosophical themes emerging from this analysis—particularly the emphasis on responsibility, transcendence, and the ethical encounter with the Other—provide philosophical foundations for understanding how Catholic theological insights engage contemporary social questions. The principles of subsidiarity and solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching gain depth through the Wittgensteinian understanding of human agency that transcends merely calculative approaches to ethics.

What Catholicism gains is an account of how social ethics flows from the mystical structure of human existence. Subsidiarity and solidarity are not merely pragmatic principles for social organization but grammatical features of how we properly speak about human community in light of our transcendental orientation toward the good. The recognition that human dignity is inviolable reflects not just a moral conviction but a grammatical insight: to speak of someone as a person is already to acknowledge their participation in the transcendental structure of existence that grounds all value.

The concept of "little goodness" illustrates how this mystical foundation informs concrete action. The ethical will operates not through grand gestures but through the "little goodness" of faithful response to the transcendental call present in every authentic ethical encounter. This challenges utilitarian and consequentialist ethics by showing that the ethical significance of action cannot be reduced to its measurable outcomes.

8.4. Theological Method and the Grammar of Faith

Fourth, the grammatical Thomist approach to Wittgenstein offers Catholic theology a methodological integration of academic rigor and spiritual transformation. Theological discourse functions as grammar for Christian practice—providing rules for how to speak about God, salvation, and the Christian life—rather than as description of metaphysical realities accessible to theoretical reason.

What Catholicism gains is a way of articulating its doctrines that respects both their cognitive content and their performative function. The Creed, for example, both makes truth claims about reality and performs the Christian community's identity. These functions are not opposed but complementary: the truth claims have their meaning within the form of life constituted by Christian practice.

This approach resolves apparent tensions between faith and reason by showing that they operate in complementary grammatical spaces. Reason investigates the structures of created reality using methods appropriate to empirical and conceptual inquiry. Faith responds to divine revelation through practices of prayer, worship, and ethical commitment that constitute a distinctive form of life. These grammatical spaces overlap and inform each other without reducing one to the other.

The integration of mystical and theological method addresses the perennial question of how theology relates to spirituality. If theology functions as grammar for Christian life, then theological reflection must attend carefully to the actual practices through which Christian claims gain meaning. Mystical experience is not marginal to theology but central, providing the experiential context in which theological grammar operates. Conversely, theological doctrine guards mystical practice from subjectivism by articulating the grammar that distinguishes authentic Christian spirituality from its distortions.

8.5. The Return to the Mystical

Finally, this return to the mystical dimensions of Catholic theology does not represent withdrawal from rational discourse but rather its deepest grounding. Like Wittgenstein's recognition that "nothing and yet everything" changes with a genuine change of aspect, mystical transformation involves not the abandonment of reason but its integration within a more comprehensive vision of human existence ordered toward transcendent meaning.

The dialogue between Wittgenstein's philosophy and Catholic theology thus contributes to what Tyler (2011) calls "the return to the mystical"—not as escape from the challenges of contemporary existence but as their deepest engagement. The mystical will, whether understood in Wittgensteinian or Catholic theological terms, represents the human person's fundamental capacity to embrace the good as the foundation for authentic life in relationship with God, neighbor, and creation.

What Catholicism ultimately gains from this Wittgensteinian engagement is not a new doctrine but a deepened understanding of how its existing doctrines function. The grammatical approach clarifies that Catholic theology's distinctive claims about incarnation, sacrament, church, and moral life operate within a form of life constituted by practices of prayer, worship, and ethical commitment. These claims cannot be adequately understood or evaluated from outside this form of life, yet they remain open to rational investigation and philosophical clarification.

This mystical foundation does not diminish the significance of rational reflection, social engagement, or ethical action but rather establishes their ultimate ground in the transcendental dimensions of human existence. As Wittgenstein recognized in his wartime reflections, genuine powerlessness in the face of ultimate questions opens toward a deeper form of freedom—the freedom to act ethically not because we can control outcomes but because such action expresses our fundamental orientation toward the good that gives life its meaning.

The mystical will, as both Wittgenstein and the Catholic tradition recognize, operates through the "little goodness" that transforms the world not by grand gestures but through the faithful response to the transcendental call that sounds in every authentic ethical encounter. In this return to the mystical, Catholic theology finds resources not only for understanding its own tradition but for contributing to contemporary discussions about human dignity, social responsibility, environmental ethics, and the relationship between religious and secular discourse.

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