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With Cold Foreign Eyes?

Existential Meaning in Truth vs. Mystery in
Religion and Art

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Abstract

This essay explores two approaches to finding existential meaning in religion: either by an approach advocating feelings of mystery and sensuous immediacy, thus justifying an ineffability of mysterious experiences, or by an approach which advocates truth and objectivity. Although the latter approach views truth in existential terms (“existential truth”) it can be criticised for diminishing the “magic” of religion much in the same way science does in its pursuit of material truth. In order to find answers as to whether this is the case and as to whether we can justify “effability” in theory, religion is compared to art: the two approaches are applied to the field of art in a continuous dialogue with the religious field. By discussing not only the ideas of philosophers like Eberhard Herrmann, Hilary Putnam, Peder Thalén and Arthur Schopenhauer, but also by contemplating the output of artists like Shakespeare, Hjalmar Söderberg and David Lynch, the so-called Truth approach is found to have the ability to more accurately (than the Mystery approach) connect artistic and religious expressions to our emotions. The possibility of recreating a sensuous experience of those expressions is also considered.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview and question at issue

In the beginning of the 20th century, William James proclaimed that one of the qualities of mystical religious experiences is their ineffability.¹ This attitude, that an experience defies conceptual expression, is found not only in religion, but also in art: rather than analysing the contents of an artwork, we should be quiet, both because words are not adequate to express the experience and because words diminish the “magic” created by the mystery of said artwork. The opposing standpoint would be to demand truth (or “describability”) from religion and art and state that it is not only *possible* to express in words the mystery of religion and art, but also an existentially rewarding practice which is why we *should* express it in words. It is, namely, with regards to existential meaning that I will examine these two approaches – henceforth called the Mystery approach and the Truth approach – towards art and religion with the intent of examining the justification of either approach in the appreciation of religion. (Art will be used as *support* in clarifying the relationship of truth and mystery in religion, hence not *all* arguments will stem from discussions on art.)

I will assume that the search for religious truth and the appreciation of religious mystery are two distinct (and perhaps in part incompatible) approaches to religion, but that they are both ways of creating existential meaning in religion. While both approaches will be considered, this essay is by and large an attempt at a defence of truth over mystery, and while many things have certainly been written about feelings of mystery in art and religion in practice, I will consider how we may justify a conceptualising approach in theory. The central question of this essay is therefore:

Should religion be appreciated as Truth with regards to existential meaning in spite of the possible loss of religion as Mystery?

In order to determine the existential power of each, a comparison between interpretative approaches of art will be made for the reason that, assumedly, both art and religion provide human beings with existential meaning and consequently that art and religion can be compared with regards to how we create meaning in the appreciation of each. This will come about by exploring to which degree art creates meaning for us depending on different approaches of

¹ W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature, Being the Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion delivered at Edinburgh in 1901-1902*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1985, p. 301f.

creating it: the Mystery approach and Truth approach are applied to the field of the arts and the results of this investigation are then re-applied to the religious field. Hence when one asks, “To which degree does an artwork create existential meaning when we use approach x ?” one is given an answer concerning to which degree religion creates existential meaning when we use x .

1.2 Intent

The general motivation behind this study is to clarify the relationship between experience and concepts in religion with regards to the meaning of life. I wonder how “untouchable” and fragile the feelings of mystery in religion (and art for that matter) really are, and hope that we can, after all, treat these feelings with words and concepts in a way that creates existential meaning rather than destroys it.

An additional motivation is the hope that its method – the comparison of art and religion – will prove a way to discuss and describe the function of religion in secular discourse, at least from an existential point of view. Religion is one approach to the existential issues which all human beings – including those of a secular upbringing – are forced to handle, and yet religion is a difficult subject to fathom – especially so, perhaps, by those same individuals who have had no close contact with religious life. In order to find common ground for both the secular and the religious, art seems a reasonable compromise because it straddles the existential field of religion and yet is something which a secular world may more readily find relatable: although the average atheist may be suspicious towards religion, he or she usually finds pleasure and meaning in books, paintings, films and music. (Indeed, Vilhelm Ekelund wrote that the source of all art is mankind’s inability to live without gods.²) With such a comparison as tool secular societies may be more easily able to “evaluate” religion by how it may bring meaning to people’s lives. As a consequence for this essay, the discussions on art are used both to provide support for ideas on religion, but also to show how meaning can be found in religion as well as art.

A practical reason for using art as support in clarifying the relationship of truth and mystery in religion, is that I believe the art community has come to develop a body of art critics whose whole *raison d’être* is to offer critique for how well an individual work in their field stands up to human emotional needs. It could serve religion well to have it scrutinized *as though* it were an artwork.

² V. Ekelund, *Nordiskt och klassiskt*, Stockholm, Albert Bonniers förlag, 1914, p. 30.

1.3 A closer look at the issue: the conflict between truth and mystery

Consider the smiling face of a 6-month-old toddler. You smile back. It is nearly impossible not to do so and you feel as though the rest of the world disappears: time and space have vanished from your conscious mind and you feel like this is exactly where you have always wanted to be. Losing yourself in the moment like this does not ask for what the meaning of life is: it is self-evident; no questions are asked and no answers are needed. The smile of a toddler, we then say, is a mystery. A mystery is ineffable, difficult to put into words, but during that moment of bliss our intellect's use of language seems irrelevant. This is what will be labelled the Mystery approach, adopted by people who believe that ultimate meaning is found in the immediate (though not necessarily short-term) and sensual experiences in religious life, not intellectual reflection. From a Mystery approach point of view, the nature of God is immediately known (if ever), not through knowledge or thought *per se*. Thought is, namely, only one human approach to the world.³ According to Muhammad Iqbal, a mystical experience is impossible to analyse because it “brings us into contact with the total passage of Reality”, a single unity of stimuli as opposed to the world as divided and conceptualised by us into the distinction of subject and object.⁴ In art, as well, we may choose to appreciate an artwork as an immediate unity of sensuous experience.

This is contrasted to a need to question life and demand answers from it. This approach is not about losing oneself in the gaze of a toddler, but to actively “figure things out”. In the arts, we may thus appreciate an artwork as an analysed, divided, conceptualised set of objects which may point to a unifying theme rather than being a unification of subject and object, *i.e.* losing one's self in the artwork. In the field of the natural sciences this attitude is evident in its demand for truth, a demand for discrimination between what is true and what is false in the physical world outside of human emotions. It may be argued that because science, as it is often perceived, only deals with the “material world” it is therefore not applicable to religious matters which deal with the human soul.⁵ As will be discussed further on, however, the same incentive to find truth which we commonly see in the work of *e.g.* natural scientists is as relevant to the existential search for meaning in life. Hence this essay will not be concerned with the debate on whether God exists from a materialist, scientific point of view, *i.e.* the ontological debate concerning what is out there. Rather, this essay wholly appertains to the human existential

³ M. Henry, *I Am the Truth: Toward a Philosophy of Christianity*, Stanford University Press, 2003, pp. 26-8.

⁴ M. Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Palo Alto, Stanford University Press, pp. 14f.

⁵ This distinction between matter and spirit is made for practical reasons; ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’ will concern human emotions and subjective experience as opposed to the objects around us with which we interact, irrespective of whether ‘soul’ and ‘matter’ strictly speaking are of a single substance or constitute dual realities.

venture for meaning; the “scientific” approach in this context regards the way in which truth as opposed to mystery influences our existential satisfaction in religious life. The truth-seeking scientist of the soul is then someone who tries to explain and put religious experience into words – *i.e.* to conceptualise religion – in the hope that this approach will make religious experience more meaningful.

But this is where the conflict between truth and mystery occurs. When investigating religion scientifically the question arises whether or not (and in what way) such an investigation is at all justified, and most importantly whether or not we run the risk of in any way “damaging” the subject in question because of our investigation. It might be argued that there is a danger – whether slight or significant – that the “magic” of religious people’s faith is diminished by scientific methods.⁶ But even if we deal with truth in an existential manner – seeking truths of the soul as opposed to ones that demand material evidence – there is a risk that the Truth approach to religion will deteriorate the power of the existential meaning created by religion as long as we use words to express it. The intention of the Truth approach – to question the experience of the smiling toddler, to ask what it means (or even *having in mind* what it may mean) and try to put it into words – may disturb one’s appreciation of the experience: the method of the Truth approach may distract from its meaningfulness. Thus is not the act of trying to understand religion as though there is a definite objective truth which should be uncovered a way of “missing the point” or outright ruining religious experience? Should not merely experiencing faith and enjoying it “as is”, as it comes to us be more than enough to justify one’s belief? And, more significantly, is not immediacy of faith also the most important aspect of the existential enjoyment of religious life? Does not analysis of one’s own faith “from outside” take focus from the experience of faith? Does not intellectual analysis question faith’s existential authenticity and introduce an element of doubt to religious belief, whichever belief that may be? These questions may be contrasted with the ideas of scientists like Richard Dawkins: to try to obtain truth does not constitute an existential problem because there is more to enjoy in the world than what mysticism provides:

The mystic is content to bask in the wonder and revel in a mystery that we are not ‘meant’ to understand. The scientist feels the same wonder but is restless, not content; recognizes the mystery as profound, then adds, ‘But we’re working on it.’⁷

The dissimilarity between truth and mystery may be further exemplified by the difference in attitude between 17th century philosophers René Descartes and Blaise Pascal. Descartes willingly

⁶ D. C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, New York, Penguin Putnam Inc., 2007, pp. 15, 154.

⁷ R. Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and Appetite for Wonder*, London, Penguin Books Ltd., 1999, p. 17.

alienated the human mind from the spatial world in order to seek scientific truths, viewing God as a wholly instrumental tool of philosophers, while Pascal found this instrumentality a devastating blow to religious authenticity. Faith, he proclaimed, is about emotions, not reason.⁸

Even the biblical story of the fall of man in Genesis could be interpreted to highlight this conflict. Adam and Eve live a life of ignorant bliss in the Garden of Eden, an innocence that is then ruined by knowledge by uncovering that which should not be uncovered, thus stifling meaning. From this point of view, the issue of truth versus mystery boils down to the question whether or not we can make the events in life meaningful by having them “pinned down” and return to them repeatedly (experience/truth), or if we need to feel everything as though experienced for the first time, like a new-born in every situation (innocence/mystery). The experience/innocence dichotomy may then be re-interpreted as our relationship to divinity. Don Cupitt writes that we both want to come closer to the Gods *and* keep them distant.⁹ If we get too close, there is no mystery; if we keep too far a distance, we lose contact with our soul altogether.

What will be called the Truth approach of religion is thus the pursuit of truth in religion through interpretation and conceptualisation, to pinpoint an “aboutness” of religion to reach a better understanding of it. It is the “describability” of religion. What will be called the Mystery approach of religion is the immediacy and ineffable mystery of religious experience. The Mystery approach in this essay does not refer to a method supposed to seek out any sort of knowledge or truth, but rather to preserve the mystery of religious feelings undisclosed.

2. What is meaning?

In order to decide whether a certain approach towards art and religion is better able to provide the receiver with existential meaning, we must define what ‘existential meaning’ entails. This essay assumes an anthropocentric and individualistic approach to the meaning of life. What will be discussed is not the meaning of *all* life, the meaning of life of humanity at large or even the meaning of life of a small group of people, but rather answers to the single human being’s question: “What is the meaning of *my* life?”¹⁰ Therefore, when the potential of existential meaning inherent in artworks and religious life is discussed, it is a discussion of in what way these artworks and religious aspects provide a single individual with existential meaning.

⁸ D. Cupitt, *Sea of Faith*, London, SCM Press, 2010, pp. 54f, 58.

⁹ Ibid, pp. 120-3.

¹⁰ M. Furberg, *Allting en trasa? En bok om livets mening*, Nora, Nya Doxa, 1987, p. 11.

2.1 A note on art and religion as “providers” of meaning

The existential alternatives available to the individual are diverse. First of all, there are many different kinds of experiences with their origin in many different kinds of objects, artefacts, events and phenomena that are able to provide an individual with increased feelings of meaning in his or her life. Second, there is no one exclusive object common to all human beings which must be realised in order for life to have meaning, because we simply are not enough alike for a single more or less detailed way of life to fit all of us. Inclusive, generic criteria like “happiness” are too wide and vague to be useful in this context.¹¹ In any case, art and religion are two of the existential alternatives which provide meaning. To say that art and religion “provide” us with existential meaning means, simply, that art or religion provides us with an experience that makes the receiver feel that his or her life has meaning.

2.2 Intrinsic purpose and disconnecting ethical issues from existential ones

One of the components which is often mentioned as providing meaning to life is, claims Mats Furberg, what we usually refer to as ‘purpose’. ‘Purpose’ is, much like ‘meaning’, a fairly vague term, but may be defined as a given goal which we strive to achieve. There is, however, an important distinction to be made between purpose as instrumental and purpose as intrinsic. On the one hand an individual may have a sort of instrumental purpose which makes him or her put on a roll in life in order to fulfil a goal of some importance, but that goal is not necessarily important to the individual in question from an existential point of view; it may perhaps only be important to people around him or for the person’s survival, but not much more than that. Such a person may, justifiably, feel like “a cog in the wheel”. Such purpose *with* life may, however, also provide a purpose *in* life, a purpose which has intrinsic value.¹² Such intrinsic value is often connected to things that are more than mere survival or utility, it is not only something that one *has* to do. A tension exists between the *with* and the *in*: we may try to use a purpose *with* life in order to achieve a purpose *in* life, but an individual who is working at a company stacking papers and whose *instrumental* purpose therefore is constituted by stacking papers for the company in question may have a hard time trying to find how stacking papers day in and day out constitutes a meaningful occupation. Thus having a purpose *with* life does not necessarily mean one has

¹¹ Ibid, pp. 135-7.

¹² Ibid, pp. 51-6.

purpose *in* life, and this purpose *in* life is what is important in order to evaluate how meaningful a life is.

Now, it seems that the purpose or goal sought when applying the Truth approach is found in truth, while the purpose sought when applying the Mystery approach is mystery. I assume that both truth and mystery, respectively, are meaningful goals. Truth, however, may seem more of an instrumental purpose in the sense that it is “enforced” – we “enforce” a mould of meaning onto art or religion by dictating the limits for what is true and what is not, what is *meaningful* and what is not. One may then argue that if one does not keep an open mind to the possibilities outside of this mould, this truth, meaningfulness is stifled. This limitation of instrumentality may even seem unethical.

The existential value of instrumentality should not, however, be overlooked because of ethical reasons. While it is possible to view instrumental purpose as non-humanistic *e.g.* because humans may then be used as means towards something removed from a human being’s personal properties, faculties and so on,¹³ it nevertheless seems to me reasonable to assume that human beings deliberately and happily *may* engage in certain actions irrespectively of whether these same people are mere cogs in a larger machinery or not. In other words: while instrumental meaning *with* life does not necessarily lead to meaning *in* life, they are not in absolute opposition either. The reason, I think, why this distaste towards instrumentality in existential matters is misdirected is that humanism is not an existential position, but an ethical one. But I find it logically unsound to derive the idea that no one could possibly find any *meaning* in being “put to use” from our *ethical* aversion towards the idea of being thus instrumentally utilised. While there are many purposes which may be called humanistic in the sense that they do not contravene any humanistic principles, it does not follow that humanism as such (in one form or another) automatically brings meaning to life or that there is no individual who cannot find meaning in life without a more or less humanistically imbued purpose. It is true that an existentially fulfilling medium (*e.g.* aesthetics or religion) may have ethical, political or other purposes, much like Plato argued that because music affects our behaviour we should advocate “Apollonian” music which fosters order, proportion and harmony.¹⁴ But we may as well *not* use art for any instrumental purpose whatsoever; hence there seems to be no necessary connection between ethics and aesthetics. It seems to me that humanism or any other ethical position is exactly that: an ethical position, not a necessarily existential one. Therefore I believe we should, in accord with Occam’s razor, beware the temptation of muddling one aspect of life with another. If the definition

¹³ Ibid, pp. 60f.

¹⁴ R. E. Wood, *Placing Aesthetics: Reflection on the Philosophic Tradition*, Ohio, Ohio University Press, 2000, p. 40.

mentioned above is one way to explain meaningfulness in life, then ethical issues cannot disallow it on *existential* grounds, only ethical ones.

In order to find a somewhat universal definition of existential meaning, it must not be dependent on ethics or history. Yet someone like Lev Tolstoy for example, would argue that we not only have the ability to choose which purpose is to give our lives meaning, but that we *must* choose.¹⁵ To my mind, this is yet another instance where ethics unnecessarily meddles with existential issues and seems an opinion wholly dependent on a time in history (Tolstoy's time) when intellectuals deemed it necessary to choose because it befitted the ideals of freedom of the time. Indeed, in a modern welfare society this issue is even more accentuated: how, asks Furberg, can life be filled with meaning when we no longer have to be useful means, when we no longer have to work constantly in order to survive?¹⁶ Tolstoy seems to assume that we as human beings are naturally disposed to make existential choices in the sense that we always have to choose or find a way of our own to make our lives meaningful. A counterargument to this could be that the continuous freedom to choose induces anxiety in the individual; *not* having to choose then provides a sense of ease and security.

Yet – again considering the possible ethical importance to meaning – is it not true that an emphatic reaction to an existentially fulfilling work of art demands compassion in the receiver, a compassion which is dependent upon the receiver's moral abilities?¹⁷ Is it not true that to receive existential meaning from art would be nearly impossible should one be unable to feel what goes on in the psyche of another human being – the artist? This way, appreciation of art could be an exercise in compassion. Must not existential meaning then be dependent upon a certain frame of ethics? Even this line of reasoning, I think, is erroneous. While it may be true that we need the ability to “read” the psyche of other people in order to understand the emotional statement (*i.e.* the artwork) of another human being, this does not in itself suggest that *compassion* – or any other ethical trait – is of utmost necessity for the appreciation of art, and even less does it mean that we need subscribe to an ethical school in which compassion is regarded as the highest form of human expression.

It may be, then, that the limitations of the Truth approach *are* meaningful despite any ethical protests, because if people under certain circumstances are likely to enjoy being a mere cog in the wheel, this opens up for the possibility that the seemingly “inhumane” and “enforcing” Truth approach is meaningful after all.

¹⁵ Furberg, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 131f.

¹⁷ R. Scruton, *Kultur räknas* (L. Ryding, Trans.), Bokförlaget Atlantis, p. 97.

2.3 Challenge versus equilibrium in the pursuit of meaning

A seemingly fundamental dichotomy in the pursuit of meaning in life is expressed by the question: What makes life more meaningful: a sense of challenge in life or a sense of equilibrium? The former suggests that mental health demands a certain tension between what has been accomplished and what one has yet to accomplish, a tension between the current self and the future self. One's purpose or goal in life should, according to this view, be challenging to fulfil, a struggle.¹⁸ The latter approach – that of equilibrium – suggests that the opposite of challenge must be sought in order to find meaning in life: one has to find one or more definite answers to one's existential questions – a kind of safe harbour of existence – and should seek discharge of tension and let mediums like those of art and religion function as a purging (catharsis) of any seemingly insurmountable troubles in life.

Which is the connection, then, between the dichotomy of challenge and equilibrium on the one hand and the Mystery and Truth approaches on the other? The Truth approach creates challenge in life in the sense that if we seek truth we face the challenge of actively finding answers to existential questions. On the other hand, this approach also provides existential “safety”: we are given definite answers by God or Beethoven or whoever we feel sufficiently summarizes what life is about. Thus existential truths provide “plans” for life, blueprints that help us navigate its events and our emotional reactions to them, consequently providing existential equilibrium. The Mystery approach is challenging because it provides no clear absolutes, there are no limits as to what ‘God’ may entail; we are then forced to adapt to an ever-changing definition of ‘God’. The Mystery approach may, on the other hand, provide safety: the immediacy of this approach keeps us in close continuous contact with His mysteries.

Both truth and mystery then have the capacity of providing challenge as well as equilibrium in life, though in different ways, and both challenge and equilibrium will be considered as equally meaningful forms in this essay.

3. The compatibility of religion and art

Religion and art are, I believe, similar when viewing them from an existential perspective. Religion, with its multitude of narratives and symbols, is a source of meaning in life in a similar way that art presents its perceivers with meaningful content through a vast array of symbols and metaphor. Before considering their compatibility, however, we must ask whether they are at all

¹⁸ V. E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Boston, Beacon Press, 2006, p. 124.

separable. Here, we should take into consideration that art can be seen as a mere tool for religious expression and has often been exactly that: paintings of the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus, Christ on the cross and statues of saints; thangkas and mandalas; Islamic calligraphy and geometric patterns. *Visual* secular art was prevalent in the ancient world, but watching these works today it might be argued that they did not – in depicting everyday life among similar things – have the same existential function as, say, a painting by Arnold Böcklin did a few millennia later or that the religion and religious art did in ancient times. This would suggest that art originally or fundamentally is not an independent field of expression, but rather one of countless parts of religion. But we need only look to the ancient Greek dramas to find art that has little to do with the supernatural, even though the dramas in question often in some way referred to gods of Greek mythology or fate or otherwise divine powers. Euripides' tragedy *Medea* comes to mind, a play where domestic struggles, love and death are in the foreground, while references to divine presence has little relevance to the drama being displayed. Fast-forward two thousand and a few hundred years and we see the development of Romantic authors expressing deeply existential themes with hardly any reference at all to a supernatural reality. While modern and contemporary artists even to our day have indeed used their art to express themselves on supernatural subjects,¹⁹ art has also become an autonomous expression independent from religion. Art's secular autonomy from religion coupled with the existential expression it has in common with religion is the reason why I think art works as a sounding board for discussing religion in secular times when we feel perhaps more at home with discussing the (existential) value of art than that of religion.

Once they are now separated, in order to make religion and art more comparable for our purposes, it is valuable to see one of them *as* the other. In order to gain knowledge from the study of art in order to say something about religion, let us then view art *as* religion. Doing so, to what does a single artwork correspond in the field of religion? Does an artwork correspond to a whole religion or merely a part of a religion?

First off, we have to consider religions and artworks as *worlds* onto which ontologies and epistemologies can be applied. Now, it is reasonable to assume that religions in general strive to provide a *complete* world which does not leave anything out: it contains a whole set of symbols which explain the reality around us or provides meaning in all important events of human life. But could a single artwork contain all of these? While some artworks are no doubt ambitious in commenting on a wide range of aspects of the experience of being human, it seems that most artworks are focused on a single or a few themes, *e.g.* the experience of how it is nearly

¹⁹ See *e.g.* Tuchman's *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, 1987.

impossible to be certain about anything, or – taking the theme further – the experience of having no certain knowledge about the mystery of death. Both of these themes apply to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and while one may read Shakespeare “religiously” and learn a lot about life and find existential satisfaction from reading his works, *Hamlet* as a single artwork can hardly be said to contain a “full” worldview in the way religions do.

Perhaps the *entire* body of Shakespeare's works can be considered to cover “enough” subjects, enough human experience, to have the same completeness as that of a religion. Keeping a regular schedule of *e.g.* Catholic rituals, reading, singing, confessing and praying could be compared to Shakespeare's wide range of emotions and events in his works as a “go-to resource” for existential meaning. It seems that the major difference between an avid reader of Shakespeare and an ardent Catholic (assuming, for the sake of argument, there is no overlap) is the practise of *rituals* connected to Catholic faith. While a 16th century Italian farmer would most likely go to church for Eucharist on a regular basis, there are no typical Shakespearian rituals around. Book clubs and academic writing on Shakespearean themes are the closest to rituals we will get at this time. It is possibly also valid to speak of Shakespearean ethics, laws and lifestyles based on Shakespeare's production in a manner somewhat equal to religious ethics, laws and lifestyles, but these aspects are, I believe, irrelevant to a purely existential discussion.

It also seems that art and religion use different “tools” to existentially support us in life. In coping with the death of a family member for example, art helps us cope with it by applying a shimmer of beauty upon it, thus bringing comfort and meaning to an event which otherwise appears ugly. Religion, on the other hand, puts the situation in a larger context, providing a sense of structure through rituals and ceremonies.²⁰ This lets us know that the fact of a family member dying is “in the order of things”, *e.g.* it is part of the continuity of life and afterlife. Thus, strictly speaking, religion is meaning through context and art is meaning through beauty.

Despite these differences, approaches to art and religion are comparable. In art, there are two basic approaches to grasping an artwork: either a description of the immediately given (form) or an interpretation of what is beyond form (content).²¹ Hence the analogy between the art and religion is useful to this essay because art encounters the same dilemma found in religion. Namely, art *can* be interpreted, echoing the venture for scientific truths in Descartes. And perhaps art indeed *should* be interpreted. Interpretation, however, is sometimes far from

²⁰ R. Wuthnow et al., “Religion and bereavement: A conceptual framework”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* No. 19, 1980, p. 408-422.

²¹ Wood, *op. cit.*, pp. 30f.

being an easy task; its difficulty might entice us to propose the argument that one *should not* try to interpret art in the first place, or that interpretation is a tool of reason which ruins art's authenticity, much like Pascal believed instrumentality ruined faith.

While the 'Truth' approach in religion seeks truth, the correspondent in art is something like an artwork's 'contents', while the mystery in religion is something more akin to the approach of making sure that any "aboutness" is kept hidden and undetermined. Art's contents are where the meaning of an artwork is found if we apply the 'Truth' approach to art, while the meaning produced by the Mystery approach can only stay intact if we avoid explanation of what we experience in art via some presumed content, and instead focus on the immediate appearance.

To get a better look at this condition, let us consider a typical but rather apt rendition of the dichotomy between the importance of artistic content versus that of an undefined message. In a recent French film, *La vie d'Adèle* (2013), two young people discuss books they have read. Thomas says he read de Laclos' novel *Les Liaisons dangereuses* in school, stating that had he read it alone without the teacher's explanation and analysis of each chapter, making it come to life, he would have missed out. Adèle, however, wonders if Thomas did not find that a pain, declaring that Thomas would perhaps have found his own reasons for liking the book had he not first had it explained to him. She finds that whenever she analyses a book, it closes off her imagination.²²

In other words, Adèle claims that art should not be explained, that "aboutness" ruins the experience of art. As soon as we delve "beneath" the surface, thus allowing for conceptualisation, an artwork becomes meaningless, which would be the religious equivalent of getting "too close" to the gods.

4. What are mystery and truth in an existential context?

4.1 A definition of 'mystery'

The Merriam-Webster dictionary provides the following definitions of the word 'mystery':

2a: something not understood or beyond understanding [...]

3: profound, inexplicable, or secretive quality or character²³

²² *La vie d'Adèle*, dir. Abdellatif Kechiche, Quat'sous Films, France, 2013.

²³ "mystery", *Merriam-Webster.com*, retrieved October 9, 2014, from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mystery>

A central theme of the mysterious would accordingly have to do with a lack of understanding. If the mysterious is secretive by nature, it is something which is not only difficult to understand, but something we *cannot* fully grasp. Similarly, concerning the mystical experiences of religions, William James says that such an experience “defies expression, that no adequate report of its content can be given in words”.²⁴

From an existential point of view, however, we may as well replace the ‘cannot’ with ‘should not’: the mysterious is something which we *should not* fully understand, because from a Mystery approach standpoint it seems to be not only an unfortunate fact that we cannot grasp a mystery to its full extent, but a prerequisite in order to be able to attain the existential meaning which the mysterious provides, as will be explained further on.

4.2 Mystery as genuineness of feeling

If religious “adequacy” – *i.e.* the ability to accurately express the experiences of the human soul – is what distinguishes religious expressions that are more able to provide existential meaning from those that are less able to do so, a glaring problem still remains: If truth and accuracy in describing the human soul are the sole criteria used, we may as well be content with an academic text about human psychology throughout the ages in order to achieve existential satisfaction. There is, however, much more than intellectual truth to religion and art. Objective (or inter-subjective) truth in itself does not make religion what it is. Author Hjalmar Söderberg found a similar problem, connecting the “describability” of the Truth approach with meaninglessness and lets his character Tyko Gabriel Glas ask:

O, what is this plague that has seized people to ask about everything what it is? What is this scourge that has whipped them out of the remaining ring of siblings of creatures on Earth, out to look upon her world and her life from above, from without, with cold foreign eyes, and find it small and worth nothing?²⁵

Here, the truth-seeking eye destroys meaning by “knowing too much”, by making the world too obvious to be meaningful. Reality becomes ontologically smaller, while our epistemic access is all-

²⁴ James, op. cit.

²⁵ H. Söderberg, *Doktor Glas*, Stockholm, Albert Bonniers tryckeri, 1905, p. 166: ”Å, hvad är det för en pest som har gripit människorna att fråga om allting hvad det är? Hvad är det för ett gissel som har piskat dem ut ur den öfriga syskonringen af [...] varelser på jorden, ut att se på sin värld och sitt lif uppiifrån, utifrån, med kalla främmande ögon, och finna det smått och ingenting värdt?”

encompassing. This obviousness is what could make any existential expression (as those in religion and art) lose its significance. The mystery is gone much like the fun in a joke is entirely ruined when the joke is explained. A similar formulation of the eye that “knows too much” is found in Selma Lagerlöf’s work:

But we thought of the strange ghost of self-observation which already had held its entry into our souls. We thought of him with the eyes of ice and the long, crooked fingers, he who sits in there in the darkest corner of the soul and picks our being to pieces, like old women pick scraps of silk and wool to pieces. [...] and thus our best feelings, our most primordial thoughts, all that we had done and said had been examined, researched, picked to pieces [...] [The ghost of self-observation sat] guarding by the source of actions, sneering at good and evil, comprehending all, condemning nothing [...] paralysing the movements of the heart and the power of the thought [...] [Life] had become a spectacle where he was the only spectator.²⁶

These are the sentiments of the youth after hearing the old men and women of the village describe how their own youth was one long adventure where they hardly reflected upon what they were doing. This provides another clue to the Mystery approach perspective: the magic of the mysterious is the lure of wonder and nostalgia, something fluttering which one cannot truly grasp and once one believes one has done so, it is gone. F. Scott Fitzgerald describes a comparable experience in *The Great Gatsby*, when Gatsby finally obtains the love of his life (in the words of the novel’s narrator Nick Carraway):

Compared to the great distance that had separated him from Daisy [the green light by her dock] had seemed very near to her, almost touching her. It had seemed as close as a star to the moon. Now it was again a green light on a dock. His count of enchanted objects had diminished by one.²⁷

Fitzgerald also makes this a parallel to the dream of America:

²⁶ S. Lagerlöf, *Gösta Berlings saga*, Stockholm, Alb. Bonniers boktryckeri, 1920, pp. 160f: ”Men vi tänkte, vi, på själviakttagelsens underliga ande, som redan hade hållit sitt intåg i vårt inre. Vi tänkte på honom med isögonen och de långa, krokiga fingrarna, han, som sitter därinne i själens mörkaste vrå och plockat sönder vår varelse, såsom gamla kvinnor plocka sönder lappar av siden och ylle. [...] och så hade våra bästa känslor, våra ursprungligaste tankar, allt, vad vi hade gjort och sagt, undersökts, genomforskats, sönderplockats [...] [Själviakttagelsens ande satt] vaktande vid handlingarnas källa, hänleende åt ont och gott, begripande allt, fördömande intet [...] förlamande hjärtats rörelser och tankens kraft [...] [Livet] hade blivit till ett skådespel, där han var den enda åskådaren.”

²⁷ F. S. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 2004, p. 97.

[F]or a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent, compelled into an aesthetic contemplation he neither understood nor desired, face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.²⁸

Thus the magic of “enchanted objects” is diminished. Similarly, religious seekers of mystery might protest against the conceptualisation of God: we cannot truly know Him, and as we desperately stretch our hands towards His true character, he becomes even more elusive, and should we nevertheless try to conceptualise or make real to us mere humans the nature of God, it would be as far from the magical, enchanted experience of God as could possibly be.

In Lagerlöf’s narrative this all too objective, conceptualising eye is contrasted to “the fullness of life” which is exemplified by how one may, when madly in love, kiss someone in front of hundreds of people or fling oneself into a snowdrift to die in sheer fury. What makes the all too wise person a whole human being again are, in Lagerlöf’s metaphor, the “lacerating griffins of passion”, who – flying with wings of fire and claws of steel on unknown ways impossible to observe – crush and kill the ghost of self-observation.²⁹

In Söderberg’s novel, a method with which we maintain meaning can be found in a subjective approach:

You shall look upon your world from your own point of view and not from some imagined point out in space; you shall modestly measure with your own measurement, according to your estate and your conditions [...]. Then the Earth is big enough and life an important thing, and the night eternal and deep.³⁰

Söderberg’s Glas speaks of an epistemic “size” of sorts: if we are too “large”, *i.e.* if our knowledge exceeds some imagined limits, then our surroundings and, ultimately, our whole existence will seem small and insignificant by comparison. If we, on the other hand, limit our knowledge to our immediate surroundings, its periphery will seem large and, indeed, “larger than life”. According to William James, mystical experiences create a sense of what he calls “muchness”, and its form “will be intuitive or perceptual, not conceptual, for the remembered or conceived objects in the

²⁸ Ibid, p. 185.

²⁹ Lagerlöf, op. cit., pp. 161f.

³⁰ Söderberg, op. cit.: ”Du skall se på din värld från din egen synpunkt och icke från någon tänkt punkt ute i rymden; du skall blygsamt mäta med ditt eget mått, efter ditt stånd och dina villkor [...]. Då är jorden stor nog och lifvet en viktig sak, och natten oändlig och djup.”

enlarged field are supposed not to attract the attention singly”.³¹ Then the limitlessness of mystery does not refer to the limitlessness of our knowledge, which is rather supposed to be confined, but the limitlessness of the world around us. This stands in opposition to the Truth approach where we strive for knowledge although we may not reach beyond what is logically possible to know (*i.e.* a “God’s eye point of view”). Simultaneously, having the world around us be brought down to concepts, thus “limiting” its depth or, rather, pinpointing exactly how far it reaches, is not something existentially limiting from the point of view of the Truth approach, but rather a blueprint to experiencing a work of art “properly”, which is exactly why conceptual knowledge of the piece is important to the Truth approach. From a Mystery approach standpoint, on the other hand, things are the reverse: the less we know about the world, the argument would go, the larger the mystery becomes and therefore the greater our feelings of existential meaning become.

The genuineness of feeling and purity of emotion as opposed to conceptualisation as exemplified in the above quotes thus seem to be important to the human need for meaning and are possibly central to the idea that mystery in art and religion is more significant than the truth of the same. It should be remembered that, whether one seeks existential truth or mystery, our actual proximity to material reality – *i.e.* how accurate our statements are in respect to the material world as opposed to our experience of it – is utterly irrelevant to this study since we are dealing, rather, with the acquirement of existential meaning, not “truth” *per se*. Thus Bertrand Russell’s critical survey of mysticism is supportive of and relevant to the exploration of the value of the Mystery approach for existential meaning:

there is an element of wisdom to be learned from the mystical way of feeling, which does not seem to be attainable in any other manner. If this is the truth, mysticism is to be commended as an attitude towards life, not as a creed about the world. The meta-physical creed, I shall maintain, is a mistaken outcome of the emotion, although this emotion, as colouring and informing all other thoughts and feelings, is the inspirer of whatever is best in Man.³²

4.3 The sensuous aspect of aesthetics found in mystery

³¹ W. James, “A suggestion about mysticism”, in R. Woods (Ed.), *Understanding mysticism* (pp. 215–222), Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1910/1980, p. 217.

³² B. Russell, *Mysticism and Logic*, New York, W. W. Norton, Incorporated, 1929, pp. 11f.

With seekers of mystery being keen on keeping any message or concept out of the picture, it naturally begs the question, “What else is there to an artwork?” Where, it may be asked, lies the actual enjoyment in reading a novel or listening to a fugal composition if we do not seek a concept? While it seems unreasonable to denigrate intellect as such in order to achieve a sense of mystery, the answer to the question may be that the attempt at achieving mystery is accompanied by a larger focus on the more immediately perceived data brought about by human senses rather than a focus on intellect.

To showcase an example of this sensuous aspect of finding meaning in art, consider the way in which we may appreciate a piece of music. On the one hand, a rhythmical musical piece may induce in us the idea of galloping horses, much like the phrase ‘galloping horses’ induces in us the idea or image of the same. It is even downright difficult *not* to get some kinds of ideas in our heads when we hear a piece of music. But that does not necessarily mean that the music is about *e.g.* galloping horses, nor does it mean that the function of the music is to induce ideas of any such thing, or any other thing at all. The meaning of the music – a seeker of mystery would say – is purely musical in the sense that we enjoy it because of the sheer excitement of that galloping-like rhythm. Or a musical piece may be constructed like an argument of sorts, with motifs “answering” each other, where the “winning” of the argument makes one feel triumphant. Hence these direct emotions are not in any way *about* human experience – they *are* human experience in so far as they provide a more or less immediate human appreciation of sound.

4.4 Transcendence

An aspect of immediacy is the existential experience of transcendence – the usually overwhelming feeling of gaining insight or access to a reality that is larger and more profound than “the world as we know it” – is found in both the world of art as well as that of religion. These are feelings that to anyone who perceives transcendence evoke an overarching pattern which shapes a reality beyond the empirical, sensuous reality,³³ coupled with a sense of unity, harmony and meaning.³⁴ We may thus gaze upon an artwork and feel ourselves part of something much greater than ourselves and the world immediately around us. A religious person may feel something similar in a church or in a temple or in nature: sense a divine presence and be given a hint of the ineffable greatness of God.

³³ Furberg, op. cit., p. 45.

³⁴ K. Hanes, “Unusual Phenomena and Transcendent Human Experience”, *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 44, No. 1, 2012, p. 26.

4.4.1 Transcendence as mystery of all-embracing “knowledge”

Söderberg complained about an approach which perceives the world “from above, from without”, resulting in meaninglessness. While Söderberg seems to defend ineffability to a large degree, his criticism of the approach which looks upon the world “from some imagined point out in space” can equally be interpreted as a criticism of feelings of transcendence, which itself, I suggest, is a sort of Mystery approach.

In this context – where we strive to distinguish the mysterious and obscure from the truthful and lucid – transcendence may seem paradoxical. Transcendence is a Mystery approach because of its alleged ineffability, but is also, according to Söderberg’s criticism, close to the Truth approach in the way that it encompasses knowledge claims that exceed even the scope of that approach: it claims to know of the existence of something of which it is humanly impossible to have any knowledge whatsoever, as claimed by Putnam in following chapters.

Also, feelings of transcendence seem to be situated somewhere in between the religious and the aesthetic. A transcendent experience can be brought about by anything from standing alone on a mountaintop, surveying the surrounding vistas or walking through a deep, snow-clad forest to fathoming the interior of a continental Gothic cathedral or joining a thousand man rally in the streets of a capital city. All of these are highly aesthetic experiences, a feast of the senses, but may also invoke a religious presence, *e.g.* as formulated by Knut Hamsun in *Pan*: Hamsun’s lieutenant Glahn walks through the woods and, shouting aloud into the night, “a confused, passionate delight in the time and the place sends a strange shiver” through him as Glahn continues his monologue:

“A toast to the dark and to God’s murmuring in the trees, to the sweet, simple harmonies of silence upon my ear, to green leaf and yellow leaf! [...]”³⁵

This feeling of “God’s murmuring between the trees” is an apt description of a feeling where something larger than life is present in extreme immediacy, *i.e.* in the small details of the natural world around us.

Thus mystery can be expressed in transcendent terms or transcendent experiences. But, as we have seen, transcendence claims knowledge, and knowledge is anathema to the Mystery approach. Can transcendence be seen as part of the Mystery approach considering this?

³⁵ K. Hamsun, *Pan: From Lieutenant Glahn’s Papers*, London, Artemis Press, 1955, p. 122.

Because of the assumptive character of the knowledge of transcendent practices, it cannot be said to be of the kind of intellectual knowledge we find in the Truth approach. People who claim to have had transcendent experiences may indeed assume they know of something more profound than any intellectual Truth-seeker, that they have the knowledge of the *existence* of something by virtue of their mere experience. But if transcendence lets us know nothing about the *character* of this being, it can hardly be described as knowledge in the first place, because – as will be established by the notion of relative ontology in later chapters – then the identity of this “something” may as well be a baked potato rather than something divine. William James describes the paradox of this “noetic quality” of mystical experience thus:

Although so similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain [...]³⁶

It is this “knowledge”, I believe, which conserves mystery by enveloping the “outer reality” in a shroud of obscurity, where the only concept to be found is a concept of a *lack* of (intellectual) knowledge.

Much of this seemingly contradictory transcendence can be found in the philosophy of Schopenhauer. From the perspective of existential meaning, Schopenhauer focuses on how the world may become vast and we become small by gazing upon what he identifies as the Platonic Idea, the “closest” we may come to the Kantian thing in itself (or, in Schopenhauer’s terminology, the Will) – precisely through overwhelming, transcendent experiences. Schopenhauer writes of a “will-less gaze”, an enchantment of sorts which brings us out of the world of relations and endows us with a rather objective view of the world. He likens it to the nostalgia of ages past: we imagine only the objects and the objective, not the suffering subjects we were. The world as will has disappeared because we have objectified the will. This experience is evident in viewing, for example, the clash of waves on a rocky beach at night. In viewing the destructive forces of nature, we realise the threat to our individual and hence our will.³⁷ This, argues Schopenhauer, constitutes the sublime aspect of nature: we are enabled to observe its idea through the humbling experience of our possible destruction through its superior powers. But in realising our smallness, our near to *nothingness*, we simultaneously forget our individuality and

³⁶ James, *Varieties*, op. cit.

³⁷ A. Schopenhauer, *Världen som vilja och föreställning* (E. Sköld, Trans.), Stockholm, Bonniers, 1916, pp. 291f.

realise how the overwhelmingly, improbably vast world exists only as an idea in us. Suddenly, the vastness of the world is situated in us and is dependent upon us instead of the other way around, enabling us – to paraphrase Shakespeare – to take fortune’s buffets and rewards with equal thanks.³⁸ In other words, we are all slaves to a transcendental aspect of reality, a puppeteer within ourselves, until we look back at its machinery – looking *at* will, not *as* will – and thus achieve a new perspective where we do not need ask existential questions at all since the answers are all immediately present to us. To Schopenhauer, art is a medium with which we may contemplate the ideas: the communication of these ideas is art’s only aim. Art, he says, is a way of observing the things in the world independently of space, time and causality, which is in opposition to science. Schopenhauer goes on to claim that his idealist approach is complete objectivity where the individual delves in observing, not willing.³⁹ Thus we lose ourselves in the objects, which is existentially meaningful insofar as it helps us move our focus from the self and its suffering. This could be equivalent to saying that we should not dwell on any emotions we may have that are dependent on the world around us, but move on.

So Schopenhauer’s aesthetics have to do with ideas and objectivity, but not with existential truth in the sense presented in this essay. As mentioned above, Schopenhauer’s will-less gazing strives to be independent of the world where concepts matter, the world where it is possible to make correct and incorrect references, and instead gazes beyond towards a world that stands way above human experiences of love, death, sadness and joy, the human inevitabilities associated with existential truth. Because, as mentioned, in Schopenhauer’s view, art is not about anything in this world as we normally know it, one dictated by relations, causality, time and space.

Not long before Schopenhauer printed these ideas, music critic E. T. A. Hoffmann proposed something similar: the sole subject of music is the infinite and about unlocking “an unknown realm – a world with nothing in common with the surrounding outer world of the senses”. Most importantly, in what Hoffmann calls an immeasurable realm, we “abandon *definite feelings*” (my emphasis); the feeling we do have is instead that of “*inexpressible* longing” (my emphasis).⁴⁰ This presents an approach to art which on the one hand perhaps claims objectivity and certainty, but makes no effort whatsoever to confirm its truth by means of trials in the outside world or other people. Instead, Hoffmann’s approach assumes a direct connection between the subject and a professed transcendent realm. The feelings associated with great art

³⁸ Ibid, pp. 300-3.

³⁹ Ibid, pp. 274-6.

⁴⁰ E. T. A. Hoffmann, “Beethoven’s Instrumental-Musik”, *E. T. A. Hoffmanns sämtliche Werke*, vol. 1, ed. C. G. von Maassen, München and Leipzig, G. Müller, 1908, (B. R. Simms, Trans.), retrieved October 9, 2014, from http://www.cengage.com/music/book_content/049557273X_wrightSimms_DEMO/assets/ITOW/7273X_INT_07_ITOW_Hoffmann.pdf

according to this approach seem to have nothing to do with the universal inevitabilities of human experience – experiences which we have put names to and to which we can refer (and which will be discussed further in following chapters) – but instead have everything to do with something indefinite and inexpressible.

There are, however, better and worse ways to – using Schopenhauer’s terms – objectify the will, thus there are also better and worse ways to achieve feelings of transcendence. Depictions of animals and humans, for example, have a larger degree of such objectification than architecture because the former constitute more explicit revelations of the will.⁴¹ In Schopenhauer’s multitude of examples, the degrees of objectification in the world of art also apply to different art forms, ranging from architecture on the lower end to music on the higher end. The lowest degrees of objectification are found in the ideas of weight, cohesion and firmness often apparent in architecture, while the highest degrees can be found in music, which directly depicts the will itself and not merely the Ideas.⁴²

A concept which reminds us of that of Schopenhauer’s objectification is the concept of ‘aura’, which relates to the mysterious and holy, the “wholly other”. Aura produces a sense of distance in objects even if they are close to us, but since they entrance and captivate us, we nevertheless wish to come close to them.⁴³ Plate claims that even secularised art has made beauty a transcendent quality, and while museums have placed art outside of a ritualistic context they have also created a new aura surrounding the artworks on display by creating a complete narrative of the past, set apart from the world and the present. This need to have a “complete collection” thus reaches for the Schopenhauerian realm of ideas and away from our bodies. The message is emphasized over the medium. But while Schopenhauer’s philosophy stresses historicity to be a negative aspect of art, the mystery of auras stands in contrast to modern technological reproduction, which in turn detaches art from tradition, ritual and any cult value by emphasising the medium over the message. The aura is diminished by technological mass reproduction and mass reception, making the evaluation of art democratized. As mentioned before, depictions of human beings constitute more explicit revelations of the will, of objectification; likewise, aura is created by the human element (faces and eyes especially), which is true for modern photography as well as religious iconography.⁴⁴ Plate also shows how the medium of film hinders any attempt to reach a pure description. Through its mechanical reproduction of images and sounds, “objects are taken from their natural, traditional context and

⁴¹ Schopenhauer, op. cit., pp. 310f.

⁴² Ibid, pp. 311-83.

⁴³ S. B. Plate, *Walter Benjamin, Religion and Aesthetics*, London, Taylor & Francis Ltd., 2004, p. 88f.

⁴⁴ Ibid, pp. 94f, 98, 101f.

given new coordinates [...]”. Thus modern technologies are finally able to keep up with the pace of everyday life.⁴⁵

4.5 What does ‘truth’ refer to in an existential context?

4.5.1 Scientific truth and existential truth

In the debate concerning belief and knowledge during the 1950s in Sweden, Ingemar Hedenius refused to accept the division between belief and knowledge as different in the sense that knowledge cannot comment upon belief. The reasoning behind this refusal was grounded in his unwavering demand for truthfulness. Indeed, Hedenius declared that reason will always question the truthfulness of a religious claim.⁴⁶

In the ideals of Hedenius and so-called New Atheists like Richard Dawkins⁴⁷ and Daniel Dennett⁴⁸ of more recent times, truth is decidedly separated from human emotions. Beliefs inspired by emotions are, according to this “school” of thought, more intense than rational beliefs, more or less unsympathetic to rational arguments and may even be characterised by proceeding from an *obligation* of believing certain things to be true despite an exceedingly low probability of said things to be so. (This last criterion could be said to be the historical consequence of people starting to reflect upon religious belief, thus initiating a belief in belief, *i.e.* recognising the importance of belief itself. The belief in belief easily becomes as strong as or stronger than the original belief [*e.g.* in God].)

In this view, there is no unbridgeable gap between the language used by religious and non-religious people: whether or not there is a heavily symbolic use of language in religion, non-religious people should in principle be able to “translate” this use of language into something which is comprehensible to them. Nor does the emotional experience of a statement need to be the same between religious and non-religious people in order to understand what it means. The emotional function of religion is therefore, according to this view, irrelevant in seeking truth in religion. Thus Hedenius *et al.* criticise religion for appealing to emotion when making claims about the world.

But is not religion existentially justified as a merely emotional outlet? Not if we have any rational demand for truth in what we devote ourselves to – and it seems difficult to argue that we do not. Because even if it would be practical or comfortable to take on a belief and

⁴⁵ Ibid, pp. 90f.

⁴⁶ I. Hedenius, *Tro och vetande*, Lidingö, Fri tanke, 2009, p. 40.

⁴⁷ R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London, Transworld Publishers, 2007, pp. 417, 394f.

⁴⁸ Dennett, *op. cit.*, pp. 369, 154, 200-204, 206, 216f.

we wanted to do so, we cannot accept just any set of beliefs based on practicality or comfort or the like – we need to feel that the ideas to which we devote ourselves are *true*. Because who would want to devote oneself to a false belief? Our emotions would not “be in it” if there is no truth whatsoever to justify our feelings. So if we accept the demands made by the likes of Hedenius, Dawkins and Dennett – that the religious use of language can be translated to and understood by non-religious people and that religious emotions are irrelevant to its truth – then it may appear that science is given free reign in religious issues and that religious claims cannot be justified even from an existential point of view.

Indeed, how is it possible to save religious truth from the clutches of science? Although Hedenius’ idea may appear uncompromising, he nevertheless accepted that should there be a satisfactory answer to the question of the relation between belief and knowledge, there is indeed a possibility that religious claims can be acknowledged by reason.⁴⁹ While religious belief may not necessarily be acknowledged by *reason* they can be viewed as a kind of truth. Religion, like any form of culture, may be viewed as a source of knowledge about our *human emotions and behaviour* as transmitted through ideals, symbols and narratives.⁵⁰ In other words, religion may not be justified as truthful by *appealing* to emotions, but by being *about* emotions. Thus religion is truth about emotions, not truth justified by emotions. That is the compromise which saves religion from irrelevance when it comes to saying something true about the world and may validate its focus on human emotions, thus possibly providing a satisfactory answer to Hedenius’ question about the relation between belief and knowledge, or emotion and truth.

The kind of truth discussed here can be labelled *existential truth*, a truth which corresponds to the human soul and the collective knowledge about it, a description of the human psyche. It is exemplified in the ideas of Martin Luther. According to Peder Thalén, if the question of the truth of God’s existence is central to Hedenius’ criticism of religious belief, it is entirely irrelevant to the likes of Luther. To him, God’s visibility is about God’s salvific activity, not about an intervention in the outer course of events.⁵¹ Thalén says that Luther describes how faith in God liberates man from identifying with his incomplete nature, our “inner boundary”. To identify with faith implies that one is no longer a prisoner in one’s own self-reliance. Self-reliance usually leads to hopelessness, which Luther, says Thalén, equates with the absence of God. The darkness inside is, however, something which God takes care of, thus the believer’s imperfections die away by themselves. This is, unlike Hedenius’ interpretation of religious belief, not some

⁴⁹ Hedenius, op. cit., p. 40.

⁵⁰ Scruton, op. cit., p. 25.

⁵¹ P. Thalén, *Den profana kulturens Gud: Perspektiv på Ingemar Hedenius uppgörelse med den kristna traditionen*, Nora, Nya Doxa, 1994, p. 57.

mysterious circumstance which we cannot confirm in our experience.⁵² Rather, in historical Christianity, God's presence is empirically verifiable and falsifiable. One example is how man's inadequacy is easily tested by examining to which degree she fulfils the commandments of God. Hence Christian knowledge is self-knowledge.⁵³

Another way of expressing this self-knowledge, is saying that religion and art treat images, narratives and ideas about the inevitabilities of life such as death, suffering, love, happiness and guilt.⁵⁴ Every human being will, it seems, sooner or later encounter these inevitabilities. We have all either experienced the death of loved ones or at least considered our own mortality. We have all suffered in one way or another and contemplated upon why there is suffering in the world and how we might accept our own suffering, to fight it, adapt to it or to accept it. We have all pondered the mystery called love, the experiences of falling in love, being loved, losing love or the feelings of not being loved at all. We have all had feelings of guilt or shame and vacillated between its denial, justification and redemption. Art and religion have the ability to treat the feelings we have regarding these inescapable events; art specifically uses beauty to either console us in matters of sorrow or confirm our joy, to even imbue images of death with majesty or serenity. This way, humanity has found meaning even in the most tormenting moments in life: a work of art can make us appreciate the beauty of things concerned with death or sorrow itself, reminding us that life – despite its horrors – is worth living because of its inherent beauty, which in itself appears to provide meaning to people's lives. In religion, the same situation – death or sorrow – is put into relation to a supernatural reality, making us feel whole despite loss. Both art and religion then provide us with a sense of redemption, a sense that everything is all right after all.

These inevitabilities could be said to be empirically unobservable,⁵⁵ but even then we can speak of true and false statements in religion and art by making the statements dependent upon our conceptualisations of our experiences grounded in the existential (rather than in the observable). Existential experiences encounter resistance from reality much in the same manner in which observable experiences do,⁵⁶ hence we are able to verify or falsify religious statements and aesthetic statements (*i.e.* art). In Eberhard Herrmann's words:

⁵² Ibid, pp. 43-5.

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 68-72.

⁵⁴ E. Herrmann, *Religion, Reality, and a Good Life: A Philosophical Approach to Religion*, Tübingen, JCB Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2004, pp. 22f.

⁵⁵ Ibid, p. 111.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 100.

When people reflect about love, for example, they try to form some idea of it with the help of literature, theatre, film, art, and religion. They may also compare their own shortcomings and disappointments, and try to form an idea of what pure love might be. In this way, love becomes a limit concept. For believers, it seems natural to call this pure love God. What is said about God is then not true or false because it agrees or does not agree with the reality conceptualized by us which offers resistance to us in our *observational* experiences. Instead, it is true or false depending upon whether it agrees or does not agree with the reality conceptualized by us which offers resistance to us in our *existential* experiences.⁵⁷

Thus existential truth is anchored in the knowledge of our conceptualisation of the human soul. It shapes us as human beings from a psychological point of view and reflects our lives in myriads of ways as seen in the arts and in religion. Existential truth supports us in our lives by giving authoritative and beautiful answers to what it means to be human.

4.5.2 The generalised human soul – existential truth as collective constant

So, seeking Truth, religion and art become media that have to do with the self, the human soul, which inevitably contains experiences and emotions concerning things as diverse as death and happiness, despair and love. These inevitabilities are represented or presented as subjects in religion and the arts.

This is an adequate response to Hedenius' demand for truth in religion because in order for existential truth to be comparable to scientific truth and its verifiability and falsifiability, existential truth needs to be grounded in something constant which does not haphazardly change the outcome of experimental trials. Existential truth is, as mentioned above, anchored in the knowledge of the human soul, a canvas of emotions and experiences which every human being encounters sooner or later in life.

But how do we prove whether or not there is existential truth contained in *e.g.* a specific artwork? In order to do that and for our interpretation to be useful not only to our individual selves, but to all people, the artwork must prove to be appreciated in a similar manner by other people. Other people – other human souls – are therefore another grounding of existential truth. Now, in the same manner as we cannot test a scientific theory an infinite

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 101.

amount of times in the physical world, an artwork's appeal cannot reasonably be tested on every human being. Instead, we have to refer to the collective knowledge of what the "average" human soul is like, gathered throughout the ages within a culture or civilisation and in recent times expressed in scientific fields such as psychology. This body of knowledge I think refers to an imagined "generalised" human soul, generalised in the sense that it is an image of the character of the human soul based on a multitude of experiences of a multitude of people throughout the history of a culture. (It is also what, among other things, brings us a canon of literature, which tells us that *e.g.* Shakespeare is a "good read".)

This generalised image is what may serve as a constant for existential truth in correspondence to how the physical world and its laws serve as a constant for truth in the natural sciences. The consistency and universality of the generalised human soul will, however, have to be relative to any given culture because it seems that tertiary emotions – such as love, happiness and ambition – which constitute a large part of the thematic content of art and religion are not hardwired in our brains (which is the case with primary emotions – pain, pleasure and fear, among others – and secondary emotions – affection, sorrow, sympathy and anger, among others), but dependent on culture.⁵⁸ The evolutionary background of the "openness" of the human brain has to do with environmental complexity: every stimulus cannot be predicted and therefore a response cannot be hardwired for every stimulus.⁵⁹ The mental life of the average person of any given culture is therefore shaped by that culture and might be dissimilar or even very different from the mental life of the average person of another culture.

This means that the tertiary emotions and experiences written, sung and talked about in *e.g.* ancient Greece are truthful to modern Westerners not *necessarily* because those emotions are globally universal, but perhaps because ancient Greek culture have had a strong impact on the art and religion of the modern West. It seems that the reason why a Greek tragedy can feel so contemporary when we read it today is because the core of the existential questions of the Western world has changed remarkably little. *Medea*, for example, is relevant to this day.⁶⁰

Correspondingly, the physical world and its laws have not changed dramatically during mankind's beginnings. This condition lets us test basic physical principles without unpredictable results, and the relative consistency of a culture lets us test *e.g.* artworks. If our human needs correspond to existential questions and these are constant in a culture, then, assumedly, answers to these questions are never entirely obsolete either, but rather true or false.

⁵⁸ L. Greenfeld, *Mind, Modernity, Madness: The Impact of Culture on Human Experience*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2013, pp. 79-84.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, pp. 61f.

⁶⁰ L. Swift, "Medea is as relevant today as it was in Ancient Greece", *The Conversation*, 2014, retrieved October 27, 2014, from <http://theconversation.com/medea-is-as-relevant-today-as-it-was-in-ancient-greece-29609>

4.6 What is existential falsity?

I have mentioned existential “Answers” in connection to the Truth approach: we may wish to find answers to our existential questions, which means that we want profoundly formulated confirmations of what we have experienced psychologically. We want to be seen and understood. So in a sense, existential truth in *e.g.* art is a confirmation that someone else has seen us, has seen our souls, and empathises with our lot. It shows us that the artist has understood something about life, something about *us*, and so we feel existentially supported by how well the artist has expressed this truth about us, bringing about a sense of existential community.

If, however, there is existential truth, this “beautiful empathy”, there must also be existential falsity. What that is exactly is less easy to enunciate. Is it possible for any artwork to be false? Can an artist be so incompetent or emotionally ignorant that he or she fails to express truth about any of the existential inevitabilities which humans experience? I believe we should not, however, talk about truth or falsity on an absolute scale of yes or no, but rather about grades of truth. Surely an artist may misunderstand human endeavours, misrepresent it or express it in inadequate ways; but no artist would, I assume, ever think of the inevitability of death in terms of, say, shoes (other than in metaphor), and it is not the case that all other artists express themselves flawlessly as to what it means to be human. Artworks are, rather – as we have all probably experienced – *more or less* existentially true.

But what would it mean to say that an artwork is existentially false? What would a practical example look like? The most striking example, which most people will be able to relate to and which accentuates a gradual shift, is that of literature, cinema or music that meant the whole world to us when we were adolescents, but are now things that we ignore, merely feel nostalgic about or are even embarrassed about. We may find that a certain film that we watched over and over again as teenagers is now trivial; it may be entertaining still, but it simply does not speak to us the way it used to, because we feel it does not understand us as the human beings we have become and the things we have now experienced. So, if we find that we are no longer able to connect with an artwork, it has become (more) existentially false (*i.e.* less true) to us.

5. Epistemological and ontological limitations of Truth and Mystery

As an expansion of Muhammad Iqbal’s notion of the difference between mystical experience as a unification of subject and object on the one hand and “ordinary rational consciousness” as

isolating stimuli into a divided,⁶¹ conceptualised world, I suggest that part of the difference between Truth and Mystery has to do with different limitations set in these approaches' epistemology and ontology respectively. The Truth approach constrains the ontological domain: the outer world should be defined and conceptually divided into a manageable whole. Epistemologically, the limits should be set only at what is logically impossible to know, but other than that we should strive to know as much as possible. This calls to mind the scientist at work: trying to make as little as possible of the world unknown, trying to explain as much as possible and retrieving knowledge from the same world within an epistemic frame which is flexible ("unlimited") when it comes to possible ontologies because truth is a continuous process of trial and error, verifiability and falsification.

Thus seeking existential truth in an artwork like Graham Greene's 1951 novel *The End of the Affair*, one should assume that it is *possible* to conceptualise the novel as a whole, even to manage to apply a concept to it that is a "perfect fit" or the only one correct interpretation of what its story is about and – most importantly – what its main subject is about. One should, however, accept that one's current concept to match the novel could be "wrong" or at least that there could be a better one, a better fit for what the novel is about. In any case, to understand the book as thoroughly as possible and to give it an as all-encompassing and yet adequate concept as possible, is the whole point of the Truth approach. So to my mind, for example, *The End of the Affair* is an existential drama about the relationship between love and hate, which in turn is put in relation to human and divine bonds respectively. It is a book that asks the question: If we do not have the ability to love other people because we do not dare trust them, how could we possibly trust and love God? Thus we have conceptualised and found some existential truth in Greene's work, because it says something truthful about what it is like to be human.

If, on the other hand, we wish to pursue the Mystery approach, we want to know little and understand little all in order to maintain the mystery of the artwork in question. This is indubitably how anything of mysterious character is created: little is known. Thus while epistemologically restrained, the limits of the outside world (which includes artworks and religious statements) not only *should* remain limitless, but also *becomes* limitless as a logical result of a self-imposed restriction of knowledge. This also makes mystery devoid of context. Director David Lynch explains:

If you were in a room and there was an open doorway, and stairs going down and the light just fell away, you'd be very tempted to go down there. When you only see

⁶¹ Iqbal, op. cit.

a part, it's even stronger than seeing the whole. The whole might have a logic, but out of its context, the fragment takes on a tremendous value of abstraction.⁶²

Abstraction makes the small appear vast by value of what we do not see. Thus it is with God: the less possible it is for us to define Him, the more immense and profound He appears – as equivalent to the “stronger” experience of only seeing a part of a staircase. So the Mystery approach makes God (ontology) seem greater because our epistemology (definition of Him) is constrained. Perhaps we do not want to understand the logic of *The End of the Affair*, but only experience it as a constant “now”, a fragmentary whole. The Mystery approach therefore makes things appear grand and important, while the Truth approach bring the artwork down from the “divine” realm, down to earth.

From this perspective, the point of the Truth approach is that while it may not make things seem grand and important, it provides something which we, mere mortals, may relate to, things that are part of lives that are not infinite, but dependent upon time, space, causality and context. The Lynchian staircase may not seem grand anymore once we have gone down those stairs and seen what is there, but at least we know how it relates to our lives. If we know the theme of a painting we can relate that theme to experiences we have had in our lives before. If God is less enigmatic, less ineffable or even less impervious, He is also easier to relate to what we go through in life as human beings. This way, God, by virtue of being representative or “highest provider” of existential justification, and the Truth approach making God relate to the inevitabilities of life, religion becomes deeply meaningful to us.

So when it comes to aesthetics, having the world around us be brought down to concepts – thus “limiting” its depth or, rather, pinpointing exactly how far it reaches – is not something existentially limiting if we seek truth. On the contrary, I suggest that such conceptualisation serves as a blueprint to experiencing a work of art “properly”, which is exactly why conceptual knowledge of the piece is important to anyone who claims that an artwork must be about something and that we must figure out what. For those who seek the mysterious aspect of an artwork, however, things are reversed: the less we know about the world – the argument would go – the larger the mystery becomes and therefore the more intense our feelings of existential meaning become.

Now, if we let a whole religion and not merely its divine realm constitute the ontology, *i.e.* if what we believe exists is conditioned by a certain religion, then everything we do in our religious lives – the transmission and acquisition of its narratives and symbols, rituals and

⁶² D. Lynch, *Lynch on Lynch* (C. Rodley Ed.), London, Faber & Faber, 1997, p. 231.

sermons, and so on – will have a different effect on us existentially depending on which approach we choose. I suggest that the Mystery approach will – if we follow the same logic as outlined above – make the narratives seem to hint at unending worlds in both time and space, the rituals make us feel a part of not only an intense “now”, but an “always”, because most rituals are characterised by how they have always been performed a certain way and always will be performed a certain way, thus connecting us with a perpetual chain of recurring events. Epistemologically, *i.e.* what knowledge with which a religion provides us, the mystery-seeking believer may, in a Christian context, recognise concepts like God, Jesus, Messiah, crucifixion, salvation and so on, and believes these particular concepts are essential to his or her faith, but will only have them summarise the overall mysterious feeling of faith. A Christian person of mystery-seeking bent reads the gospels, but – if the Mystery approach is meticulously followed – does not relate them to his or her own confrontations with the inevitabilities of life.

A Truth-seeking Christian, however, would pay attention to any answers the Christian narrative may have to his or her questions regarding how he or she should relate to the inevitable collisions with death, love, hate, joy and shame, not from an ethical point of view (*e.g.* the Decalogue), but from an existential one where the narrative provides reflective support and understanding regarding these issues. Ontologically, the Truth approach isolates religious aspects in the sense that it makes the narratives, rituals and sermons relative to our own earthly lives. Because religion becomes important to the inevitabilities of life, the religious world (*i.e.* the world as conditioned by religion) has to be of a manageable “size”, not an infinity without interpreting possibilities.

6. Epistemic clarity: Ambiguity versus objectivity

As discussed above, the Mystery and Truth approaches have opposite epistemological attitudes which will be explored further in the following pages. In the Mystery approach, the prevalent attitude seems to be that of ambiguity: a seeker of mystery perceives an artwork and endeavours to keep its “aboutness” in flux. In the Truth approach, one tries to explain what the sights and sounds of an artwork appear to communicate, and only then is meaning possible. To properly anchor the aboutness of an artwork, the Truth approach benefits from an objectivist view where the truth of a painting or a song or a novel is established not only by the individual, but also by as many fellow human agents as possible, thus supporting that the analysis of the artistic object in question is a *definite* evaluation, an objective opinion of how accurately it relates to human experience, thus avoiding mysterious ambiguity. In other words, the Mystery approach seeks

ambiguity in order to keep the aesthetic mystery intact, while the Truth approach seeks objectivity in order to keep aboutness intact.

6.1 Symbols, allegories and signs as epistemic tools

Introducing allegorical aesthetics, S. Brent Plate describes allegory as an encoded language in which there is a split between appearance and meaning, unlike in the symbol, where form (a word, an image or other) and content (the metaphysical idea) constitute a unity. Allegory is of a more “fleeting, subversive” character and opens up to multiple meanings due to subjective interpretations in its viewers, while symbols are stable and deeply imbedded in culture, representing single meanings.⁶³

Plate sees a problem in how beauty is reliant on “socially inherited concepts of symmetry, perfection, unity and harmony” and easily forgets its own earthbound nature. As a counterpoise to this, the allegorist is an inventor who works by way of selecting (metaphor) and arranging (metonymy) from “ruins” (fragments), unable to build a unified structure or even a finished artwork, thus arresting the process of death and decay. Allegory is consequently an irruption of “the profane into the sacred, the physical into the spiritual, death into the eternal, turning the mythic symbol *inside out*”.⁶⁴ It could further be said that allegory takes wholes apart, emphasizing the *passage* between the profane and the sacred. The aim then is to make religion review itself and promote reform. So, in order to make them useful in the historical present, allegory turns esoteric mythic symbols inside out to make them physical and perceivable to our senses, thus keeping the appearance intact.⁶⁵

To mystic and artist William Blake, however, the relation is the reverse. Allegory is an intellectual literary device arising from Memory, while symbols, on the other hand, rise from the subconscious, and are further associated with what Blake calls Vision, Imagination and Inspiration. The whole point of an allegory, claims Blake, is to understand what it stands for – that is its function. A symbol has a wholly different function in that its meaning should *not* be too obvious.⁶⁶ Terminologically then, Plate’s and Blake’s views are each other’s opposites. Blake’s intellectual allegory has more in common with Plate’s united symbol: the point is to “figure it out”, which would make much sense indeed if its form and content are directly connected. Likewise, the device Blake calls symbol associated with imagination and ambiguity is indicative of

⁶³ Plate, op. cit., pp. 40, 46-50.

⁶⁴ Ibid, pp. 68f.

⁶⁵ Ibid, pp. 77-80.

⁶⁶ S. F. Damon, *A Blake Dictionary: The Ideas and Symbols of William Blake*, Providence, Brown University Press, 1988, p.17.

Plate's subversive allegory. No matter which terminology we use, however, the two authors seem to agree conceptually on a clear and consistent distinction between mystery and truth as properties in art, where the mystery sought by the Mystery approach corresponds to Plate's allegory and Blake's symbol, and the truth sought by the Truth approach corresponds to Plate's symbol and Blake's allegory. If we transfer the properties of symbols and allegories to truth and mystery, we can say that truths have stable, single meanings connected to memory, while mysteries are subversive and subjective entities connected to the subconscious. (Since Blake appears to despise allegories and enjoy symbols, and Plate seems to despise symbols and enjoy allegories, it consequently seems that both are mystery-seekers at heart.) The connection Blake makes between memory and truth (or allegory) makes more sense if we remember the connection between truth and conceptualisation: we conceptualise art in order to conceive its truth, and a concept works as a mnemonic device to focus our minds on what the artwork is about.

6.2 Mystery as artistic ambiguity

In order to reach a genuineness of feeling it seems important to keep conceptualisations as far away from the experience of the artwork as possible. In art, this could mean that the "aboutness" of an artwork is kept in constant unrest. While the Truth approach involves analysing an artwork until we have managed to conceptualise it and thus understood what it is "about", the Mystery approach involves viewing the artwork as an unexplainable unknown which has no fixed definition. This is sometimes true of the artists themselves as well: Hannah Höch, for example, has worked with the possibility of intentionally creating art without a fixed and final meaning. Rather, by employing an aesthetic strategy of distanced irony, a piece of art may oscillate between different allegorical readings. This strategy serves to make an idea impossible to possess, fix or collect.⁶⁷ In other words, the truth of, say, a painting by Titian, is not something that we, according to this view, are able to or even supposed to be able to grasp.

6.2.1 Ambiguity as learning process

But wherein lies the existential value of ambiguity in an artwork? One answer could be that when a work of art presents a subject where its truth is not set in stone, where many simultaneous, possible truths hover about during our perception of the work, it resembles our own struggle to understand our lives, our surroundings and our place in this world. Ambiguity would then serve

⁶⁷ Plate, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-9.

the function of simulating a learning process. By contrast, the Truth approach is keen on reaching a conclusion, a closing, a specification of a more or less definite answer to any existential question we may ask. So, although the Mystery approach does not ever have any possible answer in mind at all, the value of that approach in an epistemic context seems to be about the process of trying to reach such an answer, that the journey is more important than the destination. It may seem contradictory to associate the ambiguity of mystery with a *learning* process because learning means knowledge and knowledge has truth, but people may find the whole inevitable learning process of life to be meaningful not because of what they learn, but because of the struggle to achieve such learning (which is used in other areas than existential meaning). The ambiguity of an artwork may then become meaningful because we can identify with that ambiguity. This idea connects with Plate's (in Chapter 6.1) on how allegory emphasizes the *passage* between the profane and the sacred.

In a film, for example, a director may invoke this sense of an ambiguous learning process through various aesthetic tropes (such as the modulation of visual space), independently of plot and regardless of where the story of the film is going. This should not be confused with the Truth approach where we assume the *concept* of a learning process, *i.e.* where we can say that a film is *about* a learning process (story) or that the film had something to say about learning processes in general (theme). Rather, someone using the Mystery approach would say that a (good) film *is* a learning process, while any theme or story derived from it is largely irrelevant.

The learning process could be said to constitute an important aspect of experience as such. When John Milton's Satan explores the world beyond the safe boundaries of God, the beauty and meaning derives from simply being alive, not from any received knowledge, which could explain William Blake's suggestion that Milton was at his most passionate when penning the arguments of the Devil.⁶⁸ As counterintuitive as it may appear, ambiguity – not truth – would then comprise the supreme motivating force in human endeavours.

6.2.2 Does the mystery-seekers have “too much to lose” from art analysis?

The analysis of art moves the perceiver of an artwork from the experience of the work of art to an outside perspective. If we prefer the Mystery approach to art, thus considering art appreciation to be a discipline chiefly concerned with immediate, sensuous perception, then we are justly

⁶⁸ See W. Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell: A Facsimile in Full Color*, New York, Dover Publications Inc., 1994, pl. 6: “The reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels & God, and at liberty when of Devils & Hell, is because he was a true Poet and of the Devil's party without knowing it”

provoked by the idea that one should instead place focus on questioning an artwork's contents rather than what it does to a perceiver of the artwork here and now: once analysed, there is, from a Mystery approach point of view, a risk that the power of the artwork wanes and is unable to amaze us the way it used to because it is impossible to take back the "innocent" point of view one once held. Much like Wittgenstein's ambiguous "duck-rabbit" image,⁶⁹ an artwork may be seen as either an object to be interpreted or an object which is simply to be enjoyed as is. And once Wittgenstein's duck has turned into a rabbit in our minds, it may be difficult to return to seeing it as a duck. Similarly, seeing an artwork *without* the eyes of the interpreter – who only sees whether the artwork is existentially true or not – may be equally difficult once the artwork *has* been interpreted; hence the meaning in immediate, non-interpretative perception of an artwork is lost. Once interpreted, an artwork may be impossible not to view without (that) interpretation in mind.

So from where does mystery derive its meaning if there is no conceptualisation at all? Immediacy has been discussed in Chapter 4.3 and will now be connected to the discussion of the epistemology and ontology of the Mystery approach. If the Mystery approach keeps us epistemologically limited, this implies that there is much more of "imagined" (unexplored) ontology to be gained, an ontology that is practically unlimited. We can assume this from *e.g.* the argument that words diminish feelings: a concept is an abstraction which has transformed something seemingly infinite or timeless to a manageable size, and yet – we complain – the concept is never enough, it never fully describes what an experience or feeling is. Now, with that infinity still intact immediacy is allowed to inhabit a limitless world. Keeping conceptualisations out of it becomes important because it limits that world and therefore might hinder the continuous flow of feeling at one with a constant Now.

The reference to *hope* may also seem like an argument for the existentially satisfying effect of the Mystery approach. This argument states that although mystery renders an ontological vast unknown, there is nevertheless *hope* that *e.g.* there is indeed a God out there who has the Answers, 'answers' in the sense that if the question is "Is not life so?", then the answer is a comforting "Indeed, and how". Hope is an assumption about what *is* there, in the work of art or in the ineffability of God, even if we cannot know about it, at least not by means of words. It is an assumption that this unknown entity must be exceedingly vast and profound. We do not know of its boundaries, shape or size, but this also provides the freedom to believe ourselves to know that it is larger than *anything* – more inclusive than any modalities and categories of things – which we could possibly imagine; hence an exceedingly great meaningfulness might also be there,

⁶⁹ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker & J. Schulte, Trans. P. M. S. Hacker & J. Schulte Eds. 4 ed.). Chichester: John Wiley and Sons Ltd, 2009, p. 204.

one great Answer to all our existential questions. So while ambiguity in religion could be seen as an existential problem, it has existential value as well. A God with unclear motives may seem like He would warrant a merely cruel existence for human beings, but ambiguity also makes God seem greater, which may serve as an existentially fulfilling circumstance in times when God *does* appear to have a “plan”: not only does God have a plan, he is a *great* god with a (presumably) great plan, resulting in the safety and harmony mentioned in 2.3: no matter what happens, God justifies the most unfathomable events; we do not know how or why, but God is the counter-weight that always secures equilibrium.

But the above argument is faulty as a *Mystery approach* argument because hope – as explained in this context – is the Mystery approach viewed through a Truth lens. The Mystery approach is not concerned with *whether* God is great or not: it is an immediate connection to the divine world, no questions asked, no answers given. If we view both approaches as communications with the divine realm, the Truth approach makes the ultimate message of God a distant point which we may strive for, while the Mystery approach is already in immediate connection with what makes religion meaningful, hence the Mystery approach asks nothing more from God than that sensuous immediacy. The question of hope in the Mystery approach only seems to occur when truth issues “invade” it. For example, if a person in search for truth asks a person in search for mystery whether or not God is great and whether He has all the Answers, the question shapes the assumed ontology into a landscape of questions and answers rather than a feast for the senses, whereby the latter person feels forced to say, “Well, probably” – because so far the seeker of mystery has assumedly only had existentially satisfying experiences of the immediate connection with the divine realm – and thus gets thrown into a debate on the Truth side of the pitch even though it does not and should not concern him or her.

So, brushing that argument aside, we are nevertheless left with sensuous immediacy (in an ontologically limitless realm) in the Mystery approach’s defence. Now, while it first off seems that striving for an Answer will diminish immediacy, it might also – on top of that – provide an *unsatisfactory* Answer. What if the Truth analysis happens to offer existential falsity, not existential truth? What if that artwork is a disappointment once it has been analysed? And what if the possible satisfactory Answer is not satisfactory enough to make the Truth “gamble” worth a shot? The existential gain of sensuous immediacy perhaps exceeds the existential gain received by the possibility that the Answer is unsatisfactory.

This is where hope finds its true colours: as an aspect of the Truth approach. If we strive to find existential truth, a psychological “gamble” is automatically implied: we either find the existential answer to be truthful *or* false. Naturally, we hope to find truth, and hope, in turn,

implies expectations. Expectations, if *not* met, result in disappointment. This means that if we do not find truth when expecting truth, we are not back to “neutral ground”, at “square one”. If we are disappointed (or even filled with despair), we are existentially less satisfied than we were at the outset of trying to find existential truth. The worst case scenario of the Truth approach, then, is that we not only lose that sensuous immediacy in a mystical, limitless world, but also left in despair brought on by disappointment. And, more importantly for the question as to which approach to choose, considering the significance of these assumptions, the *average* amount of existential meaning provided by the Truth approach seems to be less than the existential meaning provided by the Mystery approach.

A rough sketch of an anti-Truth argument from the above discussion could look like this: Assuming – all other things being equal – that

1. seeking truth results in either a) a satisfactory answer (or +1) or b) an unsatisfactory answer (-1) and that the average satisfactoriness of these two is neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory (or 0), and that
2. the reluctance of the Mystery approach to seek an answer at all renders it existentially neutral (or 0) in the context of “aboutness”, but since
3. the Mystery approach also entails sensuous immediacy, and
4. sensuous immediacy is meaningful, we arrive at the conclusion that
5. the Mystery approach is, *on average*, more meaningful than the Truth approach, which is why
6. one should choose the Mystery approach if looking for existential meaning in religion and art.

Thus the average amount of meaning provided by the combination of an unsatisfactory answer and a satisfactory answer is less than the meaning provided by not finding out at all and simply relish in the sensuous immediacy of religious life.

From this point of view, there is simply too much to lose from engaging in the Truth approach. The Mystery approach is not about talking, it is about living. While an approach bent on truth, calculation and analysis cannot help but lay a sceptic eye on most things and blemish each experience by looking at it from afar, mystery-seekers *live* the universe which is created without any second thoughts as to where it may lead.

6.2.3 Ambiguity: a flight from manipulation?

Since mystery-seekers are concerned with authenticity, one aspect of art which might undermine its existential meaning is the feeling of being manipulated, *i.e.* the feeling that an agent – in this case the artist – abusively strives to change your perception or behaviour for their own gain and at your expense. The perceiver of art may feel that he or she has not experienced something authentic, something important, but rather something put on show for ulterior motives.

This feeling of manipulation may, for example, come to pass when overt sentimentality is used to induce emotions. If, in theatre, an old man on the stage stares at the audience with “puppy eyes” in order to induce sympathy, the mechanics of emotional effect in the art may become too obvious and we are suddenly aware of the “puppet master” behind the scene rather than the mysterious world created by the artist. As Oscar Wilde suggests, “To reveal art and to conceal the artist is art’s aim”.⁷⁰ Thus, if the artist is revealed in the artwork, it takes focus away from the aesthetic experience. It could be argued that because the Mystery approach does not analyse art it does therefore not reveal anything, neither the art (theme, story and so on) nor the artist. The argument would go that the Truth approach, by contrast, puts us in a frame of mind which opens us to the reading of not only an artwork’s concepts, but also of the intentions of the artist, intentions which could look disingenuous.

The parallel problem in religion would constitute the manipulation of religion for profane means: the feeling that our susceptibility to religious feelings is abused by *e.g.* ministries and preachers, or the feeling that the written word is not sincere.

But we are always manipulated in one way or another. It is possible for the Truth approach to focus on theme, not artist; on art, not the extra-aesthetic world. If the feeling of manipulation occurs, we are beyond the scope of aesthetic and religious truth: we are delving into the realm of “intentional truth” (*i.e.* trying to understand the intentions of artist), and these are not relevant to existential meaning, as will be further discussed in Chapter 6.3.2.1.

A counter-argument to this could say that it is nevertheless within the religious or aesthetic realm this feeling occurs: the artist could have sincere intentions and still seem manipulative, a condition caused not by moral but artistic shortcomings. In other words, independently of the actual intentions of the artist, the artwork may still seem manipulative and the Truth approach may reveal such conditions, such truths.

This argument, however, assumes that all analysed artworks provide us with a feeling of being manipulated. While the Mystery approach does perhaps shield us from all

⁷⁰ O. Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, New York, Barnes & Nobel Classics, p. 1.

feelings of manipulation by means of keeping the ambiguous character of art intact, the risk of chancing upon a manipulative artwork when using the Truth approach is entirely dependent upon, again, the competence or shortcomings of the artist.

This is always the risk of seeking truth: that the answer we seek is not satisfactory. Thus we are back at the dilemma mentioned in the Chapter 6.2.2: is not the amount of meaning gained from the sensuous immediacy of mystery larger than that gained from the possibility of an unsatisfactory answer?

6.2.4 Inference: How can truth be worth the risk?

In earlier chapters we found that meaning in mystery primarily comes from limitless sensuous immediacy and that truth *might* ruin that limitlessness. The Truth “gamble” may not be worth it if we already have meaningful immediacy because the average amount of meaning of “gambling” is less than keeping to immediacy only.

So, if we are to choose the Truth approach over the Mystery approach we must be convinced that there is more to the Truth approach than the average existential meaning of a satisfying answer and an unsatisfying one. So, unless we are risk-takers enough to venture the jeopardy anyway, we must be convinced that the “gamble” is somehow worth the risk, that the average amount of meaning extracted by means of the Truth approach at least equals that of the Mystery approach.

The following chapters will delve deeper into the character of the Truth approach where we might find a sufficient answer to this dilemma.

6.3 Truth as objective content in the arts

If truth and mystery are to be divided in the realm of the arts, I contend that truth in an artwork is found in its contents as opposed to its immediate surface values. This is because the content of an artwork is its themes, which are answers to the inevitabilities of human experience. So what an artist has to say about the horrible and wonderful experiences of joy, shame, death and hope are exactly the themes which are brought up as the contents in works of art. Finding truth in content is then, if we support this approach, more existentially meaningful than finding enjoyment in the immediate and keeping the mysterious aspect intact.

6.3.1 What is aesthetic content?

According to idealist aesthetics, beyond or underlying the appearance of an artwork are its contents. ‘Content’ is synonymous to an interior idea, theme, concept or “spirit” of an artwork. Indeed, idealist aesthetics sometimes go to the extreme, proclaiming that art is merely a vessel, a container, of an idea.

The notion of content in art is equivalent to the notion of *what* artists try to convey, and to the spectator this is grasped by his or her cognitive faculties rather than only sense perception. Art and art criticism in this view mainly becomes an intellectual practice. While congregational members of a church may appreciate the rituals, the prayers and believe in God as described in holy scripture, there is a further step to be taken to understand what it all *means*. In a similar manner to that of a conceptual interpretation of an artwork, a conceptual interpretation of religion pertains to unearthing and internalising what is the religion’s ultimate philosophy and how it relates to human experience. Consequently, the Truth method of deriving meaning from content (*i.e.* religious and aesthetic truth) pertains to the attitude where focus lies in finding existential fulfilment by extracting significance from the conceptual aspect of an artwork or religion.

6.3.1.1 Conceptualisation: The difference between theme, subject, story and plot

All artworks are about something and demand interpretation.⁷¹ Using terminology from the world of literature to describe all fields of art, any narrative is, first and foremost, made up of a *plot* and a *story*. These are more meticulous and finical in their aboutness than are *subjects* and *themes*. In literature, a plot is the work’s events as arranged by the author, while the story is the plot rearranged in chronological order.⁷² The subject or subjects of a narrative refers to specific issues or topics, like love or death, while a theme is what the artwork has to say about the subject. While a story and a plot are dependent on the artwork itself, a theme states something generally about the reality outside the work from the conditions stated concretely in the text.⁷³

To draw parallels to religion, subjects in art are what I will connect to the inevitabilities of life, while themes in art are the truths of religion. In art, *themes* are what can be true or false with regards to the inevitabilities of the generalised human soul. (I will use ‘theme’

⁷¹ T. Barrett, About Art Interpretation for Art Education, *Studies in Art Education*, 42(1), 5-19, 2000, p. 5.

⁷² K. Griffith, *Writing Essays about Literature* (8 ed.), Florence, KY, Cengage Learning, Inc, 2010, p. 51.

⁷³ Ibid, p. 40.

and ‘concept’ interchangeably because ‘concept’ applies better to the “theme” of a religion and does not interfere with the different meaning of ‘theme’ in music.)

The difference between on the one hand plot and story and on the other hand subject and theme can be exemplified by how hardly every reader will have experienced in their lives something as explicit and particular as *e.g.* the life of the medieval Danish royal court as recounted in *Hamlet*, but most people will sometime and to some degree during their life have experienced the feeling of existential dread identified in Shakespeare’s play. Thus artists comment on the universal *through* the particular, making the understanding of “what is going on” (story) an important key to understanding which universal subject the artwork is dealing with.

Hence we may find that a more or less true concept found in the contents of a work of art can be complex if we focus on plot, but also something as simple as the theme “life is hard”. For example, to pianist Mitsuko Uchida, Mozart’s music is conceptually simple:

Mozart is special for the whole of humanity because it is not about grand ideas or great concepts, it is about “I love you”, “you may love me”, “I am sad”, “you are so happy”. It sounds simplistic but at the core of it he is like Shakespeare: he uses the simplest means to elevate us into a universal world of absolute joy and sorrow.⁷⁴

So according to this view, artworks need not be conceptually complex to be meaningful to people; Uchida’s description of Mozart’s music even appears to touch upon the “merely emotional” or mysterious. But we should note how even she formulates the music as being *about* something – it is about these feelings of love, happiness and sadness. As long as there is a concept and we can grasp it intellectually – which is something we *can* do even with a concept as simple as “I am sad” – we are still dealing with an “aboutness” of sorts.

Another example: we can imagine that when Beethoven sat down to compose the “Pathétique” piano sonata, he did not have a story in mind when scribbling down notes, even though as an audience it is tempting for us to apply one such story to the music when listening to the sonata in question. Now, it is not an overly easy piece to accompany with a complete narrative due to its emotional complexity even though it does seem to have a narrative structure. Trying to tie to the “Pathétique” to an intricate story like, “Janet was on her way to the bakery, she was angry, she met with a friend on the way, they had a chat, a bird was singing gaily, someone shot the bird, Janet was distraught, bought three loaves of bread for £6.20”, is plausibly

⁷⁴ “Mozart – by the leading Mozartians of our time”, *Gramophone.co.uk*, 2006, retrieved October 8, 2014, from <http://www.gramophone.co.uk/editorial/mozart-%E2%80%93-by-the-leading-mozartians-of-our-time>

too explicit and precise and would be of no help in our endeavour to hunt down the existential truth of the piece. It would be more rewarding to content oneself with the composition being a complex description of a certain *mood*, perhaps as an expression of a certain experience in the life of Beethoven. So we have rejected story as an adequate conceptualisation of the truth of the “Pathétique” and are instead content with a theme, which means that even though we have made its aboutness less explicit, it is nevertheless about something.

According to Claude Debussy, Beethoven’s famous Ninth Symphony has provoked a “mass of prose” since its premiere. He questions, however, whether clearing up the mystery of said symphony is worthwhile: “Perhaps we ought in the *Choral Symphony* to look for nothing more than a magnificent gesture of musical pride.”⁷⁵ Even here, trying to avoid explicit meaning, Debussy manages to provide a helpful concept. Listening to the Ninth with the assumption that what we hear is an expression of a man’s pride in his art helps us adjust our minds to the (possible) logic of the piece. Terry Barrett quotes dance critic Marcia Siegel, who also finds that it helps to put into words the experience in order to understand its logic:

Very often it turns out that as I write about something, it gets better. It’s not that I’m so enthusiastic that I make it better, but that in writing, because the words are an instrument of thinking, I can often get deeper into a choreographer’s thoughts or processes and see more logic, more reason.⁷⁶

As long as the composition describes something (*e.g.* a mood), we can conceptualise it and that concept can be a more or less true concept both by how accurately it fits with the structure of the music and by how accurately it fits with human experience in general. Although the applying of a specific story with intricate scenes or applying a more general theme or even applying a single emotion to the piece are all important steppingstones on the road towards extracting meaning from an artwork because all are part of human experience, themes seem to be the most significant. This is because they are not only more universal than other concepts, but also because they hit our hearts more deeply than do *less* universal and fundamental themes or plots. Our feelings with regards to love, for example, may be common and hardly complex in themselves, but are therefore also some of the most hard-hitting and important of any human emotions, and I believe it reasonable to believe that hard-hitting and important truths are the most likely to provide us with the most existential meaning.

⁷⁵ C. Debussy, *Monsieur Croche, the Dilettante Hater*, quoted in J. Fisk, *Composers on Music: Eight Centuries of Writings* (2 ed.), Massachusetts, University Press of New England, 1997, p. 201.

⁷⁶ T. Barrett, *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*, Dubuque, IA, McGraw-Hill Education – Europe, 1993, p. 21.

So this is how the Truth approach towards art works:

1. We figure out what an artwork wants to say – and this interpretation can be more or less true (*i.e.* more or less accurate).
2. We apply this interpretation to our experience, our generalised human soul – and this correspondence can, in turn, also ring more or less true to us.
3. If we make an accurate interpretation of an artwork, and this interpretation happens to correspond accurately to our experience, then we gain existential meaning.

If we, instead, pay attention only to an immediate emotion evoked by a solemn piece of music without applying a concept to it, we cannot, in turn, apply the concept to our lives as wholes, and that – in the Truth approach point of view – turns art into mere decoration, unable to provide us with much meaning.

Thus plot is a complex but superficial guide or metaphor which points to the underlying simple but deep and universal theme. We may transfer these relationships from the realm of art to that of religion by saying that the scriptures, symbols, dances and rituals of religion are all a complex potpourri pointing to an underlying simple but deep and universal purpose in our lives.

6.3.1.2 Is there something even more comprehensive than themes?

Arthur Schopenhauer glorifies the Platonic Idea (or the “Will” in Schopenhauerian terms) as the main purpose of art. To Schopenhauer, the value of art lies not in its figurative aspect, *i.e.* its references to the real world – a nude study, a landscape painting and the like. A painting of a human face should not, in Schopenhauer’s view, be a mere portrait, a copy of the individual including its contingencies. Instead, even in the painter’s reproduction of an individual human being’s character, that character serves only to represent one component of the general human idea.⁷⁷ Here, Schopenhauer’s philosophy shows connections to the Truth approach in the sense that the Truth approach strives to venture beyond historicity (though never without first journeying across these two) and focus on the theme which is more directly connected to the inevitabilities of the generalised human soul. But to Schopenhauer, the inner meaning of an artwork is even more general: the inner meaning is not a plot nor is it even a theme, but something beyond both. The ideas sought by Schopenhauer are, namely, ideas in a Platonic

⁷⁷ Schopenhauer, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

sense; they are not rational concepts and cannot in any way be dependent upon historicity.⁷⁸ One notices this attitude in Schopenhauer's disregard for conceptual art. His criticism of conceptual art seems grounded in a concern for its lack of eternity: after a few years, concepts will have changed since they are dependent on the spirit of the times. The major difference between concepts and Schopenhauerian Ideas, consists, in Schopenhauer's view, in how a concept is abstract and can be communicated through words without further mediation, while the Idea is a representation of a multitude of individual entities.⁷⁹ Therefore, the simpler the Idea itself is or the more universal it is, the more complex a reality it covers. This makes sense in the way that a universal category, *e.g.* the category of all things in the universe, encompasses a multitude of individual entities, while a specific category, *e.g.* the category of all Malayan tigers that bit their tails today three years ago, by comparison incorporates little of the universe as we know it. In Schopenhauer's view then, a concept is too specific to fully grasp the complexity of an artwork. This in turn suggests that an artwork truly is a *world* of multiple entities which point to a more fundamental category, and the deeper we reach as interpreters (from plot to theme to Idea) the more of those entities are included in a single abstract frame. Ideas, then, summarise more aspects of an artwork than do concepts.

This suggests that concepts in the Schopenhauerian use of the term are entirely contingent and in no way near the eternity of Platonic ideas; it suggests that concepts are not universal enough. But how universal does a concept need to be? Is Schopenhauer perhaps too strict? Let us ponder an artwork that depicts one of the human inevitabilities: shame. Shame is not an idea in the Platonic sense because shame is a concept which can be grasped rationally. And yet it is not a "lowly" concept in the critical Schopenhauerian sense either. Shame does not represent the Will, but neither is it wholly contingent; shame is not dependent on the spirit of the times, but is rather a reoccurring subject in the lives of humans. Shame is not universal in the sense that it would continue being a concept worth keeping after the entire human species has died out – shame is a necessarily human concept coined by creatures with these feelings and the cognitive ability to make linguistic references to it (though who knows what other high-intelligence beings may be out there or are yet to develop). But since art concerns only human beings, why do concepts need to concern something allegedly beyond the "merely human" in an epistemological sense? The merely human influences everything we do, say and feel. While nothing hinders art from being about the mystery of the cosmos or the difficulty of expressing what seems ineffable, art appeals to us not because it provides answers about the unutterable itself, but because it provides answers about human experience of what seems unutterable. The

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 338.

⁷⁹ Ibid, pp. 340f.

Schopenhauerian demand for ideas that are so universal that they are relevant to things beyond what is humanly possible to fathom – and therefore, it seems, ultimately irrelevant to human beings – is unnecessarily high. Schopenhauer could be said to aim for a truth so high that it lands on the other side of comprehensibility, a truth which is only of interest to a restricted, mystery-oriented epistemology on the opposite “side” of a conceptualised world. The need for universality is understandable, but we cannot refer to things wholly beyond human experience, and thematic concepts appear to be as universal as human experience goes. Why we cannot refer to things beyond human experience will be discussed in a summary of Hilary Putnam’s criticism of objectivity in the following chapter.

If we transfer these conclusions to a religious context, we may say that what is truly humanly relevant to us in religious practice is everything as *specific* as religious truth concerning the correct way of breathing during meditation, as *universal* as religious truth concerning the inevitabilities of life, and everything in-between, where religious truth concerning the inevitabilities of life constitutes the apex of existential satisfaction as provided by religion.

6.3.2 The generalised human soul as anchor for objectivity in the arts

A generalised human soul is, I believe, what we have to refer to whenever we wish to make a general claim whether an artwork provides existential truth or not. The question “Does x do y ?” in the natural sciences corresponds to the art critic’s question “Does this artwork contain existential truth?”. The scientific question is answered by having a theory, *e.g.* the theory of relativity, tested against the physical world’s ontological limitations (*cf.* Chapter 5), in this case from our observations of the planets. The art critic’s question is answered by having the theme (the “theory”) of the artwork, *e.g.* “time heals all wounds”, tested against the generalised human soul’s limitations, in this case from our observations of the subject of emotional pain over time (*cf.* Herrmann’s comparison in Chapter 4.5.1). In the same way as we put faith into how our pastors or psychiatrists have an authoritative knowledge when it comes to our souls and how they offer a path of “redemption”, we appoint art critics based on their experience not only in art history, art theory and so on, but also on their experience of emotional encounters in their own lives and their understanding of how the human soul functions and what it craves.

In this case, trying to anchor truth objectively to a generalised human soul, which is an “inside world” as opposed to an “outside” material world, may seem contradictory. But the generalised human soul is not to be confused with the “internal” referent. The generalised human

soul is an internal world referred to *as* an external object, *i.e.* a collective human soul referred to by many souls. Therefore, the generalised human soul must be viewed as, and criticised as, a part of the external (although perhaps not “material”) world.

But how do we refer to objects external to our souls? Can we refer to something as true or false objectively? To assume an entirely external perspective in our description of reality would imply that we would be able to refer to things we have not yet conceptualised.⁸⁰ This is made impossible by the fact that what our words refer to is decided by the linguistic community of which we are a part – the connection between a word and what it refers to is not dependent upon things like what the individual is thinking about when he or she says *e.g.* “water”.⁸¹ ‘Water’ may as well refer to what we call daffodils, but now linguistic development in the English language has it that ‘water’ refers to water, not daffodils. So in order to communicate at all, we first have to reach an agreement on what we refer to.

However, what is true or false is not dependent upon our conceptions in themselves. The fact that Caesar crossed the river Rubicon is not dependent upon us and our conceptions. He either did or did not cross the Rubicon independently of whether there are any human beings (or other creatures) able to state that fact after it happened. But the statement “Julius Caesar crossed the river Rubicon” cannot be *formulated* without our conceptions, and speaking about things that cannot be formulated is pointless.⁸² Now, is objectivity impossible simply because we cannot presuppose an unconceptualised reality (noumena)? No. Rather, disallowing an unconceptualised reality helps us on the way towards objectivity. Because if we assume an entirely external perspective, that assumption would lead to ontological relativity because we would believe we would be able to speak of something independent of how we divide the world.⁸³ We simply would not know what we were talking about. If one assumes that one can refer to things in an unconceptualised reality, this assumption would open up for a world where a ‘newspaper’ to one person may as well be a ‘submarine’ to someone else.

The foundation of objectivity is, rather, what a community believes constitutes sufficient epistemic conditions to be able to assert that something is true (or false);⁸⁴ hence objectivity has to do with what we are able to imagine.⁸⁵ Independently of whether or not we can prove the existence of planet x (perhaps it is too far away), the statement, “Planet x exists”, is at least a meaningful statement since we can *imagine* what it would signify that it is true that planet x

⁸⁰ K. Johannesson, *God “Pro Nobis”: On Non-Metaphysical Realism and the Philosophy of Religion*, Leuven, Peeters Publishers, 2007, p. 59.

⁸¹ Ibid, p. 71.

⁸² Ibid, pp. 146f.

⁸³ Ibid, p. 85.

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 149.

⁸⁵ Ibid, p. 233.

exists. Sufficient epistemic conditions for being able to say that the statement, “Planet x exists”, could be the ability for our telescopes to see far enough. This condition (*i.e.* possessing these telescopes or the like) is easy to imagine, hence we can imagine what it would like for the statement to be true, which in turn means that the statement is meaningful. We cannot, however, even imagine which conditions are needed in order to justify the existence of noumena; hence speaking of the existence of noumena is meaningless.⁸⁶ Because if one does not know exactly what one refers to, how can we prove its existence? “Does ‘f4%@’ exist?” one may ask. We would not know where to start, because we would not know what it would mean for ‘f4%@’ to exist, because one could be referring to anything, whether concrete or abstract. Thus objectivity is not dependent upon epistemic access of the things in themselves, but upon epistemic access to one’s linguistic community’s conceptualisation of the world and what that community deems sufficient conditions to call something true or false.

Before discussing the connection between proper references and art the terminology which is used should be justified. When speaking of the truthfulness of something as existentially charged as an artwork, we are dealing with what I call the generalised human soul as interpreted and expressed by the artwork. This concept (‘generalised human soul’) is “new”, *i.e.* first introduced in this essay, which is why this essay will have to serve as the linguistic community which decides what ‘generalised human soul’ means. However, said concept is, I believe, a precision of what people for a long time have simply called ‘the soul’ or ‘the spirit’ or ‘the human psyche’ or ‘human experience’. Our knowledge of the generalised human soul is then gathered by what has been said about the soul, the spirit, the human psyche and human experience in the works still available to us to this day by any and all artists and philosophers throughout a certain culture. Whenever “the soul” is written about or in other ways expressed in paintings, symphonies or cathedrals, it is reasonable to believe that what is referred to is not merely the isolated, individual psyche of the artist himself, but an expression of our joint human journey in life, where the artist through his or her artwork tries to reach out to fellow human beings to ask, “This is what it is like for us all, is it not? Is this not exactly what we all experience? Is this not truth?” So, what Shakespeare, Beethoven and others contribute to humanity is sculpting one facet of the larger knowledge about and (perhaps) insight into what it is to be human. Thus we have decided, at least to some degree, what we refer to when we speak the generalised human soul, or its many synonyms and its many expressions. Thus the generalised human soul is – because it is fixed by our linguistic community – not ontologically relative and I deem its use justified.

⁸⁶ Ibid, p. 162.

Now, what does conceptualisation of the material world (discussing the existence of “Planet x” and so forth) have to do with human existential experience? The answer is that the generalised human soul corresponds to the physical world in the sense that we can conceptualise our inner world as well. Existential inevitabilities are concepts resulting from dividing our soul into several experiences and emotions. We can talk about and refer to things like ‘love’ and ‘pain’ because most human beings know what we mean when uttering these words. If we can refer to something like ‘pain’, then we can fairly easily imagine ways to figure out whether or not life is difficult (in order to justify the truth of that statement, “Life is hard”), because hardship and pain are easily identifiable in our inner life. Life’s hardship is then not something as impossibly elusive as noumena. So, the world in which we find these experiences, the world which we divide into concepts such as ‘pain’ and ‘love’, is human experience, the generalised human soul.

These concepts must also be recognisable in an artwork. We may all know what love is, because we know our own psyches: we have a specific emotion and in communication with other people we come to an agreement that we should call this emotion ‘love’. We recognise it as the same feeling inter-subjectively because our descriptions of the feeling correspond with that of others, the causal relation is almost always the same (boy meets girl, pleasant feelings ensue) and so on. Recognition of love in a piece of art is slightly less precise, but nevertheless far from impossible. In the same sense as “Planet x” may be recognised by certain criteria – atmosphere, orbital and physical characteristics – if we make out criteria for what love is as recognised within ourselves – feelings of strong attraction, personal attachment, unselfish concern, “butterflies in the stomach”, despair at its being unrequited – finding these in art should not be impossible. An expression of love is found in Goethe’s *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* where unrequited love is likened to a physical sickness leading to madness, but love may also be found as concept in many a Mozartian sonata.

Thus if objectivity about the material world is founded in epistemic access to one’s linguistic community’s conceptualisation of the world and what that community deems sufficient conditions to call something true or false, and the generalised human soul as well as an artwork are equally divided into concepts and we are able to imagine sufficient conditions for the truth in these concepts, then objectivity in art is also possible.

Objectivity in art is in this case not about whether an artwork is objectively good or bad – that is a slightly different discussion and something which, I believe, applies to both the Mystery and Truth approach – but whether we can speak meaningfully about the things that the Truth approach refers to when discussing what an artwork is about. In accordance with the above discussion it indeed seems that we can, which is justified from an existential perspective

because this aboutness corresponds to our inner landscapes, whose conceptualised world we can speak meaningfully of as well. As opposed to Cartesian objectivity – where we assume we can make meaningful statements about elevated things when it is merely nonsense – this objectivity is not unjustified and is therefore not – as can perhaps be apprehended – pretentious. Thus because truth more firmly connects our soul – which seeks meaning – to the aesthetic meaning it seeks, the Truth approach is further justified as an approach when seeking existential meaning in art.

The conclusive implication of existential truth is then whether or not it connects our emotions with art and religion. Another way of saying it is that an artwork or religion becomes emotionally true to us once we, via the Truth approach, have made that connection. Emotional/existential falsity would then be the condition when there is no connection between the aesthetic or religious expression on the one hand and our experiences and emotional reactions to life's inevitabilities on the other hand.

6.3.2.1 Is objectivity justified by the artist's intentions?

Objectivity has not only to do with whether we as perceivers of an artwork can speak meaningfully about its contents. It has also to do with whether the artist can meaningfully communicate with his audience to such a degree that we as perceivers may understand the artwork. Because if communication of existential truth was made impossible, the Truth approach would be pointless. Now, if truth and objectivity are opposed to ambiguity, and we presuppose Hedenius' logical postulate saying that two truths cannot contradict each other (they either do not contradict each other or one of the "truths" is false),⁸⁷ there must also be something like an unambiguous (non-contradictory) truth to be found in an artwork and many interpretations/concepts of it that are contradictory. This, in turn, means that *interpretations* (and not only the themes in themselves as tested against our psychological needs) can be more or less true.

There are many wildly different themes or stories which one can apply to a single artwork, a circumstance that in itself can be interpreted as an argument against the idea that art can or should be about anything. The argument could look something like this if we apply it to music: If there are multiple themes (NB: not 'theme' of common musical terminology where it is defined as a fundamental recurring melody of a composition) that could fruitfully be applied to a piece of music – *i.e.* there are no major conflicts between the details of the theme we apply and what each change in the music makes us feel – then there simply cannot be a single "correct"

⁸⁷ Hedenius, op. cit., p. 52.

theme, and therefore the act of applying themes or stories to music at all is futile. Why, however, should that conclusion follow from those premises? The act of applying themes is not futile only because there happens to be more than one theme that more or less “fits” the music in question. The opposite condition would entail that interpretation is entirely arbitrary, which would mean that an absurd interpretation like “Hesse’s *Siddhartha* is about academic conceit”, when its theme rather seems to concern the dichotomy of worldliness and piety. We do not have to argue in absolutist terms: although “one correct interpretation” may indeed be an ideal to strive for and although such a truth may be impossible to achieve in reality, striving to be *more* right than wrong would nevertheless be better according to the Truth approach than not trying to apply a theme at all. There are simply some themes that fit *better* to an artwork than do others, even if the better ones are not a perfect fit. Terry Barrett suggests that “no single meaning is exhaustive of the meaning of an artwork”, but “some interpretations are better than others”.⁸⁸

Trying to find a fit, does it matter what the artist himself or herself had in mind? On an unusually programmatic whim, Beethoven famously annotated each movement of his Sixth Symphony (“Pastorale”) accordingly:

1. Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the country
2. Scene at the brook
3. Happy gathering of country folk
4. Thunderstorm; Storm
5. Shepherd’s song; cheerful and thankful feelings after the storm⁸⁹

It is indeed easy to imagine the “happy gathering of country folk” in the third movement, the thunderstorm in the fourth movement and so on. However, we would miss out on much of the symphony’s potential existential meaning should we only look to the plot provided by the composer. According to the Truth approach the truth of an artwork is found in its theme, while the plot either guides us or contains metaphors and symbols to underline the theme in question. Thus if an artwork should be evaluated by assessing its underlying theme, the listener should not let the annotations of Beethoven’s Sixth be quintessential to his or her understanding of the piece, though, as said, these annotation *could* work as a guide towards how the symphony corresponds to our emotions concerning the inevitabilities of life. Indeed, although music has an ability to mimic the sounds of nature, one may as well argue for how music mimics the sounds of people’s voices and the intention heard in them through intonation and so on. Therefore there

⁸⁸ Barrett, 2000, p. 6.

⁸⁹ D. W. Jones, *Beethoven: The Pastoral Symphony*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

seems to be more potential communication and intention embedded in music than what we can assume from mere annotations. Ultimately, in Terry Barrett's words, "the objects of interpretations are artworks, not artists".⁹⁰

How this additional aboutness – which goes beyond plot and constitutes a whole theme – is created in the artist is indeed mysterious. Not only do artworks often appear mysterious (and therefore meaningful) to the beholder, but to the artist responsible for the artwork as well. And the artist sometimes intentionally works in mysterious ways, *i.e.* he waits for sensuous images or melodies to pop up in his head "automatically", without reflection upon what they mean. This was the case with David Lynch's making of his 1997 feature film *Lost Highway*:

On *Lost Highway* we never talked about meanings or anything [...] If things get too specific, the dream stops. There are things that happen sometimes that open up a door and let you soar out and feel a bigger thing.⁹¹

To Lynch, these feelings have to come without mental obstacles or cookie-cutter shapes:

If you start off with a theme and say, 'We're gonna amplify this theme,' [...] that to me is completely backwards. Then you've gotta force things to fit.⁹²

Working this way, the artist is almost as clueless as his audience. This seems to imply that the artist does not intend for his art to be about anything and that the artwork therefore becomes meaningful to us as an audience only if we apply the Mystery approach, and that the artwork becomes meaningless if we apply the Truth approach. But Lynch has more input which may suggest otherwise:

The other way around [*i.e.* letting images come to you before any conceptualisations], you don't know what it is. It just comes together and then later you find out. But meanwhile you're falling in love with it. You just know somewhere that it's right for you.⁹³

This proposes that which ideas the artist chooses to keep in the artwork and which ideas he chooses to abandon originate not intellectually but instinctively. To some degree, then, the artist and his audience alike are interpreters of the artist's ideas only after those ideas have been

⁹⁰ Barrett, op. cit.

⁹¹ Lynch, op. cit., p. 227.

⁹² Ibid, p. 239.

⁹³ Ibid, p. 239.

created. But does that mean that the artist does not have anything to communicate at the outset? I propose that because, as Lynch hints, “you just *know* [my emphasis] somewhere that it’s right for you”, instinctive ideas of this kind do have meaning for the artist at the outset, but have not yet been conceptualised in a fully conscious way. Artist and audience alike can sense a hint of what it means and recognise some of its power without grasping its entire aboutness – in Lynch’s words it “just comes together”. It just comes together, and yet we have not fully identified its significance, because, as Lynch says, “then later you find out”. If we agree with Lynch, any ontological limitations have to be shattered in order for the artist to create freely and find the instinctively powerful images and sounds that will constitute his work. The artwork’s ontology may then be demarcated by the artist in order to more easily relate the artwork to human experience.

So, it appears that to some degree the ideas and meaning of an artwork are always decided upon by the artist, even if it is not brought about through what we usually refer to as “intention” and although the artist himself may refuse or fail to ever conceptualise the artwork (*i.e.* tell us in words what it is about). After all, that would perhaps not be the mission of an artist, but that of a critic. More importantly, objectivity still seems possible because even among mystery-seeking artists there seems to be an intention, a message, a truth to be found; hence we can still speak meaningfully of the artist’s thematic creation.

6.3.3 The difficulty of applying a non-conceptual perspective and how truth saves us from despair through “navigation”

Schopenhauer had a viable point: art should be more than mere concepts. And it is. But Schopenhauer’s rather extreme view points to a problem where it is difficult *not* to apply concepts to experiences of art. We seem to be afraid to lose the magic of our own experience of the art we perceive if we know what it is about, in turn making us assume that the unconscious creativity of the artist and the equally unconscious appreciation of the spectator are supposedly the things that make art meaningful. But from the Truth approach point of view, this is a misunderstanding. The reason why we appreciate art at all is that we *do* have a slight idea what the art is about; we have at least a slight hint of a concept. Even when trying to produce a pure aesthetic form (as in *e.g.* absolute music), there is always at least an indirect reference: the art work is perceived as joyful or sad.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Wood, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

One example of our predilection for conceptualising artworks even when we intend not to, is Hoffmann's review of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. In it, Hoffmann clearly wishes to advocate the symphony as a prime example of non-descriptive music insofar as its subject is the infinite, indefinite, inexpressible and immeasurable – a “ghostly world”.⁹⁵ The review illustrates Hoffmann's wish to celebrate the Romantic spirit by exalting Beethoven's work to a near-transcendent realm as a way of saying that no words can truly describe its profundity. This is an understandable approach, but the review as a whole shows the difficulty of being consistently non-conceptual. Because Hoffmann cannot help but be specific enough to mention how the music “wields the lever of fear, awe, horror, and pain” and goes on to formulate something which is close to a full-blown conceptualisation of the work:

The breast that is oppressed and alarmed by intimations of things monstrous, destructive, and threatening wheezes for air with wrenching gasps, but just then a friendly, luminous figure appears and brings light into the dark night [...]⁹⁶

Although Hoffmann bravely keeps the description relatively abstract, mysterious and otherworldly, the effort appears contrived and practically screams out for more concrete descriptions to guide his assessment. Thus the review I think exemplifies a general human need for conceptualisation.

Does this suggestion demand that “essence precedes existence”? Only when it comes to our nature itself, not the contents provided by the Truth approach, *i.e.* the act is natural while the concept itself is never given beforehand. We may have a natural inclination to conceptualise, and the inevitabilities of the generalised human soul – which the Truth approach presupposes – are also innate and therefore essential to the human condition. But the content, the *what* of the Truth approach, is not a foregone conclusion. To follow a scientific impulse to find out what is true is, rather, necessarily a flexible approach which needs to be prepared for unexpected answers. One might suggest that if we cannot “help ourselves” from naming things, we tamper with a natural impulse, and that the Truth approach seems more meaningful than the Mystery approach because following natural impulses is more meaningful than not doing so. While tempting, following that conclusion leads to a possible fallacy (an “appeal to nature”) which, should it be challenged, would need an essay of its own.

The point here is, instead, that if we cannot escape conceptualisation, we may as well try to make the concepts we use more accurate. Because if we try to stay away from concepts

⁹⁵ Hoffmann, op. cit.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

while we nevertheless do conceptualise artworks when we try to describe them, the description becomes distorted. It may be argued that this is irrelevant to anyone who is only interested in the mysterious side of art – what does truth matter to them? The answer is that truth will matter even to them as soon as they refer to things, because if we try to keep mystery intact when in fact we already start to conceptualise as soon as we start talking about an artwork and have thus entered the “realm” of truth, we enter it as ignoramuses. Trying to make sense of one’s experience (which we undoubtedly do if we have started to refer to things) clashes with the Mystery approach endeavour to keep intellectual sense out of the picture. This keeps us on from knowing more when in a context where only knowledge is satisfactory. Thus we are struck with existential frustration from the feeling that one is not in a land of meaningful mystery, but stuck in one of ignorance. In other words, if not even seekers of mystery can avoid some truth, the Mystery approach will inevitably clash with the Truth approach, leading to ignorance rather than mystery, and thus existential frustration from lack of meaning. Hoffmann, in his review above, comes off as ignorant and even pretentious with his “infinite, indefinite, inexpressible and immeasurable” Beethoven, while he appears more honest and true to himself when he paints analogies of “things monstrous” and “friendly, luminous figures”.

Kierkegaard finds similar problems in the immediacy of mystery. According to him, the human being is a synthesis between two terms: the temporal and the eternal. Because human beings constitute a synthesis, this makes possible an imbalance, a sickness of the self, which Kierkegaard identifies as *despair*.⁹⁷ One way of being in despair is brought about in people who are in immediate continuity with something illusorily (the temporal) thought to be eternal. The person in despair makes himself dependent upon things external – if external circumstances change, then so does he. Because reflection is something internal, the self passively craves and desires without reflection.⁹⁸ This immediacy entails an extreme fragility: should a small amount of reflection enter into this state of immediacy, the person becomes aware of the difficulties inherent in the imperfect self, and thus recoils from it and despairs. Symptomatically, he ends up in reveries, wishing to be someone else. Yet the despairer is unable to properly point this despair out. This is an intermediate state in which no definite step is taken towards inward awareness – it is the imbalance between the temporal and eternal. In Kierkegaard’s view, it is the most common form of despair, shown in adolescents in the form of the illusion of hope in the extraordinary from life and themselves, and in adults in the illusion of recollection, *i.e.* exaggerated positive

⁹⁷ S. Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death: A Christian Psychological Exposition of Edification and Awakening by Anti-Climacus*, London, Penguin Books Ltd, 1989, pp. 43ff.

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 82.

accounts of their own youth.⁹⁹ It seems that a person who always looks to the external features of art is therefore existentially fragile to the “eternal” character of a truth, *i.e.* what the artwork is about. Questions of what an artwork is about will inevitably turn up much in the same way that we sooner or later will ask what life is about. And we will be unable to answer those questions because immediacy of mystery is not equipped to answer them.

What we can learn from Kierkegaard’s critique is that the Truth approach could make us “immune” to the despair brought about by difficult questions because the Truth approach allows us to navigate our inner landscape. The Mystery approach is not interested in concepts or dividing the world (inner or outer) into things we can refer to, hence the Mystery approach leaves us lost once the questions that demand navigation even start to pop up at the back of the heads of mystery-seekers. In this view, the Mystery approach is simply not an existentially sustainable approach to art, religion or life in general. Everyone may not find a fully satisfying answer through the Truth approach, but seems a better option when considering the sudden despair that may be brought about by the Mystery approach.

Yet another aspect added to the temporal/eternal dichotomy is that of complexity: the idea that a work of art should not be interpreted at all in order to preserve its mystery could originate in the assumption that complexity of an artistic expression is something that is good in itself and that a conceptualisation of the same artwork merely simplifies its expression, *i.e.* the complexity is decreased. I will argue that complexity can be seen as something existentially valuable.

Here, the term ‘complexity’ is assumed to be connected to (and relevant to) existential meaning and that existential complexity is something opposed to what could be called “material” complexity. In other words, the complexity of the *existential* expression in *e.g.* a symphony is what is important to this discussion, not necessarily the complexity of the composition itself or the technicality of the playing performed by the orchestra. Existential complexity has to do with complexity of human emotions rather than any complexity rendered outside of our psyche.

How then could this emotional complexity be valuable in an artwork? The short answer is that an emotionally complex work of art captures a wider range of emotions and more nuances associated with human life, hence it provides a more complete answer to the question of what it is to be human. The amount of emotional complexity in a work of art could therefore be said to be relevant to the amount of existential meaning which said artwork creates, because we must indeed ask ourselves, “How relevant is this work of art to my life? How relevant is it to the

⁹⁹ Ibid, pp. 77ff.

experiences I have had in life and what can it teach me about the experiences which are yet to come?”

But is emotional complexity a reality? Is it not a mere nonsense term for something which cannot be referred to because it is not fully distinguishable in art? How can we label one artwork more emotionally complex and another one less so? It does not have to be difficult. To illustrate with an example, let us consider the art of music and regard the possible differences in existential complexity (and thus relevance to human experience) between different pieces of music. If we rank the pieces, the least existentially complex music would be the kind that merely keeps rhythm. A piece which keeps rhythm could still be called music and its keeping rhythm has some value to a human being (one can stomp one's feet to the rhythm for entertainment purposes or, as in ancient times, have slaves in a Roman galley row its heavy oars to the beat of a drum for more utilitarian reasons), but other than that this kind of music provides little of existential value. Further up the hierarchy, we find music which is at least catchy. It piques our interest somewhat, but does not bring out any emotion. The next item, a level above the last, does exactly that: it brings out an emotion in the listener. This single emotion can be anything from joy to anger, from love to hate, but is nevertheless only a single emotion played about in a recurrent pattern. The next few levels of emotional complexity convey a larger number of emotions and eventually convey emotional change. Emotional change is, I believe, of importance to existential meaning because emotional change mirrors perhaps the largest existential problem to human beings. Had we been continuously content without any change in feelings about our circumstances, had we not had the experience that joy might easily turn into sadness, or hope into disappointment, the “therapeutic” aspect of art would hardly be needed in the first place (*cf.* Chapter 3 on coping). On a higher level, music may convey a specific experience, meaning that the music has a specific story to tell: through *e.g.* thematic development music may create a subjectively perceived narrative that is more than merely a few haphazard emotions without direction. Presumably even more relevant to existential meaning is a conveyed experience which involves a feeling of having learned something about life, and even further up the ladder we find a more generalised maturation experience. What I have been meaning to show is that it is possible (at least in theory) to produce art that uses simple emotional building blocks that by increasing complexity manages to mirror the more profound experiences of human life. If this is true, it is possible for artworks to – by virtue of being more or less complex – be more or less meaningful.

Now, it could be said that conceptualisations “cheapen” the artistic expression by simplifying it. The “quasi-experience” provided by an artwork (as discussed later on, in Chapter

6.3.4) loses, it could be argued, its nuances if translated into a more intellectual and “dry” concept. If complexity is valuable to existential meaning, it is reasonable to assume that anything which decreases complexity (*e.g.* conceptualisation) would also decrease the potential existential meaning contained in a work of art. Because is it not the case that a conceptualisation of an artwork like “Life is hard” indeed cheapens the artwork by simplifying it and brushing aside its nuances? How can the music of Mozart be any good if we accept Uchida’s view (*cf.* 6.3.1.1) and reduce it to simple concepts like “I am sad”? While it may be true that – as discussed concerning Schopenhauer’s Ideas in 6.3.1.2 – the simpler (and hence the more universal) the idea/theme/plot itself is the more complex a reality it covers, the “covering” (*i.e.* the summary) of a complex reality is only covering in the sense that the concept *describes* that reality. The category of all things of the known universe only *describes* its contents in the sense that the category in question gives us only a rough knowledge of what we may expect from it, what we may find there. It does not, however, provide the *experience* of all these things; the Mystery approach would, however, demand immediate, sensuous contact with each nuance of colour, form, sound and so forth. The problem with simple (and therefore more universal) concepts is that they are shortcuts, and with shortcuts we miss out on the experience of learning and maturation. The tramp Sandemar in Harry Martinson’s novel *Vägen till Klockrike* describes this problem by contrasting – on the one hand – nature “as is” and our immediate, undisguised contact with it (“truth”), with – on the other hand – the words (“probabilities”) we use to disguise the horrors of the disrupted reality around us:¹⁰⁰

... the world is an infinite archipelago of improbabilities. And a tremendous struggle and kneading of the words is required in order to have them trusted with the in her banality entirely fortress-secure and arrogant human being of universal applicability, with her false reliability, the cold and emotionally dead.¹⁰¹

Nor is this Sandemar impressed with the collective agreement upon reference mentioned in 6.3.2: he prefers the unvarnished reality to the “mendaciously sober gathering around symbols” that “cannot cover reality, but they can conceal both play and suffering”.¹⁰² As a response to this criticism I wish to emphasise that the point of concepts is *not* to liken the immediate experience of the world, nor is it to conceal it (although that *is* one of its possible

¹⁰⁰ H. Martinson, *Vägen till Klockrike*, Stockholm, Albert Bonniers förlag, 1950, pp. 95-7.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 97: ”... världen är en oändlig skärgård av osannolikheter. Och en oerhörd kamp och knådning med orden krävs för att få dem betrodda hos den i sin banalitet fullkomligt fästningssäkra och arroganta allmängiltighetsmänniskan, med hennes falska vederhäftighet, den kalla och känslodöda.”

¹⁰² Ibid, p.97.

applications), nor is it to perpetually keep us away from the immediate world. Concepts are merely there to guide our minds and make order in the jungle that is the chaos of nature, and then have us return there all the wiser. In the musical case, complexity is not necessarily reduced because we let a theme guide us; rather, themes help us structure what we experience into a coherent whole. The assembly instructions to an IKEA shelf are not the same as the finished shelf itself, but had we no manual, we might still sit among a disarray of planks and screws (neat though they may be). For this reason I think Mozart can be complex *as well*; whether the concept we use is complex or not, it helps us appreciate the complexity of Mozart with more precision. Uchida's concept "I am sad" is more precise than the immediacy of mystery, yet is not very precise, and nevertheless it provides some accuracy, some aim, to the listener who tackles Mozart's intricate composition.

Martinson makes a fair argument – concepts create a kind of "distance" from unruly nature – but intellectual knowledge is nevertheless important because even if we believe that we retain the complexity of an artwork by choosing not to conceptualise it and thus believe that we gain a more genuine aesthetic experience, if we do not know *what* we experience, the experience of said complexity will be perceived merely as a chaotic jumble, which – if we follow Kierkegaard's argument – leads to despair. Again, we need navigation. Perhaps the disorder perceived is confused with complexity itself, which in turn – according to Mystery-seekers – was supposed to provide meaning, beauty and experience.

This problem relates to the ontological relativity described in Chapter 6.3.2. With the ontological chaos inevitably prompted by the Mystery approach preference for disorder, it is hard to find a justifiable way to be able to refer to anything that is of value to existential meaning. We cannot refer to any single emotions presented as symbols or metaphors in an artwork; we cannot refer to emotional change, specific experiences or experiences of learning or maturation mirrored in the work of art. Nor can any of these concepts be referred to in wholly religious contexts. With the use of intellectual conceptualisation, however, we have at our disposal a guide with which we may know something by dividing a work of art (and the world as a whole) into concepts which may then give us a clue as to what the work as whole wants to communicate. But if the experience of an artwork is ontologically relative, we cannot claim that we have had an experience *of* anything. Mystery-seekers may claim that we do not need to refer to anything, that we do not need an experience *of* anything and that ontological relativity is existentially "all right" because all we need is the experience itself. The Truth approach, however, has the ability to *connect* the emotions expressed in an artwork with the emotions of our psyche, because the Truth approach allows us to navigate both the artistic themes and our inner landscape. The Mystery

approach does not seem to be able to justify any such connection. It seems, rather, that it is a “hit-and-miss” approach: sometimes we happen to recognise something in the chaotic jumble that we have made from an artwork which resonates with our own soul and it feels mysteriously significant, but it is a rough method which misses and confuses at least as often as it hits and astonishes. (It is also possible that the accuracy of the Truth approach manages to hit the mark not only more often than the Mystery approach, but also more deeply: truth has the quantity *and* the quality of existential meaning.) So, referring to something (in this case the emotional building blocks of art) by means of concepts may indeed be seen as experiential “shortcuts”, but at least it effectively connects our souls to the artwork we experience because of the navigational power of conceptualisation.

To apply these finds to religion, the difficulty in avoiding conceptualisation of art echoes the difficulty in avoiding conceptualising God even when do not wish to do so. If, for example, we want God to be infinitely profound, any name or concept given to God would take Him down to a lower level – lower, at least, than the level of infinity. Therefore, we call God that which is greater than anything that could possibly be fathomed by man, or we refer to Him as ‘Godhead’ or the ground of being, an esoteric, mystical category or the like. We do so in order to avoid the diminishing power of words, but are stranded with 1) concepts nevertheless, and 2) concepts that are comparatively empty of meaning and relevance to us as human beings with human experiences and needs. The Judeo-Christian custom of referring to God as ‘Father’ puts Him in a more relevant position to us than *e.g.* ‘Godhead’ and is nonetheless powerful – ‘Father’ is then the compromise between the ineffable and meaningless on the one hand and the authoritatively diminishing on the other.

But as hinted at above, there is a larger religious context, not only about God specifically. If religion and art both provide answers to what life is about, and we have a tendency to sooner or later ask what the whole point of life is, then we must sooner or later ask what the religion we follow is about and not merely enjoy it as mere ritual or revel in its mystery. If that is true, yet we live our religious lives according to the Mystery approach, we will be lost. The point here is, again, that the Truth approach makes us immune to the despair brought about by difficult questions because the conceptualisation of the Truth approach makes the existential subjects found in religion – and which are inevitable in life – easily recognisable as something which we will or already have experienced in life, making it possible for us to find satisfying answers in the religion of which we are a part. In the same sense that truth connects us to art, it also connects us to religion. The Truth approach may not *have* answers, but it allows us to navigate once we are inevitably put in a situation where we need them.

6.3.4 “Possibility” described in art as part of existential truth

While we do – as is assumed in content-based interpretations of art – demand truth as a criterion for gaining existential meaning (as when themes in art provide a concept that is existentially true to us), an artwork’s content may not only contain a true concept, but also a true “quasi-experience” of what it is to be human. For example, reading fiction is a way of reflecting upon our lives and the problems therein by providing concrete scenarios of descriptions of life as well as by relating generally to our own experiences of life’s more extreme situations.¹⁰³ Literature has the ability to help us live by creating a lively, usually detailed description of what *could* happen in our lives depending on which paths we choose. Hence fiction in this case is not tried, empirical knowledge, but knowledge about a *possibility*.¹⁰⁴

Again, the distinction between plot/story and subject/theme applies. A novel is not only an exploration of a subject, but a shortcut to an actual life experience by way of its plot. In this sense, Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* recounts what might happen – in terms of anguish, mainly – to a person of nihilistic tendencies who murders a fellow human being in order to test a philosophical hypothesis. Dostoyevsky, in a manner of speaking, renders humanity a service by letting us know what might happen to certain people under certain conditions (even if this is not Dostoyevsky’s main goal in writing his book), preparing us all for such a possibility of events. Fiction puts us in a setting where we are “forced” to encounter a certain experience. In other words, while a theme in a work of art functions to pinpoint (or “formulate”) the inevitabilities of life (*e.g.* what love is), the role of a plot is to recount the possibilities of these inevitabilities (*e.g.* what love might lead to). While an artfully explored subject (in this case love) may make us exclaim, “Yes, that is truly what love is!”, the corresponding plot may rather make us ask, “Oh, so that is what love can do to me?”

The question, however, is how existentially meaningful a described possibility is. Is there not a substantial risk that if we evaluate art by its plot being an accurate description of certain consequences, then we are left with a mere strategy guide to life? A strategy guide may be *practical*, but not necessarily existentially meaningful. The existential satisfaction in having read a novel which in a remarkable way pinpoints love or fear or joy or death, appears *much more* valuable than the existential satisfaction gained from having read a novel which merely describes the cause and effect related to a subject. Instinctively one may protest that this argument is counterintuitive, at least in an empirical sense, because the experience of reading about the Prince

¹⁰³ C. R. Bråkenhielm, *Verklighetsbilder*, Nora, Nya Doxa, 2009, pp. 222-4.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, pp. 226f.

of Denmark and the consequences of his endeavours does seem meaningful. This counterargument could in turn be countered by claiming that the perceived meaningfulness of the reading about the possibilities lying dormant in any inevitability of life is in reality derived from how the possibilities in the shape of plot is used as an expression of the *theme*, and that the plot or the real-life possibilities it explores are in themselves anything but existentially meaningful.

But even if the examination of possibilities appears meaningless because it is merely practical or merely instrumental in the expression of a theme, it seems that knowing the consequences of the inevitabilities of life is existentially meaningful if we consider the ontological implications. Namely, the examination of the cause and effect of the inevitabilities of life illustrates the limits and borders of any of those inevitabilities. This, I would assert, is relevant to the Truth approach: creating a limited ontology by defining its reality (*i.e.* creating limits and borders) is exactly what finding truth is about. If the effects of love are demonstrated – even if the scenario in a novel is merely a *possibility* – our emotional landscape becomes clearer, more easily defined and more easily manoeuvrable. “Possibility analysis” is thus the kind of “if-then” statement that, I believe, creates existential safety in the lives of human beings and brings us closer to existential truth concerning life’s inevitabilities because what the consideration of possibilities says about *e.g.* love is, “This is what will probably happen to you emotionally when navigating on the proverbial Seas of Love”. In other words, it helps us navigate our emotional landscapes. Analysis of plot to illuminate the possibilities of the inevitabilities of life is therefore important in defining the truth of an artwork in a more detailed manner and is therefore an analysis which assists us in receiving existential meaning from the same.

To relate this to the objectivity and relevance of the Truth approach, it is reasonable to believe that the finest art in this case of plot is the one that most thoroughly and beautifully recounts and identifies experiences which are universal in the sense that they are inevitable to most human beings, again referring to the “existential inevitabilities”. It might seem contradictory to, on the one hand, demand universality from these artworks when, on the other hand, the point of “possibility” is to provide shortcuts to experiences we have *not* yet encountered – how do we know what an existentially satisfying artwork is if we have not encountered the experiences of which it speaks? This was the point of evaluating the success of the rendition of themes in art: the reviewer of an artwork has the ability to properly evaluate an artwork because a reviewer must (reasonably) have gathered enough experience of life (and therefore the generalised human soul) to know which subject a work of art explores, even if he or she has not experienced the events brought about by the story rendered in the artwork. And indeed, even the most experienced reviewers, who know the human soul inside and out, have

never experienced life in the courts of medieval Denmark as recounted in *Hamlet*, but may nevertheless recognise its subjects and how accurately they express it.

In religion, plot in the role of illuminating possibilities of the inevitabilities of life corresponds to some degree with the function of initiation rituals. Among some indigenous peoples to this day, certain initiation rituals are a way for the individual to rapidly gain experience of adult life. While marriage is a ritual which existentially divides life into a “before” and an “after”, an initiation ritual is a procedure which moreover provides a glimpse of what *e.g.* a young man is to expect of adult life. In the same way as novels prepare us for events of a life we possibly cannot have the chance to experience first-hand, but have all to gain from knowing beforehand, religious rituals prepares the initiate for what might happen in life.

6.3.5 The Truth approach not altogether anti-mystery

Despite concepts being “anti-mystery” in the sense that a concept makes us reflect and to force us out of an immediate experience of art, the Truth approach does not entirely lack mystery insofar as our concept of choice may *describe* a work of art as mysterious. An artwork which depicts mysterious events or creates a mysterious atmosphere may still be contained within the concept. Conceptualisations do not, therefore, avoid mystery as such, but may let mystery and its ambiguity be part of the aboutness.

A superficial manner in which a mysterious mood may be constructed is by the artist’s reliance on plot. An example would be detective fiction, where the narratives centre on the gradual uncovering of an unidentified cause of typically horrid effects. The mystery lies in the circumstance that the culprit is unknown from the outset and we as readers are usually taken along on a journey sided by shady characters and strange events. Shadiness and strangeness are in turn attributes of the worlds created by writers of horror fiction, whose characteristics we usually associate with the mysterious: ghosts, darkness, death, evil, the afterlife, assorted monsters and so forth. The mystery is not necessarily brought about by the reading of these characteristics as metaphoric, but rather by how these characteristics *in themselves* are considered mysterious (usually through tradition or inherent in all human beings biologically [as shown by how our sensitivity to detecting agents easily creates “ghosts”¹⁰⁵]). Nor is there – more importantly – a need for a Mystery approach to produce this sense of mystery. A classic horror novel like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* is practically overflowing with the token manifestations of what is commonly referred to as mysterious, but the whole story can nevertheless, according to the Truth approach, easily be

¹⁰⁵ See *e.g.* T. Tremblin, *Minds and Gods: The Cognitive Foundations of Religion*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2006.

summed up in rather dry concepts pertaining to the blood symbolism which Stoker sought, the Victorian nightmare of Dracula as the emblem of immorality which tempts and corrupts the nation, an inner parasitic enemy who only needs the slightest invitation in order to suck the blood and sense out of English aristocracy. And so on.

To a more profound degree, however, the aboutness of an artwork may induce a sense of mystery not only on the level of plot, but on the thematic level as well by the means of metaphor. For example, a mysterious aura is brought about by the writing of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. While we can imagine that the author in question had a carefully reasoned theme in mind when writing this novel and went about the job in a more or less deliberate fashion, Conrad handles the subject in a way that creates a world that rather adequately can be labelled as mysterious: a metaphor runs deep throughout the novel, and it is through reading of metaphor that a sense of mystery – even in the pursuit of truth – is felt. Even though truth demands for us to find out what an artwork is about, the two-sidedness of metaphor provides a particular semi-mysteriousness to any work of art; the message is hidden, but it is our quest as readers to take the “scientific” journey towards the truth behind the symbols set up by the author.

Conrad's novel can be interpreted as the guilt of European colonialism, but we can also make a more general interpretation of playing God and thus go deeper. If we read *Heart of Darkness* as a battle of the soul in modern times, Conrad makes the dark waterways to the depths of Africa an obscure, fateful and eschatological route to humanity's most primordial intentions, where the idea of civilisation – of us as humane, noble and elevated beings – is relentlessly challenged. On the trip on the rivers of Africa, horrifying cries of the natives are heard among the trees. These, however, are not aggressive battle cries, but mournful, distraught screams of all of mankind: our soul cries out in the darkness. The way down the river is the path towards self-knowledge, risking our mental stability as we go. When alone in existential darkness, all we can do is to shout like the enigmatic antagonist of the story, ivory trader Kurtz: “The horror! The horror!”¹⁰⁶ This description of *Heart of Darkness* is all conceptual, it is all “aboutness”, and yet it describes a mysterious aura brought about by Conrad's powerful metaphor.

Also, ambiguity may, seen from the artist's perspective, be the whole point of an artwork. Kurtz' famous line above, for example, is purposefully open-ended; “the horror” may refer to practically any demons of our minds. But open-endedness in itself does not necessarily mean that readers should call it quits when it comes to finding truth in art, give up any conceptualisation of the novel and instead accept the Mystery approach as a superior method to

¹⁰⁶ J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness: And Other Tales* (C. Watts Ed.), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 178.

reading *Heart of Darkness*. If we conceptualise the novel with regard to its ambiguity, the concept is not ambiguous in itself because we know what we are talking about (*i.e.* what we refer to) when we discuss ambiguity as concept. Thus ambiguity may be contained within the concept we choose to represent an artwork and we may say that artwork *x* is, in part, *about* ambiguity.

The Truth approach is not the same as Kant's term ontotheology which "believes that it cognizes the existence of the original being through mere concepts, without the aid of the least experience".¹⁰⁷ The Truth approach does not avoid experience nor does it rely on conceptions alone. The Mystery approach, however, has more in common with Kant's term cosmotheology in so far as it is described as inferring "the existence of the original being from an experience as such (without determining more closely anything concerning the world to which this experience belongs)".¹⁰⁸ The Mystery approach, namely, seems wholly unable to "contain" any truth (like truth is able to contain some mystery, even though the latter has then been conceptualised). Even if the magic is not unescapably broken as soon we start to *reflect* upon what the meaning is to be gazing upon a smiling toddler, it strongly interferes with the experience and must be ignored. In this case, one might discuss evolutionary reasons as to why we enjoy looking at happy toddlers, and such explanations put an academic, cynical or even brutal veil upon the whole experience: while gazing upon such a face we do not want to know *e.g.* that we are selfish creatures who enjoy this because it is and has been evolutionarily advantageous to us. Less utilitarian explanations like those provided by the Truth approach, however, with its concern for *existential* meaning as opposed to any scientific explanations, may be a lot less interfering with the genuineness of the experience. As with art, we receive meaning from a toddler's face via the Truth approach by interpreting what the toddler wants to communicate with its smiles. We could explain the toddler's happy face's "theme" as being about love: it makes sense to interpret it as an "I love you" message and is satisfying and meaningful to us not because the truth of it relates to the toddler's intentions (in parallel to the intentions of an artist that we sometimes wish to uncover in order to find the true meaning of an artwork) and not even because the toddler's smile makes us feel loved, but because the smile pinpoints and relates to a feeling about love. From a Truth approach point of view, the concept of love as channelled to us through the toddler is meaningful to us primarily because it makes us proclaim that, "This is what love is", not declare that "I am loved". And this distinction is, I think, the reason why mystery cannot contain truth: even when we, in this case, perhaps only want to be loved and feel love, truth provides us with a "dry fact" of sorts, a "mere" statement about things dear to us. The Truth

¹⁰⁷ I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason: Unified Edition (with All Variants from the 1781 and 1787 Editions)* (W. S. Pluhar Trans.), Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Co, Inc., 1996, A632, p. 610.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

approach can contain the ambiguity of mystery if ambiguity is turned into something conceptual, but the Mystery approach has no way of containing a statement in its realm of emotions without to some degree leaving that realm. This would not be much of a disaster should we be able to return to the pure original experience once we have gained knowledge through conceptualisation. But this may seem impossible: innocence once lost is hard to regain. The immediacy of mystery is forever “contaminated” by truth because it puts a bridge of reflection and historicity between us and the sense of infinity otherwise provided by the Mystery approach. Seeking mystery, we worry that we cannot help but think in matter-of-factly statements once something has been explained conceptually. Experience inevitably forces us to view the world with a new set of eyes.

The same goes for art: we cannot say that H. P. Lovecraft’s short story *The Other Gods* is about “epistemological limitations as a gift from the Gods” without tainting the pure state of the story’s unconceptualised world. Once we have already conceptualised the work, it is suddenly difficult to find meaning in the instinctually strong feeling brought about by losing ourselves in the tale where a naïve man finds something even more primordial than the gods he and the people in his village have always venerated, without being forced to take the detour of what the meeting with those forces means in conceptualised form.

The Mystery approach antagonism towards truth (where no truth aspect whatsoever is recognised) appears prominent in religion as well. While the approach of scientists like Richard Dawkins, who, while intent on finding truth above all, is tolerant of mysterious experiences,¹⁰⁹ it seems unlikely that someone who defends religion by use of arguments that say that seeking for the “truth” behind the mystery of God ruins faith (in its pure form) should tolerate even minor intellectual reflections to invade upon the experience of mystery. Because by doing so, we take God down to earth to make His divinity serve our earthly existential needs; we demand some objective agent to tell us that love is like this, death is like that or that shame is indeed like so and so. But to relate God to human beings and our feelings, God does no longer seem as important. Indeed, even if God now takes on the character of an understanding and authoritative agent, He does not have the authority of a being whose power the Mystery approach depicts as so great that it is virtually impossible for human beings to try to fathom it. Thus, the Mystery approach shows a certain “fragility”, unlike the Truth approach.

7. The advantage of critics

Thus far, we have brought some clarity as to why the Mystery approach standpoint is concerned with keeping Truth queries at bay: the Mystery approach *always* has immediate sensuous access

¹⁰⁹ Dawkins, op. cit.

upheld by a shroud of mystery, while the Truth approach only *may* provide existential truth. Immediacy is lost once we take on the Truth venture and we may stumble upon existential falsity as well, so why risk it? The answer lies in what exactly this loss of immediacy entails.

The Truth approach seems to be not only possible, but reliable. Art and religion are tested for truth against the generalised human soul, which is possible to refer to objectively because the generalised human soul on the one hand and art and religion on the other hand fulfil objectivist demands of conceptualisation and possibility to imagine sufficient epistemic access. Because any conceptual interpretation of *e.g.* an artwork is *more or less* accurate (“fits” more or less accurately), because an entirely arbitrary interpretation would be absurd, an interpretation can also be more or less true, which further supports the notion that objectivity is possible not only *a priori*, but also *a posteriori*.

But even if accuracy is possible via the Truth approach, that accuracy not only identifies a true religious or aesthetic expression as true, but also a false religious or aesthetic expression as false. So, while there seems to be no methodical hindrances, the truth or falsity of an artwork ultimately depends on the individual artwork itself. Thus the risk of diminished existential meaning is still present.

This, however, seems to me to be a substantial problem only if we assume that we are lone agents facing a multitude of unknown aesthetic or religious expressions. This is not the case if we consider the societal factors which help us find existential truth. For art, we have a community of critics who gives us ideas about how to look at an artwork, tries to communicate what the critic teaching himself or herself what he or she is looking at,¹¹⁰ and tries to express the complicated effects that an artwork has on us.¹¹¹ In art critic and professor of art education Terry Barrett’s view, critics

work for viewers of art and those members of society who want to think critically about the times and conditions in which we live. [...] When critics do their work well, they increase for their readers understanding and appreciation of the art they write about.¹¹²

And in the Truth approach perspective, understanding allows us to extract meaning from art. Interpretation, says Barrett, is “ultimately a communal endeavor and the community is eventually

¹¹⁰ Barrett, 1993, p. 9.

¹¹¹ Ibid, p. 16.

¹¹² Ibid, p. 20.

self-corrective”,¹¹³ which suggests that even a canon of sorts – which could support our search for existential truth in art – is not impossible.

So, the Truth approach may trust in experience in the sense that the experience of the community of which we are a part constitutes an important aspect in our choice of which artworks on which we should spend our time. The collective experience helps us navigate the mass of artworks much in the same manner that the Truth approach itself helps us navigate an individual artwork. This means that our choice of artworks becomes neither random or devoid of context, nor a struggle with a multitude of artworks that may or may not be meaningful. Therefore, the risk of stumbling upon the disappointment of existential falsity is reduced: it is no longer the neutral average of the equation $+1-1=0$ found in Chapter 6.2.2, but an average which is a lot more likely to be positive as long as we put our trust in a more experienced cultural community. Immediacy – the trump card of the Mystery approach – is then put up against the guiding hand of collective experience. And the reason why mystery-seekers cannot count critics among its allies is that any analysis of an artwork, any guiding hand in the understanding of an artwork, is anathema to the Mystery “credo”. Even the more cautious attempts at analysis, as exemplified by Hoffmann’s review in Chapter 6.3.3, are likely to shift one’s focus from mystery to truth.

The religious implication of this discussion is the same. A religious person will probably not “choose” a religion the way any person would choose which book to read next, which painting to view next or which musical piece to listen to next, but perhaps rather an aspect of life (*e.g.* love) as viewed through a certain religion’s perspective, hence the principle still applies: much as the art community has its fair share of critics, the religious community of which we are a part function as the collective mediator between human beings and the divine realm, as in the catechesis of Christianity, where the catechists themselves may constitute clergy or family, but also the community at large.¹¹⁴ Again, we are not lone agents forced to choose between the safety of immediacy and the highly hazardous venture of possible existential disappointment. The religious community has knowledge and experience which helps us locate and extract the meaning of a religion for our own personal fulfilment. In *e.g.* Roman Catholicism the aim of

¹¹³ Barrett, 2000, *op. cit.*

¹¹⁴ J. Manternach, C. J. Pfeifer, *Creative Catechist: A Comprehensive Illustrated Guide for Training Religion Teachers* (2nd Revised ed.), Mystic, CT, Twenty-Third Publications, 1991, p. 23.

catechesis is to “[initiate] the hearers into the fullness of Christian life”¹¹⁵ and each portion of Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism* is followed by a section of what *e.g.* the Lord’s Prayer *means*.¹¹⁶

8. To have the cake and eat it too: The immediacy of the Truth approach

It would perhaps be more meaningful to not know what we are doing or why we are doing it when we gaze *e.g.* upon the happy face of a toddler. The absolute bliss found in such experiences does not need explanations to be enjoyed; we forget ourselves and we forget to ask difficult existential questions – we are simply “in the moment”. But while religion and art sometimes provide these states of bliss, I believe they are not *as wholes* the equivalents to gazing upon a toddler’s face. Instead, they are intricate expressions with more to communicate than merely to provide a haven in which to lose ourselves. They are a sort of blueprints for life. Therefore, I suggest that it is possible for us to “lose ourselves” (*i.e.* experience something profound) without losing our grip on this world of causality, relations, space and time, and that it is possible for us to lose ourselves knowingly: once we have conceptualised an artwork or a religion, we know what we are losing ourselves to, and I believe that willingly doing so amplifies the experience rather than diminish it.

Because what indicates that we *cannot* fully analyse religion or art by its “contents” and still come back to it and “live” it wholeheartedly? Immediacy may be lost by means of Truth approach exploration, but may as well be found anew in a new context. The point is to make the interpretation come full circle, reminiscent of T. S. Eliot’s poem: “We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we began and to know the place for the first time.”¹¹⁷

It is of little wonder if the Truth approach is off-putting if we seek mystery. While it is easy to enjoy yourself while in the “flow” of *e.g.* a musical piece – simply letting yourself go to the sheer sensuous immediacy of the work – an analysis of it (*i.e.* to place yourself outside of the experience) can, while perhaps enjoyable in its own right (*e.g.* because it is satisfying to solve an aesthetic mystery), be likened to being forced out of the warmth of a sauna. From a simplistic Truth approach perspective it can be likened to solving a math problem, hence there is no point

¹¹⁵ Catholic Church, Apostolic Exhortation: *Catechesi Tradendae* of Pope John Paul II On Catechesis in Our Time, 1979, retrieved November 2, 2014, from http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae_en.html

¹¹⁶ I. Green, *The Christian’s ABC: Catechisms and Catechizing in England, c. 1530-1740*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 17.

¹¹⁷ T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”, *Four Quartets*, London, Faber & Faber, 1959.

in sitting “in the sauna” staring extra closely at the numbers. But, as I have indicated, there is more to the Truth approach than “analysing and moving on”, hence art and religion are more than saunas and math problems. Once we have found existential truth in an artwork or in religion, we do not merely state the fact and move on to analyse something else. Rather, we revel in the perspective this truth analysis has provided, allowing us to enjoy a “post-analytical” sensuous immediacy. Once we have read a *e.g.* novel and found what it is all about or have been given explanations by a critic or teacher – thus having found out how it connects to our human souls – we may read it anew, but with the perspective of the artist. Once we have fully understood how the religion we practice connects to our psyche and needs, we may fully enjoy it as something sensuous and immediate. A certain symbol or act becomes neither an immediate but random experience, nor a “dry fact”, but an immediate connection to a certain part of our soul. When we read a certain metaphor in a novel and we know what it signifies, it strikes us not only immediately because we understand it and therefore do not have to spend time to consider it or use our intellectual faculties to comprehend it, but also deeply because we know how it connects to our own experiences in life.

Plate’s criticism (in Chapter 6.1) of truth as symbol is reasonable in the sense that a symbol is difficult to connect to our own psyches if the symbol is, as he states, a culturally stable – inflexible – unity of form and content. The logical solution indeed may seem to be to open the symbol to our hearts, to turn the symbol inside out. The problem as I see it is that the Mystery approach does *only* that: it keeps the symbol open, but it does not *relate* it to our souls. The Truth approach, on the other hand, appears able to open the symbol up, meld its truth with our experiences and close it shut again, so that it indeed becomes a shortcut to a world of immediate experience. That way, we recreate the Blakean “Vision, Imagination and Inspiration” while nonetheless having our Memory (in the Blakean capital letter sense) locate specific emotions by means of conceptualisation.

Even if the Mystery approach is a wild journey (in accordance with the idea that it is a learning experience and Plate’s focus on *passage*), and the Truth approach is more about aligning the thematic content of art and religion with that of our psyche, it nevertheless seems that the latter approach is not about the goal itself (*i.e.* a fixed existential answer to be removed from the experience), but a “guided tour”, *i.e.* also a journey of sorts, but more informed.

Also, if the inevitabilities of life as described by Herrmann are inevitable, the Mystery approach may be psychologically hazardous in the long run. Because tempting though it may be, “ignorantly” losing ourselves in objects (perhaps in an attempt to *avoid* existential suffering) ultimately makes us avoid dealing with the emotional luggage we carry around with us,

thus hinders us from truly reacting to our inevitable confrontations with love, death, rage, joy and so forth. For example, we cannot simply “objectify” the death of a family member and assume our emotional life will find equilibrium. Therefore, we should confront these emotions and do so with knowledge of how the souls of human beings function. This is why it is important to understand the idea of an artwork or the idea which religious life reveres.

9. A short analysis of works of David Lynch as practical example

David Lynch has been mentioned and quoted earlier, and his cinematic works turn out to be highly helpful in illustrating the power of the Truth approach. Indeed, one of the reasons for my own conviction that conceptualisation is needed in order to derive the most meaning from an artwork comes from a viewing of the films of Lynch. It may be argued that a viewing that is extremely focused on the “aboutness” of an artwork makes the work in question no more artistic or existentially meaningful than the typical academic paper. But my viewing of the art of Lynch says otherwise: it is precisely because of the understanding of their conceptual, “dry” ideas that his works become a revelation.

My initial encounter with the world of Lynch was disastrous when it comes to understanding: I could not make much sense of films like *Blue Velvet* (1986), *Lost Highway* (1997) or *Mulholland Drive* (2001). They were enjoyable, but on a whole the films seemed to be too fragmentary and too inconsistent to be “about” anything. Indeed, some reviewers, like the late Pulitzer-prize winning writer Roger Ebert, assumed that Lynch’s films were never about anything at all: *Mulholland Drive* was “refusing to yield to interpretation”,¹¹⁸ and Ebert concluded that, “If you require logic, see something else”.¹¹⁹ It is true that the art of Lynch is difficult to interpret and to conceptualise. Lynch typically depicts the dreams of his main characters, dreams which play in parallel with these characters’ daily lives in such a way that it is sometimes exceedingly difficult to tell what is dream and what is reality, rendering a surreal world of experience. But the impression that the films are ultimately pointless originates (as we shall see) in how the *analysis* – not the film – is inconsistent or fails to tell a logical story. In the case of *Blue Velvet*, some reviewers promptly state that the film “doesn’t progress or deepen, it just gets weirder, and to no good end”,¹²⁰ or

¹¹⁸ R. Ebert, “Mulholland Dr. Movie Review and Summary (2001)”, *RogerEbert.com*, 2012, retrieved October 9, 2014, from <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-mulholland-dr-2001>

¹¹⁹ R. Ebert, “Mulholland Drive Movie Review (2001)”, *RogerEbert.com*, 2001, retrieved October 9, 2014, from <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/mulholland-drive-2001>

¹²⁰ P. Attanasio, “Blue Velvet”, *Washington Post*, 1986, retrieved October 9, 2014, from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/bluevelvetrattanasio_a0ad54.htm

deem it “weird for weird’s sake”.¹²¹ Regarding *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch has been accused of cheating his audience with the single goal of confusing us: “He takes characters we have come to care about and obscures their fates in gibberish.”¹²² The supposed lack of sense in the film makes Lynch come off as “arrogant”¹²³ and “fooling around”.¹²⁴

It should also be noted that many reviewers, such as Roger Ebert, have written favourably of *Mulholland Drive*. Even when Lynch’s storytelling is confusing to such a degree that the film assumedly is about nothing at all, the fragments that are left sometimes leave the viewer with an intriguing set of mysterious questions (that never receive an answer) which make us believe we are viewing something highly significant whether we understand it or not (this would be a Mystery approach to watching Lynch). This is the same “mess” which other reviewers have loathed and which have frustrated viewers who *do* want answers and assume that formulating the main idea of a film should not be as exceedingly difficult as is the case of many of Lynch’s films.

In any case, it turns out that *Mulholland Drive* and all other Lynch films *do* contain logic. It appears that every detail is meticulously thought out to relate to the larger logic of the artwork (although Lynch never works from a theme). The surreal aspects of the film turn into a realistic depiction of our emotional life in the sense that we might cry out “Yes, this is exactly what [an aspect of life] is like!” in response to it – it rings true to us.

In the case of *Mulholland Drive*, Lynch explores what terrible things jealousy and personal failures do to our souls. The film follows a young woman, Diane, who wins a jitterbug contest and from there manages to make her way to acting in Hollywood. Another young woman, Camilla, gets the part Diane wants, but from pity she helps Diane to receive small parts in her films. Diane falls in love with Camilla and the two engage in a relationship. Camilla, however, turns out to be a “player” who sleeps with both men and women invariably. Predictably, Camilla tires of Diane, abandons their relationship and tells her she is now engaged to Adam, the director in whose film they are both acting. In a vengeful state, Diane hires a hitman to assassinate her ex-girlfriend, whereupon a couple of detectives try to hunt her down. Haunted by constant thoughts on what a failure of an actress, mistress and human being she is, the solitary Diane kills herself in her worn down apartment.

¹²¹ “Blue Velvet”, *Reel Film Reviews*, 2001, retrieved October 9, 2014, from <http://www.reelfilm.com/mini7.htm#blue>

¹²² J. Berardinelli, “Mulholland Drive”, *Reelviews*, retrieved October 9, 2014, from http://www.reelviews.net/php_review_template.php?identifier=1622

¹²³ R. Reed, “A Festival of Flops”, *New York Observer*, 2001, retrieved October 9, 2014, from <http://observer.com/2001/10/a-festival-of-flops/>

¹²⁴ C. Cavagna, “Mulholland Drive (2001)”, *AboutFilm.com*, 2001, retrieved October 9, 2014, from <http://www.aboutfilm.com/movies/m/mulhollanddrive.htm>

But this is only a summary of what happens in “real life”. The plot deviates strongly from the story. Somewhere between the time when Diane gets rejected and the moment when she shoots herself to death, she has a wonderful dream whose contents occupy most of the duration of this film. In this dream sequence, everything which has gone wrong in Diane’s life since her arrival in Los Angeles is corrected. She arrives as an ideal version of herself in a sunny Hollywood where dreams do come true, where everyone is kind and Diane’s audition amazes everyone. In her dream, it is Camilla who is the weak, broken wretch hunted by detectives, while Diane is the helpful, optimistic and strong girl who supports Camilla, making the latter fall in love with her. Camilla is dependent on Diane, not – as in the real world – the other way around. In order to change their biographies in her mind and project her fantasies unto her object of love, Diane makes Camilla the victim of a car accident and she now suffers from temporary amnesia. To get back at Adam-the-director, Diane envisions him as an aggressive madman who does not acquire the contracts he seeks, whose wife cheats on him and whose bank accounts are blocked. In order to justify losing her starring role to Camilla, Diane also imagines Adam to be forced by a conspiracy to choose her. This defends Diane’s idealised view of Camilla without letting the latter be superior.

In dreams, we are mostly unaware of the fact that we are dreaming, a circumstance which Lynch uses in order to make his film a mystery to be unravelled and the realisation of hard reality ever more heartbreaking; neither Diane nor the viewer realise that we are experiencing/watching a dream, nor do we understand who Diane and Camilla in the dream truly are. Throughout the dream, however, more and more clues are revealed as to what Diane’s reality is like beyond her wishful thinking. Among other things, we uncover premonitory signs of Diane’s death wish, a friend of her aunt doubts Diane’s identity and a blue key (the sign promised by her real-life hitman when the assassination is completed) is found in Camilla’s purse. Thus the dream plays out like a tense battle between on the one hand Diane’s wishful thinking and on the other hand her realisation of who she is and what she has done.

Lynch’s labyrinthine method makes us come close to experiencing the hope and terrible disappointments of dreams: the fantasies we make up when we wish we were someone else and our struggle to keep that fantasy alive, which makes for a commentary on the Hollywood film industry. Now, applying this concept to our experience of the film makes each event meaningful. A single scene like one where Diane cries and simultaneously masturbates, desperate for a flicker of joy, is merely a fragmentary sad scene in a strange world if not supported by a concept. Once we know that Diane’s crying is connected to the overall idea of how her soul is

breaking down in front of our eyes because of guilt, lost love and lost dignity, the scene suddenly becomes highly significant.

It seems that the key to understanding most of Lynch's films is to assume that the main character – usually a morally good person – has something to hide under layers of denial, a dark secret that the main character himself or herself usually does not fully comprehend. So for example the protagonist in *Blue Velvet* is displayed as a genuinely “nice guy” who wants only the best for his girlfriend, Sandy – he is polite, caring and would never think of her in ways indecent – while the film runs like a detective story where he slowly discovers more and more clues to uncovering the sexual predator within – his true, socially unacceptable feelings and urges towards Sandy. The realisation is a shock which passes into acceptance and absolution via honest confrontation with his urges and an overcoming of them. In *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk with Me* (1992) a young self-hating sophomore is haunted by her repressed memories of childhood molestation, anthropomorphised as “Killer Bob” in dreams and visions.

All films include horrible realisations (and sometimes absolution) which communicate an experience which feels almost like our own. But if we do not know *what* is to be realised, the real significance of the artwork is lost. Most of Lynch's films would then only be creepy detective stories with romantic elements. Thus we need to make an intellectual analysis in order to collect the whole potential emotional spectrum of these films. They are possible to enjoy as something sensuously immediate only, which seems to be what *e.g.* Roger Ebert does, but I hope to have shown that there is more to be gained from Lynch's works via the Truth approach. The point here is that the art *comes alive* from following the concepts that have been presented. The indifference that Harry Martinson worried about is nowhere to be found; rather, the imagination is most definitely put into motion. This is because concepts provide us with *precision*. While Martinson thought concepts *conceal* truth, I argue that they *guide* us towards it. Concepts are not the experiences or emotions themselves, but they are the aim which allows emotions to pierce our hearts with accuracy.

10. Conclusion

In the introduction to this essay I asked whether we should endeavour to try to find truth in religion with regards to existential meaning despite there being a possibility that the feeling of mystery might diminish meaning in religion. After introducing truth and mystery as approaches to religion, the discipline of art was presented as support and comparison with how these approaches should be applied to religion. The epistemological and ontological limitations of each

approach were discussed: the Mystery approach was found to create ambiguity and retain sensuous immediacy in art, while the possibility of objectivity in the Truth approach was considered. Further, community was considered as guidance in the individual's search of truth, and the possibility of immediacy in the Truth approach was discussed.

The Truth approach does seem to have a few advantages in comparison to the Mystery approach. The Truth approach

- confronts and “deals” with the inevitabilities of life, rather than avoids them
- has the ability to connect our experiences to aesthetic and religious expressions, thus achieving emotional accuracy and depth
- has the ability to recreate the sensuous aspect of mystery within a frame of existential knowledge
- is likely to fulfil its goal – finding existential truth – from support of the community
- is not as “fragile” as its Mystery approach counterpart

All of these points, I believe, add to the amount of meaning we are able to extract from art and religion by means of the Truth approach. The Mystery approach, by contrast, renders all religious and aesthetic expressions as something mysterious and sensuously immediate, which, although meaningful aspects in themselves, miss out on a lot of the existential potential of these expressions. Therefore it is difficult for me, with these results, to argue against the Truth approach as an “anti-magical” method which ultimately diminishes existential meaning in our appreciation of art and religious life. It seems, rather, that the Truth approach as I have presented it is the better choice of the two approaches.

Whether this truth-seeking method is preferable in the debate concerning the *existence* of a divine realm is a different question. But as for the question asking whether or not we should try to put into words, to conceptualise, our religious experiences, these results imply that, indeed, we should.

By using the method of comparing art and religion and showing how the Truth approach extracts existential meaning from both of them, pursuers of material truth may hopefully find insight into how truth may – if they accept the Truth approach forays in the aesthetic field – also be found in religion, and that the “cold foreign eyes” of the Truth approach need not be cold nor foreign, but a friendly hand that opens doors to deeper aesthetic and religious experiences and thus a greater chance of experiencing more existential meaning.

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