The commitment in feeling absolutely safe

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Abstract

The experience of feeling safe even in the midst of trials and temptations seems to be a central feature of the Christian faith. In this article I will try to solve some possible difficulties in understanding this kind of absolute safety by discussing some problems noted by philosophers in connection with the related statements by Socrates that a good man cannot be harmed, and by Wittgenstein that he sometimes feels absolutely safe, that nothing can injure him whatever happens. First, I will investigate whether there is an invalid prediction implied in this feeling of absolute safety: how can someone know that nothing will hurt him or her? Second, I will examine whether this experience of complete safety is dependent upon impossible requirements, such as to be a good man or an impeccable Christian. Third, I will consider the character of the people who claim absolute safety as portrayed by different philosophers: do these people really need to be so cold and inhumanly detached from the world for them to be able to say that nothing can hurt them? I will argue that if, instead of asking *how* someone can claim absolute safety, we ask to what someone *commits* him- or her-self in making this claim, these difficulties disappear.

Keywords: Absolute safety Peter Winch Socrates Ludwig Wittgenstein Commitment

From Psalm 23's "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil," to Reformer Martin Luther's claim that nothing whatever can do a Christian any hurt, to popular hymns such as 'Safe in the arms of Jesus' and 'Under His wings I am safely abiding', the experience of feeling safe even in the midst of trials and temptations seems to be a central feature of the Christian faith. But what does it mean to be 'safe' even in the valley of the shadow of death? How can we make sense philosophically of these claims to complete safety in this unpredictable and insecure world?

In this article I will try to solve some possible difficulties in understanding this kind of absolute safety by discussing some problems noted by philosophers in connection with it. A variety of examples will be discussed, some overtly Christian, such as examples of Luther and Kierkegaard, but also related statements originating outside of Christianity, such as the ones by Socrates that a good man cannot be harmed, and by Wittgenstein that he sometimes feels absolutely safe, that nothing can injure him whatever happens. First, I will investigate whether there is an invalid prediction implied in this feeling of absolute safety: how can someone know that nothing will hurt him or her? Second, I will examine whether this experience of complete safety is dependent upon impossible requirements, such as to be a good man or an impeccable Christian. Third, I will consider the character of the people who claim absolute safety as portrayed by different philosophers: do these people really need to be so cold and inhumanly detached from the world for them to be able to say that nothing can hurt them? I will argue that if, instead of asking *how* someone can claim absolute safety, we ask to what someone *commits* him- or herself in making this claim, these

difficulties disappear. It will not give you a recipe for how to feel absolutely safe, but it will become clear what it means if someone claims that nothing whatever can do him or her any hurt.

The modern discussion in philosophy on the correct interpretation of absolute safety started with the article 'Can a Good Man be Harmed?' by Peter Winch written in 1965, republished in the collection of his articles *Ethics and Action* in 1972. Winch (1972, p. 193) attempts to understand the statement by Socrates during his trial: "But you, too, my judges, must face death with good hope, and remember this one truth, that a good man cannot suffer any evil either in life or after death, and that the gods do not neglect his fortunes." What does Socrates mean by saying that a good man cannot suffer any evil? Winch (p. 193 f.) connects this with a statement by Wittgenstein from his *Lecture on Ethics*: "I will mention another experience straightaway which I also know and which others of you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling *absolutely* safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say 'I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens'." Winch (p. 193 f.) adds related statements from Kierkegaard, Shakespeare and Twain, and places everything in the context of "the idea that it is worse for a man to do than to suffer wrong." He notes that this idea does not play a very big role in moral philosophy at the time, but he considers this to be a major oversight of his colleagues. This idea forms the background for Winch's attempt to make sense of Socrates' claim to his judges that a good man cannot be harmed.

In 1520 Martin Luther wrote a tract called *On the Freedom of a Christian*, which he considered to be "a summary of the Christian life put together in small compass" (p. 5). In this treatise Luther not only declares Christians free from belief in good works, but also free from harm. He (p. 13) writes: "Every Christian is by faith so exalted above all things, that, in spiritual power, he is completely lord of all things; so that nothing whatever can do him any hurt." He (p. 13) explains how he can claim such a thing: "This is a spiritual power, which rules in the midst of enemies, and is powerful in the midst of distress. And this is nothing else than that strength is made perfect in my weakness, and that I can turn all things to the profit of my salvation; so that even the cross and death are compelled to serve me and to work together for my salvation." Luther states categorically that no harm can come to a Christian, while at the same time he is aware that Christians may be in the midst of enemies and distress. A Christian may suffer weakness, the cross and even death, and yet, in the same vein as Socrates, Luther holds that a good Christian cannot be hurt, one is exalted above all things.

Mikel Burley (2010, p. 82) describes this kind of experience of feeling absolutely safe as being based upon "the doctrine of moral harm." He (p. 84) explains: "The viewpoint seems to rely on a distinction between two main categories of harm, namely worldly harm, which is relatively superficial, however painful or injurious it may appear, and moral harm, which is not superficial at all, since it is something that damages a person's soul or moral character." A statement like 'A good man cannot be harmed' can be understood if one redefines the word 'harm' to refer only to damage to the soul. However, this may all seem a bit too quick and too easy. Winch (1972, p. 194 f.) notes: "Now a certain sort of 'tough-minded' philosopher, with whom we are familiar (and who is perhaps among my present readers), might make the following move on being confronted with these examples: he might say that if the words in them are being used in their ordinary sense, then they express a straightforward empirical falsehood; that they can only be true by virtue of an eccentric use of such words as 'harm', 'safe', 'punishment', and then they are true 'by definition' and in a merely 'trivial' way." It has to be admitted that to some extent this is true. As long as someone is with Christ, one is absolutely safe, for that is how 'safe' has been defined.

However, as Winch notes, this experience of feeling absolutely safe is not trivial for the people involved. For them it is not a trivial play with words, but a discovery or a revelation. Saying that it is a trivial re-definition of terms, does not do justice to all cases – to say the least. Maybe someone has sung Psalm 23 all her life, but then, when she finds herself in the valley of the shadow of death, it may suddenly become true for her. If it ever was trivial for her, now it no longer is, now it goes deep with her, it is what keeps her standing: 'I fear no evil', she is absolutely safe. For these people, so we may ask, for those for whom it is not trivial, for whom the experience of absolute safety is a discovery or revelation, what does it mean for them? For example, is there a prediction

about what will happen there in the valley of the shadow of death, involved? And if there is a prediction, how could that ever be a valid prediction? That is the central puzzle that Winch in his article 'Can a Good Man be Harmed?' discusses.

1. Invalid prediction?

Is there not an invalid prediction implied in feeling absolutely safe? How can someone really know that nothing will hurt him or her? A large part of Winch's article is dedicated to the example of punishment. He (1972, p. 194) sets out to explain Kierkegaard's statement: "But even if the world gathered all its strength, there is one thing it is not able to do, it can no more punish an innocent one than it can put a dead person to death." Punishment is by definition – by Kierkegaard's definition at least – connected to doing something wrong, and so an innocent person may be put in prison and that may be sad, but it would not be punishment. Similarly if someone has done something evil, but no one ever finds out, he could still be seen as having been punished, namely by having become someone who has done something evil. Torture, prison, or even a death sentence, however, would not be real punishment, it would not be really harmful for someone who is innocent, it would not be what Kierkegaard calls punishment or harmful.

This attitude is the attitude implied in the experience of feeling absolutely safe. Winch (p. 206 f.) summarizes: "A man who has such an attitude to life sees that as long as afflictions do not deflect him [from acting decently], they do not harm him – not in relation to what he regards as really important in his life." So far, so good, but then Winch encounters what he (p. 207) calls "the biggest hurdle of all in the way of understanding this question" 'Can a good man be harmed?' He even admits that according to him this hurdle cannot be surmounted. The person who feels absolutely safe because a good man cannot be harmed "still thinks that *something* could harm him, namely, for him to cease to 'will the Good'; and it is clear that this *may* befall him as a result of afflictions which he has to suffer" (p. 207). Prison, torture, death – it all would not harm him, because all he cares about is willing the good, but what if he stops willing the good? Is it not overconfidence or pride to assume that afflictions cannot break you? Winch (p. 207) concludes: "Thus, if he says 'nothing can harm me', there *is* still a predictive element in what he says; so he is not really entitled to add 'whatever happens' and if he cannot do this, then his utterance does not have the absolute character it was intended to have."

Without a predictive element someone may claim absolute safety. Whether the judges release him or condemn him to death, Socrates is not harmed, for he is still good. Whether he walks either in the light, or in the valley of the shadow of death, the Psalmist may claim he never fears any evil, for his fear does not depend upon his circumstances. His circumstances may change, but he will fear no evil, whatever happens, because God is with him. But what if God is no longer with him, or if the shadows of death do so engulf him that he himself turns away from God? What if Socrates is crushed by the torture his judges apply to him, what if he does break and no longer has the strength to continue being good? As soon as there is a prediction implied in saying 'nothing can harm me', the safety is no longer absolute, and isn't there always the prediction implied that the speaker will continue to have this particular perspective on life?

Winch thinks that this prediction is unavoidable and that, therefore, someone cannot legitimately say that he is absolutely safe *no matter what*. His safety would not be unconditional. He would only be safe on the condition that he does not lose his ability to view life from this perspective that it is worse for a man to do than to suffer wrong, this perspective that a good man cannot be harmed. In his doctoral dissertation, Andrew Douglas Gaff (2007, p. 55) concludes: "Winch's final acknowledgement is that even patience can be overwhelmed by affliction. In the end it is possible for the good person to be harmed – even while adopting the attitude of patience, the good person is not justified in proclaiming they cannot be harmed 'whatever happens.' What could harm the good person is that she ceases to will the Good." And, therefore, there is no other option left then to admit that the safety is never absolute, never 'no matter what': "Even Winch acknowledges there is

nothing absolute in this protection. The blow can be too hard and shatter the sense that willing the Good gave my action in the first place" (p. 56). The person who thinks she experiences being absolutely safe, must be confused, for her safety can be lost: by her losing her goodness, which would make her vulnerable to harm again.

D.Z. Phillips (1992, p. 275), in an article discussing a related paper by Winch on 'Ethical Reward and Punishment,' agrees with Winch on this point: "Winch is right to identify a predictive element in the moral patience he elucidates. Socrates, after all, makes the prediction explicit: 'I am sure that you would see me facing my fate with serenity.' Winch is also right to point out that this agent perspective may be destroyed by affliction." By saying that a good man cannot be harmed, Socrates already implied the prediction he makes later that he will continue to patiently will the good, whereas he should not have made that prediction. Even someone like Socrates cannot know that he will not be broken, so he should have said something like 'A good man cannot be harmed, except by losing his wish to be good.' Only now, after his life has been completed, we can say that Socrates was really never harmed. Someone's life needs to be complete to be able to say such a thing, so it has to be a spectator's judgment and can never be someone's own.

Mikel Burley (2010, p. 88), in his discussion of the idea of absolute safety in Winch and Wittgenstein, agrees with Phillips on this point, summarizing it as follows: "One certainly cannot say of *oneself* that one is immune to moral harm, since as long as one is alive and able to speak, one continues to be susceptible not merely to worldly harms but to the moral harm of falling short of virtue as well." Absolute safety can only be ascribed to someone by someone else after someone's life is completed. Wittgenstein may feel 'I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens,' but the part of 'whatever happens' is not really justified for he may lose the patience that he experiences at that time. Someone may feel absolutely safe in the arms of Jesus, but, in truth it can only be said after someone died that someone *was* safe in the arms of Jesus. This seems to be a serious problem for making sense of the experiences of feeling absolutely safe, but other perspectives on these are possible.

Lance Ashdown (1995, p. 165), for example, rightly notes that "The problem is that both Winch and Phillips fail to see any other use for the first-person expression 'I am absolutely safe' other than that of a prediction of patience." Whereas Ashdown does find another use for this expression, namely in Paul claiming that "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Phil 4:11-13). Here, Paul is not predicting his own patience but entrusting himself to God. Ashdown (p. 166) paraphrases him saying: "Yes, I am pure, but the purity is of God, not me." Paul's perspective on life through which he can be content in any and every situation, is not his own, but is God's gift, and if he loses this perspective later in life, that must be God's will just as well. Here, Ashdown (p. 169) summarizes: "'I am absolutely safe' is the expression of freedom in the face of the radical uncertainty of life; or, to put it differently, his freedom from the need to have his life turn out a certain way is precisely the absoluteness of his safety." The fact that there is no prediction involved makes the statement independent of what happens in the future and in that sense absolute. Part of the meaning of 'I am absolutely safe', according to Ashdown, is that someone takes everything as it is whatever way it is, including the future. He (p. 166) states: "Both Winch and Phillips see 'I am absolutely safe' as a commitment to being in a particular way in the future regardless of what that future brings. What I am suggesting is that it is a *willingness* to accept whatever comes that gives the safety its absolute character – not the belief that one will act a certain way next week or next year." Someone who claims to be absolutely safe, is not making a prediction about oneself, but expresses a willingness to approach whatever may happen in a particular way. Whether or not someone may turn out to be strong enough to live up to that willingness or commitment, is another matter. Ashdown continues to describe a non-religious person who claims absolute safety without prediction as well, although this person turns out to be extremely austere and Ashdown (p. 171) admits that "she may be judged as cold and unfeeling." In the third section I will return to the problems involved in that, but, for now, Ashdown's emphasis on willingness and

commitment points out the direction for solving the puzzle of how the feeling of absolute safety does not need to imply an invalid prediction.

In his article on 'Can a Good Man be Harmed?' Winch fails to consider the question to what it commits someone to make such a statement, whereas in the article on 'Ethical Reward and Punishment' he (1972, p. 226) does do so with respect to the statement 'No crime goes unpunished': "We must try to understand, that is, exactly what such a judgement commits its author to." He (p. 226) continues: "There is an extremely simple short answer to this question: namely, that one who believes that all wrong-doing is punished is committed in all cases to pitying wrongdoers, not only when they are subsequently visited by worldly misfortunes (including pangs of remorse) but also, and even more especially, when they seem to have escaped any consequences of their crimes." The meaning of the statement is not in any implied prediction about what will happen in the future, but in 'exactly what such a judgement commits its author to.' 'No crime goes unpunished' is not a prediction about what will happen to particular offenders, but saying it does commit someone to something, namely to feel sorry for whoever has done wrong – however difficult this may be. Had Winch used the same approach towards the statement 'I am absolutely safe,' he would not have had the problems with invalid predictions that force him to leave his central question in 'Can a Good Man be Harmed?' unanswered. Winch should have asked: to what does the experience of feeling absolutely safe commit its author to?

Using this question in trying to make sense of the experiences of feeling absolutely safe, it becomes clear that to live in the assurance that a good man cannot be harmed does not commit someone to the belief that he or she will never lose that conviction. In fact, it commits this person to *not* committing to that belief – to not worrying about whether one will be able to hold on to that perspective. This person takes life as it comes, whatever happens. One is committed to not to worry about losing this perspective, which is something very different from being committed to the prediction that one will not lose it. This does not mean that this person is insecure about whether he or she will continue to hold on to the conviction, but the issue of losing it or not, is simply not on someone's mind in that way.

There are interesting similarities here to the promise people make in marriage. Camilla Kronqvist (2011, p. 650) in 'The Promise That Love Will Last' discusses the "presupposition that the sense of our promises to love is dependent on our ability to make predictions." People promise each other that they will love each other forever. How can they do that? As Kronqvist (p. 651) states: "Reflecting on the break-ups of other people's relationships we might ask, what sets our love apart? What protects us from harm?" Everybody knows that marriages often end in divorce. How could people know that their love is different, that their love is going to last? Well, they cannot know this. Harm may come to everyone's marriage. However, the promise that someone will love someone else forever is not a prediction either.

Kronqvist (p. 653) argues that, instead: "My promise to love you is not a conclusion about the probability of my continuing to act and respond to you in certain ways in the future, drawn from observations of myself." It is not the prediction that this love will not be harmed. "Rather I mark the perspective against which I understand, and want others, and especially you as the one to whom I make the promise, to understand my actions as well as my feelings at present and in the future. I am expressing my *trust* in you and my *willingness* that our relationship continues" (p. 653). During marriage people do not predict that this love will beat the odds and last forever, but they dedicate themselves to their love. Maybe over time the love slips away, but in their marriage vows they have committed themselves to regret it if that happens. Since predictions come with estimates and probabilities, and the marriage vow does not, in making a promise to love someone forever, one is not making a prediction. As Kronqvist (p. 655) states: "promises are constitutive of the meaning my actions have. It is against the background of my promise that it is meaningful to describe what I do as either keeping a promise or breaking it." The promise to love someone forever changes not so much what will happen itself, but the *meaning* of whatever happens afterwards: losing love would become breaking a promise. Someone made a promise and now this person is guilty of breaking that promise. The promise to love someone forever does not involve an estimate about the risk that someone's

love will die – however high or low. In fact, not thinking about one's relationship in terms of risk and vulnerability is part of what people commit themselves to. Kronqvist (p. 660) argues: "The *perspective of love* is characterized by my not thinking of my relationships in terms of risks, exposure and vulnerability, especially not of my own." Someone takes responsibility for continuing to love, and wants to be blamed if one stops doing so, irrespective of what overpowering risks or outside forces did play a role. Promising to love someone is not making factual or hypothetical statements – neither about the present, nor about the future – but it is to present, as Kronqvist (p. 662) states, "an *absolute* perspective on our life with other people, which itself provides the background for what we come to think of as good and possible in our life in the first place." It is an absolute perspective because it is not relative to the facts, but it is the framework within which facts are seen. In committing ourselves to that perspective people vow that, now and in the future, they will see their actions from that perspective, and request others to see them from that perspective as well.

The promise to love someone forever changes the character of things that happen afterwards: it may be the same things that would have happened otherwise, but now they are either keeping the promise or breaking it. In the promise people expresse the background against which they want their actions and feelings to be understood by themselves and by others, now and in the future. As Yaniv Iczkovits (2012, p. 183 n., quoting Akeel Bilgrami) explains: "Standing up to a commitment is not accounted for by the actual deed, that is, the actual fulfilment of the commitment, but rather, by seeing a failure to stand up to the commitments as an occasion for 'self-criticism and for trying to do better to act so as to fulfil her commitment'." A commitment is not a prediction – not even a prediction about what one will do in the future, but presents a perspective from which one wishes one's future acts to be judged. In another context Winch (1958, p. 50) comments on the commitment involved in using a slip of paper as a bookmark: it commits someone to start reading at that place in the book later on, but "this does not mean that he must necessarily *actually* so use it in the future (though that is the paradigm case); the point is that if he does not, some special explanation will be called for, such as that he forgot, changed his mind, or got tired of the book." Commitment provides the perspective from which to judge future actions: actions may still be different, but, if they are, that requires a special explanation or – in more important cases – self-criticism and remorse.

Likewise to believe that a good man cannot be harmed does not commit someone to a prediction about whether one will be able to remain good in the future, but it does commit someone to guilt and regret if one happens to lose this goodness. It provides the background against which someone wants to measure oneself and want to be measured by others. The conviction that a good man cannot be harmed expresses a commitment to a particular conception of harm, and often also of suffering, punishment, reward, happiness, blessedness, etcetera. That other conception of all of these concepts is the perspective that this person adopts in how someone looks at the world: a good man cannot be harmed, it is better to suffer than to inflict suffering, no crime goes unpunished, even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, nothing whatever can do a Christian any hurt, under His wings I am safely abiding, etc. These statements are not observations about the world which can be true or false, but they are descriptions of a particular way of looking at the world. They are not statements of fact, but statements that express a perspective. And this perspective commits someone to feel sorry for those who do evil, even if it turns out to be the person him- or herself who will become evil, and to refrain from predictions about the future – even one's own future. From this perspective the person ought to regret it and people ought to feel sorry for him or her, if it so happens that this person starts to fear evil at some point in the future. Someone does not predict what will happen or how one will react, but one places how one does react and will react in a particular perspective. 'I am absolutely safe' may look like a prediction, but when one considers to what this statement the author commits, it becomes clear that it implies a commitment to a perspective from which to judge whatever event may happen.

2. Impossible requirement?

Firstly, Peter Winch struggles with the possible prediction implied in claiming to be absolutely safe; secondly, he also wonders about the possible self-congratulatory character of claiming to be the good man who is absolutely safe. Is it possible to claim of oneself that one is a good person, or does such a person, even if he or she were really a good person, immediately stop being good by bragging or pride? Mikel Burley (2010, p. 85 n.) refers to this as a "performative contradiction": in the very act of saying it, someone contradicts him- or herself. D.Z. Phillips (1995, p. 276) compares this to a similar example: "There are cases where this is even more obvious. Ascriptions of humility come from spectators. 'I am the humblest of men' is a self-refuting remark." It is not very humble to call yourself humble.[1] The same applies to goodness or moral purity, according to Phillips (p. 276): "What I want to emphasise is that the character ascribed to such moral purity by others, is *not* part of the agent's perspective on his own deeds." Someone may say of someone else that she is absolutely safe because she is a good person, but no one can say of himself that he is absolutely safe no matter what happens, for that implies a self-refuting claim to moral purity concerning himself. If someone cannot say 'All will be well with me for I am a good man and a good man cannot be harmed' because it is a performative contradiction, does this imply that people cannot say 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil' or 'I am safe in the arms of Jesus' either?

Mikel Burley does not discuss these cases, but he does draw a sharp distinction between claims to being a good man who cannot be harmed and Wittgenstein's description of feeling absolutely safe. Burley (2010, p. 90) notes that for Socrates there is a direct link between his goodness and his being safe, and that "Winch assumes that, when Wittgenstein announces his feeling of absolute safety, he too is drawing a connection between invulnerability and virtuousness." This connection is what led to the problems of statements about such safety being self-refuting in the first place. Burley, however, notes that Wittgenstein nowhere explicitly makes a connection between being good and the absolute safety he discusses. All Wittgenstein mentions is "the experience of feeling *absolutely* safe," and the inclination to say "I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens." Later on in his *Lecture on Ethics*, when Wittgenstein (1993, p. 42) turns to the religious rendering of this experience, he speaks of "We feel safe in the hands of God." No moral or religious requirements are mentioned. Therefore, Burley (2010, p. 91) suggests: "In the case of the feeling of absolute safety, far from describing an experience that is conditional upon any state of one's moral character, it appears that Wittgenstein is alluding to something wholly *un*conditional, which (we may presume) is why he introduces it in the context of a discussion of 'absolute safety'." Burley distinguishes Wittgenstein's reference to safety from Socrates's, by pointing out that Wittgenstein's person who feels absolutely safe is not required to be a good man: he is not required to do or be anything at all. According to Burley (p. 91), the safety in question can only be absolute if it not only does not imply predictions about the future, but neither sets moral requirements: "If we take seriously Wittgenstein's use of the term 'absolutely' here – and he does, after all, italicize this term in the expression '*absolutely* safe' – then we should reject the assumption that absolute safety, in Wittgenstein's sense, does depend on moral character." And Burley (p. 93) concludes: "Rather than associating the feeling of safety with an understanding of oneself as good and virtuous, Wittgenstein instead associates it with the feeling that one is in the hands of a supremely benevolent God." A moral (or religious) requirement would diminish the absoluteness of the feeling of safety, so, in Burley's interpretation of Wittgenstein, there are no longer any requirements.

Burley's exegesis of Wittgenstein is based upon the fact that Wittgenstein does not mention any moral or religious requirements and upon Wittgenstein's emphasis on 'absolute.' This second point, however, is problematic. In a critique of Winch, Rush Rhees (1990, p. 185) observes: "The 'absolute' in that phrase of the *Lecture* [*on Ethics*] is the same as in 'absolute value' [in the

[1] As was done, for example, by US President Donald Trump, claiming that "I'm much more humble than you would understand" (https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/07/18/donald-trump-is-way-more-humble-than-you-could-possibly-understand/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.08fa61932cc1).

Tractatus]. Wittgenstein soon gave up using it." Rhees (p. 187) rightly criticizes Winch for not paying attention to the context in which Wittgenstein spoke of absolute safety: "What had kept ethics, i.e. absolute value, and the world of facts apart had been his idea of a strict logical form of what can be said." So 'absolute' for Wittgenstein at this stage of his philosophical development means something like 'not expressible as a fact and therefore not expressible in language proper.' Wittgenstein soon gave up this austere *Tractatus*-picture of language, and the use of the word 'absolute' along with it. Rhees (p. 187 f.) continues: "When he saw the confusions in this, it was possible to look at the ways in which people do speak of 'good' and 'bad' in the course of their lives; and also at the ways in which we may speak of 'moral issues' and 'moral problems' without those special words appearing." Rhees' comments make Burley's exegesis of Wittgenstein questionable; however, in the context of this article exegesis of Wittgenstein is not the point.

Even if Wittgenstein had a very specific, limited perspective on 'absolute' at the time he wrote about 'absolute safety', looking at the ways in which people do speak a different and more widely acceptable meaning may be given to the phrase 'absolute' as well. Above it has been discussed how Lance Ashdown made explicit Winch and Phillips's implicit interpretation of 'absolute' as referring to the fact that there is no prediction involved, which makes the statement independent of what happens in the future. Burley adds to this the interpretation that to be absolute there can be no preconditions either, no untenable moral or religious requirements. Despite the fact that it is probably not what Wittgenstein meant in this instance, it is a valid use of the phrase 'absolute' in 'absolute safety' to take it to mean something like 'unconditional'. As I (Kroesbergen 2018, p. 17) argued elsewhere: "Every context presupposes […] absolute concepts. […] These concepts refer to things that do not exist at any particular time or place, but as concepts they are present within the context. […] Absolute concepts derive their meaning not from what is found in our contexts, but from how people look at what is found in our contexts." The 'absolute safety' is such an absolute concept in that sense that it is not contingent upon contingent, particular circumstances, but provides a framework to look at those circumstances. As long as there are conditions attached to the safety, it is not truly absolute. However, from the fact that "one's immunity to harm [. . .] is not contingent upon one's own moral character," as Burley (2010, p. 93) puts it, it does not yet follow that this invulnerability does not have a moral dimension.

More seriously questionable from the point of view of this article than the point about the meaning of Wittgenstein's 'absolute,' is Burley's claim (p. 91) that the notion of invulnerability or absolute safety is "detached from that of moral integrity or goodness." The fact that being morally or religiously good is not a precondition for the experience of feeling absolutely safe does not mean that this kind of experience does not have a moral aspect at all. Without falling back into the self-congratulating and self-refuting declaration to be a good man and therefore invulnerable, I would argue that there is a moral *commitment* that is part of feeling absolutely safe.

In a footnote Burley quotes an anonymous reviewer who pointed out that he failed to discuss grace. The reviewer stated: "What makes any person invulnerable in an absolute sense is grace that operates in all circumstances. For grace is available at all times to all persons as long as they surrender themselves to it. So there is not boasting involved in saying 'My safety lies in God's grace. We all need grace, and I most of all'" (p. 91 n.). In a similar way Ashdown pointed out the importance of grace in discussing the example of Paul in Philippians 4 quoted above where Paul says he has learned to be content in all circumstances. Ashdown (1995, p. 166) comments that Paul here is "recognizing what it means to be both high and low; he can make sense of the world's perspective on his actions. His purity consists in his ability to see his moral successes and failures *sub specie aeternitatis*." Paul does not need to be good before he may safe in the hands of God, but, as far as he is good, he praises God for it rather than himself: it is God's grace that strengthens him. His goodness is not a condition for being content in whatever state he is – he goes through moral successes and failures, so he is not self-congratulating – but Paul ascribes all moral purity that he happens to possess to God. It would be odd to conclude from this that he is now *indifferent* towards how he fares morally. Of course he is not indifferent towards his moral successes and failures. He wishes to be good, he wishes to have faith, although always too often he will find himself needing to pray as

the father of the boy with an evil spirit in Mark 9:24: “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!,” or as Paul says himself: “I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For I do not the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do – this I keep doing” (Romans 7:18-19). Grace allows someone to recognize both his moral successes and failures, without falling prey to Burley’s performative contradiction, and also without falling prey to indifference towards one’s moral character.

“I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens” is the statement that Wittgenstein gives as an example of an ethical experience in his *Lecture on Ethics*. This is the statement about which Burley claims that it is detached from moral integrity and goodness. However, if we ask, to what someone commits him- or herself who says that one is absolutely safe, it would be strange not to include at least a *willingness* to be good. The invulnerability referred to in this experience is not a licence to throw all moral considerations out of the window. Someone cannot have the experience of feeling absolutely safe and then continue saying ‘So now I can do whatever I like, for nobody can stop me anyhow!’ This person must want to do good. One feels embraced by a goodness – Burley (2010, p. 93) expresses this by saying that you feel that you are “in the hands of a supremely benevolent God” – and it would be self-contradictory to not want to be good and benevolent in response oneself. In claiming absolute safety, people are not congratulating themselves on their goodness, but they do commit themselves to wanting to be good as far as grace allows them. The experience of feeling absolutely safe is not detached from morality, rather a particular morality is implied, although Burley is right to emphasize that this morality does not fulfil the function of a requirement. So, how is this feeling of absolute safety related to morality?

Martin Luther who claimed that nothing whatever can do a Christian any hurt, coined the phrase ‘simul justus et peccator’, indicating that the Christian always at the same time is both righteous and a sinner. The Christian’s justification does not rest upon the condition that someone stops being a sinner, but one should wish to stop sinning and wish to work for the good, while acknowledging how small one’s own contribution is: all good that someone actually does, is from grace. The commitment to wishing to do good without making grace in any way conditional upon actually doing good, is illustrated in Luther’s exegesis of Psalm 127:1: “Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain.” Luther (1962) distinguishes between the building of the Lord and the labouring of the builders. The builders should labour as good and as hard as they can, but whether their work will be successful, whether it is actually building a house, is not within their control, so they should leave that part to God. The result of actually building is in God’s hands and the builders should leave it there, they should not worry about it. They should focus on working well, on doing that what is within their power, as soon as they start to think about the results they overstep their boundaries and usurp the role of God. If they have worked well, they have played their part and the rest should be left in the hands of God.

Reaching goals is outside of a human being’s control, so one should leave that to God, just try to do right whatever the consequences may be. A person can only be free from harm, if one gives up caring about reaching any goal. Job and Paul, for example, are to be considered happy despite all the suffering they had to endure. They cared about something else. And the brothers of Joseph and Judas are not to be praised, despite the important roles they played in God’s salvation history. If someone does something good, but, unexpectedly, the results are a disaster, this person has done well nonetheless. If someone does something bad, but God turns it into something good, one should be ashamed of oneself.

If someone has a particular goal or ambition, people can influence this person by either promising him or her that goal or threatening to take it away. Having goals or ambitions makes someone vulnerable to harm, and it makes someone vulnerable to corruption as well. Someone will no longer be concerned with simply doing the right thing, but now one is also concerned with pleasing these people who can give or take away one’s goal. This person has become – what Kierkegaard calls: ‘double-minded’ and are no longer fully concentrating on what is good, no longer purely wishing the good.

From the perspective of a good man cannot be harmed or absolute safety, someone should let go of all goals and ambitions, but, even if someone wants to, one may not always be able to live up to this perspective, and in as far as one does it is from grace, so it can also be phrased in a more paradoxical way: someone's ambition should be to let go of one's ambitions. The experience of feeling absolutely safe does not depend upon any untenable requirement to be morally or religiously good, but this experience does come with a commitment: the commitment to wish to be good as far as grace allows that person. If people sing that they are safe in the arms of Jesus, they cannot therefore do whatever they like; they can only feel safe in the arms of Jesus if they wish to do good, or rather, to be an instrument for good used by grace, for they should even leave being good into the hands of God. The commitment in feeling absolutely safe is to wish to surrender oneself to God's goodness.

3. Inhuman detachment?

In an attempt to make sense of the experience of feeling absolutely safe, different scholars painted a picture of people with such an experience as being completely detached from the world in an almost inhumanly cold way. As mentioned above, Lance Ashdown, for example, introduces a hypothetical person he calls 'Jean.' He (1995, p. 170) says about her: "Rather than saying things such as 'Once I get a promotion, things will be much better', she is inclined to say 'I take each day as it comes' and 'Why worry about what you have no control over?'" Jean is content with her life and accepts whatever comes her way. She is absolutely safe, since whatever hurt may come her way she will simply embrace it as it is. She is not concerned with whether she will be in a particular way in the future or not. There is no prediction in her feeling absolutely safe: "In fact, the absence of this sort of self-preoccupation constitutes the safety in question," Ashdown (p. 171) says. Jean does not worry about herself, she does not worry about what may or may not happen to her in the future, and that is it what makes her safe in a non-predictive way. There is no prediction in this kind of absolute safety, but the commitment to a particular perspective – taking every day as it comes – and there are no untenable requirements, but Jean surrenders herself to whatever comes her way without expectations and ambitions. In many ways, Jean fits the description of absolute safety that has been described here so far, and yet her safety does not seem to be the safety of Psalm 23 or 'Safe in the arms of Jesus'. Apart from the religious aspect, something else is missing in Jean's kind of safety as well.

Ashdown describes how Jean is admired by many for her calmness and groundedness. She seems to be free from worries. Yet other people around her may respond less positively to Jean: "Perhaps she will be criticized for lack of ambition, or maybe for indifference to the concerns of her peers," Ashdown (p. 171) notes. Jean is so free from concern about the future that she appears indifferent concerning a lot of the things that matter to the people around her. Ashdown (p. 171) continues: "she may be judged as cold and unfeeling, given her calmness and mild amusement when others become upset with her." Jean does not make predictions about what will or will not happen, but expresses a willingness to accept whatever comes her way. Now, this may be a way to be absolutely safe, but it makes her seem cold and unfeeling as well.

Does Jean have no feeling? Is she really alive? Is this kind of inhuman detachment the price that one necessarily has to pay to experience the kind of absolute safety that is being analysed in this article? Does being more free than others – remember that Martin Luther's description of absolute safety also derived from his tract *On the Freedom of a Christian* – estrange a person from others? Does this safety make it impossible for someone to understand one's fellow's emotions? Does not having ambitions imply not having any feelings about the future either? Ashdown (p. 171) states: "The safety of Jean is her willingness to deal with the events of the day with calmness and resolution. That freedom, meeting the contingencies of life with open arms, *is* the safety." Does this freedom also set her apart from the people around her? Can she still love them, if she meets whatever

contingency not only she but also they may face, with open arms? Is Jean's calmness not actually plain coldness? Is coldness the price one has to pay for the experience of feeling absolute safe?

About ten years after Peter Winch, Antony Duff wrote an article presenting his interpretation of Socrates' claim that 'a good man cannot be harmed' under the title 'Must a Good Man be Invulnerable?' (1976). Like Winch and the other authors discussed in this article, Duff immediately dismisses attempts to justify morality on what you get out of it. Duff (1976, p. 300) states: "this is not an impossible attempt to provide prudential reasons for moral commitment but, rather, an attempt to spell out the implications of a genuine and nonprudential commitment." Even if being good makes someone invulnerable that should never be the reason to be good. Someone's being moral cannot rest upon prior ideas about what brings well-being, but, rather the other way around, someone's ideas of what counts as 'well-being' rests upon someone's moral stance. Therefore, so Duff argues, if someone is invulnerable – whereas in this unpredictable, contingent world harm can never be excluded beforehand – then what someone wants must be beyond the world. If someone wants something within the world, the person may get it or maybe not, therefore, if someone claims to be safe – even absolutely safe – then what this person wants must lie outside the world.

If, however, what someone wants lies outside the world, whereas one's body is inside the world, then the answer to the question 'Can a good man be harmed?' cannot be 'no' – nor 'yes' for that matter – but the question should be counted as irrelevant. It is not a question about something that a person wants, what the person wants is beyond what the question is referring to. Duff (p. 301) gives the example of a doctor who dedicates his life to helping people – "he is living the life he wants to lead and doing what matters most to him" – and Duff (p. 301) asks whether he can be called 'happy': "within the world as it is, the doctor cannot be said to be unhappy with his life; the point is, rather that the categories of happiness and unhappiness are irrelevant to him." Happiness and unhappiness do not matter, as harm and no harm would not matter, not because this doctor is invulnerable, but rather because he does not care about those things, what he cares about is doing the good. Duff (p. 302) concludes: "He must be detached from his own suffering and from that of others; but his detachment must not be such that he is callous and unpitying toward the suffering of others." His basic attitude must be detachment, with one exception, namely in so far as attachment is needed for what he really wants: helping others, doing good. Duff (p. 302) continues: "It is this notion of detachment which seems to be central to much of what Simone Weil has to say about man's proper relationship to this world." And Duff continues by expounding his interpretation of Weil's concept of detachment as the proper reading of Socrates' 'a good man cannot be harmed' or absolute safety. He (p. 302) sets out to "clarify some of the ways in which the good man, if he is to be invulnerable, must be detached from his own sufferings and from those of others."

Duff (p. 302) begins by noting that the morality of such an invulnerable good man "must be strictly one of intentions, not of practical success; [. . .] that he *will* the Good, that he set himself, with all his skill and effort, to do what is required of him." The good man should limit himself to labouring as good and as hard as he can, but should leave building the house to God. He should be without particular goals and ambitions. Duff (p. 305) summarizes: "The Good that he serves lies beyond the affairs of this world and beyond his own practical success or failure; his commitment and his moral well-being lie in willing and striving for the Good, not in achieving the practical goals at which he aims." Like Paul the good man sees both moral successes and moral failures from the same perspective, his safety lies beyond that, he is in the hands of God whatever happens.

Duff (p. 308) continues: "He must 'die to the world,' not just by abandoning self-seeking goals and material aspirations, not just by detaching himself from his own worldly desires and ambitions, but also by detaching himself from those relationships which are so central to most human lives and moralities." As long as a person cares about other people, one can be harmed through them, and Duff (p. 308) quotes Weil on "the need to 'seek solitude,' to do without friendship." And Duff (p. 309) takes the argument even further: the invulnerable good man does not care about himself, he does not care about others, all he cares about is the good, he does not even care about his doing the good: "what he must believe is not that he cannot be harmed but, rather that no harm to him, not even his own moral destruction, will matter. He must be detached even from his own moral

survival." Such a person's own being good or doing good should not even matter to him: "To try to decide for myself whether or when it is right to do evil that good may follow is again to fall into a kind of egocentricity or arrogance" (p. 310 f.). And Duff (p. 311) adds: "I think that this is the force of what Weil says about Necessity and Obedience: 'We should not take one step, *even in the direction of what is good*, beyond that to which we are irresistibly impelled by God, and this applies to action, word, and thought."

Duff's description of the invulnerable good man seems to go even beyond the coldness of Ashdown's Jean. Duff's portrayal is of someone who is completely out of this world, completely detached in an almost inhuman way. Is such an ice-cold breaking down of every connection with the world and its concerns really necessary to claim the experience of feeling absolutely safe? This seems unlikely. If someone wishes to stretch things, Luther's argument for the eminent freedom of a Christian and Socrates' show of dignity in front of his judges might be compatible with such a coolness, but the emotion in songs like Psalm 23 and 'Safe in the arms of Jesus' definitely does not fit such inhuman detachment.

There is a commitment in feeling absolutely safe. Someone cannot feel it and say 'So now I can do whatever I like,' but neither can someone feel it and say 'So now I don't care about anything anymore.' This person must want to do good, he or she commits to that, and someone must not want to do good in a cold, unfeeling way, he or she commits to that as well: to care, to love. When a person feels safe in the hands of a supremely benevolent God, it would be self-contradictory to not want to be good and also benevolent in response for oneself. In claiming absolute safety, people are not congratulating themselves on their goodness, but they do commit themselves to wanting to be good including the feelings of care and love as well, of course, as far as grace allows it to them.

Duff uses his interpretation of Simone Weil to paint the picture of the invulnerable good man as being detached from everything in the world in an inhuman way. Peter Winch in his book on Simone Weil notes this tendency towards extreme detachment in Weil's work as well, but he (1989, p. 204) balances this by other threads in her work such at the emphasis on love and attention: "For Simone Weil love and attention are closely connected; perhaps the latter is even a form of the first." Winch (p. 204, quoting her London notebook) quotes Weil stating that "Real love wants a real object, and to know the truth of it, and to love it in its truth as it really is," commenting: "That is very far from 'detaching' love from the things of this world." The things and the people around us require true, genuine and full attention and love. This implies that this love and attention are not instrumental in any way either. In Duff's first example the good doctor has an attitude of detachment, except in so far as attachment is needed for helping others. Weil would not consider this as real attachment, real love or real attention: the doctor really cares about doing good and his love for his patients is only a means towards that end. In Weil's opinion people should not think about themselves when they help others, they should not even think about doing good, they should not even think about God: "There are times when thinking of God separates us from him," Weil (1951, p. 93) says in *Waiting on God*. If someone genuinely wants to help, our full and complete attention should be on those people in front of us. Being good is not to be found in a cool, inhuman detachment from the world, but it *implies* true love and attention.

In *Gravity and Grace* Simone Weil distinguishes two types of courage: someone may become courageous by suggestion, by telling oneself again and again that one should not fear anything and that one has to have courage, and someone may become courageous in a different way. Weil (2002, p. 99 f.) writes: "A sensitive person who by suggestion becomes courageous hardens himself; often he may even, by a sort of savage pleasure, amputate his own sensitivity. Grace alone can give courage while leaving the sensitivity intact, or sensitivity while leaving the courage intact." Courage that is acquired by suggestion is a courage that bit by bit excludes feelings and sensitivity. Someone works hard to stop oneself from feeling anything. But another kind of courage is possible, the courage that is given to someone from beyond, given by grace, and what makes this kind of courage special is that it leaves the sensitivity intact. Such a person is without fear, but not because this person is without feelings: one still feels everything and yet one feels absolutely safe. But how does this courage by grace work?

D.Z. Phillips (1986, p. 88) reflects upon this perspective of grace, explaining that: “Acceptance of all things from God’s hands may be thought, in these days of talk of activism, to involve a resigned quietism.” Someone might think that to surrender everything to God, thrusting oneself into the arms of Jesus and feeling absolutely safe, is a withdrawal from the world, is a withdrawal from what goes on around us, but, Phillips (p. 88) continues: “This is not so, for seeing God and not the self at the centre involves combating the many styles, relationships and institutions where this truth is denied and where men are related to each other in different forms of self-appropriation and exploitation of others.” Feeling safe in the hands of God, someone does not stop caring about what goes on in the world, on the contrary such a person cares even more. Yet, such a person is also are aware that: “Such endeavours, however, will not be totally successful. They may show little sign of getting anywhere. At such times, the kind of religious believer I am talking about will be sustained by the religious patience in the name of which he acts. He will realise that in all his strivings the outcome too is in God’s hands” (p. 88). The one who feels absolutely safe leaves everything in the hands of God, but instead of giving up caring about the world, it implies a commitment to care even more about the world. The safety of being in the hands of God and caring about what goes on in the world belong together.

Merold Westphal recognises this same combination of safety and caring in Kierkegaard’s description of the true believer. Such a ‘knight of faith’ makes two movements. First, the knight of faith resigns from the world: “Resignation is the end of hope, the loss of a future. [. . .] But resignation’s loss of hope and a future is not despair. It is the withdrawal of the self out of time and into eternity” (Westphal 2014, p. 33). This is the cold, inhuman detachment painted by Ashdown and Duff: someone withdraws oneself from the world. “It takes purely human courage to renounce the whole temporal realm in order to gain eternity,” Kierkegaard (1985, p. 77) explains. This ‘human courage’ is the courage by suggestion, by trying hard enough, that Simone Weil speaks of. But Abraham, as Kierkegaard’s knight of faith, does not stop there. The knight of faith by grace receives the courage that leaves the sensitivity intact.

Second, Westphal (2014, p. 33) continues, “Abraham believes, ‘by virtue of the absurd,’ that he will get Isaac back. The promise of God keeps hope alive. Abraham still has a future.” First, he had the courage to let go of hope in setting out to sacrifice his only son Isaac; second, he holds on to hope nonetheless. Kierkegaard (1985, p. 65) observes: “I would have been at a loss had I got Isaac back again. What Abraham found the easiest of all would be hard for me, to find joy again in Isaac!” The hardest part is not giving up Isaac – however hard that may be – the hardest part is when someone has given up Isaac to be able to receive him back. If someone gathered all one’s strength to give him up, how can such a person live with him again? But Abraham does do this. Westphal (2014, p. 35) notes that throughout Kierkegaard “puts great emphasis on the worldliness of Abraham. He does not withdraw from time to eternity, from the body to the soul.” The cold detached good man withdraws from the world, but the knight of faith does not. Kierkegaard (1985, p. 68 ff.) describes how from the outside he is hardly distinguishable from any ordinary man: “He looks just like a tax-gatherer. [. . .] This man takes pleasure, takes part, in everything, and whenever one catches him occupied with something his engagement has the persistence of the worldly person whose soul is wrapped up in such things. [. . .] to him finitude tastes just as good to him as to one who has never known anything higher.” He has risen far beyond the earthly realm in courage, but it is a courage which leaves the sensitivity intact: “He belongs altogether to the world; no *petit bourgeois* belongs to it more” (p. 68). If there is a difference, it seems like he cares even more than any ordinary man: “he has this sense of being secure to take pleasure in it [the finite things], as though it were the most certain thing of all” (p. 70). He has this security, this absolute safety that has been discussed in this article. The true believer has courage with sensitivity fully intact, he experiences safety without feeling any less love and care for all around him. In fact, the feeling safe commits him to that love and care.

In the detective series *Waking the Dead* policeman Boyd finds his estranged grownup son Luke in a shack about to take a shot of heroine. His son assumes that his father will try to stop him, but Boyd says: ‘It is your call, son, I love you no matter what.’ Luke responds: ‘So you don’t care if

your son is a junkie?' In response to which Boyd has no choice but to answer: 'Of course I care!' This is the absoluteness of 'no matter what' but with the sensitivity intact. In the same way, we may imagine Abraham telling Isaac at the foot of mount Moriah: 'Whatever happens, know that I love you, son,' Isaac responding: 'So you don't care if I die on the altar,' and Abraham assuring him: 'Of course I care.' The caring is an integral part of the loving someone whatever happens. Likewise we may imagine God telling the poet who wrote Psalm 23 'I love you no matter what, and I do care, I want you to love those around you as well.' Coldness and withdrawal from the world do not suit someone who feels safe in the arms of Jesus. In the experience of feeling absolute safe, there is the commitment to feel care and love as well.

Conclusion

From Psalm 23 to Martin Luther's claim that nothing whatever can hurt a Christian, the experience of feeling safe even in the midst of trials and temptations seems to be a central feature of the Christian faith. Different difficulties have been noted in making sense of such a feeling of absolute safety as it is present both within and outside the Christian tradition: is there not an invalid prediction involved, how about untenable moral or religious requirements that are implied, and is such a feeling not necessarily connected to an inhumanly cold detachment from the world and everyone within it? In this article I have argued that these difficulties disappear once, instead of using a direct way of interpreting statements of absolute safety, we consider to what someone commits oneself if one claims to feel absolutely safe. The commitment in feeling absolutely safe is not a commitment to a prediction about what will or will not happen in the future, but it is a commitment to understand and want others to understand one's actions in a particular light, the light of God being with someone so one needs to fear no evil even though one walks through the valley of shadow of death. The commitment in feeling absolutely safe is not presupposing any moral or religious achievements, but is to wish to surrender oneself to God's goodness with all one's moral successes and failures. And, finally, in the experience of feeling absolute safe, there is the commitment to feel care and love as well, as far as grace allows it to the person.

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