

Ludwig Wittgenstein and Lewis Carroll  
From Math and Humor

Recall Ludwig Wittgenstein's remark that a serious work in philosophy could be written that consisted entirely of jokes. He meant, of course, that "getting" certain jokes is possible if, and only if, one understands the relevant philosophical point. Let us now examine some of this "philosophical humor." George Pitcher (1966) has demonstrated some very interesting similarities between the philosophical writings of Wittgenstein himself and the work of Lewis Carroll. Both were concerned with nonsense, logical confusion, and language, although, as Pitcher notes, Wittgenstein was tortured by these things whereas Carroll was (at least in his writings) delighted by them. Pitcher cites many passages in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* as illustrating the type of joke Wittgenstein probably had in mind when he made the comment referred to above.

The following excerpts are representative of the many in Lewis Carroll that concern topics that Wittgenstein wrote about and that demonstrate a purposeful confusion of the logic of the situation.

1. She [Alice] ate a little bit, and said anxiously to herself, "Which way? Which way?" holding her hand on the top of her head to feel which way it was growing, and she was quite surprised to find that she remained the same size. [*Alice in Wonderland*, p.10]
  
2. "That is not said right," said the Caterpillar.  
"Not quite right. I'm afraid," said Alice timidly. "Some of the words have got altered."  
"It is wrong from beginning to end," said the Caterpillar decidedly, and there was silence for some minutes. [*Alice in Wonderland*, p.471]
  
3. "Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.  
"I do," Alice hastily replied; "at least-at least I mean what I say-that's the same thing, you know." "Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "Why, you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see!'" [*Alice in Wonderland*, pp. 68-69]
  
4. "Would you-be good enough," Alice panted out, after running a little further, "to stop a minute just to get one's breath again?" "I'm good enough," the King said, "only I'm not strong enough. You see, a minute goes by so fearfully quick. You might as well try to stop a Bandersnatch!" [*Through the Looking Glass*, pp. 242-4]
  
5. "It's very good jam," said the Queen.  
"Well, I don't want any to-day, at any rate."

"You couldn't have it if you did want it," the Queen said. "The rule is jam to-morrow and jam yesterday but never jam to-day."

"It must come sometimes to 'jam to-day,'" Alice objected.

"No, it can't," said the Queen. "It's jam every other day; to-day isn't any other day, you know."

"I don't understand you," said Alice. "It's dreadfully confusing." [*Through the Looking Glass*, p.206]

What do these examples have in common? As noted, they all betray some confusion about the logic of certain notions. One does not lay one's hand on top of one's head to see if one is growing taller or shorter (unless only one's neck is growing). One cannot recite a poem incorrectly "from beginning to end," since then one cannot be said to be even reciting that poem. (Wittgenstein was very concerned with criteria for establishing identity and similarity.) In the third quotation the Mad Hatter is presupposing the total independence of meaning and saying, an assumption that Wittgenstein shows leads to much misunderstanding. The fourth passage confuses the grammar of the word time with that of a word like train, and the fifth illustrates that the word today, despite some similarities, does not function as a date. Both these latter points were also discussed by Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein explains that "When words in our ordinary language have prima facie analogous grammars we are inclined to try to interpret them analogously; i.e. we try to make the analogy hold throughout." in this way we "misunderstand . . . the grammar of our expressions." These linguistic misunderstandings can be, as I have mentioned, either sources of delight or sources of torture depending on one's personality, mood, or intentions. Wittgenstein was concerned (tortured even) by the fact that a person does not talk about having a pain in his shoe even though he may have a pain in his foot and his foot is in his shoe. Carroll, had he thought of it, probably would have written of shoes so full of pain that they had to be hospitalized.

Open any book on analytic philosophy and you will find clarifying distinctions that, if utilized differently, could be the source of humor. The following pairs of phrases serve as examples of what I mean, "Going on to infinity" versus "going on to Milwaukee"; "honesty compels me" versus "my mother compels me"; "the present king of France is hairy" versus "the present president of the United States is hairy"; "an alleged murderer" versus "a vicious murderer"; "Have you stopped beating your wife?" versus "Have you voted for Kosnowski yet?" "before the world began" versus "before the game began." The first phrase in each case shares the same grammar as the second phrase, yet the logic (in a broad sense) of the two is quite different.

In fact, much of Wittgenstein and modern analytic philosophy in general has been concerned with unmisunderstanding (getting clear about) the logic and (surface) grammar of problematic terms (e.g., time, mind, rule, action, pain, reference) as well as with explicating and clarifying phrases such as the ones in the previous paragraph. Analytic philosophy can in a sense even be called linguistic therapy, and philosophers like Wittgenstein, Ryle, and Austin have devoted much effort and analysis to curing some of these linguistic diseases. Pitcher comments that Alice is a victim of the characters in her mad world of nonsense just as the philosopher is the victim of the nonsense he unknowingly utters. Wittgenstein (1956) writes, "The philosopher is the man who has to cure himself of many sicknesses of the understanding before he can

arrive at the notions of a sound human understanding. If in the midst of life we are in death, so in sanity we are surrounded by madness." In humor the anxiety induced by these misunderstandings as well as by more traditional philosophical concerns (God, death, choice) finds its release in laughter. (Compare Woody Allen and Kierkegaard, say, or the "humor" of Samuel Beckett.)