

## ***A Philosophical Joke Book?***

ABSTRACT: Norman Malcolm recalls: “Wittgenstein once said that a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist only of jokes.” While I have no doubt that such a work might constitute *good* philosophy, that such a work could be *serious* seems troubling. After all—is not levity the opposite of seriousness? In this paper, I analyze what Wittgenstein might have meant by this remark. To properly understand him on this point, one must take into account Wittgenstein's stated goals on the proper method and purpose of philosophy—which I argue is closely related to his views on humour. Throughout I tie together his very isolated and sparse remarks on humour, and come to an understanding of what humor is for Wittgenstein, and how it is related to his idiosyncratic view of philosophy.

### **I. What's so Funny about Wittgenstein?**

Hearing the title of this paper, I imagine that some members of the audience might be under the impression that it, itself, *is* a joke. As many are aware, Wittgenstein was a miserable and humorless man. For those that are not—by all means, read the Ray Monk biography<sup>1</sup>: Wittgenstein was always moping about and contemplating suicide. Nearly all biographical accounts of him agree that he was intolerant of facetiousness, and disliked small talk. For such an intense and serious man, there is not much concerning his personal attitude or temperament to talk about in this paper. Perhaps, then, Wittgenstein discussed humour? No, not really. A search for the word “humour” among his published writings and aphorisms garners only a handful of passages. So, one might wonder: what might prompt such an investigation? The goal of this paper is to explain an odd remark that Wittgenstein once made, which was handed down to us second-hand. Norman Malcolm, in his *Memoir*, tells us that Wittgenstein once said “a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes.”<sup>2</sup> The question of whether a such a book might be *good* does not trouble me so much. Although most philosophers who try to be humorous fall very far short of the mark, there are examples—Bertrand Russell and George Boolos are two that

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1 Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Penguin, 1991)

2 Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984), 27-8

immediately come to mind—who sprinkle serious work with witticisms. But how a philosophy text which consists “entirely of jokes” might yet be “*serious*” raises a number of questions in my mind. After all: isn’t seriousness the opposite—if not the enemy—of levity? I think the way to make sense of this remark is to come to terms with what the proper object and function of philosophy is for Wittgenstein. If the audience will provide me a little latitude, it is to this I must first turn.

## II. Wittgenstein on Philosophical Method

Wittgenstein's views on the function of philosophy are well-known. Consistent through his life, he thought that philosophy was valuable not for the *answers* it might provide, but rather because of the activity of thinking involved with the questions it asks. In the *Tractatus*, for example, Wittgenstein tells us that “philosophy is not a theory but an activity” (TLP 4.112). Also, in a similar vein, he tells us elsewhere in the *Philosophical Investigations* that “[i]f one tried to advance theses in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them” (PI §128). The goal of philosophy for Wittgenstein—not unlike his early analytic brethren—is not to *solve* philosophical problems, but to dis-solve them. That is, to show the ungroundedness of classical philosophical questions and how, in a certain sense, our supposed answers to these questions create often more problems than they solve. “Most of the propositions and question to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical,” he tells us in the *Tractatus*. “Consequently we cannot give any answer to questions of this kind, but can only point out that they are nonsensical” (TLP 4.003). Instead of providing answers, or devising elaborate theories about what lies beneath our linguistic practices, the positive function of philosophy for Wittgenstein is instead to lay open our these practices to investigation. In the *Philosophical Investigations*, he tells us:

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces

anything—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us. One might also give the name philosophy to what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions (PI §126).

Wittgenstein “puts everything before us” by demonstrating the diversity of our linguistic forms, and showing us how simple totalizing theories of linguistic meaning miss the mark. The problem with 'theories' of language, he thinks, is that they focus on finding a kind of forced the unity in our linguistic practices, rather than attempting to let them be seen in their inherent diversity. This, of course, is not a function of diversity in any essential way—but rather an essential diversity of function. Early on in the *Investigations*, he often compares words to tools:

Think of the tools in a tool-box: there is a hammer, pliers, a saw, a screw-driver, a rule, a glue-pot, glue, nails and screws.—The functions of words are as diverse as the functions of these objects. (And in both cases there are similarities.)

Of course, what confuses us is the uniform appearance of words when we hear them spoken or meet them in script and print. For their *application* is not presented to us so clearly. Especially when we are doing philosophy! (PI §11)

Imagine someone's saying: "All tools serve to modify something. Thus the hammer modifies the position of the nail, the saw the shape of the board, and so on."—And what is modified by the rule, the glue-pot, the nails? (PI §14)

Just as tools have discrete uses for a specific function, so also do words. And likewise, two distinct functions of language may not be comparatively analyzed. Throughout the *Philosophical Investigations*, he painstakingly lays each bare, showing each specific aspect of language to us in its own unique way, with its own unique capacity and limitations.

What is unique about Wittgenstein's view of philosophy is that it show us the errors with our philosophizing as such. Philosophy does not provide solutions to our questions, but rather should seek to question the questions themselves, so to speak. Since humor is itself a function of language unique from giving orders, reporting colors, telling stories, asking questions, etc., it can only be analyzed in its own way (PI §23). Our linguistic patterns are

themselves diverse activities, so it follows that humour, for Wittgenstein, is also unique function of language and must be analyzed differently than the various ways we are set to analyze language in general. But unfortunately this means that we cannot look to Wittgenstein for a totalizing theory of what makes something funny. There is no single reason why a joke is funny, but rather we must look at the variety of ways in which humor occurs.

### III. Humour and *Lebensformen*

Although linguistic expressions are diverse in their function, they share certain necessary criteria without which language would mean nothing to us at all. What Wittgenstein thinks underlies our linguistic practices are certain basic shared background conventions, which he calls “forms of life.” There are only a handful of passages where he uses the term in the *Philosophical Investigations*, but most commentators agree that it maintains a very important role in his analysis of language. Here are two key passages:

It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle.--Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others.—And to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life (§19).

Here the term "*language-game*" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. (§23)

It is tempting to think one of these “innumerable others” includes jokes. “Forms of life” are a necessary condition for language to signify as it does. Should counterfactually our forms of life have been radically different than they currently are, or two people did not share a certain shared form of life, then certain linguistic practices—as we understand them currently—would lack function. Or, certain linguistic functions as we currently understand them might attain a different role. Humour is a type of language game, just like any other. And so understanding a joke, in this same way, relies upon a certain shared background. Consider the following joke:

An experimental physicist performs an experiment involving two cats, and an inclined tin roof. The two cats are very nearly identical; same sex, age, weight, breed, eye and hair color.

The physicist places both cats on the roof at the same height and lets them both go at the same time. One of the cats fall off the roof first so obviously there is some difference between the two cats.

What is the difference? One cat has a greater mew.

It's a dreadful joke, but illustrates an important point. This joke may be humorous to a someone well versed with physics; but if one were not to know that the Greek letter "mu" is the symbol for the coefficient of friction, one would not see why it is humorous. (Or even if one were to know that, one still might not). A joke only is a joke when it is understood, and the understanding of it relies upon a common set of shared conventions and background assumptions, or forms of life.

In the collection of aphorisms published as *Culture and Value*—one of the few places where he explicitly addresses humour—he makes a telling remark:

Two people are laughing together, say at a joke. One of them has used certain somewhat unusual words and now they both break out into a sort of bleating. That might appear very extraordinary to a visitor coming from a quite different environment. Whereas we find it completely *reasonable*. (CV 78)

Likewise, elsewhere he asks us: "What is it like for people not to have the same sense of humour? They do not react properly to each other. It's as though there were a custom amongst certain people for one person to throw another a ball which he is supposed to catch and throw back; but some people, instead of throwing it back, put it in their pocket" (CV 83). This underlies the point made above. Understanding a joke relies upon "forms of life," and are as contingent upon them as anything else which is expressed in language.

#### **IV. The Familiar and the Uncanny**

But at the same time, even though a common background is *necessary* for the

understanding of a joke, it is certainly not *sufficient* for humour. Rather, as many investigators into the philosophy of humour have noted,<sup>3</sup> something is often funny due to a discontinuity between the narrative of the joke and the traditional responses within our form of life. Wittgenstein once said “Humour is not a mood but a way of looking at the world. So if it is correct to say that humour was stamped out in Nazi Germany, that does not mean that people were not in good spirits, or anything of the sort, but something much deeper and more important” (CV 78). I would like to understand “a way of looking at the world” as consistent with this understanding of humour. That is, the function of humor is to see what is ordinary as anything but ordinary.<sup>4</sup>

One particular example, which I believe illustrates this point, is banal humour. By this I mean cases wherein a joke is used so often that turns cliché. In this sense, it becomes stale and unfunny. Consider the old joke: “A man walked up to me on the street and said he hadn't had a bite all day—so I bit him.” The punchline to this joke is expected, it's too familiar to be funny. It is interesting to note in this context that one can make such a stale joke funny again by turning them back around, and making them unexpected again: “A man walked up to me on the street and said he hadn't had a bite all day—so *I gave him a ham sandwich.*” This illustrates something I think is important about humor. The latter turns on the unexpected, by giving a punchline different from what was expected. In doing so, although the joke results from not being a joke, in a strange way. It twists the cliché punchline become incongruous with our practices, strangely enough by being consistent with our practices. This is a type of conceptual humor, and not necessarily consistent with everyone's tastes. But this example, I believe, confirms the point made above about the necessity of humor and the interplay of the familiar and the uncanny.

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3 See, for example, Aristotle *Rhetoric* III, 2; Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* I, 1, 54; Henri Bergson “Laughter” *passim*.

4 I should note here that I do not think that incongruity is the only way that humour can occur. To do so would be to fall into the same trap which Wittgenstein explicitly warns us against.

## V. The Annoyance of a Good Example

Wittgenstein's later philosophy is marked by a particular methodology, which is often referred to as “therapeutic.” In the *Philosophical Investigations*, he likens philosophical problems to a “disease” (§593), which requires “treatment,” (§255) or “therapy” (§133). But he is also careful to point out that there is no single therapy for all philosophical ailments; rather there are many philosophical methods, “like different therapies” (§133). The point he is trying to make is that, for whatever ails you philosophically—whether it be propensity towards metaphysics (such a serious case of Platonism), or if there is something wrong with a person internally, such as one is suffering private pains, or has a beetle in one's box that needs to be removed—each specific trouble will require a different course of treatment, targeted to the character of the disease itself. The goal of philosophy for Wittgenstein, as I argue above, is to dissolve philosophical problems, to show their ungroundedness—and to resist the urge to feed the philosophical disease. “The real discovery,” he tells us, “is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to—The one that gives philosophy peace, so it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself in question” (§133).

Wittgenstein's philosophical style is idiosyncratic. He often argues by analogy, arguing by examples of the case to either confirm or disconfirm the general point he was trying to make. Often, it is by showing the absurdity of a parallel case that he, by *reductio*, intended to dismiss a point. Malcolm also recalls:

A curious thing, which I observed innumerable times, was that when Wittgenstein invented an example during his lectures in order to illustrate a point, he himself would grin at the absurdity of what he had imagined. But if any member of the class would chuckle, his expression would change to severity and he would exclaim in reproof, “No, no; I'm serious.”<sup>5</sup>

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5 Malcolm, op cit., 37

Malcolm glosses on this experience that “[t]he imagined events and circumstances were so odd and so far beyond the reach of natural possibility that he himself could not help being amused; yet the intention of his example, of course, was serious.”<sup>6</sup>

His use of examples is integral to his methodology. They are used to demonstrate the error of certain grammatical analogies that are liable to mislead one in doing philosophy. As I noted above, Wittgenstein opposed totalizing theories of language that intend to unify cases into a totalizing theory of linguistic usage. In the *Blue Book*, he tells us that “[t]he idea that in order to get clear about the meaning of a general term one had to find the common element in all its applications has shackled philosophical investigation; for it has not only led to no result, but also made the philosopher dismiss as irrelevant the concrete cases, which alone could have helped him understand the usage of the general term” (BB 19-20). It is honing on these concrete cases which help us understand the conceptual muddles in which we find ourselves when we philosophize.

## **VI. Philosophy and Humor**

Throughout I have analyzed what Wittgenstein might have thought about humor through an elucidation of his philosophical methodology. His resistance to traditional philosophy, and its urge to provide answers to our questions illustrates what the function of philosophy is for him. Likewise, his use of examples to illustrate his point shows us how to approach showing the discontinuity with our ordinary ways of thinking. For Wittgenstein, providing a good example is in a certain sense providing an argument. What remains is for me to illustrate what he meant by “a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes.”

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Given the equivalence of function between philosophy as Wittgenstein sees it and humour as I see it—where both are attempts to show the uncanniness of our familiar practices—it follows that they can ultimately serve the same function. As William James—a philosopher whom Wittgenstein greatly admired—once noted, that “Philosophy . . . is able to fancy everything different from what it is. It sees the familiar as if it were strange, and the strange as if it were familiar.”<sup>7</sup> I think this would apply equally to humor—it allows us to focus in on our practices and see these familiar occurrences as strange, and strange occurrences as familiar. That is, we could have a “serious” work of philosophy consisting only of jokes, since jokes can be serious philosophy (at least, if we have the same image of the function, purpose and method of philosophy that Wittgenstein does). As he points out in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

The problems arising through a misinterpretation of our forms of language have the character of *depth*. They are deep disquietudes; their roots are as deep in us as the forms of our language and their significance is as great as the importance of our language.—Let us ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be *deep*? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.) (PI §111)

Wittgenstein, in fact, often argues by providing what appear to be jokes. Consider for example PI §268, where he asks whether one's right hand could give one's own left hand money. I think this is funny. The example is provided to show a larger point about the possibility of providing a private definition to oneself—that the grammar of “give” requires two people, a giver and a receiver, and that it is an improper analogy between the two senses of the word that causes confusion. So too, it seems, with a private language, since the function of language is to communicate (presumably, with someone else). But one cannot help but think that Wittgenstein intended it as a joke. Consider also PI §250, where he asks “Why can't a dog simulate pain? Is he too honest?” Likewise, one gets the feeling that he intended

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<sup>7</sup> William James, *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1979), 11

that as a witticism.

We can't help but find certain conceptual confusions funny. Thus, engaged in the Wittgensteinian project of clarifying these confusions, humour can be used as a type of argument. Thus a philosophy book consisting of jokes could be funny for the same reason that it would be good philosophy: it will show us the misuses of words and, by making the familiar word unfamiliar, clarifies the meanings of each. To use another of Wittgenstein's own examples from *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, in the discussion of Gödel's incompleteness theorem, and why there might be such things as true propositions which may not be provable in *Principia Mathematica*, he argues from analogy to the question of whether “there are propositions provable in Euclid's system, but are *false* in another system.” To this he quips “May not triangles be—in another system—similar (*very* similar) which do not have equal angles?—'But that's just a joke! For in that case they are not “similar” to one another in the same sense!’ (RFM, App. III §7) A joke? Sure, it is intolerably punny (and confirms the point made above that Wittgenstein had no sense of humor), but is a good example of the type of joke from which a good philosophy book might be made. Diagnosing our conceptual confusions in this way—and attempting to clarify the distinctions which we often fail to draw between them—was a large part of Wittgenstein's project. But it was also, in a certain sense, what he really meant by humour.