Wittgenstein, Lewis Carroll And The philosophical Puzzlement of Language

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Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter's remark seemed to her no sort of meaning in it, and yet it was certainly English. "I don't quite understand you," she said, as politely as she could. (LG, 61)

When Lewis Carroll sends Alice down the rabbit hole in his fairy-tale masterpiece, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, he plunges her into a world of puzzlement. The characters speak English, and it is grammatically correct (even elegant) English, but Alice is nonetheless continually baffled by their use of language. In his Philosophical Investigations, Ludwig Wittgenstein discusses this type of puzzlement, describing philosophy as "a battle against the bewitchment of intelligence by means of language" (PI #109). In fact, Wittgenstein spends a large part of the Investigations attempting to show how philosophy must deal with the problems inherent in our use of language.

But while Wittgenstein is concerned with finding an escape from the puzzlement, Carroll submerges himself further in the morass. In his fairy-tale masterpieces, Carroll uses and misuses language to achieve humor and charm; his heroine, in both Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass, continually meets with the very sources of philosophical puzzlement which Wittgenstein fears. The methods differ, but both Wittgenstein and Carroll admonish their readers to pay attention to language, pointing out the fallacy in assuming that we can understand a sentence simply because it is grammatically well-formed, containing familiar words. Peter Heath, in a philosophical analysis of the Alice books, describes Carroll's message as having the form of:

a sottisier: a horrendous catalog of philosophical blunders, logical fallacies, conceptual confusions, and linguistic breakdowns, which do not only entertain but persistently tease the reader, compelling him to ask himself, "What has gone wrong here? Why won't this do?" and to find that it is not always perfectly easy to supply the answer.
By this approach, Lewis Carroll conveys a message (or, as the duchess would say, a moral) which is strikingly like Wittgenstein's description of a philosophical problem as a statement of the form: "I don't know my way about" (PI, #123). According to this view of philosophical puzzlement, we start with a set of seemingly true propositions and are led to a conclusion that either seems extremely implausible or contradicts what we know to be true. In both cases, the outcome seems completely devoid of sense: "it can only be expressed by what strikes us as an illegitimate combination of words."2

Furthermore, says Wittgenstein, when we are in the clutches of philosophical puzzlement we cannot look to any new facts for help. Unlike the empirical investigations of science, philosophy does not attempt to introduce new information — for there is no need to do so. Rather, philosophers must concentrate on finding a new understanding of the propositions, construing them in such a way that they are no longer seen as contradictory. Our pursuit is therefore best seen as interpretive: we shed light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away — "misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language" (PI #90). Philosophy must provide clarification by unraveling the confusion, not by formulating a new theory.

This view, which emerges in the Investigations, is a departure from his earlier position in the Tractatus:

The Wittgenstein of the Tractatus operates, as it were, on the same level as, say, Frege and Russell. He pursues problems they raised and gives answers that are at times the same and at times rival to theirs. He is playing more or less the same game ... The later Wittgenstein does not give answers or formulate ideas on the same level ... Were the later Wittgenstein to read a contemporary work of philosophy, he would not get down on all fours with it and dispute it. He would rather stand back, and seek to find the source of the author's ideas, which source would be held to be disguised nonsense.3

The aim of philosophy, says the later Wittgenstein, is to "shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle." (PI, #309)

In contrast, it seems that Carroll makes no attempt to release the fly, but only ensnares it further. Throughout the Alice tales, Carroll draws on the
nonsense inherent in language, purposefully construing common statements in such a way as to cause bewilderment. For instance, at the mad tea-party:

Alice sighed wearily. "I think you might do something better with time," she said, "than wasting it in asking riddles that have no answers."
"If you knew Time as well as I do," said the Hatter, "you wouldn't talk about wasting it. It's him."
"I don't know what you mean," said Alice. (AW, 63)

Alice's confusion at the Hatter's description of "time" exemplifies what Wittgenstein means by philosophical puzzlement. The reference to "time" as something that can be known as a person can be known indicates a common, deeper problem of our language: we tend to be held captive by a picture of time, space, etc., that causes perplexity; "this kind of mistake recurs again and again in philosophy, e.g., when we are puzzled about the nature of time, when time seems to us a queer thing." (BB, 6)

The cause of the problem, says Wittgenstein, lies in an oversimplification of the function of language. We must not assume that all words function in the same way. Even in identical contexts, words may be used differently: merely because the word "time" appears in sentences in the same position as, for example, "sugar" ("There's no —— left") or as "money" ("If we have ——, we'll go to the store") does not mean that it represents an entity or a thing. (cf. PI #112, "A simile that has been absorbed into the forms of our language produces a false appearance, and this disquiets us").

As Wittgenstein says in the Blue Book, "the man who is philosophically puzzled sees a law in the way a word is used and trying to apply this law consistently, comes up against cases where it leads to paradoxical results." (BB, 27) However, in examining the actual circumstances behind our use of the word, we see that it is not a word like "money" or "sugar." Thus, the only means of escape from our philosophical puzzlement is the abandonment of our a priori picture of the use of words. We cannot "guess" how a word functions, but we have to look at each specific use. Once we "command a clear view of the use of words" (PI, #122), we can eliminate our confusion; we will no longer have to ask ourself "what is time?" for "we will realize that the very question is illegitimate, if it presupposes, as it seems to, that time is some kind of thing."
But—throughout the Alice Tales—Carroll delights in depicting this sort of "illegitimate questioning." For example, in Through the Looking Glass, he plays upon the concept of "nobody":

"I see nobody on the road," said Alice.
"I only wish I had such eyes," the King remarked in a fretful tone. "To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why it's as much as I can do to see people, by this light." (LG, 198-9) . . .

"Who did you pass on the road?" The King went on, holding out his hand to the Messenger for some more hay.
"Nobody," said the Messenger.
"Quite right," said the King. "This young lady saw him too. So of course Nobody walks slower than you." (LG, 201)

Once again, this illustrates Wittgenstein's point. In the Blue Book, he specifically points to problems with words such as "nobody," describing a possible language in which the problem would be even worse than common English. He asks us to envision a language in which "Mr. Nobody" would replace the term "nobody," so that for example, Alice's remark would be: "I see Mr. Nobody on the road." Imagine, he says, the problems that would arise from this! (BB, 69).

Another concept played upon by Carroll is the word "today." After the Queen offers Alice some jam, Alice responds:

"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 sometime 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!" (LG, 174-5)

Once again, we are sympathetic with Alice's confusion; Wittgenstein, too, speaks of this kind of mistake as being one of the "most fertile sources of philosophical puzzlement" (BB, 108). According to his discussion, we must resist the temptation to say that "now" and "6 p.m." refer to "point of time."
Using words in this way causes "the puzzlement which one might express in the question 'what is the "now"?' -- for it is a moment of time and yet it can't be said to be the "moment at which I speak" or "the moment at which the clock strikes", etc., etc." (BB, 109). We have only to look at Hegel's discussion of "the Now" in his Phenomenology of Mind to see an example of this kind of philosophical puzzle:

To the question, What is the Now? we reply, for example, the Now is night-time. To test the truth of this certainty of sense, a simple experiment is all we need: write that truth down. A truth cannot lose anything by being written down, and just as little by our preserving and keeping it. If we look again at the truth we have written down, look at it now at this noon-time, and we shall have to say it has turned stale and become out of date. 5

As a result of these reflections, Hegel concludes that "the Now" is a not this, or a Universal. 6 His conclusion results from bring caught in the clutches of a philosophical confusion; as Wittgenstein explains, the word "now" functions in a completely different way from the specifications of time. Although we could see this if we were to examine how the word "now" is used in our language, confusion reigns when we look only at small contexts and short phrases in which the term appears, rather than at the entire language game.

Alice and the Queen make a similar mistake in their discussion of the jam. The words "today" and "tomorrow" do not function as dates, like "Monday" or "April 5th". Although they might seem to be used in the same way as these terms, we must look at the whole of the language game, and see that the word "tomorrow" is completely different from a specification of a date. When only a particular context is seen, as is the case in the discussion with the Queen, the role of the word is obscured, and it is no wonder that Alice is "dreadfully puzzled."

Even as early as the Tractatus, Wittgenstein shows the confusion that can come about as a result of these kinds of problems in language: "Language disguises thought. So much so, that from the outward form of the clothing it is impossible to infer the form of the thought beneath it, because the outward form of the clothing is not designed to reveal the form of the body, but for entirely different purposes" (TLP, 4.002). Though language serves its purpose for ordinary human beings, providing them with a means of communication, it was not designed to serve the purpose of the philosopher. Any English speaker, for
example, gets through everyday life perfectly well using words such as "time," "today," and "now." But when the philosopher attempts to analyze the meanings of these words, the overwhelming temptation is to succumb to false analogies, to see these words only within a narrow language context. When doing so, philosophers make the mistake of treating words abstractly, as if they had no relationship to those around them.

But words do have relationships to those around them; they are components of language games. For the later Wittgenstein, the whole of our language is a multitude of these language games. We must look at a word's use in the specific game, and not at its grammatical function, in order to glean its meaning. Expanding on the Tractatus idea that "only in the nexus of a proposition does a name have a meaning" (3.3), Wittgenstein tells us in the Investigations that each word has meaning only as part of the language game which is its "original home" (PI, #116). We must not lose sight of this fact, he stresses: "if we forget the intimate connections between language and behavior, and try to treat words in isolation from the actual practical situations which they are used, we end up in puzzlement." This kind of problem arises when "language goes on holiday" (PI, #38).

Humpty Dumpty, in Through the Looking Glass, amuses the reader with his imaginative use of English, but his speech is a clear illustration of "language on holiday." Though Humpty Dumpty scornfully tells Alice: "When I use a word. . . it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less" (LG, 190), he has used "to mean" illegitimately. We cannot pick a word and assign whatever meaning we choose, as Wittgenstein indicates in a note to the Investigations: "Can I say 'bububu' and mean 'If it doesn't rain I shall go for a walk'? —It is only in a language that I can mean something by something" (PI, p.18).

Humpty Dumpty misconstrues the role "to mean" plays in the language game; as Wittgenstein shows us, the function of "to mean" is not like the function of "to imagine" or "to say." Alice has previously been taught by the Hatter and the March Hare that "I mean what I say" is different from "I say what I mean" (AW, 61); Humpty Dumpty has yet to learn this lesson. Distinguishing "surface grammar" from "depth grammar," Wittgenstein notes that our immediate impression of a word is the way it is used in a sentence, "the part of its use —one might say— that can be taken in by the ear" (PI, #664). He could almost be speaking of Humpty Dumpty in this remark; he even points specifically to the words "to mean." A comparison of the depth grammar with
our expectations from the surface grammar leads us into the puzzlement. Humpty Dumpty remains unruffled by his failure to look beyond the surface, in fact, he uses the phrase “I make words mean what I want” in a fashion similar to “I make workers do what I want” and even goes as far as to tell Alice he gives the words additional wages when he forces them to do “extra work.”

There are many other places in the Alice books Where Carroll sends language on vacation and a lot of passages which seem, at first glance, to be completely nonsensical. However, “nonsense” is a term we apply without discrimination to anything failing to make sense. In his article, Heath suggests that a distinction should be drawn between nonsense and absurdity, where “the former neglects and defies the ordinary conventions of logic, linguistic usage, motive and behavior, [and] the latter makes all too much of them.” Regarded in this way, Carroll’s works are incorrectly classified as nonsense, and we should see him instead as a matter of the absurd:

Instead of blithely departing from the rules, as the nonsense-writer does, the absurdist persists in adhering to them long after it has ceased to be sensible to do so, and regardless of the extravagances which thereby result. This is what Carroll and his characters habitually do.

Though Wittgenstein did not draw this distinction in his writings, he did distinguish between “disguised nonsense” and “patent nonsense,” indicating that his aim was to show how one could pass from the former to the latter. With this differentiation, it seems clear that the Alice books fall under the heading of “patent nonsense,” and thus, Carroll has aided Wittgenstein in accomplishing his task. If the fly can get out of the fly-bottle by recognizing patent nonsense, then Carroll has provided an escape route. Philosophical problems arise because fundamental mistakes are made deep in the language game. These mistakes, misinterpretations of language, have the feature of being ingrained deep within us, and it is the philosopher’s task to bring them to the surface. By doing so, as Carroll does in the Alice books, we can see the puzzle more clearly and (it is hoped) proceed to solve it.

As Wittgenstein suggests: “Let us ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be deep?” It has been reported that Wittgenstein used to cite, as an example of a good grammatical joke, the Mock Turtle’s remark (AW, 84) “We called him Tortoise because he taught us.” Grammatical jokes such as these abound in the Alice books, for example, when
the Gryphon tells Alice that boots and shoes under the sea are made with "soles and eels" (AW, 92), when the Mouse tells Alice the driest story he knows because she is sopping wet (AW 25), or when Alice learns about lessons:

“And how many hours a day did you do lessons?” said Alice, in a hurry to change the subject.
“Ten hours the first day,” said the Mock Turtle: “Nine the next, and so on.”
“What a curious plan!” exclaimed Alice.
“That’s the reason they’re called lessons,” the Gryphon remarked: “because they lessen from day to day.” (AW, 87).

In fact, it is precisely the recurrent use of grammatical jokes that lends Carroll’s work its wit and irony.

But puzzles of language, besides being at the very heart of the Alice books, are crucial to Wittgenstein’s Investigations. Discerning the puzzle is, for Wittgenstein, a necessary component of philosophy; if we do not suffer from this kind of puzzlement, then we cannot see the need for further philosophical inquiry. The philosopher must necessarily be immersed in a state of bafflement, the subsequent outcome of which is “the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language.” (PI, #119).

Thus, Wittgenstein wants us to see the puzzle, and it is in this sense that sharp parallels can be drawn between his endeavor and the works of Carroll. Carroll is a master of presenting the puzzle, and surely no one comes away from a reading of the Alice books without a sense that something strange is going on with language; even a child gains an increased comprehension of the importance of words.13 Furthermore, Wittgenstein is known to have read the works of Carroll; along with the two specific references to Carroll in the Investigations, this suggests it may not be coincidence that some of Wittgenstein’s examples of sources of philosophical confusion overlap with the puzzles in the Alice books.

But, though Carroll has shown us the puzzle, and like Alice, we know that something has gone wrong, it is philosophy’s job to clear up the confusion. As Wittgenstein indicates in the Blue Book: “Philosophy, as we use the word, is a fight against the fascination which forms of expression exert upon us” (BB, 27). Carroll leaves the reader in this state of fascination, but, as Wittgenstein tells us, it is only through philosophy — and a close examination of the language games played— that we can lead the reader out of bafflement, the fly out of the fly-bottle, and Alice out of Wonderland.


Carroll, Lewis, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There, Edited with an introduction by Roger Lancelyn Green, New York: Oxford University Press, 1971. [abbreviated as AW and LG, respectively]


4 Pitcher, p.229.


6 If someone other than Hegel had written this, we might consider it a joke. Surely we wouldn’t take the Queen seriously if (in another example of Carroll’s “illegitimate questioning”) she had asked Alice “what is the now?” — and then concluded that it must have gone bad!

7 Ibid, pp. 244-5.

8 Note that this very phrase could itself be a source of philosophical puzzlement, if “language” were seen to function as an entity, e.g., analogously to “the Jones family” in “the Jones family went on holiday.” As the Queen might ask, “And where does language go on holiday; I go to the beach.”


10 Heath, p. 47.

11 Ibid, p.. 47.
