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Wittgenstein, Nonsense, and Lewis Carroll

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George Pitcher

## Wittgenstein, Nonsense, and Lewis Carroll

THE PHILOSOPHER LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN (1889-1951) was always concerned, one way or another, about nonsense; and much more so in his later writings than in the early ones. Nonsense is construed in the *Tractatus*<sup>1</sup> in a narrow technical way: a combination of words is nonsensical when it cannot possibly be understood, because no sense is or can (except trivially) be accorded it.<sup>2</sup> As an example of a nonsensical question, Wittgenstein gives that of “whether the good is more or less identical than the beautiful” (*T* 4.003).<sup>3</sup> He thinks that “most of the propositions and questions to be found in philosophical works are not false but nonsensical” (*T* 4.003), not even excepting, sadly, those found in the *Tractatus* itself (*T* 6.54). One of his main objectives is to devise and justify a method for distinguishing sense from nonsense, so that the latter may be consigned, as it should be, to silence (*T* 7). Nonsense is thus viewed as the major target for the philosopher’s destructive weapons.

In the later *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein still finds that philosophers—including the author of the *Tractatus*—are professionally

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<sup>1</sup> Wittgenstein completed the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1918: it was published in the original German in 1921, and a year later in a German-English parallel text.

<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein distinguishes nonsensical utterances from those which simply lack sense: “Tautologies and contradictions lack sense” (*T* 4.461), but they are not nonsensical. They are *sinnlos*, but not *unsinnig*.

<sup>3</sup> The following abbreviations will be used in giving references to Wittgenstein’s works: *PI*, *Philosophical Investigations*; *BB*, *The Blue and Brown Books*; *T*, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*; *RFM*, *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics*.

The following will be used for Carroll: *AW*, *Alice’s Adventures In Wonderland*; *TLG*, *Through the Looking Glass*; *SB*, *Sylvie and Bruno*; *SBC*, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*.

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given to uttering nonsense. Not obvious nonsense, but hidden nonsense: and he conceives the job of *good* philosophy to be that of revealing it for what it is. "My aim," he wrote, "is: to teach you to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is patent nonsense" (*PI* Sec. 464. See also Sec. 119). Disguised nonsense has a surface air of plausibility and naturalness about it, so that it can take in even a sensible man. It has the semblance of sense. But when one examines it carefully and follows out its consequences, its inherent absurdity becomes manifest. Wittgenstein is still as concerned as ever to exorcize nonsense from philosophy; he wants to cure us of the puzzlement, the deep disquietude, it engenders in our soul. But now he also *uses* it<sup>4</sup> like a vaccine that cures us of *itself*. He may, for instance, describe some state of affairs that, according to a certain harmless-looking view or picture which he is criticizing, ought to be perfectly unexceptionable: but in fact the alleged state of affairs is radically odd, inherently absurd. The hidden nonsense is thus uncovered.

It is through the bond of nonsense that Wittgenstein is closely linked with Lewis Carroll. What I shall seek in general to demonstrate is the remarkable extent and depth of the affinity between these two great writers with respect to nonsense. Since I do not want to embroil myself in controversies about matters that would be excessively difficult to establish with anything approaching certainty, I shall not draw the further conclusion that Carroll exerted a profound influence on the later Wittgenstein. That he did, is one of my firm convictions;<sup>5</sup> but I shall content myself with pointing out what I believe to be the extraordinary and illuminating parallels between their treatments of nonsense.

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<sup>4</sup> To be sure, even in the *Tractatus*, some nonsense—namely, Wittgenstein's own—was deemed to be profoundly useful:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.) (*T* 6.54)

But whether this doctrine is a legitimate one or not—I think it is not—it still claims a radically different kind of use for nonsense from those uses found in the *Investigations*.

<sup>5</sup> Quite apart from the fact that anyone who lived in England, and particularly in Cambridge, during the time that Wittgenstein did, could not fail to have read Lewis Carroll—especially the *Alice* books—it is known with certainty that Wittgenstein did read and admire Carroll. Miss G. E. M. Anscombe, Mr. R. Rhees, and Prof. G. H. von Wright, all friends of Wittgenstein, have

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What I aim to show in particular is, first, that some of the important general kinds of nonsense that the later Wittgenstein finds in the doctrines of philosophers are found also in the writings of Lewis Carroll. By “kinds of nonsense,” I mean nonsense that has its source in certain fundamental confusions and errors. I shall try to show that the very same confusions with which Wittgenstein charges philosophers were deliberately employed by Carroll for comic effect. Second, I want to show that some quite specific philosophical doctrines that the later Wittgenstein attacks are ridiculed also by Carroll. (Certain of these specific doctrines will embody, naturally, some of the general *types* of nonsense just mentioned.) Third, I shall cite several examples used by Wittgenstein to illustrate his points that resemble, in varying degrees, examples that are found in the works of Carroll.

Does it seem paradoxical, or even perverse, to assert that philosophy and humor—especially *nonsense* humor—are intimately related? If so, I hasten to add that Wittgenstein himself was keenly aware of the connection:

Let us ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be *deep*? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.) (*PI*, Sec. 111.)

And Malcolm reports that

... Wittgenstein once said that a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of *jokes* (without being facetious).<sup>6</sup>

Wittgenstein undoubtedly had the works of Lewis Carroll in mind when he made those remarks.

Nor is it really very surprising to find some affinity between the nonsense of Carroll and that which bothered Wittgenstein: for both

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kindly provided me with information about his acquaintance with the works of Carroll. All confirm that he read at least some of the works. Miss Anscombe and Mr. Rhees both report that Wittgenstein used to cite, as a good grammatical joke, the Mock Turtle's remark “We called him Tortoise because he taught us” (*AW*, ch. 9). Mr. Rhees recalls a conversation in 1938 in which Wittgenstein referred admiringly to a passage in *Sylvie and Bruno*; but he adds that in the last eight or ten years of his life, Wittgenstein no longer thought as highly of Carroll as he had earlier. Carroll is mentioned by name in *PI* Sec. 13 and p. 198; and it is a safe bet that the nonsense poems referred to in *PI* Sec. 282 are those of Carroll.

<sup>6</sup> N. Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir* (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 29.

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men were professional logicians and much of their nonsense, as we shall see, is grounded in just those matters connected with language that a logician must concern himself with—such matters, for example, as the meanings of terms and sentences, as the (logical) differences that exist amongst various sorts of terms, as the fact that sentences having the same (or at least *apparently* the same) grammatical form sometimes express propositions of radically different logical forms, and so on.

I SHALL PRESENT MY CASE by starting with items of less importance and proceeding in the rough direction of those of more importance.

1. Wittgenstein makes the point that one must not be seduced into thinking that one understands a certain sentence simply because it is grammatically well-formed and consists entirely of familiar words: the sentence may, in fact, make no sense whatever, or be at least “fishy” in some important respect.

“These deaf-mutes have learned only a gesture-language, but each of them talks to himself inwardly in a vocal language.”—Now, don’t you understand that?— . . . I do not know whether I am to say I understand it or don’t understand it. I might answer “It’s an English sentence; *apparently* quite in order—that is, until one wants to do something with it; it has a connexion with other sentences which makes it difficult for us to say that nobody really knows what it tells us; but everyone who has not become calloused by doing philosophy notices that there is something wrong here.” (*PI*, Sec. 348.)

The same point is made in *The Blue and Brown Books*: there, instead of saying “It’s an English sentence; *apparently* quite in order,” he says “It sounds English, or German, etc., all right” (*BB*, p. 56). This point and even the forms of words in which it is expressed are reminiscent of Carroll. After the Hatter had said something (*viz.*, “Which is just the case with *mine*”) that he seemed to have thought answered Alice’s criticism of his watch,

Alice felt dreadfully puzzled. The Hatter’s remark seemed to her to have 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. (*AW*, ch. 7.)

A similar scene occurs in *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*. The Professor said:

“I hope you’ll enjoy the dinner—such as it is; and that you won’t mind the heat—such as it isn’t.”

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The sentence *sounded* well, but somehow I couldn't quite understand it . . . (*SBC*, ch. 22.)

2. Just as there are remarks that are nonsense, or nearly so, because one can "do nothing" with them, so there are acts which make little or no sense because nothing of the right sort follows from them; they do not have the consequences or connections that are needed to make them into the kinds of acts they purport to be. Two examples that Wittgenstein gives of such acts find parallels in Carroll:

- (a) Why can't my right hand give my left hand money?—My right hand can put it into my left hand. My right hand can write a deed of gift and my left hand a receipt.—But the further practical consequences would not be those of a gift. . . . (*PI*, Sec. 268.)

When Alice, after having eaten a piece of magical cake, grew so tall that she could hardly see her feet, she contemplated the possibility of having to send presents to them.

And she went on planning to herself how she would manage it. "They must go by the carrier," she thought, "and how funny it'll seem, sending presents to one's own feet! And how odd the directions will look!

*Alice's Right Foot, Esq.*  
*Hearthrug,*  
*near the Fender,*  
*(with Alice's love).*

Oh dear, what nonsense I'm talking!" (*AW*, ch. 2.)

- (b) Imagine someone saying: "But I know how tall I am!" and laying his hand on top of his head to prove it. (*PI*, Sec. 279.)

Putting your hand on top of your head does not demonstrate that you know how tall you are, because it has no conceptual connections with anything beyond itself—for example, with acts of measuring with foot-rules, or of standing back to back with another person of known height. The same (vacuous) act could be performed by anyone, no matter how tall he was and whether or not he knew how tall he was. Similarly, if you should ever have occasion, like Alice, to wonder whether you are rapidly growing or shrinking, it will avail you nothing to put your hand

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on top of your head to find out: the same results will be achieved in either case—namely, none.

She 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. (*AW*, ch. 1.)

Alice’s procedure would not be fruitless, of course, if she had reason to think that *only* her head and/or neck were stretching or shrinking while the rest of her body was remaining the same size. But she had no such reason, nor, as far as I can tell, did she think she had. Her surprise, therefore, is entirely unwarranted.

3. I can detect no intimate connection between Carroll and the early Wittgenstein, and so virtually all my examples are drawn from the later Wittgenstein. Still, there is one point in the *Tractatus* with which Carroll would presumably agree. Wittgenstein maintains that tautologies, including the Law of Excluded Middle, say nothing.

(For example, I know nothing about the weather when I know that it is either raining or not raining.) (*T* 4.461.)

Carroll relies on this truth for his laughs when he has the White Knight describe the song he intends to sing.

“It’s long,” said the Knight, “but it’s very, *very* beautiful. Everybody that hears me sing it—either it brings *tears* into their eyes, or else—”

“Or else what?” said Alice, for the Knight had made a sudden pause.

“Or else it doesn’t, you know.” (*TLG*, ch. 8.)

4. In both the *Tractatus* and the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein heaps scorn on the (alleged) proposition that “A thing is identical with itself.”

Roughly speaking, to say of *two* things that they are identical is nonsense, and to say of *one* thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing at all. (*T* 5.5303.)

“A thing is identical with itself.”—There is no finer example of a useless proposition, which yet is connected with a certain play of the imagination. It is as if in imagination we put a thing into its own shape and saw that it fitted. (*PI*, Sec. 216.)

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Carroll, too, saw that there is something very peculiar about such propositions:

"I'm sorry you don't like lessons," I said. "You should copy Sylvie. *She's* always as busy as the day is long!"

"Well, so am I!" said Bruno.

"No, no!" Sylvie corrected him. "*You're* as busy as the day is *short!*"

"Well, what's the difference?" Bruno asked. "Mister Sir, isn't the day as short as it's long? I mean, isn't it the *same* length?" (*SB*, ch. 12.)

5. One of the points that Wittgenstein makes over and over again in his later writings is that certain words which seem to denote something momentary and fleeting—usually, a feeling or thought or sensation—actually signify something quite different—perhaps a disposition or ability, or at least a longer-range pattern of events. At one point, he uses the example of 'grief': one is tempted to think that this word simply denotes an inner feeling which, although it usually endures for some time, may happen on occasion to last for only a few seconds or even for only one. To cast doubt on this whole idea, Wittgenstein asks

Why does it sound queer to say: "For a second he felt deep grief"? Only because it so seldom happens?

But don't you feel grief *now*? ("But aren't you playing chess *now*?") The answer may be affirmative, but that does not make the concept of grief any more like the concept of a sensation.—(*PI*, p. 174.)

Carroll, too, appreciates the absurdity of supposing that someone could feel deep grief for only a second. In Knot VIII of *A Tangled Tale*, we read:

"But oh, agony! Here is the outer gate, and we must part!" He sobbed as he shook hands with them, and the next moment was briskly walking away.

"He *might* have waited to see us off!" said the old man piteously.

"And he needn't have begun whistling the very *moment* he left us!" said the young one severely.

6. Two points that are constantly stressed in the later writings of Wittgenstein are the following: (a) that "an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case" (*PI*, Sec. 28),<sup>7</sup> and (b) that from

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<sup>7</sup> Giving an *ostensive definition* of a general term (e.g., 'two') consists in pointing to, or otherwise indicating, something to which the general term is applicable (e.g., two nuts) and saying "That is called 'two'," or something equivalent to it. Wittgenstein shows that the person to whom an ostensive definition is given *may* always interpret it wrongly: in our example, for in-



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the fact that a person knows what a word  $W$  denotes in one linguistic construction, it does not follow that he knows what  $W$  denotes in a different construction. (This latter point is, of course, intimately related to point 1, above.) To illustrate point (b), Wittgenstein uses the example of 'measuring': one may know very well what it is to measure distance or length, but from this it does not follow that he knows what it is to measure *time* (See *BB*, p. 26, and N. Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, p. 47 f.) In Carroll, there are passages in which these two points seem to play an essential part. During the trial of the Knave of Hearts,

one of the guinea-pigs cheered, and was immediately suppressed by the officers of the court. (As that is rather a hard word, I will just explain to you how it was done. They had a large canvas bag, which tied up at the mouth with strings: into this they slipped the guinea-pig, head first, and then sat upon it.)

"I'm glad I've seen that done," thought Alice. "I've so often read in the newspapers, at the end of trials, 'There was some attempt at applause, which was immediately suppressed by the officers of the court', and I never understood what it meant till now." (*AW*, ch. 11.)

This was not, to be sure, a paradigm case of an ostensive definition, since no one pointed to the proceedings and said to Alice "That is what is known as 'suppressing a guinea-pig'"; but it was just like one, since Alice guessed, from her previous reading of the newspapers, that it was in fact a case of suppressing a guinea-pig. Although not explicitly stated, it seems clear enough that Alice thought the phrase 'suppressing a guinea-pig' refers to the beast's being put head first into a large canvas bag and being then sat upon, rather than to its being restrained and its cheering quelled, by whatever means. She thus misinterpreted the "ostensive definition" (point (a)). It is not so clear what is to be made of the second paragraph. Did Alice think she understood what the phrase 'suppressing the *people*' (i.e. those who attempt to applaud at the end of trials) means? If so, she was wrong—for such people are not generally put head first into large canvas bags and sat upon—and then the point of the passage would be to show just how drastic her misinterpretation of the ostensive definition was. Or, to read the passage more literally, did Alice rather think she understood what 'suppressing an *attempt*' (e.g. at applause) means? If so, she was wrong again: for even if she

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stance, the person may think that 'two' denotes that particular pair of nuts, or that *kind* of nut, or the color of the nuts, or their size, or any number of other things.

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knew what suppressing a *guinea-pig* was, it would not follow that she knew what suppressing *an attempt at applause* was (point (b)). Indeed, on her understanding of the phrase 'suppressing a guinea-pig', the phrase 'suppressing an attempt at applause' is nonsensical, for attempts cannot be put into bags and be sat upon.

The following passage from *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded* is, however, more clearly relevant to point (b):

"You seem to enjoy that cake?" the Professor remarked.

"Doos that mean 'munch'?" Bruno whispered to Sylvie.

Sylvie nodded. "It means 'to munch' and 'to *like* to munch.'"

Bruno smiled at the Professor. "I *doos* enjoy it," he said.

The Other Professor caught the word. "And I hope you're enjoying *yourself*, little Man?" he enquired.

Bruno's look of horror quite startled him. "No, *indeed* I aren't!" he said. (*SBC*, ch. 23.)

Sylvie's analysis of 'to enjoy cake' seems to me to be masterful; at any rate, Bruno may be assumed to know what it is to enjoy *cake*. But he mistakenly thought this knowledge entailed a knowledge of what it is to enjoy *himself*. Hence the Other Professor's kindly enquiry, which Bruno wrongly construed as containing the imputation of auto-cannibalism, badly shocked him.

7. Wittgenstein shows that one cannot always with sense "make the easy transition from some to all" (*PI*, Sec. 344): for example, although it certainly makes sense to say that people sometimes make false moves in *some* games, it does not make sense to suggest that everyone might make nothing but false moves in every game (*PI*, Sec. 345). Carroll also realizes the absurdity of such transitions from *some* to *all*. After Alice has recited the poem called "You are old, Father William" to the Caterpillar, the latter is highly critical:

"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; and there was silence for some minutes. (*AW*, ch. 5.)

During the silence, Alice was doubtless wondering just what was fishy about the Caterpillar's accusation. (Alice's "ear" for nonsense is infallible; but she is never able to locate the source of the trouble.) The

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answer is that the charge was much too harsh to be intelligible: for although it is quite possible to recite a poem and get some of the words wrong, it is not possible to recite a given poem and get *all* of the words wrong—for then one is not reciting *that poem* at all.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, when the Dodo announced that *everyone* had won the Caucus-race (*AW* ch. 3), he was speaking nonsense. One of the contestants can win a race, or some of them can, but not all. All can be given prizes, or even *win* prizes, for running so well or just for taking part in the race at all or for some other reason; but they cannot all receive prizes for *winning the race*—for to *win* a race is to come out *ahead* of the others. (Carroll, of course, delighted in ridiculous extremes of all sorts. In chapter 11 of *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, for example, Mein Herr argued that since a map is better the larger its scale, the best map must be one drawn on the scale of a mile to the mile. His countrymen actually produced such a map, but they were unable to unfold it for fear of shutting out the sunlight; so they had to be content to use the country itself as its own map.)

8. Some of the later Wittgenstein's investigations were concerned with the relationship between, as we may put it, what a thing (quality, process, etc.) *is* and what it is *called*. One absurd extreme view is that a thing really *is* what a certain group of people (e.g. English speakers) call it, so that speakers of other languages are flatly wrong to call it by some other name ("How peculiar you Germans are to call it a 'Tisch' when it is so obviously a *table*"). But another extreme view is equally absurd—the view, namely, that *in all cases* what a thing really *is* is altogether different from, is wholly independent of, what it is *called*. Wittgenstein, as might be expected, maintains that the way the relation is to be characterized varies from case to case:

First I am aware of it as *this*; and then I remember what it is called.—Consider: in what cases is it right to say this? (*PI*, Sec. 379. See also Secs. 380 and 381, and the illuminating discussion of colors and color-words at the beginning of Part II of *The Brown Book*, especially *BB*, pp. 133-5.)

There are two passages in Carroll in which the absurdity of the second extreme view, above, is demonstrated. In the first, the Cheshire-Cat ex-

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<sup>8</sup> Under these conditions, in fact, one is not reciting any poem whatever. Even if the (wrong) words that come out should happen, by chance, to constitute a poem, the speaker would not be *reciting* that poem.

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plains to Alice why he is mad. After getting Alice to agree, reluctantly, that a dog is not mad, he goes on:

“Well, then,” the Cat went on, “you see a dog growls when it’s angry, and wags its tail when it’s pleased. Now *I* growl when I’m pleased, and wag my tail when I’m angry. Therefore I’m mad.”

“I call it purring, not growling,” said Alice.

“Call it what you like,” said the Cat. (*AW*, ch. 6.)

The second is the famous passage in which the White Knight tells Alice what song he is about to sing to her:

“The name of the song is called ‘*Haddock’s Eyes*’.”

“Oh, that’s the name of the song, is it?” Alice said, trying to feel interested.

“No, you don’t understand,” the Knight said, looking a little vexed. “That’s what the name is *called*. The name really is ‘*The Aged Aged Man*’.”

“Then I ought to have said ‘That’s what the *song* is called?’” Alice corrected herself.

“No, you oughtn’t: that’s quite another thing! The *song* is called ‘*Ways and Means*’: but that’s only what it’s *called*, you know!”

“Well, what *is* the song, then?” said Alice, who was by this time completely bewildered.

“I was coming to that,” the Knight said. “The song really is ‘*A-sitting On A Gate*’: and the tune’s my own invention.” (*TLG*, ch. 8.)

If it is absurd to think that what a thing *is* is in every case *wholly* independent of what it is *called*, it is equally, and even more evidently absurd to suppose that the entire nature of a thing is *completely* dependent on what it is called. In Carroll, of course, we find just this absurdity beautifully exploited. Alice came to a forest where nothing had a name: she met a fawn which then walked trustingly by her side.

So they walked on together through the wood, Alice with her arms clasped lovingly round the soft neck of the Fawn, till they came out into another open field, and here the Fawn gave a sudden bound into the air, and shook itself free from Alice’s arm. “I’m a Fawn!” it cried out in a voice of delight. “And, dear me! you’re a human child!” A sudden look of alarm came into its beautiful brown eyes, and in another moment it had darted away at full speed. (*TLG*, ch. 3.)

9. As is well known, the later Wittgenstein wages war against essentialism, the doctrine that there is a unique set of characteristics—constituting an essence—that is shared by all and only those individuals

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to which a certain general term (e.g., 'table', 'tree', 'serpent') applies. Carroll pokes gentle fun at essentialism when he describes the Pigeon's interview with Alice, whose neck had just stretched to an alarming length:

"Serpent!" screamed the Pigeon.

....

"But I'm *not* a serpent, I tell you!" said Alice. . . . "I—I'm a little girl". . . .

"A likely story indeed!" said the Pigeon, in a tone of the deepest contempt. "I've seen a good many little girls in my time, but never *one* with such a neck as that! No, no! You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!"

"I *have* tasted eggs, certainly," said Alice, who was a very truthful child; "but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know."

"I don't believe it," said the Pigeon; "but if they do, then they're a kind of serpent: that's all I can say." (*AW*, ch. 5.)

The Pigeon had very peculiar ideas about the essences of little girls and of serpents: indeed, her conceptions of these two essences represent two extremes. On the one hand, she thought that the essence of little-girlness contains a great many characteristics, including that of having a neck considerably shorter than poor Alice's stretched one. Since Alice lacked that essential characteristic, the Pigeon judged that she could not possibly be a little girl, despite the fact that she presumably had all the other required characteristics. On the other hand, the Pigeon seemed to hold that the essence "serpenthooood" consists of only one characteristic—that of eating eggs: therefore, if little girls eat eggs, they must be a kind of serpent.

10. A variety of problems connected with *rules* occupy the later Wittgenstein's attention as much as anything else. Carroll, too, has something to say about these matters. In the well-known article, "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles," for example, Carroll attacks the problem of what it is to accept a rule of inference. He tries to show that if accepting a rule of inference is considered to be the same thing as accepting a premise of an argument, then absurdity, in the form of an infinite regress, results. As soon as the rule is added to the premises of an argument, it no longer applies to the argument, and new rules must forever be appealed to.<sup>9</sup> The issue raised here by Carroll is a near cousin to

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<sup>9</sup> I *think* this is what Carroll tried to show. I also think he does not succeed: see J. F. Thomson, "What Achilles should have said to the Tortoise," *Ratio*, Vol. III, No. 1 (1960), pp. 95-105.

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Wittgenstein's intimately connected worries about obeying or following a rule, applying a rule to a particular case, and interpreting a rule.

There are many other difficulties connected with rules. For example, suppose that one or more persons are engaged in something that may be called a rule-governed activity. How can an external observer determine what rules the participants are following? If it is a game, can he "read these rules off from the practice of the game—like a natural law governing the play?" (*PI*, Sec. 54.) But then "how does the observer distinguish in this case between players' mistakes and correct play?" (*PI*, Sec. 54.) Or, more troubling still: how can the outside observer—or the participants themselves, for that matter—determine the difference between the participants' acting (merely) *in accordance with* a rule and their (knowingly) *obeying* or *following* the rule. (See *BB*, p. 13. Kant, as everyone knows, stressed the importance of this distinction in the realm of morality.) That Carroll was also aware of these problems is clearly demonstrated in the following scene, in which the Red Knight and the White Knight fight to determine whose prisoner Alice shall be:

"I wonder, now, what the Rules of Battle are," [Alice] said to herself, as she watched the fight, timidly peeping out from her hiding-place. "One rule seems to be, that if one Knight hits the other, he knocks him off his horse; and, if he misses, he tumbles off himself—and another Rule seems to be that they hold their clubs with their arms, as if they were Punch and Judy. . . ." Another Rule of Battle, that Alice had not noticed, seemed to be that they always fell on their heads; and the battle ended with their both falling off in this way, side by side. (*TLG*, ch. 8.)

11. One of the most deeply Wittgensteinian—or perhaps I should say "anti-Wittgensteinian"—characters in all of Lewis Carroll is Humpty Dumpty. Wittgenstein attacks the idea that what a person means when he says anything is essentially the result of his performance of a mental act of intending (or meaning) his words to mean just that. If this view were correct, it would seem to follow that a person could utter a word or group of words and mean *anything* by them, simply by performing the appropriate act of intention. Wittgenstein concedes that the possibility exists of a person's giving a special meaning of his own to a word or words which mean something quite different in the language; but to do that is not to perform a special mental act:

But—can't I say "By 'abracadabra' I mean toothache"? Of course I can; but this is a definition; not the description of what goes on in me when I utter the word. (*PI*, Sec. 665.)

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(See the principle of point 5, above, of which this is a special case.) But generally—and this is a necessary truth—what a person means by the words he utters is just what those words *do mean*. We do not have to wait for the speaker to tell us what, in virtue of the mental act of meaning he performed while he spoke, he meant by them: and indeed, if we did, we could *never* discover what he meant—for we would be in no better position to understand his explanation than we were to understand his original utterance! One could almost say that it is precisely Humpty Dumpty whom Wittgenstein is here opposing.

“There’s glory for you!”

“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory,’” Alice said.

Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t—till I tell you. I meant ‘there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!’”

“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean ‘a nice knock-down argument,’” Alice objected.

“When *I* use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.” (*TLG*, ch. 6.)

Some of Wittgenstein’s examples sound extremely Humpty-Dumpty-ish, in fact:

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. This shows clearly that the grammar of “to mean” is not like that of the expression “to imagine” and the like. (*PI*, p. 18.)

Underlying the Humpty Dumpty view of the use of language is the following picture: a person’s ideas (which are non-linguistic) are formulated, more or less clearly, in his mind; in order to express them, he need only find some suitable words—and, if Humpty Dumpty is right, *any* old words will do. And so, as the Duchess saw, if you are sure that the idea itself is clearly formulated, the matter of translating it into words is no great problem:

‘Take care of the sense, and the sounds will take care of themselves.’ (*AW*, ch. 9.)

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Wittgenstein describes the picture as follows:

The phrase “to express an idea which is before our mind” suggests that what we are trying to express in words is already expressed, only in a different language; that this expression is before our mind’s eye; and that what we do is to translate from the mental into the verbal language. (*BB*, p. 41.)

Wittgenstein regards the picture with suspicion, since it is dangerously apt to mislead the philosopher: Carroll, on the other hand, simply has fun with it.

We sometimes—and mothers of young children, quite often—speak of saying something and meaning it (“I told you to put on your overshoes and I *meant* it!”). This form of expression inevitably gives rise to the idea that the *saying* is one thing and the *meaning it* another—a mental act or private feeling or whatever, that accompanies the saying. Wittgenstein argues against this idea (see, for example, *BB*, p. 34f. and p. 145): in doing so, he is defending Alice—at least up to a point—against the March Hare and the Mad Hatter:

“... 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!’”

“You might just as well say,” added the March Hare, “that ‘I like what I get’ is the same thing as ‘I get what I like!’” (*AW*, ch. 7.)

12. Of the several techniques Wittgenstein uses to make his philosophical points, two that are especially conspicuous are that of describing worlds (or possible situations) in which “certain very general facts of nature” are different from what we are used to, and (perhaps a more special case of the first) that of describing tribes of people whose institutions and practices are quite different from our own. What he says in the following passage would apply to *both* of these methods:

I am not saying: if such-and-such facts of nature were different people would have different concepts (in the sense of a hypothesis). But: if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize—then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him. (*PI*, p. 230.)



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Thus, for example, Wittgenstein makes important points by considering the possibility of pain patches (*PI*, Sec. 312); of one mathematician's always being convinced that a figure in another's proof had altered unperceived—presumably where there is no way of ascertaining whether it had or not (*PI*, p. 225); of a chair's suddenly disappearing and re-appearing (*PI*, Sec. 80); of all peoples' "shape, size and characteristics of behavior periodically undergo[ing] a complete change" (*BB*, p. 62); and so on. And here are some examples of the second method: Wittgenstein imagines tribes of people who measure things with elastic foot-rules made of very soft rubber (*RFM*, p. 4); or who have slaves that they think are automatons, although they have human bodies and even speak the same language that their masters do;<sup>10</sup> or who have no common word for (what we call) light blue and dark blue (*BB*, p. 134f.); or who show no outward signs of pain (*PI*, Sec. 257); and so on.

I do not think it overly speculative to suggest that Wittgenstein *might* have gotten the original idea of these devices from his reading of Carroll: for what are any of Carroll's worlds but worlds in which certain "very general facts of nature" are radically different and in which people (or at least *beings*) act in very strange ways? One or two of Carroll's actual fancies, indeed, closely resemble some of Wittgenstein's: the ontological behavior of the Cheshire-Cat (*AW*, chs. 6 and 8) is like that of Wittgenstein's disappearing and re-appearing chair; and in *Sylvie and Bruno*, Bruno measures garden beds with a dead mouse (*SB*, ch. 15), which, although not elastic, shares some salient characteristics with foot-rules made of very soft rubber. Countless other of Carroll's fancies are Wittgensteinian in spirit: for example, the White Queen screamed in pain *before* she pricked her finger (*TLG*, ch. 5); and the Other Professor described certain people who do not feel pain when burned by a red-hot poker until years later, and who *never* feel it if they are (merely) pinched—only their unfortunate grandchildren might feel it (*SB*, ch. 12).

13. I have saved until last the respect in which Wittgenstein and Carroll are most deeply "at one," in which they become true spiritual twins. If any theses can be said to lie at the heart of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, one of the plausible candidates would certainly be the doctrine that much of the nonsense and puzzlement to be found in phi-

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<sup>10</sup> See N. Malcolm, "Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*," *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXIII, No. 4 (1954), p. 548f.

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losophy is the direct result of one fundamental kind of mistake—namely, that of wrongly treating a word or phrase as having exactly the same kind of function as another word or phrase, solely on the basis of the fact that they exhibit superficial grammatical similarities.

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. (*BB*, p. 7. See also *PI*, Sec. 90.)

We thus “misunderstand . . . the grammar of our expressions” (*BB*, p. 16), and fall victim to misleading analogies (*BB*, pp. 26 and 28). Numerous examples of this pernicious, but completely natural, tendency are presented by Wittgenstein. Quite as many are scattered throughout the works of Carroll: indeed, I venture to suggest that the single major source of Carroll’s wit lies precisely in his prodigious ability to exploit this particular human frailty. I do not propose to burden the reader with long lists of examples drawn separately from Wittgenstein and Carroll: I content myself with giving a handful (five, in fact) that I have chosen from among those found in *both* authors.

(a) Wittgenstein would maintain that the absurdity of Humpty Dumpty, already discussed, stemmed from his being misled by grammatical similarities.

. . . What tempts us to think of the meaning of what we say as a process essentially of the kind which we have described is the analogy between the forms of expression:

“to say something”

“to mean something”,

which seem to refer to two parallel processes. (*BB*, p. 35.)

So Humpty Dumpty treated the phrase ‘to mean such-and-such’ as if it meant something very like what the phrase ‘to say such-and-such’ means, and hence as though it referred to a private process going on in his mind while he spoke, just as ‘to say such-and-such’ seems to refer to the observable public process. (Humpty Dumpty was inordinately given to this vice: thus he treated the sentence “I can make words mean what I want them to mean” as though it were perfectly analogous to “I can make workers do what I want them to do.”)

(b) The temptation to assimilate phrases with radically different uses to one another is especially great, of course, when one or more of the words involved are the same (or at least appear to be the same). Hence it is treacherously easy to confuse empirical and logical necessity,

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since words like 'must' or 'can't' or 'won't' occur typically in expressions of both:

... It is somewhat analogous to saying: "3 x 18 inches won't go into 3 feet." This is a grammatical rule and states a logical impossibility. The proposition "three men can't sit side by side on a bench a yard long" states a physical impossibility; and this example shows clearly why the two impossibilities are confused. (Compare the proposition "He is 6 inches taller than I" with "6 foot is 6 inches longer than 5 foot 6." These propositions are of utterly different kinds, but look exactly alike.) (*BB*, p. 56.)

Both Alice and the White Queen are guilty of this very confusion:

"I'm sure *my memory* only works one way," Alice remarked. "I can't remember things before they happen."

"It's a poor sort of memory that only works backwards," the Queen remarked. (*TLG*, ch. 5.)

Alice thought that the statement "I can't remember things before they happen" stated an empirical necessity; that is, she thought it was like "I can't break twigs before they are dry." She thus supposed that if she had a better memory, she might have been able to manage remembering things *before* they happened. But clearly it is not an empirical, but rather a logical, or conceptual, necessity that one can't remember things before they happen. Since the White Queen thought that Alice's inability to remember things before they happen was due to the poor quality of the girl's memory, she too confused empirical with logical necessity. The White Queen fell into this confusion because in her world (if it *is*, in fact, a conceivable world), time ran backwards, and in that kind of world it would presumably make sense to speak of remembering "things that happened the week after next" (*TLG*, ch. 5). But she forgot that her own memory, too, worked in only one direction (albeit in the opposite direction from that in which Alice's memory worked<sup>11</sup>), and had she remembered it, she would have been blissfully unaware that this, too, was a matter of logical necessity.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Let us leave unasked the question: How could the White Queen, for whom time ran backwards, converse with Alice, for whom time ran forwards?

<sup>12</sup> Ignoring some minor qualifications, we can say that in Alice's world it is logically necessary that one can remember only things in the past, while in the White Queen's world, it is logically necessary that one can remember only things in the future. Here we may begin to see, if only dimly, the (very important) connections between (i) the distinction between logical and empirical necessity (point 13) and (ii) certain very general facts of nature being what they are (point 12).

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(c) Wittgenstein points out that many of our forms of expression seduce us into thinking of time as “a *queer thing*” (*BB*, p. 6) of one sort or another—for example, as a ghostly kind of stream or river:

... We say that ‘the present event passes by’ (a log passes by), ‘the future event is to come’ (a log is to come). We talk about the flow of events; but also about the flow of time—the river on which the logs travel.

Here is one of the most fertile sources of philosophic puzzlement: we talk of the future event of something coming into my room, and also of the future coming of this event. (*BB*, p. 107f.)

We would not expect Carroll to pass up the opportunities presented by this sort of confusion—and he doesn’t.

Alice sighed wearily. “I think you might do something better with the 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.

“Of course you don’t!” the Hatter said, tossing his head contemptuously. “I dare say you never even spoke to Time!”

“Perhaps not,” Alice cautiously replied; “but I know I have to beat time when I learn music.”

“Ah! That accounts for it,” said the Hatter. “He won’t stand beating. . . .” (*AW*, ch. 7.)

“In *your* country,” Mein Herr began with a startling abruptness, “what becomes of all the wasted Time?”

Lady Muriel looked grave, “Who can tell?” she half-whispered to herself. “All one knows is that it is gone—past recall!”

“Well, in *my*—I mean in a country *I* have visited,” said the old man, “they store it up: and it comes in *very* useful, years afterwards! . . . By a short and simple process—which I cannot explain to you—they store up the useless hours: and, on some *other* occasion, when they happen to *need* extra time, they get them out again.” (*SBC*, ch. 7.)

(d) Although it is not a very easy trap to fall into, someone might conceivably construe ‘nobody’ as if it were a proper name, because of certain grammatical similarities, some of which are indicated in the following passages from Carroll:

“Just look along the road, and tell me if you can see either of them.”

“I see nobody on the road,” said Alice.

“I only wish *I* had such eyes,” the king remarked in a fretful tone. “To

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be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it's as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!" (*TLG*, ch. 7.)

"Who did you pass on the road?" the King went on, holding out his hand to the Messenger for some hay.

"Nobody," said the Messenger.

"Quite right," said the King: "this young lady saw him too. So of course Nobody walks slower than you."

"I do my best," the Messenger said in a sullen tone. "I'm sure nobody walks much faster than I do!"

"He can't do that," said the King, "or else he'd have been here first." (*TLG*, ch. 7.)

Wittgenstein imagines a language in which it would be much easier to succumb to this temptation:

Imagine a language in which, instead of "I found nobody in the room," one said "I found Mr. Nobody in the room." Imagine the philosophical problems which would arise out of such a convention. (*BB*, p. 69.)

(e) Finally, Wittgenstein warns us that just as 'now' is not a "specification of time," despite the apparent similarities between such utterances as "The sun sets at six o'clock" and "The sun is setting now" (*BB*, p. 108), so

The word "today" is not a date, but isn't anything like it either. (*BB*, p. 108.)

The White Queen needs to learn this lesson—or else she has learned it very well and is not above applying it for her own advantage. She offers to engage Alice as her maid at wages of "Two pence a week, and jam every other day":

"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!" (*TLG*, ch. 5.)

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WITTGENSTEIN AND CARROLL, AS WE HAVE SEEN, were both professionally concerned with nonsense—and with very much the same sort of nonsense. It is the kind of nonsense that results from the very natural confusions and errors that *children* might fall into, if only they were not so sensible. It is nonsense, in any case, that can delight and fascinate children. It is significant, I think, that both Wittgenstein and Carroll understood the way children's minds work: this is obvious in the case of Carroll, and as for Wittgenstein, one must remember that he spent six years (1920-1926) teaching in village elementary schools. (Note, too, that this period came *between* his earlier and later phases—that is to say, just *before* his conception of nonsense took a Carrollian turn.)

Wittgenstein's and Carroll's nonsense both produce extreme puzzlement: Alice is constantly bewildered and confused by the nonsense she hears in the course of her adventures, just as philosophers, according to Wittgenstein, are puzzled and confused by the nonsense that they themselves unknowingly utter. In both cases, the nonsense takes on the form of something like madness. Alice's world is a mad one, and she is a victim of it: she is utterly powerless against the nonsense of the mad ones she encounters—she *never* wins! The philosopher's mind, on Wittgenstein's view, is just Alice's mad world internalized.

The philosopher is the man who has to cure himself of many sicknesses of the understanding before he can arrive at the notions of the sound human understanding.

If in the midst of life we are in death, so in sanity we are surrounded by madness. (*RFM*, Part IV, Sec. 53.)

Like Alice, the philosopher is a helpless victim of the madness (the nonsense)—until, also like Alice, he awakens, or is awakened, into sanity.

To be sure, Wittgenstein and Carroll had radically different attitudes towards nonsense: it tortured Wittgenstein and delighted Carroll. Carroll turned his back on reality and led us happily into his (wonderful) world of myth and fantasy. Wittgenstein, being a philosopher, exerted all his efforts to drag us back to reality from the (horrible) world of myth and fantasy. But the two men cover much the same ground: we may even look upon Wittgenstein as conceptualizing and applying to philosophy many of the points that Carroll had simply *intuited*. But the attitude, certainly, is fundamentally different. The same logical terrain that is a playground for Carroll, is a battlefield for Wittgenstein. That is why, although standing very close to one another, they may appear to the superficial eye to be worlds apart.