I THINK, THEREFORE I LAUGH

An Alternative Approach to Philosophy

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By God, Jeeves! Its a map showing a fly the way out of a fly bottle!

Introduction

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN, the Austrian philosopher, once re-
marked that "a serious and good philosophical work could be
written that would consist entirely of jokes." If one understands
the relevant philosophical point, one gets the joke. This has al-
ways seemed to me to be a wise remark and this book is written
in part to exemplify it. The book thus will contain a number of
jokes as well as stories, parables, puzzles, and anecdotes, all of
which in one way or another will relate to various philosophical
problems. These stories and anecdotes will be linked by some
(minimal) exposition and will be loosely integrated by topic. I
hope they convey something of the flavor and substance of mod-
ern philosophy and dispel the feeling among some that philoso-
phy is some sort of guide to life, a branch of theology or
mathematics, or merely a matter of being stoical in the face of
adversity.

One obvious criticism of an endeavor such as this is that to
make the philosophical points comprehensible requires that the
jokes, examples, and metaphors relating to them be placed in a
relevent context and that they be made part of a tightly reasoned
argument. This is often true of course, but for most of them the
context and argument are at least partly implicit in the stories
themselves. Consider for example the story of monkeys ran-
domly typing on a typewriter and *King Lear* resulting. Even with
no context or argument, the isolated story is thought-provoking,

no matter that the "wrong" thoughts are often provoked. Similar remarks can be made about other classic stories—the sound of a tree falling in an uninhabited forest, Laplace's deterministic image of the universe as something like a giant and inexorable clock, or Plato's metaphor of the cave and the vague reflections of reality it allows. Often what one retains from a philosophical discussion are just such stories, vivid metaphors, examples, and counterexamples. The same thing holds for philosophical jokes.

Finally even without much supporting context or argument, these stories and jokes are such that any fuller discussion or theory must accommodate and account for them. They provide part of the raw material that any reasonable philosophical theory must make sense of and thus should be part of the intellectual gear of all curious human beings.

Wittgenstein and Carroll

LET ME consider a couple of unlikely pairs of men, the first Wittgenstein and Lewis Carroll, the second Bertrand Russell and Groucho Marx. The first pair I also compared in my previous book, *Mathematics and Humor,* from which this subsection is taken. However, in this book, among much else, I expand a bit on the comparison as well as on a few other points made in *Mathematics and Humor.*

George Pitcher in "Wittgenstein, Nonsense, and Lewis Carroll" has written of some very striking similarities between the philosophical writings of Wittgenstein and the work of Carroll (Charles Lutwidge Dodson). Both men were concerned with nonsense, logical confusion, and language puzzles, although, as Pitcher notes, Wittgenstein was tortured by these things whereas Carroll was, or at least appeared to be, delighted by them. (The relation between the two men is similar in this latter respect to that between Soren Kierkegaard and Woody Allen: same concerns, different approaches.) Pitcher cites many passages in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* as illustrating the type of joke Wittgenstein probably had in mind when he made the comment on philosophical jokes mentioned earlier.

The following excerpts are representative of the many in Lewis Carroll that concern topics that Wittgenstein also considered in his writings.

1. She [Alice] ate a little bit, and said anxiously to herself, "Which way? Which way?" holding her hand on the top of her head to feel which way it was growing, and she was quite surprised to find that she remained the same size. (*Alice in Wonderland*)

2. "That is not said right," said the Caterpillar. "Not *quite* right, I'm afraid," said Alice timidly; "some of the words have got altered."

"It is wrong from beginning to end," said the Caterpillar decidedly, and there was silence for some minutes. (*Alice in Wonderland*)

3. "Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on.

"I do," Alice hastily replied; "at least—at least I mean what I say—that's the same thing, you know."

"Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "Why, you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see'!" (*Alice in Wonderland*)

4. "Would you—be good enough," Alice panted out, after running a little further, "to stop a minute just to get one's breath again?"

"I'm *good* enough," the King said, "only I'm not strong enough. You see, a minute goes by so fearfully quick. You might as well try to stop a Bandersnatch!" (*Through the Looking Glass*)

5. "It's very good jam," said the Queen.

"Well, I don't want any to-*day*, at any rate."

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

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

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

"I don't understand you," said Alice. "It's dreadfully confusing." (*Through the Looking Glass*)

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

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

Groucho Meets Russell

JUST AS Wittgenstein and Lewis Carroll shared some of the same preoccupations with language and nonsense, so Bertrand Russell and Groucho Marx were both in their own way concerned with the notion of self-reference. Furthermore Russell's theoretical skepticism contrasts with Groucho's streetwise brand as do Russell's aristocratic anarchist tendencies with Groucho's more visceral anarchist feelings. I try to illustrate these points in the following dialogue between the two. Some of the topics mentioned in the dialogue will be discussed more fully in later chapters.

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Groucho Marx and Bertrand Russell: What would the great comedian and the famous mathematician-philosopher, both in their own way fascinated by the enigmas of self-reference, say to each other had they met. Assume for the sake of absurdity that they are stuck together on the 13th metalevel of a building deep in the heart of Madhattan.

GROUCHO: This certainly is an arresting development. How are your sillygisms going to get us out of this predicament, Lord Russell. (Under his breath: Speaking to a Lord up here gives me the shakes. I think I'm in for some higher education.)

RUSSELL: There appears to be some problem with the electri-

cal power. It has happened several times before and each time everything turned out quite all right. If scientific induction is any guide to the future, we shan't have long to wait.

GROUCHO: Induction, schminduction, not to mention horsefeathers.

RUSSELL: You have a good point there, Mr. Marx. As David Hume showed 200 years ago the only warrant for the use of the inductive principle of inference is the inductive principle itself, a clearly circular affair and not really very reassuring.

GROUCHO: Circular affairs are never reassuring. Did I ever tell you about my brother, sister-in-law, and George Fenniman?

RUSSELL: I don't believe you have though I suspect you may not be referring to the same sort of circle.

GROUCHO: You're right, Lordie. I was talking more about a triangle and not a cute triangle either. An obtuse, obscene one.

RUSSELL: Well, Mr. Marx, I know something about the latter as well. There was, you may recall, a considerable brouhaha made about my appointment to a chair at the City College of New York around 1940. They objected to my views on sex and free love.

GROUCHO: And for that they wanted to give you the chair?

RUSSELL: The authorities, bowing to intense pressure, withdrew their offer and I did not join the faculty.

GROUCHO: Well, don't worry about it. I certainly wouldn't want to join any organization that would be willing to have me as a member.

RUSSELL: That's a paradox.

GROUCHO: Yeah, Goldberg and Rubin, a pair o' docs up in the Bronx.

RUSSELL: I meant my sets paradox.

GROUCHO: Oh, your sex pair o' docs. Masters and Johnson, no doubt. It's odd a great philosopher like you having problems like that.

RUSSELL: I was alluding to the set M of all sets that do not contain themselves as members. If M is a member of itself, it shouldn't be. If M isn't a member of itself, it should be.

GROUCHO: Things are hard all over. Enough of this sleazy talk though. (Stops and listens.) Hey, they're tapping a message on the girders. Some sort of a girder code, Bertie.

RUSSELL: It's a Godel code, Mr. Marx, in honor of the eminent Austrian logician Kurt Godel.

GROUCHO: Whatever. Be the first contestant to guess the secret code and win $100.

RUSSELL: I shall try to translate it. (He listens intently to the tapping.) It says "This message is . . . This message is . . ."

GROUCHO: Hurry and unlox the Godels, Bertie boy, and st. . st. . stop with the st-st-stuttering. The whole elevator shaft is beginning to shake. Get me out of this ridiculous column.

RUSSELL: The tapping is causing the girders to resonate. "This message is . . .

A LOUD EXPLOSION.
THE ELEVATOR OSCILLATES SPASMODICALLY UP AND DOWN.

RUSSELL: ". . . is false. This message is false." The statement as well as this elevator is ungrounded. If the message is true, then by what it says it must be false. On the other hand if it's false, then what it says must be true. I'm afraid that the message has violated the logic barrier.

GROUCHO: Don't be afraid of that. I've been doing it all my life. It makes for some ups and downs and vice versa, but as my brother Harpo never tired of not saying: why a duck?

CHAPTER TWO:

Logic
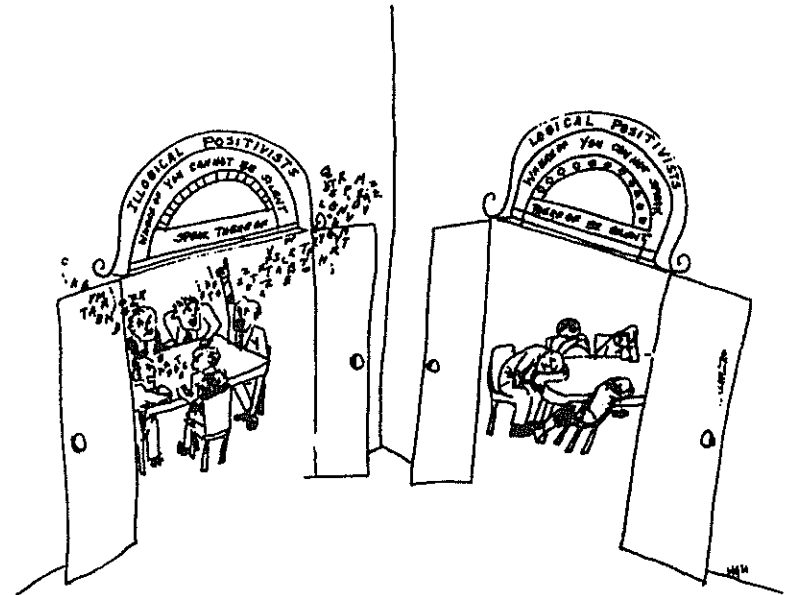
Either—Or

THERE ARE no more basic principles of logic than the law of noncontradiction and the law of the excluded middle and hence no better place to start the study of logic than with them. The law of noncontradiction states that "It is not the case that A and not A" or, as Aristotle phrases it, "The same attribute cannot at the same time belong and not belong to the same subject and in the same respect." The law of the excluded middle states that "Either A or not A," or, to state a specific instance of the law, "Either Wittgenstein was a redhead or he was not." (Symbolically, using $\sim$ for "not," $\wedge$ for "and," $\vee$ for "or," and parentheses ( ) to indicate that the statement within them is to be taken as a whole, the law of the excluded middle can be expressed as $A\vee\sim A$ and the law of noncontradiction as $\sim(A\wedge\sim A)$.)

Even such basic principles as these can cause problems, however, if they're used uncritically. Consider, for example, the law of the excluded middle. Below are three uses of the principle, one unexceptionable and vaguely humorous, the second puzzling and distinctly misleading, and the third straightforward except to a minority.

The first story is due to Leo Rosten and tells of a famous rabbi-logician who was so wise he could analyze any situation no matter how complex. His students wondered, though, if his reasoning power could withstand a bout of drinking. So these respectful yet curious students induced him during a feast to drink enough wine to make him quite tipsy. When he fell asleep

they carried him to the cemetery and laid him on the ground behind a tombstone. They then hid themselves and awaited his analysis of the situation.

When he awoke they were most impressed by his Talmudic use of the law of the excluded middle. "Either I'm alive or I'm not. If I'm living, then what am I doing here? And if I'm dead, then why do I want to go to the bathroom?"

The second story deals with future events. If it's true now that I shall do a certain thing next Tuesday, let's say fall off a horse, then no matter how I resist doing so, no matter what precautions I take, when Tuesday comes, I shall fall off a horse. On the other hand, if it's false now that next Tuesday I shall fall off a horse, then no matter what efforts I make to do so, no matter how recklessly I ride, I shall not fall off a horse that day. Yet that the prediction is either true or false is a necessary truth, the law of the excluded middle. It seems to follow that it is already now fixed what shall happen next Tuesday, that in fact not just one event next Tuesday but the entire future is somehow decided, logically preordained.

The problem with the above is not the law of the excluded middle, but the meaning, or rather meaninglessness, of statements of the form "It is true now that some specified event will happen."

Interestingly a small minority of mathematicians deny that the law of the excluded middle is a law of logic. They object to statements such as "Either there is a string of 8 consecutive 5s somewhere in the decimal expansion of π or there is not." Since there is lacking both a constructive proof of the existence of this string of 5s and a constructive proof of its nonexistence, the intuitionists and constructivists do not count the above instance of the law of the excluded middle as being true. For them truth is a matter of constructive provability.

For quite different reasons some quantum physicists also reject the applicability of the law of the excluded middle in some

contexts. In fact ever since J. Lukasiewicz, an influential Polish logician of the 1920s, initiated the formal study of 3-valued logics—true, false, undetermined (indeterminate, intermediate)—it has been an object of persistent, though limited interest. Classical logicians who accept the law of the excluded middle sometimes deride those who don't with the following: "Did you hear the one about the Polish logician? He thought there were three truth values."

The moral of these stories is simply that even such a basic principle of logic can be misapplied, can be controversial. Logic is the most important theoretical tool we possess but, as with all tools, one must know how and when to use it. We want to avoid the sad fate of that proverbial tribe of Indians who, being experts on the theoretical properties of arrows (vectors), simultaneously fired arrows northward and westward whenever they spotted a bear to the northwest or two arrows northward and one eastward when they spotted a bear north-northeast of them.

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"If I had a horse, I'd horsewhip you!—*Groucho Marx*

Conditional statements can be tricky, even straightforward ones like the following.

*: If George is hungry, then Martha is hungry." It's clear, I hope, that if * is true and George is hungry, then Martha is also hungry. It's equally clear that if George is hungry and Martha is not, then * is false. What if Martha is hungry and it's unknown whether or not George is. In almost all mathematical and many logical contexts the convention is that in this case * is true. What if George is not hungry and it's unknown whether or not Martha is. Again the convention most useful in mathematics and logic is that * is true.

To summarize, in mathematical, logical, and many everyday contexts any sentence having the form "If P, then Q" or "P implies Q" or, symbolically, "P → Q" is (1) true whenever Q is true whether P is true or not, (2) true whenever P is false whether Q is true or not, and (3) false only when P is true and Q is false.

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The following two stories are relevant and illustrative.

Bertrand Russell was discussing conditional statements of the above type and maintaining that a false statement implies anything and everything. A skeptical philosopher questioned him, "You mean that if 2 + 2 = 5, then you are the Pope?" Russell answered affirmatively and supplied the following amusing "proof."

"If we're assuming 2 + 2 = 5, then certainly you'll agree that subtracting 2 from each side of the equation gives us 2 = 3. Transposing, we have 3 = 2 and subtracting 1 from each side of the equation gives us 2 = 1. Thus since the Pope and I are two people and 2 = 1, then the Pope and I are one. Hence I'm the Pope."

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LOGICIAN: So you see class, anything follows from a false statement.

STUDENT: I'm afraid I'm lost.

LOGICIAN: It's really quite simple. Are you sure you don't understand?

STUDENT: All I'm sure of is that if I understood that stuff, then I'd be a monkey's uncle.

LOGICIAN: You're right there. (Laughs)

STUDENT: Why are you laughing?

LOGICIAN: You wouldn't understand.

STUDENT: Anyway, doc, if you're interested, we're having a party tonight.

LOGICIAN: And if I'm not interested?

STUDENT: What?

LOGICIAN: Thanks anyway, but I'm busy.

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Nonmathematical contexts in which the foregoing analysis of if-then statements does not hold are not hard to find. Two statements that are false despite the falsity of their if-clauses are:

(1) If one were to place that nail in that glass of water, it would dissolve.

(2) If Harpo Marx had spoken in any of the Marx brothers' movies, World War II would have been averted.

The truth of such so-called subjunctive and counterfactual conditional statements does not, as in the case of mathematical conditional statements "If P, then Q," depend only on the truth or falsity of P and Q. The truth of subjunctive or counterfactual conditionals depends on the lawlike relationship that may or may not exist between P and Q.

Still there are many uses of the mathematical conditonal outside of logic and mathematics. If someone says "If it's raining, I'm going to punch you and if it's not raining, I'm going to punch you," you can be sure that that person is using the mathematical conditional and that he intends to punch you.
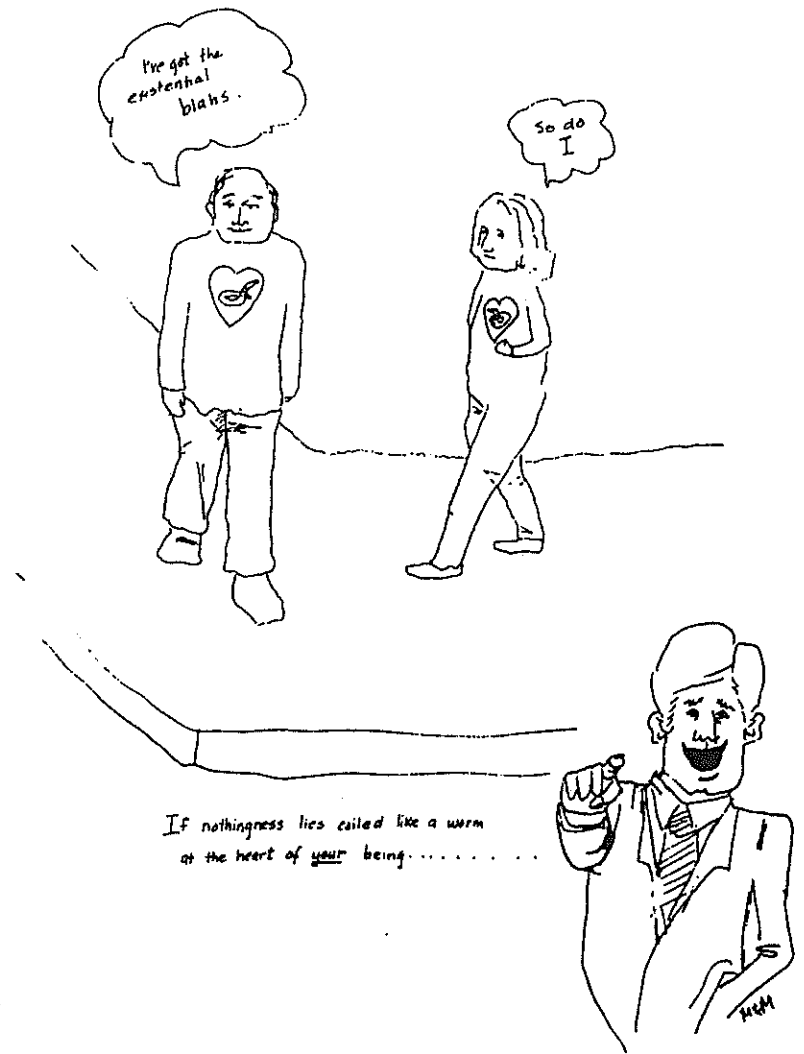
When I was young, I forgot to laugh. Later when I opened my eyes and saw reality I began to laugh and haven't stopped since.
Soren Kierkegaard

WITTGENSTEIN ONCE remarked that he looked forward to the day when philosophy was no longer a subject in its own right but rather infused all other subjects. Philosophy is or should be, in this view, an adverb. One does linguistics philosophically, one studies science philosophically, one investigates political issues philosophically. Humor or play has something of the same character. It's awkward for humor itself to be the focus of an activity. The announcement "We will now tell jokes and be humorous" sounds distinctly totalitarian. Humor too is adverbial and qualifies one's approach to other activities. One answers questions humorously, analyzes a situation humorously, writes or speaks humorously.

Of course "quickly," "painfully" and "odoriferously" are also adverbs, but I hope I've managed to indicate that "philosophically" and "humorously," at least in their best manifestations, share more than adverbial status. Both require a free intelligence in a relatively open society, and both evince a keen concern for language and its (mis)interpretation as well as a skeptical tendency toward debunking. The incongruity that is at the heart of most jokes is analogous to the conundrum that is at the heart of most philosophical problems. Likewise the aggressive tone present in many jokes and the social control the jokes tend to foster is analogous to the argumentative nature of many

philosophical papers and the intellectual dominance the papers are meant to establish. This aggressive tone and argumentative nature are, it should be noted though, clearly circumscribed and presuppose an independent intelligence in others.

Finally, both humor and philosophy are quintessentially human, requiring as they do the characteristically human ability to transcend one's self and one's situation. The discrepancy between our hopes or pretensions and reality is, try though we sometimes do, impossible not to see. Two responses to the starkness of this discrepancy are through philosophy and humor. I think, therefore I laugh.

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Our heroes—Ludwig Wittgenstein, Bertrand Russell, Lewis Carroll, and Groucho Marx—are discussing the question "What is philosophy?" Let us join them for the end of their discussion and ours.

WITTGENSTEIN: I repeat the question is not well-posed. There are a whole family of uses for the term "philosophy." Still my primary aim has been to clarify, to show how to pass from a piece of disguised nonsense to something that is obvious nonsense. Misunderstandings, as I've always insisted, must be cured if we are to be free of them.

GROUCHO: Is that anything like curing hams?

RUSSELL: Asking the question indicates, I think, that you know quite well what Mr. Wittgenstein is talking about.

GROUCHO: Easy on the self-reference shtick, Bertie. We're not in the elevator anymore. I understand Ludwig's point but most of this other philosophical stuff you guys dream up seems so nit-picking and technical. What about the big questions: the meaning of life, the death of God, the residuals on my television reruns?

RUSSELL: Better some real progress on the meaning of confirmation and probability, on the nature of logic and scientific law,

on reductionism, artificial intelligence, and intentional explanation, e.g., than a lot of empty blather on the so-called big questions. The big questions, at least the ones that make sense, will always be there. They're sometimes clarified by the answers to the smaller questions, sometimes not. When they're not though, listening to wooly-headed pontificators expound on them doesn't help either. A courageous acknowledgment of ignorance is much preferable.

GROUCHO: Calm down, Bertie. Without those wooly-headed pontificators we might both be unemployed or, worse yet, lawyers. Maybe what I'm trying to get at—or be cured of, as Ludwig might say—is what difference does it all make? What difference will the answers to these smaller questions, or anything else for that matter, make in 50,000 years? Even my reruns won't be on then and there'll be no more copies of *Principia Mathematica,* Ludwig's *Philosophical Investigations,* or even *Alice in Wonderland.*

LEWIS CARROLL (overcoming his shyness stammers): Maybe n . . . n . . . nothing we do now will make a difference in 50,000 years, but *if* that is so, then it would seem that nothing that will be the case in 50,000 years makes a difference now either. In particular it doesn't make a difference now that in 50,000 years what we do now won't make a difference.

GROUCHO: You can bet your walrus that I'm not going to tangle with you about time. The time has passed, in fact, to talk of many things. Enough. If you fellas will excuse me, I'm going to be leaving in a minute. If you persist with this talk though, I might even leave in a huff or maybe even in a minute and a huff. In any case since you haven't asked, I'm going over to make love with our old friend Martha. Fortunately her husband George is out looking for grue emeralds with Waldo.

Groucho slouches off leaving the three philosophers wondering.