

Humor and Esoteric Religion in Wittgenstein

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The title of this paper mentions humor and esoteric religion, neither of which are commonly treated in philosophy. Only the linguistic aspect of esoteric religion is taken into account here. It's the only aspect of religion clearly seen in Wittgenstein's writings. And it's an aspect that is understandable--if not acceptable--to students of Wittgenstein from what they already know of Wittgenstein.

The paper is focused on humor in Wittgenstein's published writings, other writings, and recorded conversational remarks. This is regarded as helpful in understanding Wittgenstein's thought. Since this thought automatically separates those who understand it from those who don't (cf. *C&V* p.7e), understanding the humor has a similar role, i.e., separating those who understand it from those who don't. This does not mean the humor is *hermetic*, i.e. sealed and impervious to any outside inquiry. I will also be touching on humor and theory, humor and tragedy, humor and happiness in Wittgenstein's expressed world view.

Wittgenstein's sense of humor, in philosophy and life, is essential to understanding the spirit of his writings. For the present I refer back to brief previous discussions of the preface to the *Tractatus* as a joke on the history of philosophy (pp. 25ff. *Wittgenstein & Judaism*), an idea supported separately by the philosophers Dominick La Capra and Tim McDonough), of the *Philosophical Investigations* in its author's own description as 'a collection of wisecracks' (p. 32, from Wittgenstein's MS. 119).

Previously I presented Wittgenstein as a Judaic esoteric, not a Christian at all. Here the word *esoteric* is important, because it implies wordlessness. In Wittgenstein this is rather clearly indicated by the suggestion that nothing was being communicated in a work like the *Tractatus*. A person reading it should derive pleasure from recognizing ideas *he already has*, not from learning something from the text by linguistic means. If words are essential to the communication, it's not esoteric but mundane and corrupt. This is the clear esoteric goal—wordless communication bypassing language. Since it's most likely that in the course of his self-identification as a Jewish thinker Wittgenstein read Maimonides, the paradigmatic Jewish thinker, we must take into account that this was also Maimonides' view: "*customary words... the greatest among the causes leading unto error*" (*The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Pines, vol. I, 132). So the loss of a great cause of error is no loss.

It's a matter of relief and clarity, the result of a philosophical job well done—in this case, by Wittgenstein, who asserted that he was doing nothing new but was pointing in all his work to something else (cf. Drury; what he says will not be hard to understand, but the point why he says it might be).

Trying to write on Wittgenstein's humor led me into integrating the topic with his overall thought. It has been observed, rightly I think, that all this thought hangs together (one object seen from different angles, cf. *C&V* p.7e), so one cannot remove one brick and leave the rest of the edifice standing.

Humor is a sign of confidence, reassurance and detachment. Its effect instantly connects minds within a circle, excluding and perplexing those outside. This paper claims that a natural humor arising from such qualities is at work everywhere in Wittgenstein's writings. Only shared assumptions or background of understanding make humor possible, whether it is vulgar ethnic humor about our neighbors Swedes, Danes etc. or the most elevated intellectual humor about the philosophy of science or the bewitchment of our minds by means of language.

When a potential playwright (say Harold Pinter, Samuel Beckett or Tom Stoppard) reads Wittgenstein, he/she sees humor behind the thought

and we are made to laugh. When a philosopher reads Wittgenstein, generally we are made to see theory and think thoughts already thought.

There is direct evidence that humor is not incidental to Wittgenstein's philosophical writing. He gave directives to himself: "Never stay up on the barren heights of cleverness, but come down into the green valleys of silliness." (*CV* p. 76e). He observed that if people never did silly things nothing intelligent would ever get done. He characterized his major later work as 'a collection of wisecracks' (Wittgenstein, MS. 119, p. 32). He also claimed that "humor is not a mood but a way of looking at the world. So if it is correct to say that humor was stamped out in Nazi Germany, that does not mean that people were not in good spirits, or anything of that sort, but something much deeper and more important" (*C&V*: 78e, 1948). Wittgenstein constantly practiced humor in the classroom, and in conversations with philosopher colleagues. For example, he thought that the idea that one day, bit by bit, everything would be known, was funny, very funny indeed (*L&C*). Very early on, as a young man, he announced his perception (to Pinsent) that philosophers of the past were fools and made stupid mistakes. Once CD Broad tried to corner him with the proposition that either God existed or he didn't exist. Couldn't he half-exist, Wittgenstein countered? Broad is said to have left the room. In another case, Wittgenstein and some other people were trying to enter a university facility, when someone remarked, "I'm afraid

it has been taken over by an organization of philosophers,' to which Wittgenstein said, "I'm afraid so, too."

There is also indirect evidence. Monk reports at length on Wittgenstein's whimsical humor and playfulness, for which his own word was 'nonsense': cf. pp. 265-67, 294-95, 493, 529ff. Wittgenstein was a fan of P. G. Wodehouse, cf. Drury, *Conversations*, p. 148.

In general, humor goes with happiness. In tragedy there is no humor. Wittgenstein noted that in his view of life there was no tragedy. Hence there was nothing that could not be looked at with humor. I would like to link this with certain religious assumptions about the world, such as it is created by a benevolent entity we call God. According to Wittgenstein, the happy man is doing the will of God (*Notebooks 1914-1916*). In this sense Wittgenstein was always happy, and despite a life of many sorrows and stresses, his last words are said to have been, "Tell them I've had a wonderful life." He didn't let philosophical quandaries overcome him. He wrote instead that in order to help philosophers solve their problems, you have to think even more crazily than philosophers do. Therefore the quandaries that he generates, such as is a dog too honest, or if a lion could talk we could not understand him [or, as someone added, if a lion could speak, it wouldn't understand itself], are not his perplexities, but intended to humorously perplex his interlocutor.

Now we must get into some serious aspects of humor to touch intellectual issues. I would like to suggest the link between religion, humor and language. Of course, Wittgenstein's thinking--his critique of language—is based on language. Let me suggest that there are two religions that are also amenable to linguistic approaches. They are Buddhism and Judaism. These are system-destroying rather than system-creating (or dogmatic) religions. Let's look at each in turn.

In Buddhism all our sensory input including brain activity is regarded as illusory. This means that all our talk about it is meaningless, ineffective, to be set aside. Therefore Buddhism propounds no theories. Language cannot speak about language. Even the idea that sensory output is illusory is regarded as illusory. Language can only joke about language. And it does:

Q: What did a Buddhist say to the hot dog vendor?

A: Make me one with everything.

(Contributed by Kevin Allen)

Here there is no residue, no result, no dogma, only laughter. Any attempt to formulate goes up in a puff of smoke. Buddhism posits no God, claiming rather that discussions of his existence were useless, distracting.

On the other hand, Judaism is a very different religion, built around a Creator God. However, this God is a very linguistic God, who operates through language. In this way he is very human. He becomes comprehensible at least partly as a result of the human philosophical or intellectual activity of *critique of language*. He creates and reveals through language. When language is used for the arrogant purpose of reaching heaven through the Tower of Babel—through a misunderstanding of the nature of language--the act is forestalled.

Now, what about the case of a religion that resists the critique of language and insists on a language-engendered reality? Let us say that such a religion has a leader named Maledict, and it has proposed and fought for various dogmas throughout its existence. One of its current dogmas is that sex is for procreation only. On a visit to a continent where STD's are raging, Maledict insists that condoms may not be used to prevent their transmission. Here we see that *dogma killeth*—millions of deaths have resulted from it and will continue. On the other hand, the reflective spirit of the critique of language *giveth life* simply because dogma expressed in language is not seen as a creator and enforcer of reality from the dogmatist's point of view. The image of a German-European like Pope Benedict XVI going to Africa, being welcomed by dancing African men and women, and sentencing them to die for his current dogma is a stark recapitulation of previous dogmas by which Africans were declared subhuman, and suitable for enslavement and

massacre by Europeans. This is the ultimate kind of *the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of our language*, or, we may say, *by means of our dogmatic, theoretical view of language*. We note that Wittgenstein clearly and severely criticized the dogmas of the Catholic Church, although several of his 'disciples' were Catholics, and he is often taken to have been one himself. Although Monk in his much-praised biography mistakenly saddles Wittgenstein with Weininger's world view, he does clarify that Wittgenstein was not a Catholic.

We suggest that humor and tragedy are incompatible. What did Wittgenstein say about tragedy and his world view? That there was no tragedy in it. He wrote that tragedy is something un-Jewish (*etwas unjüdisches*). Later, to emphasize and clarify that this observation is not just some historical or sociological point, he writes: "In this world (mine) there is no tragedy, nor is there that infinite variety of circumstance which gives rise to tragedy...." To give some more indication of his mentality, Wittgenstein explains: "It is as though everything were soluble in the aether of the world: there are no hard surfaces." The German is more compact: "*Es ist sozusagen alles in dem Weltäther löslich; es gibt keine Härten*" (See C&V., p. 1, 9, 1929, 1931). We can connect this with the observation quoted earlier: that *humor is not a mood but a way of looking at the world*. All this suggests that it was a way of looking at the world that was his own, that he had personally adopted.

Judging life to be tragic is a human decision. The tragic hero is then seen as incapable of preventing the tragedy in which he or she figures. But to deny tragedy on the other hand is to assert that Creation is good and man is created free. Life cannot lapse into tragedy. Everything that happens, or seems to happen, is a lesson at worst, a wisecrack.

Language does not refer. It cannot depict reality. So we are never caught up in any reality. "Reality," the daughter of language, is, so to speak, the mother of circumstance. And it is *the infinite variety of circumstance*, in Wittgenstein's phrase, "which gives rise to tragedy." In other words, the line of logic is like this: no referring language = no reality; no reality = no infinite variety of circumstance; no infinite variety of circumstance = no tragedy. *Circumstance* is here, by this descent, the granddaughter of language, like her an agent of bewitchment.

Do we have any further clue as to the importance of circumstance in Wittgenstein's usage? Yes. He gave this advice to Drury: "Oh, don't depend on circumstances. Make sure your religion is a matter between you and God only" (117). (We will skip here some theological details which makes this advice *Jewish* in opposition to *Christian*—Pascal on Jesus as intermediary, i.e. religion is *not* a matter between you and God only). This is a clarification of Wittgenstein's claim that he lives in a non-Greek Jewish world where there can be no tragedy because there are no language--engendered *circumstances* to give birth to it. There is no binary opposition *tragedy : comedy* for Wittgenstein. So we could say, if we still

want to apply these terms, *there is only comedy*. The attitude that circumstances create tragedy, but the religious man in his focus on God does not take circumstances into account, is an attitude embedded in the Book of Job, and it was also emphasized by Wittgenstein.

[In Wittgenstein's usage, going by the excerpts in *Culture & Value*, *circumstance* is linked to *reality* by *language* and also to *the world*. Just as Wittgenstein warns Drury against letting *circumstance(s)* come between him and God, he speaks of *the world* being "left on one side like an uninteresting lumber room," and even more clearly, "the whole outcome of this entire work is for the world to be set on one side" (*C&V*, p.9e). So: the critique of language, which goes back to Jewish sources, results in the *world* or *circumstances* to be set aside, providing the possibility of contact with God in silence. This is the line behind what we are saying about humor. It wells up when we have expunged our minds of the very idea of *circumstance*, granddaughter of linguistic bewitchment].

Philosophy traditionally attempts to provide a theoretical overview. We recall that theory derives from the Greek for sight, seeing. Wittgenstein's view of language tells us that theoretical or 'meta'-language is incapable of providing this overview, any more than ordinary language. So ordinary language is all right. This is already clear from the Preface to the *Tractatus*. Humor, which leaves no theory standing, becomes a God-like

activity that humans can take part in, a sort of *imitatio dei*. Any human theoretical view attempting to replace God's is arrogant, without foundation, and therefore an occasion for humor—for example, the theories of Newton or Einstein or Darwin or Freud, all of which Wittgenstein condemns. He makes fun of evolution in the *Lectures & Conversations*. He says the vaunted 20th-century scientists are not great. Although he declared himself a disciple of Freud, he significantly condemns Freudian psychoanalysis for its 'irreligiousness.'

The path to understanding Wittgenstein's humor is skepticism. Skepticism about language prevents the making of any 'serious' statements. Anyone who does can either be laughed at or criticized, the prime example of this being the philosopher in the *Tractatus* who makes positive statements and is shown how they fail to make sense. That is the proper method in philosophy.

Going back to our two religions, this is also the method in Buddhism—purely deconstructive, the ultimate critique of language. It leads to silence. Silence is also the goal advocated by another thinker much admired by Wittgenstein, Søren Kierkegaard. We might say that it is *tragedy* and *circumstances* that create noise. In silence, everything is funny.

This paper is written between a dream and a reading. The dream is of attending a conference on deconstruction and the law. There, as usual, I

am reluctant to participate in much discussion and reveal my thinking. At the end of the day, when people are leaving, I buttonhole a participant and ask her for her impressions. She tells me exactly what I had thought had gone on. I am satisfied and leave happy.

The reading is called *Duties of the Heart*. It was written in Arabic in the Middle Ages by a Jewish writer, ibn Paquda, a kind of Kierkegaard of the time, very learned but guileless. The book tries to guide the reader into unconditional love of God, exposing the vanity of language and thought: “start by curbing your tongue and lips by avoiding unnecessary words—to the point where moving your heaviest limb is easier for you than moving your tongue. For the tongue is quick to sin, and its sins are the most numerous sort of all, because the tongue moves effortlessly and speedily, it does its work easily and is able to do good and evil without an intermediary....for as the sage said, “Death and life are in the hands of your tongue” (Proverbs 18: 21). So we see that the critique of language has a long history, at least as far back as Solomon, and the private language argument has its analogues in the book of Isaiah.

Wittgenstein was seeking a way to speak of religion after the path had been too muddied. This means, the language in which we speak of religion had been too corrupted. So he imagined not speaking of religion at all. As he remarked, “Likewise the truth, the value, of religion can have nothing to do with the *words* used. There need, in fact, be no words at

all. 'Is talking essential to religion?' he asked (Monk 305). So, if in Wittgenstein's view, the most important human activity can be conducted without words, like music, what importance do words have? Perhaps only as a source of humor. The speaker, even the philosophical speaker, is always a fool. In Wittgenstein, this is rather clearly indicated by the suggestion that nothing was being communicated in a work like the *Tractatus*. A person reading it should derive pleasure from recognizing ideas *he already has*. If words are essential to the communication, it's not esoteric but mundane and corrupt. This is the clear esoteric goal—wordless communication bypassing language. So Wittgenstein gave us another hint: "I can well imagine a religion in which there are no doctrinal propositions, in which there is thus no talking" (quoted in Monk, 305). He also wrote of a grammatical joke indicating the depth of philosophy (*PI* §111), and of philosophy in the form of jokes.¹ With this result or conclusion there is nothing to worry any student of Wittgenstein, only the question, has it been understood?

What about those readers of Wittgenstein who have not noticed his humor? Should they be argued with or just be left alone until they notice? To leave them alone would be an exclusive and superior practice—nobody would learn anything. Some would laugh a lot and some not at all. Therefore it is better to demonstrate the humor and make it accessible. Here the starting point is the relation of Wittgenstein's humor to skepticism. Ordinary language is ordinary

language and that's it. We can't know anything through it, so we are skeptical, even about skepticism. The question is, where to go with this paradox. Philosophy, of course, does not change the world, it leaves everything as it is. So who changes? The only possible answer is, we. We change, and that means, not our clothes or our food, but our behavior. This is the end result of Wittgensteinian humor, which we have allied to Buddhism and Judaism. We then don't have to worry about the intellectual, cosmic or hermetic aspects of humor.

I'd like to clarify that I'm not suggesting that Wittgenstein was just a humorist or a comedian, an intellectual comedian or comic playwright. As he emphasized, his father was a *businessman*, and *he* was a businessman too: he wanted to get something accomplished *in philosophy*, cleared up once and for all. So I suggest that *Wittgenstein saw beyond humor to service*. He had a program for human beings. This is clearly seen not in all the papers and books published by philosophers like us, but in the life of one of his closest friends, Maurice Drury. On Wittgenstein's direct advice, instead of becoming a minister in the Protestant Church of Ireland, Drury actually made a doctor and psychiatrist out of himself. He also made contributions to understanding his friend's message: essays reminiscing about Wittgenstein, and a book expounding his thought, *The Danger of Words*. Even the mathematician Monk (note that Wittgenstein thought mathematicians make bad philosophers!) agrees that this is the work out of all that is closest to

Wittgenstein's spirit. So if we understand such a work and also engage in service to others, we will be good Wittgensteinians. *For*: "...only if you try to be helpful to other people will you in the end find your way to God" (Wittgenstein to Drury, 129).

¹ Some useful previous information and discussion will be found in Bela Szabados, http://74.125.77.132/search?q=cache:FHuS8rSSKcIJ:www.uqtr.quebec.ca/AE/Vol_10/wittgenstein/szabados_intro.htm+wittgenstein+jokes+philosophy&cd=10&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us:

"...we might recall a passage in the *Philosophical Investigations* where Wittgenstein compares the depth of philosophical problems to that of a grammatical joke. "Let us ask ourselves: why do we feel a grammatical joke to be *deep*? (And that is what the depth of philosophy is.)" [14] Also there are allusions to humor and jokes in *Culture and Value* which link humor and community, and suggest that a breakdown in the former may show the fault-lines in the latter. "Humour is not a mood but a way of looking at the world. So if it is correct to say that humour was stamped out in Nazi Germany, that does not mean that people were not in good spirits, or anything of that sort, but something much deeper and more important." [15] Again: "What is it like when people do not have the same sense of humour? They do not react properly to each other. It is as though there were a custom among certain people to throw someone a ball, which he is supposed to catch & throw back; but certain people might not throw it back, but put it in their pocket instead." [16] What a striking example of "not getting it" – or perhaps a refusal to get it."