

I Think, Therefore I Laugh

[The Flip Side of Philosophy]



John Allen Paulos

Best-selling author of
Innumeracy and *A Mathematician Reads the Newspaper*



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The Flip Side of Philosophy

JOHN ALLEN PAULOS



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For my wife, Sheila

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I Think, Therefore I Laugh is the second of my six books, and it has been out of print for a while. When Columbia University Press asked me if I would be interested in reissuing it and writing a new preface, I immediately agreed. With an author's myopic vanity, perhaps, I have always liked this little book, inspired, as it was, by Wittgenstein's quip that a book on philosophy might consist entirely of jokes. Since the book went out of print rather quickly, I've used it as a small quarry, and readers of my subsequent books may recognize bits and pieces of it in them. Moreover, many of the book's concerns are similar to those of my later books: misunderstandings of mathematics and science and of the relation between them, pseudoscience and its appeal, the uses and misuses of probability and statistics, humor and "higher-order" endeavors, the interplay between narrative and numbers.

Although my Ph.D. is in mathematics, specifically mathematical logic, I've always had an interest in analytic philosophy and its puzzles. It seemed to me when I wrote *I Think, Therefore I Laugh*, and it still seems, that the border between such philosophical abstractions and the concerns of everyday life is well worth exploring. The payoff to this

exploration is of a largely intellectual sort. Recall one definition of a philosopher: he is the one who attends a conference on crime sentencing guidelines and delivers a paper on the meaning of “time” and the logical dilemma faced by imprisoned accomplices. Since social, economic, and topical issues are not the focus of this book (as they have been in a couple of my later works), there is no compelling temptation to update it. Aside from eliminating a number of infelicities and a few minor mistakes, I have not changed anything.

If I were to do the book over, I would choose a slightly different set of philosophical problems and a different set of jokes and parables and would develop them at a more leisurely pace. The presentation here is a bit relentless—something, something else, and then some other thing. Nevertheless, I reiterate and stand by the book’s guiding insight: conceptual humor and analytic philosophy resonate at a very deep level. Did you hear what George Carlin and Groucho Marx said to Robert Nozick and Bertrand Russell? . . .

I THINK, THEREFORE I LAUGH

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chapter one



TWO UNLIKELY PAIRS OF MEN

Introduction



Ludwig Wittgenstein, the Austrian philosopher, once remarked that “a serious and good philosophical work could be written that would consist entirely of jokes” (Wittgenstein). If one understands the relevant philosophical point, one gets the joke. This has always seemed to me to be a wise remark, and this book is written in part to exemplify it. The book 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 modern philosophy and dispel the feeling among some that philosophy 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 for the philosophical points to be comprehensible, the jokes, examples, and metaphors relating to them must be placed in a relevant context and must 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 randomly typing on a typewriter and *King Lear* resulting. Even with no context or argu-

ment, 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.



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; today 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 hand 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 "minute" with that of a word like "train"; and the last illustrates that the word "to-day," 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” (Wittgenstein). As I have 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 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 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.



Groucho Marx and Bertrand Russell: What would the great comedian and the famous mathematician-philosopher, both in their own ways fascinated by the enigmas of self-reference, have said to each other had they met? Assume for the sake of absurdity that they are stuck together on the thirteenth 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 electrical 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 two hundred 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 code, Bertie.

RUSSELL: (*Giggles*) Perhaps, Mr. Marx, we should term the girder code a Godel code 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?

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