On Difficulty and Understanding

One begins to go about with the sluggish step of a philosopher or a clochard, as more and more vital gestures become reduced to mere instincts of preservation, to a conscience more alert not to be deceived than to grasp truth.


CORTÁZAR AND WITTGENSTEIN

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy is notoriously difficult to approach because of his rhetorical style and structure. These challenges are not an arbitrary result of his writing, but rather an instantiation of his philosophical views. In the same vein, Julio Cortázar is known for his perplexing and unorthodox fiction. The authors pursue a common agenda, in the manner as well as the content of their works. Wittgenstein and Cortázar write to alert their audience to the failings of more conventional perspectives on philosophy and literature. The unorthodox structure of Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* and of Cortázar’s *Hopscotch* makes them more difficult to approach and thereby requires more active involvement on the part of the reader. This demand in turn reinforces the shared content of these books.

The shortcomings Cortázar finds in literature correspond to the deficiencies Wittgenstein identifies in the traditional approaches to language and philosophy. For instance, both authors point to an emphasis on specificity and rigidity. Most of their predecessors seem to think that an analysis is only complete and worthwhile if it arrives at strict definitions and sharp boundaries; both Cortázar and Wittgenstein consider this emphasis on specificity misplaced. As Cortázar suggests through Morelli, a fictional writer whom Cortázar quotes throughout *Hopscotch*, “any clear idea was always an error or a half-truth.” The error, one often committed by the literary and philosophical traditions, lies in

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1. Consider Oswald Hanfling’s view in *Wittgenstein and the Human Form of Life* (Psychology Press, 2002) for a typical example: “… even in the most finished writings of the mature Wittgenstein there are passages whose meaning may elude us … Wittgenstein himself sometimes said that the difficult of coping with his ideas would be one of will rather than understanding” (p.11)
their mistaken insistence on imposing structure and clarity where none is present. There is an unacceptable rift between the portrayal of the world by these authors and the manner in which the world is actually experienced. *Hopscotch* and the *Investigations* both intend to close this gap in the name of intellectual honesty.

The alternative methods Wittgenstein and Cortázar propose as solutions also bear resemblance to each other. Both suggest that the fixation with explanation and analysis, which leads to the false attribution of structure, be replaced with description and demonstration. The new philosopher and the new novelist must reject the linear, logical approach of the past and replace it with pictures; instead of forcing a fundamentally ambiguous reality into a rigid argument, one should present a picture that allows the reader to survey the subject at hand without compelling him to a restrictive conclusion. By doing so, the author avoids making assumptions based on how things *must* be and arrive instead at a portrayal of how things *are*.

Not content to simply preach a new order, both Wittgenstein and Cortázar craft their own work as examples of the approach they are advancing. The chapters of *Hopscotch* and the remarks of the *Philosophical Investigations* defy logical arrangement with a deliberate lack of sequence. This should not be mistaken for laziness or lack of forethought—organization is not absent from these works. Instead, their organization is unconventional and elusive in order to avoid the inflexibility their authors condemn. Faced with such an unusual arrangement of thoughts, the reader is jarred from his comfortable position of being led and has no choice but to take an active role in exploring the pictures set before him.

In addition to encouraging the reader with an engaging structure, Wittgenstein and Cortázar present arguments in the form of dialogue to give a more complete picture of the matter at hand. In Wittgenstein, the voices speaking are not explicitly identified or given authority, but there is some regularity to the manner in which they are portrayed. Stanley Cavell suggests that these voices can be seen as “the voice of temptation” and “the voice of correctness”\(^3\). The voice of temptation begins by suggesting a view that seems plausible, only to have it rejected as “nonsense” by the voice of correctness. The voice of correctness generally offers arguments in support of its rejections, but the arguments are not all

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\(^3\) Winblad, Douglas. “Tractarian Reflections.” 3
uniformly convincing. This format has the advantage of presenting both views for the reader to consider and allowing him some leeway in reaching a conclusion. Some of the excerpts from Morelli’s work involve dialogue between similarly indeterminate interlocutors, who present opposing views without clearly resolving their disagreement at all. Many of these dialogues can be read as internal disagreements that Morelli has with himself, just as both the voice of temptation and the voice of correctness can be considered voices of Wittgenstein. In both works, however, one of the voices seems to gain the upper hand.

MAJOR PROBLEMS IN LITERATURE & PHILOSOPHY AND WITTCGENSTEIN...

CONVEYING ONE MESSAGE: BEING “UNDERSTOOD”

One of several mistakes made in traditional philosophy and literature is to insist on conveying a single, clearly delineated message. In the spirit of Wittgenstein’s deliberate ambiguity, Cortázar prefers to allow for multiple meanings to be communicated. One of Morelli’s notes observes that “in general, every novelist expects that the reader will understand him … or that he will retrieve a determinate message and incarnate it”.\(^4\) Traditionally, a novel that does not accomplish this goal is deficient. Perhaps one would say that it lacks coherence or direction, or that it fails to make a point. Cortázar, on the other hand, suggests that this is not the purpose of a novel. In the same chapter, he states that a narrative should not be “a pretext for the transmission of a ‘message’ (there is no message, there are messengers and that is the message….)”.\(^5\) The word “pretext” casts a shadow of illegitimacy over the traditional novel, implying that its author is pursuing an agenda under the guise of literature instead of carrying out his duties as a writer. Those duties, according to Cortázar, consist of portraying what it is to be a person and experience the world, which can only be accomplished by casting off the strictures of the old novel.

Remark 132 of the Investigations supports Cortazar’s efforts to avoid limiting the conclusion available to the reader. Wittgenstein points out that logical analysis must be “an order with a particular end in view; one out of many possible orders; not the order”\(^6\).

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\(^4\) Cortázar, 517
\(^5\) Cortázar, 516
While he admits that logical analysis can serve the practical purpose of gaining specific knowledge, it is often insufficient to describe experience as a whole; analysis is only capable of presenting one perspective of a conceptual landscape. Echoing this Remark, Cortázar uses Morelli to caution the would-be author that “all closed orders will systematically leave out those announcements that can make us messengers…”.

In order to portray the experience of being human, which is complex and multivariate, the novel must be open to multiple messages and all possible orders.

Although it deals specifically with the nature of language, Remark 203 of the *Investigations* can be read as supporting this view. Using the analogy of exploring a labyrinth, it states that “you approach from one side and know your way about it; you approach the same place from another side and no longer know your way about”. If the goal of the novel is to help one understand experience, approaching the subject from a single side is insufficient. In order to provide a clear view of experience, the novel must provide the opportunity to traverse its subject along many paths.

**The Inadequacy of Logic**

In one of his excerpts, Morelli asks himself why he writes and finds that the answer is inextricably linked to *how* he writes:

> Why do I write this? I don’t have clear ideas, I hardly even have ideas. There are pulls, impulses, blocks, and everything searches for a form, then rhythm comes into play and I write within that rhythm, I write for it, moved by it and not by that which they call thought and which makes prose, literary or otherwise.

Morelli’s writing is based on his experience, resulting in work that is at the same time more organic and more tumultuous than traditional prose. His description of the writing process is passive—instead of saying “I do,” he says “there is,” appealing to the processes he finds occurring in him and around him to catalyze his work. The “why” and “how” of literature are manifested the flow of experience, which Morelli is *in* and which he writes *for*. One might ask why he gives priority to this rhythm if it so chaotic and disordered. The answer can be found in several remarks of the *Investigations*.

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7 Cortázar, 516
8 Wittgenstein, 82
9 Cortázar, 522
In Remark 107, Wittgenstein says, “the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a result of investigation: it was a requirement”\(^{10}\). This observation sets the stage for the rejection of strict logic. Wittgenstein finds no empirical reason to demand ironclad logic in every case; investigation is not inherently or necessarily logical. In Remark 372, Wittgenstein states that “the only correlate in language to an intrinsic necessity is an arbitrary rule. It is the only thing which one can milk out of this intrinsic necessity into a proposition”\(^{11}\). If the rule is arbitrary, the author should be free to disregard it when it does not suit his purposes. The insistence on crystalline purity of logic as a rule often does come into conflict with the investigation itself. In the absence of a necessary connection, Wittgenstein chooses to maintain the primacy of investigation over logic, in accordance with the purpose of philosophy as he sees it. He stipulates that “philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it”\(^{12}\). Imposing requirements that are not supported by experience can only obscure the matter he is attempting to clarify, and so he rejects it as a mistake.

The devotion to logic rejected herein can be compared to the frictionless ice Wittgenstein discusses in Remark 107. In a certain theoretical sense, it is ideal – for physics experiments, perhaps. In terms of reality, however, the frictionless ice is not only useless, but detrimental. This theoretical ideality is too far removed from the world in which we live and prevents us from walking. If any genuine progress is to be made, one must have the friction and roughness characteristic of experience.

Cortázar’s characters are likewise faced with this confusion. At one point, Horacio’s friend Ronald claims that their discussion has become unclear. The reader is inclined to side with Ronald, the voice of temptation, but Horacio’s response dispels the objection: “It can’t be clear, if it were it would be false, it would be scientifically true perhaps, but absolutely false. Clarity is an intellectual demand and nothing more”\(^{13}\). The distinction he draws between scientific truth and actual truth is telling. The logical is not untrue, but it is only part of the truth, and it becomes a falsehood if it is taken to be true absolutely.

\(^{10}\) Wittgenstein, 46
\(^{11}\) Wittgenstein, 116
\(^{12}\) Wittgenstein, 49
\(^{13}\) Cortázar, 225
Therefore, a logical truth can be accepted as describing one facet of the situation, but insisting that it account for everything is a guarantee of failure.

Both authors use the analogy of a thread to explore this notion of partial truths. Cortázar describes Oliveira’s inability to communicate his thoughts by saying “If he began to pull from the spool he would pull out yarn, meters of yarn . . . yarn to the point of nausea but never the spool”\textsuperscript{14}. Remark 67 of the \textit{Investigations} offers an explanation of his difficulties using the same analogy: “…we extend our concept … as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres”\textsuperscript{15}. This remark, which makes a positive statement regarding the nature of a concept, can also be interpreted negatively. Attempting to extract the elusive “one fibre” that comprises the concept may yield one fibre or another, but never the concept as a whole. In order to express the concept, one must include all the other fibres as well. An attempt to isolate a fibre may lead to a metaphorical unraveling of the entire thread, leaving one with the mistaken conclusion that the remaining fibre is, in fact, the concept he was looking for.

**SOLUTIONS, SUGGESTED & IMPLEMENTED...**

**REJECTING LINEAR STRUCTURE**

The manner in which literature and philosophy are written must correspond to their task of portraying experience. In the preface to the \textit{Investigations}, Wittgenstein states that “the very nature of the investigation … compels us to travel over a wide field of thought criss-cross in every direction”\textsuperscript{16}. With this in mind, the traditional approach of leading the reader down a single path to a single conclusion is unsatisfactory. Instead, the author must present his reader with a view of the landscape itself and allow him to explore it. At the same time, a novel must be intelligible by the reader, which requires some sort of guidance from the author.

\textsuperscript{*} In the original Spanish text, this ellipsis is filled with words that contain the same sounds as the word for yarn: “metros de lana, lanada, lagnorisis, lanaturner, lannapurna, lanatoma, lanata, lanatalidad, lanacionalidad, lanaturalidad, la lana hasta lanausea...”. This connects the passage more closely to the subject of related words, but I am at a loss as to how it can be translated meaningfully.

\textsuperscript{14} Cortázar, 409
\textsuperscript{15} Wittgenstein, 32
\textsuperscript{16} Wittgenstein, v
In Remark 172, Wittgenstein points out that there are multiple senses in which the word “guide” is used. One can guide by force, as the traditional novel does, but it also makes sense to speak of guiding someone who is blindfolded, guiding a partner in a dance, or guiding a friend on a casual walk. These concepts are more suited to the goals of literature than guiding by force because they are more associated with demonstration. Wittgenstein uses the example of a teacher and student, saying that “it seems to us as though in this case the instructor imparted the meaning to the pupil – without giving it to him directly; but in the end the pupil is brought to the point of giving himself the correct ostensive definition”\(^{17}\). The pupil is not forced to a conclusion by the teacher, but rather led to it gently through demonstration. This approach allows the student to gain knowledge without being subject to the imposed logical structure that easily leads to misunderstanding.

The best example Cortázar provides of this is *Hopscotch* itself. The chapters are only occasionally arranged chronologically or sequentially, and many of them seem to be disjointed and unrelated. It is difficult to say which events are central to the “plot” and which are not, because none of them constitute a definitive or central point of the novel. The result is a constant flow of thoughts and details, a plot-less collection of context that conveys the mental states and personalities of the characters and their experience of the environment around them. This style prevents the reader from organizing the events of the novel. The presence of a linear plot leads the reader to form a hierarchy in which certain events and characters are central, while others do not serve to move the plot forward and are relegated to the secondary status of context. By writing a novel without plot, Cortázar ensures that his readers consider all the contents of his work equally as the contexts that define human experience.

Furthermore, Cortázar suggests that the chapters can be read in orders other than even the loose arrangement that he provides. In the note that precedes the novel, he states that “this book is many books, but more than anything it is two books. The reader is invited to choose one of the two following possibilities”\(^{18}\). This puts the reader in the active role of deciding how he wants to traverse the contents of the novel. He has the freedom to read

\(^{17}\) Wittgenstein, 114
\(^{18}\) Cortázar, (preliminary note, no page number)
them in any order he likes; Cortázar suggests two orders, however, that may be helpful in orienting the reader. In this manner, Cortázar guides his reader through the novel without forcing him along a particular path.

The disjointed nature of the chapters should not be mistaken for a lack of coherence or connection. It does appear that some chapters have nothing to do with each other: If chapter 1 has feature A, chapter two has features A and B, and chapter 3 has feature B, it seems that there is no connection between chapters 1 and 3. Wittgenstein observes the same phenomenon in defining words, specifically the word “game.” If one begins by comparing board games and card games, “here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost”\(^{19}\). The events of the novel relate to each other in a similar fashion. For example, Oliveira’s interactions with the clochards and the death of Rocamadour share the common feature of involving La Maga. The death of Rocamadour and the Berthe Trepat incident both serve as evidence of Oliveira’s indifference to human suffering, but La Maga does not appear in the latter episode. Nevertheless, the various events of the novel are related in the same way that games are related, which Wittgenstein refers to as family resemblance.

The thread analogy used previously is helpful here as well. There is no single fibre that runs through the entire group of particulars to connect them. Instead, they are unified by their relationships to one another, creating a thread whose strength is not instantiated in any one of them in isolation. Each chapter can be read as a fibre of human experience, which together form a family despite the absence of a single common element. The fact that this analogy applies to both the nature of experience and the format of Cortázar’s novel can be taken as proof of his success. If the relationships of family resemblance are found in use, they must be present in literature as well – the manner in which *Hopscotch* is constructed fulfills this requirement.

**USING PICTURES**

The requirement that the novel demonstrate rather than explain is met by the use of pictures. Wittgenstein places a great deal of emphasis on this notion in the context of

\(^{19}\) Wittgenstein, 31
explaining words. He suggests that showing a series of pictures constitutes a definition by encouraging the viewer to “understand it by looking for and seeing what is common to the pictures. Then he can look at, can point to, the common thing”. These pictures are capable of capturing the variety of relationships characteristic of family resemblance in a way that strict definitions cannot. By presenting multiple pictures, the author addresses multiple facets of the subject at hand and is more able to do justice to the complex nature of experience.

Pictures also have the advantage of expressing the ambiguity that is characteristic of experience. Traditionally, explanation has been used to sharply delineate the limits of a concept. Many concepts, however, simply do not have clear boundaries. Wittgenstein asks, “Is it even always an advantage to replace an indistinct picture by a sharp one? Isn’t the indistinct one often exactly what we need?” Pictures accord with the tasks of philosophy and literature by faithfully portraying reality; the author should not seek out a sharp boundary because that boundary not present in experience and therefore is incapable of describing experience. Remark 72 points out this illegitimacy by stating, “If someone were to draw a sharp boundary I could not acknowledge it as the one I wanted to draw ….For I did not want to draw one at all.” Wittgenstein recognizes that there is a kinship between his ambiguous picture and the sharp boundary, but he also accepts that any number of different sharp boundaries could be deemed “correct” for the ambiguous picture.

The use of pictures also helps avoid a linear structure. Unlike an explanation, pictures can be presented simply as a collection and in no particular order. The reader therefore must consider the picture album, so to speak, without giving undue precedence to any one of them. This makes the picture approach particularly appropriate for portraying the context of experience.

The chapters of Hopscotch act as pictures in this sense. Each one portrays a moment that is important not because it furthers the plot, but because it shows something about experience. Taken together, these pictures make a point that cannot be made with logical analysis or with any one of them by itself. Oliveira’s interaction with Berthe Trepat, for instance, does not have any direct effect on the rest of the novel. Berthe Trepat herself does

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20 Wittgenstein, 34
21 Wittgenstein, 34
22 Wittgenstein, 36
not appear again, nor is she mentioned at any other point. The purpose of that chapter is to show the reader a picture of Berthe Trepas’s desperation, of Oliveira’s indifference, of the gloominess that fills the streets of Paris in the rain, and of the various other elements that comprise that experience. In Argentina, the ridiculous bridge that Oliveira, Talita and Traveler construct between their buildings to transport a package of mate is inconsequential. The motivation behind the incident is trivial and the bridge is removed and forgotten once the goal is accomplished. Even so, it constitutes a picture of Oliveira’s whimsicality, which borders on mental instability even at this point, and of the strange relationship between him and his friends. As such, it serves an important purpose within the novel. These considerations apply to the other chapters as well. They are not connected logically, but each contributes to the overall arrangement of chapters that acts as a picture album of human experience.

The characters of the novel observe this phenomenon of demonstration through pictures in their interactions. In attempting to explain his feelings to Oliveira regarding the mental hospital where they work, Traveler turns to pictures:

“I don’t know if you noticed that the head doctor is named Shepherd. Those sorts of things.”

“That’s not what you wanted to tell me.”

“...Of course it isn’t, but what does that matter. This cannot be said”\(^{23}\).

Finding explanation inadequate, or perhaps unsure even of what it is he wants to explain, Traveler gives an example that paints a picture of how he feels about the mental hospital. It is not an exhaustive description of his experience, but it begins to demonstrate the sort of issues with which he is concerned. This is reminiscent of Wittgenstein’s definitions through description, in which he says “…we should describe games to him, and we might add: ‘This and similar things are called games’”\(^{24}\). Each picture serves to describe one fibre that makes up the thread of family resemblance; this is the only means by which the reader can be made to understand the family being represented.

**CONCLUSION**

\(^{23}\) Cortázar, 407  
\(^{24}\) Wittgenstein, 33
The project Cortázar and Wittgenstein pursue in these works is ambitious. By writing *Hopscotch*, Cortázar intended to highlight the failures of the traditional novel, demonstrate *why* they are failures, suggest solutions and implement them in his own work. As a result, his novel is long, complex, and unorthodox. Its unprecedented structure catches the reader off guard, eliciting a more careful consideration of the author’s project. Wittgenstein’s work possesses similar features. The style of the *Investigations* makes the work difficult to approach and demands of the reader that he be willing to immerse himself in Wittgenstein’s thought if he is to understand. The two authors share a suspicion of logical analysis and a conviction that philosophy and literature must relate more closely to experience and use; their first initiative in furthering their shared view is to structure their work in a manner that reflects and supports the theoretical content.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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