

Letting It Get To You: Why Philosophy is a Dead End

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“Letting it get to you. You know what that’s called? Being alive. Best thing there is. Being alive right now is all that counts.”

— The Doctor, *Doctor Who* Series 6, Episode 4 “The Doctor’s Wife”

Now I can’t claim to have come near to understanding Ludwig Wittgenstein’s ultimate solution (or dissolution) to philosophy in his *Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*. But it seems relatively clear that the takeaway message from the *Tractatus* is that *philosophy doesn’t get you anywhere except to the place where you realize that philosophy has gotten you nowhere*.

Wittgenstein’s preface to *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* lets us in on a profound secret, one which we should probably know before we start our graduate studies in philosophy (too late!). Once we solve all the problems in philosophy (as he has, apparently), we’ll come to realize “how little is achieved when these problems are solved” (4). In fact, once we are able to decipher the ultimately definitive truth behind Wittgenstein’s words, we will, according to him, come to realize that all of his words were just clever claptrap. “Anyone who understands me,” intimates Wittgenstein, “eventually recognizes [my propositions] as nonsensical, when he has used them—as steps—to climb beyond them” (89). So according to Wittgenstein, the *Tractatus* is not meant to be only instructive. It is meant to help the muddled thinker get beyond nonsensical quandaries—it is philosophical therapy.

In his book *Orthodoxy*, Catholic theologian, novelist, and master of the one-liner G. K. Chesterton is similarly concerned with the limitations of philosophy. Madness, Chesterton suggests, is not a breakdown of someone’s ability to think straight. It’s just the opposite: “The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason” (24). The thing is, you can have a complete, self-enclosed explanation of the world that makes perfect sense, rationally speaking, but you might still be dead wrong. If you think you’re the rightful King of England, so Chesterton argues, the existing authorities will probably deny it and call you crazy. But isn’t that exactly what the authorities would do if you *were* the rightful King of England, just to protect their own authority? Everything in your life suddenly makes deadly sense, and everywhere you turn, you find confirmation that you *are* the rightful King of England, and the whole world is upside down and against you. How deep does this conspiracy go?! And so it is, says Chesterton, that the madman “is in a clean and well-lit prison of one idea: he is sharpened to one painful point” (27).

For Chesterton, this is something that affects more than just the “madman.” Taking careful aim at the materialist philosophy of his day to make an example out of them, Chesterton, in his characteristic rhetorical style says this: “The materialist is sure that history has been simply and solely a chain of causation, just as the [madman] is quite sure that he is simply and solely a chicken. Materialists and madmen never have doubts” (29). If we start to think that we’ve got a handle on how the universe works, leave it to Chesterton to remind us that maybe our complete rational explanation of the universe may not be as complete as we think it is. For Chesterton, it’s

not a matter of how precise and complete an explanation is; it's about how *large* it is (24). Once we realize the limitations of our narrow explanations and open ourselves to the possibility that the universe is large and mysterious, life takes on a new and surprising clarity (33).

I can't help but wonder if something like this is precisely what Wittgenstein had in mind when he wrote the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. If we can get past the hope that philosophy will solve all our deepest questions, perhaps we can get on with our lives. Trust me, cautions Wittgenstein, I've found the limits of philosophy, and it's not as great as you think it is.

Wittgenstein divulges the secret to understanding the *Tractatus* in a letter to potential publisher of the book Ludwig von Ficker: "[M]y work consists of two parts: of the one which is here, and of everything which I have *not* written" ("Letters to Ludwig von Ficker" 94-95). The second part, according to Wittgenstein, is about ethics, and it's the reader's job to fill it out by living life in response to the conclusions of the first part. If we can climb up beyond all the meaningless problems of philosophy using the first part, we'll be able to live life, ethically awake and more alive. The first part of the *Tractatus* being an enigmatic collection of logical proofs and definitions, it's difficult to see how this provides a springboard into living out an ethical life. But I'd like to think that Wittgenstein is up to something brilliant.

Maybe if, through Wittgensteinian philosophical therapy, we're finally able to peel back all the layers of muddled thought, we'll be able to let life get to us, to be really alive right now. If we can let go of the temptation to try to distill the universe into simple propositions and be okay with a little mystery, maybe life will break through. And if we can let it get to us, maybe we've already started "writing" the first page of the second part of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*.