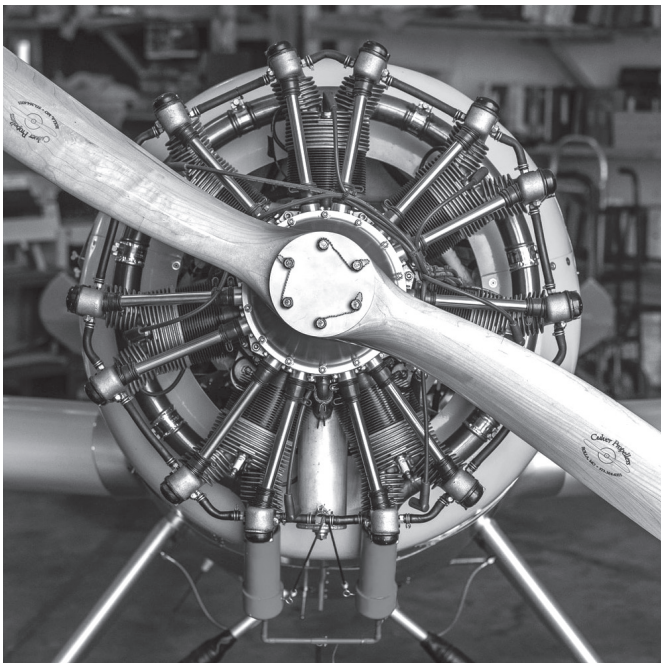
Guidebook for The Paradox Box



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INTRODUCTION

The Paradox Box is a work of historical fiction. Its goal is to introduce readers to Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), one of the most important philosophers of the twentieth century.

Wittgenstein led an unconventional life, and *The Paradox Box* conveys both his philosophy and a sense of his personality. Although the overall premise of the novel is based on facts, parts of the plot are invented in order to create a story, rather than a biography. Most of that invention is consistent with the facts and therefore could have happened; however, the story telescopes two years into one in order to maintain a galloping pace.

Wittgenstein's career divides into two phases: the "early Wittgenstein" culminated in the publication of his *Tractatus*; the "later Wittgenstein" culminated in the posthumous publication of his *Philosophical Investigations*. *The Paradox Box* focuses exclusively on the early Wittgenstein. The novel's publication in 2022 marks the 100th anniversary of the publication of the *Tractatus* in English in 1922.

While Wittgenstein presented many valuable insights in the *Tractatus*, *The Paradox Box* primarily explores his picture theory of meaning. The picture theory is Wittgenstein's attempt to explain the puzzling phenomenon of human language. Stop to consider it for a moment: I am thinking of a lion pouncing, so I write: "The lion pounces." You read that sentence and immediately think of a lion pouncing. How do marks on a page (or sounds in the air) cause you to think my thoughts? It is astonishing!

Wittgenstein's picture theory asserts that sentences refer to the world by having the same structure as the world. Just as a picture of a lion reflects the shape of a real lion, true assertions reflect the shape of reality. Logic is the common denominator: the same logic that governs the facts outside of our heads governs the facts inside of our heads.

Because Wittgenstein had a mathematical mind, his work often becomes quite technical and difficult to understand. No doubt he played a role in the history of mathematics. However, our study in *The Paradox Box* concerns his role in the history of philosophy, and we will be concerned with his mathematical arguments only insofar as they affect on his ultimate philosophical goal.

What was that goal? In a letter to a potential publisher of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein wrote, "The book's point is an ethical one.... My work consists of two parts: the one presented here plus all that I have *not* written. And it is precisely this second part that is the important one."

What an extraordinary pronouncement! Wittgenstein was saying that what he had *not* written was the most important part of his writing—a paradox! What does it mean? In the end, you'll need to read the novel to decide for yourself. But when the going gets tough, just remember: Wittgenstein

told us that his ultimate point is ethical. This is to say that what he was investigating was value: What is truly good?

Suppose I set up a treasure hunt in your house and give you a set of clues that clearly lead to one particular room. When you go to that room, however, you learn that the location of the treasure cannot be identified by clues. What can you infer? That the treasure has to be found somewhere outside the room. You might reason as follows:

1. This room is identified by the clues.
2. The clues cannot identify the location of the treasure.
3. Therefore, the treasure cannot be found in this room.

The point of the *Tractatus* is parallel to this example. Wittgenstein reasoned as follows:

1. Ethics is a product of language.
2. Language cannot identify the nature of goodness.
3. Therefore, the nature of goodness cannot be found in ethics.

Step two of this argument is surprising and controversial. Why can't language identify the nature of goodness? The answer to this question arguably lies with Russell's Paradox.

Wittgenstein's teacher Bertrand Russell set out to prove that $1 + 1 = 2$. In order to do so, he had to come up with a complete description of the rules for arithmetic. That became an extremely complicated task, requiring set theory—the study of how collections of objects are related. Because set theory assumes that sets are themselves objects that can be collected, it has to explain how sets of sets are related. This leads to the supposition of sets that are members of themselves—a paradox!

Wittgenstein applied a parallel analysis to human language. Just like numbers, concepts are sets. For example, the concept "lion" is the set of all lions. Collections of physical objects make perfect sense. Because the set of all lions is not itself a lion, the concept "lion" is not a set that is a member of itself.

Metaphysical concepts, however, lead to paradox. In particular, the concept of goodness is the set of all good things. But is goodness itself a good thing? It seems that it must be. So then the concept of goodness is a set that is a member of itself. Although this may seem acceptable at first, in the end it makes no sense. Wittgenstein concluded that there is no true concept of goodness.

Does this mean that goodness does not exist? Not necessarily. Goodness might be experienced without being conceptualized. As with the treasure hunt, you have to stop searching inside the room.

But how do we search for goodness outside of ethics—outside of language itself? Wittgenstein told us that we have to look instead of think, see instead of say. We have to experience goodness without talking about it. This outlook made Wittgenstein a highly unique individual.

Although Wittgenstein wanted to be nothing but a logician, he was also a man, and he dealt with a number of personal issues, including a tyrannical family, homosexuality, and chronic depression. His friendship with David Pinsent, who serves as the protagonist of *The Paradox Box*, was his life's great treasure, adding richness and depth to his logical genius, and it is also a fundamental element of the plot of the novel.

While the novel can be enjoyed and learned from on its own, this guidebook presents selections from the primary sources of ten authors needed to understand Wittgenstein's philosophy. These are passages from the works that most profoundly influenced him, along with two key passages from his own *Tractatus*. The guidebook contains twelve chapters, each focused on three or four successive chapters of the novel. Each guidebook chapter has three components:

1. A summary of the plot developments for those three or four chapters of the novel
2. A primary reading relevant to the storyline
3. Discussion questions concerning both the reading and the novel

These components will provide a rich backdrop for thinking about the deeper dimensions of the story as it unfolds.

Wittgenstein believed that it was his job to bring the entire history of philosophy to its final conclusion. Having observed that philosophical problems arise from a misunderstanding of language, he set out to explain how language works. His aim was to solve philosophical problems by preventing them from arising in the first place. Wittgenstein said that philosophers are like flies trapped in a bottle; his picture theory of meaning was meant to show the flies the way out.

Was Wittgenstein correct that philosophy is a trap? If so, do you think he found the way out? Best wishes for your investigation!

A Note about the Readings: The readings in this book are the authors' original words. Some of them are challenging to read. Students may need to read passages more than once to understand the points that these writers are making. Readings that are too challenging can be skipped; however, the discussion questions at the end of each chapter will allow even students who do not read the selection to engage in thoughtful debates, prompting them to think about points that they may not otherwise have considered. Note, too, that at least half of the questions concern the events in the novel. As such, even students who do not complete the guidebook reading or do not fully understand the guidebook reading can still take an active part in the discussions.

Resources for Further Reading

McGuinness, Brian. *Wittgenstein, A Life: Young Ludwig (1889-1921)*. Penguin, 1990.

Monk, Ray. *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius*. Penguin, 1991.

Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Chronology of his Life and Work: www.wittgensteinchronology.com

"Ludwig Wittgenstein," The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/wittgenstein

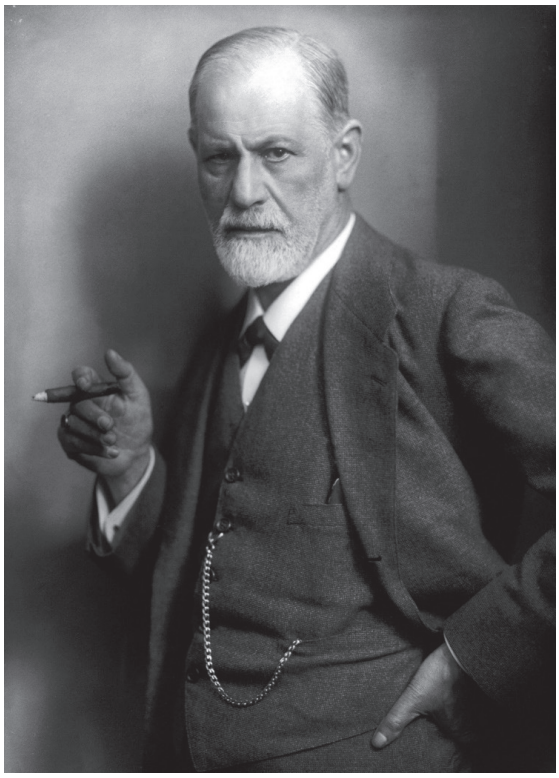
I. *THE PARADOX BOX*
PROLOGUE-CHAPTER 4

Plot Summary

The book opens with the narrator, David H. Pinsent, a twenty-year-old university student in Edwardian-era England, just before World War I, acknowledging that he is telling the story posthumously. He is attending a campaign party for his mother, who will go on to become the first woman in history to be elected to the city council. At the party, David is approached by a man who identifies himself as Eger F. Bolttog. Bolttog asks David to look out for another student at Trinity College, a young man named Ludwig Wittgenstein. Although David doesn't know Wittgenstein and feels wary about the request, he agrees. A letter from Bolttog reveals that David might have in common with Wittgenstein that the two suffer from bouts of melancholy. David explains that the reason for his suffering is likely due to his homosexuality, which he has kept a secret and which he explains through the lens of Freudian psychology.

SIGMUND FREUD

Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) was the Austrian neurologist who invented psychoanalysis. As a psychoanalyst, Freud treated patients who suffered from mental disorders such as anxiety and depression. His method was to interpret their dreams and analyze the thoughts that streamed through their minds when they lay relaxed on the couch in his office. By studying his patients, Freud developed the theory that many mental disorders arise from repressed sexual urges.



https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?search=Sigmund+Freud&title=Special:MediaSearch&type=image

Freud lived and worked in Vienna during Wittgenstein's youth. Though the two may never have met in person, Wittgenstein read Freud and knew many of his patients. Although Wittgenstein admired Freud for attempting to deal scientifically with the forbidden issue of sexuality, he felt that Freud's understanding of science was overly broad. For Wittgenstein, science needed to be strictly limited to the observable facts. In contrast, Freud believed that scientists needed to venture beyond

the facts to theorize the unobservable. In particular, Freud's theory of repressed sexuality led him to hypothesize the existence of the subconscious, a part of the mind that we are not aware of.

In this selection, Freud explains why civilization, despite its great material benefits, is a terrible psychological burden to human beings.

"CIVILIZED" SEXUAL MORALITY AND MODERN NERVOUS ILLNESS, 1908

Generally speaking, our civilization is built up on the suppression of instincts. Each individual has surrendered some part of his assets—some part of the sense of omnipotence or of the aggressive or vindictive inclinations in his personality. From these contributions has grown civilization's common assets in material and ideal wealth. Besides the exigencies of life, no doubt it has been family feelings, derived from erotism, that have induced the separate individuals to make this renunciation. The renunciation has been a progressive one in the course of the evolution of civilization. The single steps in it were sanctioned by religion; the piece of instinctual satisfaction which each person had renounced was offered to the Deity as a sacrifice, and the communal property thus acquired was declared "holy." The man who, in consequence of his unyielding constitution, cannot fall in with this suppression of instinct, becomes a "criminal," an "outlaw," in the face of society—unless his social position or his exceptional capacities enable him to impose himself upon it as a great man, a "hero."

The sexual instinct—or, more correctly, the sexual instincts, for analytic investigation teaches us that the sexual instinct is made up of many separate constituents or component instincts—is probably more strongly developed in man than in most of the higher animals; it is certainly more constant, since it has almost entirely overcome the periodicity to which it is tied in animals. It places extraordinarily large amounts of force at the disposal of civilized activity, and it does this in virtue of its especially marked characteristic of being able to displace its aim without materially diminishing in intensity. This capacity to exchange its originally sexual aim for another one, which is no longer sexual but which is psychically related to the first aim, is called the capacity for *sublimation*. In contrast to this displaceability, in which its value for civilization lies, the sexual instinct may also exhibit a particularly obstinate fixation which renders it unserviceable and which sometimes causes it to degenerate into what are described as abnormalities. The original strength of the sexual instinct probably varies in each individual; certainly the proportion of it which is suitable for sublimation varies. It seems to us that it is the innate constitution of each individual which decides in the first instance how large a part of his sexual instinct it will be possible to sublimate and make use of. In addition to this, the effects of experience and the intellectual influences upon

his mental apparatus succeed in bringing about the sublimation of a further portion of it. To extend this process of displacement indefinitely is, however, certainly not possible, any more than is the case with the transformation of heat into mechanical energy in our machines. A certain amount of direct sexual satisfaction seems to be indispensable for most organizations, and a deficiency in this amount, which varies from individual to individual, is visited by phenomena which, on account of their detrimental effects on functioning and their subjective quality of unpleasure, must be regarded as an illness.

Further prospects are opened up when we take into consideration the fact that in man the sexual instinct does not originally serve the purposes of reproduction at all, but has as its aim the gaining of particular kinds of pleasure. It manifests itself in this way in human infancy, during which it attains its aim of gaining pleasure not only from the genitals but from other parts of the body (the erotogenic zones), and can therefore disregard any objects other than these convenient ones. We call this stage the stage of *auto-erotism*, and the child's upbringing has, in our view, the task of restricting it, because to linger in it would make the sexual instinct uncontrollable and unserviceable later on. The development of the sexual instinct then proceeds from auto-erotism to object-love and from the autonomy of the erotogenic zones to their subordination under the primacy of the genitals, which are put at the service of reproduction. During this development a part of the sexual excitation which is provided by the subject's own body is inhibited as being unserviceable for the reproductive function and in favorable cases is brought to sublimation. The forces that can be employed for cultural activities are thus to a great extent obtained through the suppression of what are known as the *perverse* elements of sexual excitation.

If this evolution of the sexual instinct is borne in mind, three stages of civilization can be distinguished: a first one, in which the sexual instinct may be freely exercised without regard to the aims of reproduction; a second, in which all of the sexual instinct is suppressed except what serves the aims of reproduction; and a third, in which only *legitimate* reproduction is allowed as a sexual aim. This third stage is reflected in our present-day "civilized" sexual morality.

If we take the second of these stages as an average, we must point out that a number of people are, on account of their organization, not equal to meeting its demands. In whole classes of individuals the development of the sexual instinct, as we have described it above, from auto-erotism to object-love with its aim of uniting the genitals, has not been carried out correctly and sufficiently fully. As a result of these disturbances of development two kinds of harmful deviation from normal sexuality—that is, sexuality which is serviceable to civilization—come about; and the relation between these two is almost that of positive and negative.

In the first place (disregarding people whose sexual instinct is altogether excessive and uninhibitable) there are the different varieties of *perverts*, in whom an infantile fixation to a preliminary sexual aim has prevented the primacy of the reproductive function from being established, and the *homosexuals*

or *inverts*, in whom, in a manner that is not yet quite understood, the sexual aim has been deflected away from the opposite sex. If the injurious effects of these two kinds of developmental disturbance are less than might be expected, this mitigation can be ascribed precisely to the complex way in which the sexual instinct is put together, which makes it possible for a person's sexual life to reach a serviceable final form even if one or more components of the instinct have been shut off from development. The constitution of people suffering from inversion—the homosexuals—is, indeed, often distinguished by their sexual instinct's possessing a special aptitude for cultural sublimation.

More pronounced forms of the perversions and of homosexuality, especially if they are exclusive, do, it is true, make those subject to them socially useless and unhappy, so that it must be recognized that the cultural requirements even of the second stage are a source of suffering for a certain proportion of mankind. The fate of these people who differ constitutionally from the rest varies, and depends on whether they have been born with a sexual instinct which by absolute standards is strong or comparatively weak. In the latter case —where the sexual instinct is in general weak— perverts succeed in totally suppressing the inclinations which bring them into conflict with the moral demands of their stage of civilization. But this, from the ideal point of view, is also the only thing they succeed in achieving; for, in order to effect this suppression of their sexual instinct, they use up the forces which they would otherwise employ in cultural activities. They are, as it were, inwardly inhibited and outwardly paralyzed. What we shall be saying again later on about the abstinence demanded of men and women in the third stage of civilization applies to them too.

Where the sexual instinct is fairly intense, but perverse, there are two possible outcomes. The first, which we shall not discuss further, is that the person affected remains a pervert and has to put up with the consequences of his deviation from the standard of civilization. The second is far more interesting. It is that, under the influence of education and social demands, a suppression of the perverse instincts is indeed achieved, but it is a kind of suppression which is really no suppression at all. It can better be described as a suppression that has failed. The inhibited sexual instincts are, it is true, no longer expressed as such—and this constitutes the success of the process—but they find expression in other ways, which are quite as injurious to the subject and make him quite as useless for society as satisfaction of the suppressed instincts in an unmodified form would have done. This constitutes the failure of the process, which in the long run more than counterbalances its success. The substitutive phenomena which emerge in consequence of the suppression of the instinct amount to what we call nervous illness, or, more precisely, the psychoneuroses. Neurotics are the class of people who, since they possess a recalcitrant organization, only succeed, under the influence of cultural requirements, in achieving a suppression of their instincts which is *apparent* and which becomes increasingly unsuccessful. They therefore only carry on their collaboration with cultural activities by a great expenditure of force and at the cost of an internal impoverishment, or are obliged at times to interrupt it and fall ill. I have described the neuroses as the "negative" of the perversions because in the neuroses the perverse impulses, after being repressed, manifest

themselves from the unconscious part of the mind—because the neuroses contain the same tendencies, though in a state of "repression," as do the positive perversions.

Experience teaches us that for most people there is a limit beyond which their constitution cannot comply with the demands of civilization. All who wish to be more noble-minded than their constitution allows fall victims to neurosis; they would have been more healthy if it could have been possible for them to be less good. The discovery that perversions and neuroses stand in the relation of positive and negative is often unmistakably confirmed by observations made on the members of one generation of a family. Quite frequently a brother is a sexual pervert, while his sister, who, being a woman, possesses a weaker sexual instinct, is a neurotic whose symptoms express the same inclinations as the perversions of her sexually more active brother. And correspondingly, in many families the men are healthy, but from a social point of view immoral to an undesirable degree, while the women are high-minded and over-refined, but severely neurotic.

It is one of the obvious social injustices that the standard of civilization should demand from everyone the same conduct of sexual life—conduct which can be followed without any difficulty by some people, thanks to their organization, but which imposes the heaviest psychical sacrifices on others; though, indeed, the injustice is as a rule wiped out by disobedience to the injunctions of morality.

These considerations have been based so far on the requirement laid down by the second of the stages of civilization which we have postulated, the requirement that every sexual activity of the kind described as perverse is prohibited, while what is called normal sexual intercourse is freely permitted. We have found that even when the line between sexual freedom and restriction is drawn at this point, a number of individuals are ruled out as perverts, and a number of others, who make efforts not to be perverts while constitutionally they should be so, are forced into nervous illness. It is easy to predict the result that will follow if sexual freedom is still further circumscribed and the requirements of civilization are raised to the level of the third stage, which bans all sexual activity outside legal marriage. The number of strong natures who openly oppose the demands of civilization will increase enormously, and so will the number of weaker ones who, faced with the conflict between the pressure of cultural influences and the resistance of their constitution, take flight into neurotic illness.

From https://sexualityandthemodernistnovel.files.wordpress.com/2017/02/freud_sexualmorality.pdf

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Freud was clearly sympathetic to those people whose "organization" does not allow them to fit into society because they cannot sublimate their sexual instincts—meaning that they