Learning and the Limits of Doubt

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One of the common distinctions in beginning foundations courses in education is that between transmissive views of education versus transformative views: between an education primarily based on socialization into a given body of knowledge, values, customs, and dispositions versus one more given to questioning those givens and reformulating new knowledge, values, customs, and dispositions. This same basic dichotomy is often phrased in different terms: conservative/liberating, reproductive/critical, or, most recently, modernist/postmodernist. In cruder forms, these are sketched as absolute dichotomies between which a principled educator must choose. In more subtle forms, they are viewed as developmental phases, where perhaps the more transmissive approaches are suited to the young, who are not ready or able to question, but as a basis for a later stage in which, based on that canonical foundation, a more skeptical approach becomes possible. This latter view has been expressed by theorists as diverse as Antonio Gramsci and E.D. Hirsch.

Wittgenstein, as Jeff Stickney helps us understand, absolutely rejected this dichotomy (Dewey did too, but that's another story). For Wittgenstein these sorts of pairs must be viewed not as opposites, but as figure and ground in one relation, each taking its contours from its relation to the other. Wittgenstein's strongest expression of this view comes in his discussion of doubt and certainty, in which he emphasizes that doubting some beliefs *requires* that other beliefs be held constant — that it is impossible, indeed meaningless, to talk of doubting everything all at once.

> We could doubt every single one of these facts, but we could not doubt them *all*.
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> Wouldn't it be more correct to say, "we do not doubt them *all*."
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> Our not doubting them all is simply our manner of judging, and therefore of acting.[1]

It is useful for education to reflect further on why Wittgenstein thought this was so. In learning, he believed, there was a great deal of the tacit, the unspoken, and even the unspeakable.[2] It is often what we "swallow" while we are in the process of learning something else.[3] This background, which he sometimes refers to as a "form of life" and in other places as a "world-picture," as Stickney explains, *is what it does not occur to us to doubt* ("the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false" [*OC*, 94]). Wittgenstein says, it is not that it *cannot* be doubted, in the sense that it is indubitable, but that it does not *make sense* to doubt it. Similarly, for Wittgenstein, the "certain" is not the highly verified or strongly established justified true belief, but that which it never occurs to us to question ("This is my hand"). "What stands fast does not do so because it is intrinsically obvious or convincing; rather it is held fast by what lies around it" (*OC*, 144). What else would we have to abandon if we seriously could doubt that this was our own hand? What would we be unable to *do*?

In part, this analysis is closely linked with Wittgenstein's discussion, elsewhere, of what it means to engage in a complex practice (like a language). The *doing*, the *acting*, is the demonstration of knowledge and understanding; being able to articulate exactly what one is doing, and why, may come *after*. For many of these rule-following or practical activities, overt instruction and explanation never enter into it — we learn by observing, following, participating, imitating. "It is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game" (*OC*, 204).

Stickney points out that a good deal of judgment and guesswork comes into much of this learning. In ostensive teaching, he explains, there is a degree of uncertainty built in — take, for instance, the ambiguity of the term "this," as Wittgenstein explores at length and as W.V.O. Quine later applied to his "gavagai" example: *Look at this*. This what? This thing, this location, this part, this color, this gesture? *Do it like this*. How do you mean? With your left hand? With your eyes closed? On Tuesdays? Standing right here? In the end, one only knows that one has "got it" when the action turns out successfully — which usually means that others in the community of practice and learning affirm, "yes, that's right." "You must bear in mind that the language-game is so to say something unpredictable. I mean: it is not based on grounds. It is not reasonable (or unreasonable). It is there — like our life" (*OC*, 559).

One might think that this is an extremely conservative view — but Wittgenstein simply ignores these kinds of classifications. Being able to do anything (to play, to speak, to joke, to argue, to critique) means accepting a more or less unquestioned framework of assumptions that, again, can be examined or questioned in part, but not as a whole. To question *all* of it would be to question the entire activity (playing, speaking, joking, arguing, critiquing) — which would be to lose it. "[A]re we to say that *certainty* is merely a constructed point to which some things approximate more, some less closely? No. *Doubt gradually loses its sense. The language-game just is like that*" (*OC*, 143, emphasis added).

Deconstruction has an interesting take on the problem of doubt. In an oft-cited passage, Gayatri Spivak said:

> If I understand deconstruction, deconstruction is not the exposure of error, certainly not other people's error. The critique of deconstruction, the most serious critique of deconstruction, is the critique of something that is extremely useful, something without which we cannot do anything.[4]

This suggests that deconstruction as an attitude of critique or doubt cannot stand outside its subject: here we question not what is wrong, mistaken, or dispensable; we question, Spivak suggests, what is *necessary*, what we cannot reject or abandon in its entirety.

This confluence of Wittgenstein's and Spivak's arguments gives us a reason to reject the simple dichotomies of transmissive/transformative, conservative/liberating, reproductive/critical, and modernist/postmodernist. The received, the given — the "swallowed," if you will — is not *opposed* to the critical; it is a necesssary condition of being critical at all. This is true at the very basic level of a language itself

— the language, for example, that Descartes himself could not doubt, and in which the self-evidence of his one true certainty, "I think, therefore I am," is revealed as an artifact of a distinctive Indo-European confluence of actor and verb ("cogito") that, in fact, does not occur in many other languages (and so in which that "self-evident" truth could not even be meaningfully uttered).

But beyond the level of implicit assumptions and background knowledge in a codified sense, there is another sense in which the very activities of critiquing, transforming, and going beyond — which seem to suggest leaving something behind — never do leave *everything* behind. Recognizing the continuities as well as the discontinuities of critique and change is an important counterbalance, I am suggesting, for the sometimes smug satisfaction of critical stances that place themselves outside, above, or beyond that which they critique.

By the same token, Wittgenstein's argument shows that there can never be anything as simple or straightforward as mere "transmission" either. Because of the indeterminacy of judging and acting built into any complex practice, to learn to do something is *always* to learn to do it in one's own way; to understand is always in part to misunderstand — or, more accurately, to *understand differently*. Modernism, to take one example, already contains within it the seeds of postmodernism (a point emphasized by Michel Foucault, Bruno Latour, Jean-François Lyotard, and other "postmodernists"). Postmodernism is not the opposite of modernism, or its rejection, or its transcendence; these are impulses in dynamic relation with each other.

When viewed as figure and ground, these sorts of apparent dichotomies come instead to be seen as mutually constituting, each necessary for the other, not as developmental stages that one "goes beyond." They coexist at every stage (in different mixes and combinations, perhaps) and, in that sense, require each other. The challenge of the educator resides in this in-between, this tension, for we *must* "reproduce" the culture in order to transform it, and we transform it even in the process of reproducing it. Our capacities for doubt and skepticism are not unbounded or *sui generis*; they come from somewhere, and in their exercise we inevitably reveal as much about what we do not — and cannot — call into question as what we do.

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1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, in Rush Rhees, *Wittgenstein's On Certainty: There — Like Our Life*, ed. D.Z. Phillips (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 232. This work will be cited as *OC* in the text for all subsequent references. Thanks to Paul Smeyers for many conversations around these issues.

2. Nicholas C. Burbules and Paul Smeyers, "Wittgenstein, the Practice of Ethics, and Moral Education," in *Philosophy of Education 2002,* ed. Scott Fletcher (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2003), 248–257.

3. The term "swallow" is Wittgenstein's; see *OC*, 143.

4. Gayatri Spivak, "In a Word," quoted in Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter* (New York, Routledge, 1993), 27.