

## WITTGENSTEIN, SMEYERS, AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

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Somewhere in the recesses of my memory a graduate professor is cautioning our class that it may take a lifetime to understand a single great philosopher and that, in all likelihood, our understanding of the philosopher will remain incomplete. It is in the spirit of that humble warning — now so vaguely remembered — that I respond to Paul Smeyers' provocative interpretation of what a Wittgensteinian view of educational research might look like. First, I will interpret what I take to be Smeyers' project and summarize some of his central questions; then, I will raise some concerns about Smeyers' claims about education and educational research.

Smeyers tell us that he will use "Wittgenstein's ideas" to deal with some problems in educational research. In particular, he wants us to consider the following problems: 1) Is one method of investigation more useful than another in research? 2) How does the content or nature of education affect the kind of useful research that can be done? 3) Should our normative commitments be central to our research? In taking up Smeyers' position on the first of these problems, I will try to introduce some Wittgensteinian concerns. I will then pose some of the difficulties I had with the final section of the paper.

First, let us consider Smeyers' views on what constitutes a useful method of investigating problems. I find Smeyers' position somewhat confusing here. Smeyers writes that Wittgenstein "argues that the confusion in psychology is the result of a confusion between the problems it has to study and the method that has to be followed." What Wittgenstein actually did suggest is an analogous relationship between psychology and mathematics: "For in psychology, there are experimental methods and *conceptual confusion*. (As in the other case [mathematics] conceptual confusion and methods of proof)." <sup>1</sup> The later Wittgenstein did focus on eliminating conceptual confusion through linguistic investigations, some of which would eliminate certain philosophical problems. Smeyers notes that the kind of understanding Wittgenstein aims at is based on "perspicuous representation" that enables one to "see connections." In his direct interpretation of Wittgenstein, many of Smeyers' comments are insightful. He writes of Wittgenstein: "To look for a further explanation seems to Wittgenstein something different from 'placing things side by side,' and is in his view wrong." Here and in much of the paper, Smeyers rightly emphasizes that Wittgenstein's focus would be upon revealing those kinds of understandings that participants in a social practice draw upon while engaging in the practice. He is quite right in telling us about that, for Wittgenstein: "Understanding always goes back to the understanding of the practitioners" and that we should refrain from formulating theories, since they "are not capable of bringing forward the heterogeneity of cases and always presuppose more homogeneity than in fact can be found."

Smeyers tells us that "any method [of research] can be as good as any other, provided it can withstand firstly, the criticism of those who are involved in it when confronted with the interpretation, secondly the criticism, of the scientific community..." The problem here is that such a claim presupposes that those who live in the community and those who do research about them work within the same "language game" or inhabit the same "form of life." I do not believe this is true. The force of a Wittgensteinian critique of social science research is to suggest that those

seeking the external objectivity of science are doomed to failure for they will not understand the way in which those living within a culture understand their own practices. Roger Trigg expresses the dilemma of a social scientist who takes Wittgenstein seriously:

What appears strange to an outsider can be perfectly meaningful seen from the standpoint of the practices of a society. Field-work is not an optional extra to anyone who wishes to understand properly what is going on. To understand the part you have to participate in the whole. We thus slip quickly to the position that participation is an absolute pre-condition for any understanding. Social Scientists are then faced with a dilemma. If they 'go native' they are hardly fulfilling a scientific role. Yet the alternative appears to be an inevitable failure to grasp what is really going on inside a culture.<sup>2</sup>

Smeyers seems to believe that good research can satisfy both the criticism of the participants and the criticism of the scientific community. However, he sees no dilemma in this claim, no paradox in reconciling the orientations of the internal participants and the external scientific observers. Later in the paper he claims that within the scientific paradigm “good research is the kind that proves capable of prediction” and claims we need some of that in education even if it does not aim at understanding. I find these claims both non-Wittgensteinian in spirit and conceptually unreconcilable. My sense of a Wittgensteinian position is that either research illuminates the internal point of view of the participants or it is not research at all.

My main criticism then is that in the latter part of the paper Smeyers wanders far afield in his extension of Wittgenstein to the domain of educational research. In so doing, he remains loyal neither to the spirit of Wittgenstein's investigations nor to Wittgenstein's strict separation of philosophical and scientific method. Smeyers strays from the concrete problems of particular, richly contextualized language-games. The result often is a set of abstract ideas convoluted in their expression, opaque in their meaning, overly general in their intent, and non-illuminating of particular cases or problems.

In the spirit of promoting some Wittgensteinian conversation, let me generate some questions about the last part of the paper. Do we talk about education as some unified set of processes and practices that we are clear about? Are we clear about what it means to become educated? Is there fundamental vagueness or ambiguity here to notice in our many different uses of education in different contexts? When we ask, “What kind of an education is he/she receiving?” Are we clear what kind of an answer to expect? Thoughtful answers to these questions might indicate much conceptual confusion remains to be eliminated; there is much Wittgensteinian work ahead. Does Smeyers see it that way? Not at all. He offers us the “Wittgensteinian position” that “‘education’ can be conceived as a dynamic initiation into a form of life.” The “aims of it” can be conceived as “summarized formulation, as elucidations of the idea of humankind, as anticipations from the point of view of the parent, embedded in the “form of life.” The older notions of education clearly do indicate its connections to child-rearing, but most of our concern with “education” in the U.S. is not with child-rearing but with socially legitimated versions of education — namely schooling, and the forms of life associated with schooling are often seriously disjointed from basic approaches to parenting. Does that linguistic fact make a difference for educational philosophers or researchers? Later Smeyers tells us that “good research...puts us in a position to understand what is at stake according to those involved in it.” But what is the “it”? Are educators those seeking to make a positive difference in the lives of others or primarily those with official roles to play in legitimated “educational practices”? Having told us simplistically what a Wittgensteinian view of education is, Smeyers cannot and does not ask these kinds of questions. At one point, he asks us to think about the quintessential example of “crucial importance,” but he gives us nothing concrete to think about. What is the situation of an orphan? Is there a singular way to describe it? Think about it? What is particularly problematic about it?

At the end of his interesting paper, Paul Smeyers suggests that educational research should focus on how things ought to be because that gets to the heart of the matter; he also suggests that the focus in educational research has to be on the content, and reminds us that the way education is conceived

determines to a large extent how to proceed. But if understanding ideas means I know how to go on, I clearly do not understand these ideas. And if philosophy, as Wittgenstein reminded us, “is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language,” I am afraid that Smeyers’ conclusions leave this reader baffled and bewitched. I find Wittgenstein’s comments on his early theory of language apply to Smeyers’ final conclusions: “We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that we are unable to walk. We want to walk: so we need *friction*. Back to the rough ground!”<sup>3</sup> In conclusion, Smeyers has taken us on a fascinating trip from Wittgenstein’s later philosophy to some problems in educational research; it is a journey worth taking. My central question remains: Why did the Wittgensteinian tour guide leave the trip before it was over?

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (London: Basil Blackwell, 1958), 232. Hereafter *P.I.*

<sup>2</sup> Roger Trigg, “Wittgenstein and Social Science,” in *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays*, ed. A. Phillips Griffiths (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 213-14.

<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein, 46.

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