

SOME RADICAL CONSEQUENCES FOR EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH FROM A WITTGENSTEINIAN POINT OF VIEW, OR DOES ALMOST ANYTHING GO? ¹

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INTRODUCTION

Popper has argued that research starts from a problem. What comes after that, whether one tries to explain (perhaps in order to predict), or “just” to understand a certain situation is a matter of continuing debate. This topic is the focus of a recent paper by Michael Dale, who is interested in the question as to whether claims about the nature of social theory and inquiry, in principle, undermine the acquisition of objectively valid knowledge and explanations in the social sciences. Without further question, he seems to accept that the choice of a theoretical framework for investigating society involves articulating the *causes* of social practices. Though this is one of the possibilities, the important question is whether it is the only or the most interesting option, given the nature of society, of human behavior and, for that matter, of education.

Other authors in a variety of disciplines have debated the issue as to whether a certain method has to be followed — for example, within sociology, and between disciplines such as psychology and education. Those disciplines which are “only describing” a particular field of reality are sometimes denied the label “science.” The discipline of education is one of those, so it is argued, which has suffered much from these kinds of discussions, being considered as a part either of psychology or of philosophy and as using their respective methods. In this paper I want to reverse the order of things, and start with the content instead of with the way of dealing with a problem. I will use Wittgenstein’s ideas and try to develop from that stance an answer to the aforementioned issues concerning educational research. It will be argued that it is the nature of the phenomenon of “education” that determines the nature of educational research as well as the nature of the discipline of education and the “methods” it has to use.

THE “METHOD OF PSYCHOLOGY” AND THE NATURE OF PHILOSOPHY AND OF THE “GEISTESWISSENSCHAFTEN”

In the *Philosophical Investigations* 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. The confusion, in other words, is caused by the experimental method (borrowed from physics), which tries to explain human behavior by analyzing the connection between dependent and independent variables. This issue is linked with Wittgenstein’s idea of philosophy. The aim of philosophy is to reach a *surview*, a perspicuous representation of a certain part of our language. This “*Uebersicht*” can only be reached by an investigation of the way in which sentences and expressions are used. Philosophy thus works in the same way as therapy, rather than being an idea of “how things have to be”; furthermore, it is an expression of our practical understanding. The puzzlement of “I don’t know my way about” can only be overcome if the person’s attitude changes. And that is not a psychological matter, not a matter of stopping to ask questions one cannot answer. The focus instead is on the realization that because it is senseless to inquire further, one’s outlook has to change. The task of philosophy consists in “assembling reminders for a particular purpose,” as there are no

theories in philosophy. Theories can be changed in view of new facts and can be more or less accurate in predicting certain phenomena.

In philosophy, there are no new facts. “The difficulty here is, not trying to justify what admits of no justification.” Finally, the result of the philosophical investigation is indicated by Wittgenstein as “*a new way of looking at things*,” “to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures” (Wittgenstein 1953, #144). Giving reasons in philosophy, according to Wittgenstein, is analogous to giving reasons in aesthetics. There can be a discussion, but that has more to do with sensitizing the opponent to appreciate a work of art differently than with reaching conclusions. In this sense, philosophical propositions offer new criteria for the use of certain concepts, new ways of looking at things.

In what manner is this understanding of philosophy of the same kind as the understanding that is sought in the “*Geisteswissenschaften*”? On the work of the anthropologist Frazer, concerning his assembling of facts, Wittgenstein comments: “I can represent this law, this idea, by means of an evolutionary hypothesis, or also, analogously to the schema of a plant, by means of the schema of a religious ceremony, but also by means of the arrangement of its factual content alone, in a ‘*perspicuous*’ representation.... This perspicuous representation brings about the understanding which consists precisely in the fact that we “see the connections.” Hence the importance of finding *connecting links*.” This method is formally identical with the philosophical method. To look for a further explanation seems to Wittgenstein something different from “placing things side by side,” and is in his view wrong.

“MEANING” AND “ACTING”

As well as Wittgenstein’s idea of “meaning” conceived as “socially determined,” there is also his idea of “acting,” conceived for the large part as non-reflective action. These are at the basis of his views of human behavior. Human behavior is thought of as a constant stream of reactions which only very rarely, and in such cases only for a moment, are stopped by deliberate reflection. To answer a question, to follow a command, usually does not contain an interior step in which the situation is analyzed. To act is not first to think and subsequently to do something. It is to do something in a certain manner (which doesn’t mean that one cannot reflect upon it afterwards). Furthermore, the meaning of a concept is not the result of what I intend, but is determined and carried, one might say, by the community to which I belong. To understand a concept means to be able to paraphrase it and to act accordingly. In both, the “third person perspective” is predominant. Language is first the language of the others. It determines the way I can speak: otherwise I risk being unintelligible. These ideas are elaborated through Wittgenstein’s concepts the “language game” and the “form of life.”

In the determination of the meaning of a word, the context fulfills a crucial role, Wittgenstein holds. The idea of the language-game expresses this (among other things). We are initiated into language-games, and Wittgenstein *insists* on the way this initiation proceeds and on its relevance in establishing meaning. A word has a “family” of meanings: there are different contexts, or to put this more technically, there are different language-games. In a particular context there usually is only “one” meaning of a word. In other words, its meaning generally is clear to the participants. Wittgenstein indicates that the “form of life” is the bedrock of our language-games. As far as one can speak about it, I would like to mark that as the fundamental basis of the ethical, epistemological, metaphysical and religious levels. The “form of life,” he argues, is given. These unjustified and unjustifiable patterns of human activities can be seen as the complicated network of the rules which constitute language and social life. This “given” is a whole: it is the “language-and-the-world.” We cannot place ourselves outside of it. Differences concerning these basic “propositions” will lead us to call other persons fools and heretics, Wittgenstein argues in *On Certainty*. And in the following section we read: “I said I would ‘combat’ the other man, — but wouldn’t I give him *reasons*? Certainly, but how far do they go? At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*. (Think what happens when missionaries convert natives.)” (Wittgenstein 1969, #611).

Through the theses of the social determination of meaning and of understanding, we can grasp in what way an investigation of the use of language clarifies our concepts. The crucial role is fulfilled by the context. To understand a concept, one has to describe the context in which it is used; different cases of its use are placed together. Furthermore, to understand speaking and acting is first to be able to participate in these activities, to be able to go on, to follow the rule — and only secondarily (and to a certain extent, not even necessarily) to be able to talk about them. This ability “to go on” limits in a strong sense those who can understand a practice to those who can participate in it.

THE NATURE OF UNDERSTANDING IN THE “GEISTESWISSENSCHAFTEN”

In the “Geisteswissenschaften,” the human “sciences,” one tries to understand human conduct, the reason(s) of our actions. The understanding that is offered has to be of the same kind as the understanding of the praxis, the descriptions of the everyday language. Firstly, in order to talk about the same issues as those who are involved, one has to describe the situation in such a way that they are able to recognize it for themselves. Secondly, for whatever kind of understanding that is offered, at least rules of translation are necessary to relate (make understandable, and/or define) the technical language to the ordinary language. Understanding thus always goes back to the understanding of the practitioners. Wittgenstein further advises that we refrain from formulating theories, as they are in his opinion not capable of bringing forward the heterogeneity of cases and always presuppose more homogeneity than in fact can be found. He also suggests that not everything is explainable or understandable, and he draws our attention to different kinds of understanding.

A particular interest concerns what is important for a human being, what is relevant without being useful for something else. “Kissing the picture of one’s beloved. That is *obviously not* based on the belief that it will have some specific effect on the object which the picture represents. It aims at satisfaction and achieves it. Or rather: it *aims* at nothing at all; we just behave this way and then we feel satisfied” (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 64). The important difference between understanding and explaining can further be indicated by the difference in the effects they have for those involved. “Compared with the impression which the description makes on us, the explanation is too uncertain. Every explanation is an hypothesis. But an hypothetical explanation will be of little help to someone, say who is upset because of love. — It will not calm him” (Wittgenstein 1979, p. 63). The tasks of research in the human sciences are therefore to be found in interpretation, which, according to Wittgenstein, means one must “place things side by side.”

“To place things side by side” brings forward the relationship between the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* and between “what is the case” and “what should be the case,” i.e., the normative. It is not possible to deal with these problems within the scope of this paper. Some basic ideas, however, have to be outlined to avoid a possible misunderstanding. Firstly, in the later philosophy of Wittgenstein, he maintains the position that “the limits of *language*...mean the limits of my world.” However, since Wittgenstein later gave up the picture theory of language, this would now mean something different. “Language” and “the world” are no longer separated from each other but are one: “language-and-the-world.” Though “the world out there” is in a certain sense there irrespective of and prior to our language, it is in another sense only there *for us* (the shift from *my* to *us* indicates a second major difference with the earlier position), from being spoken of afterwards. To put this in a Heideggerian way — and there are of course a number of fundamental similarities between his and Wittgenstein’s positions — it can be worded as follows. Only insofar as people speak of certain things do they, i.e., the things, come into existence: they are brought in the openness, they become “beings.” Before that they were not *non-existent* but literally (in a non-Aristotelian way) *not existent*, not conceived. In this sense what is the case — what we can speak about (the *a posteriori*), which exemplifies what is important to us, what is relevant to us, what impresses us — determines future meaning (what can be spoken about, the *a priori*) in a radical manner.

Secondly, an analogous relationship can be noted between “what is” and what “ought to be” the case. Wittgenstein stresses over and over that justification comes to an end — that we exhaust our

justifications and are then confronted with “what we do” (Cf. Wittgenstein 1953, # 217). Far from being arbitrary, this is basic to the human condition. As facts are only facts within a “theory,” we cannot speak about values except as present in particular situations. Facts bring forward our language-games, our “form of life.” As far as possible, they bring “the bedrock” into the open. In this sense our utterances about what is the case, though conceptually laden, are submitted to the influence of “what is the case” in the way they are shaped. The separation of “what is there” and “what is said” by means of a conceptual apparatus, cannot be made radically. Without concepts one cannot speak about “what is there” and in any case concepts without instantiations are empty. This interwovenness implies that there are limits upon what can be said “by us.” As was indicated earlier, “what is said by us,” reveals “what is important for us” and exemplifies “what has made an impression on us,” which brings forward values and the normative issue. In this sense, “what is there for us” is linked with “what has value for us.” The situation in which we find ourselves and which has led to this particular (use) of the concepts that are at stake has left its mark upon both. Both also are the focus of reflection by those involved and confront them in certain cases with an appeal for engagement.

Both relationships (the *a priori/a posteriori* and the relationship between “what is” and “what ought to be” the case) are conceived by Wittgenstein as “in constant evolution,” the speed of it to be indicated by the changing of the banks of the river. In a very radical way, Wittgenstein asserts that one cannot step outside the form of life, that one cannot judge it using external (and/or eternal) criteria, and that in this sense what we care for cannot be justified along supra-human terms — though again, that doesn’t mean that it’s all the same whatever we do.

“EDUCATION” AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH

From a Wittgensteinian position, “education” can be conceived of as a dynamic initiation into a form of life. Here parents are seen as the “first educators” and from their responsibility, the responsibility of the state concerning schooling is derived. Children mean a lot to them — what they are, what they achieve, doesn’t leave their parents indifferent. These educators offer the child the truth by which they live. What moves them, what appeals to them, supports the idea of “human being” that they offer the child, hoping that she or he will participate. This is the initiation into what is self-evident, the initiation into the “form of life.” Their offering and making present the horizon of meaning is at the same time a taken or accepted responsibility, the intentional aspect of the process of child rearing. “Aims of it” can be conceived as summarized formulations, as elucidations of the idea of humankind, as anticipations from the point of view of the parent, embedded in the “form of life.” This is not to say that having certain basic propositions is only an external process that happens to us. In the end, through a number of experiences, what matters is the acceptance of an offered meaning. Given this position concerning child-rearing, what can be said of educational research?

There are different interests which can be indicated in educational research. In the case of understanding, the focus is on indicating the particular aspects of which it is constituted. The emphasis is on what is actually done and its relevance for those who are involved. One can’t take seriously enough here what literally is said by the practitioners. Good research in this case means that such research puts us in a position to understand what is at stake according to those involved in it — in other words, in the terms in which they can recognize themselves in it. The aim of such an investigation can be described as trying to enhance the level of consciousness of what one is doing. Concerning this Carr argues: “Thus, a critical educational science would not produce theoretical knowledge about educational practice, but the kind of educative self-knowledge that would reveal to practitioners the unquestioned beliefs and unstated assumptions in terms of which their practice was sustained.” The aim could be an ethical, informed reasoning which should lead to practical knowledge about what has to be done in a particular case in accordance with ethical insights. I will leave for now the question as to the extent to which one can distance oneself from and criticize what

one is normally inclined to do; I will simply accept that it is within a shared basic framework and not completely impossible.

Though one could start from existing research, it is important to realize that one has to limit the possible methods to those that can be reconciled with the aim of this type of research, namely to understand within the terms of those who are involved. It goes without saying that the kind of interpretation that is offered by the theoretician is open to criticism. It also goes without saying — and this might sound more provocative — that in a way it doesn't matter in what manner a particular interpretation was brought about. Any method — whatever that may be and mean in the context of understanding — 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, and secondly, the criticism of the scientific community — as interpretations are not in the air but are a part of a history of problems and answers. Its value is neither more nor less than the value of self-consciousness of what we are doing, sometimes provoked by a confrontation with different viewpoints and/or positions. This is not to say that there is no difference between silly or sensible and appropriate methods of investigating a certain problem; it is only to argue that one shouldn't waste one's time discussing too many different methods in order to find *the best method*. It seems more advisable to proceed with an investigation dealing with all the relevant issues in an appropriate way.

There is also the question of predicting future behavior or the way situations will develop, starting from the variables determined by the kind of problems that are studied. Concerning the interpretation of the data, the critical test is situated within the scientific community. As no “understanding” is aimed at, in a more radical sense it doesn't matter which variables are studied as long as they are predictive for the specific outcome one is interested in. Good research here is that kind of research that proves capable of prediction — and I'm sure we need some of that in education, at least insofar as human action is the result of causal influences, but I insist on the fact that it does not help us to “*understand*” the actions of the persons involved, although this kind of insight (predictive) may be part of an understanding insofar as it links certain outcomes with certain antecedents. Because of its particular interest in generalizability, this kind of research has to face a number of difficulties: for instance, how to combine different variables and how to apply general laws to particular cases.

The final aspect, already mentioned, is the importance of changing the situation. It will be clear that within the Wittgensteinian approach the justification for this in the end will be given in terms of what seems to be right to some people, what is consistent with their form of life, so that they will try to convince others, hoping that their reasons will appeal to them. This, incidentally, also implies that those who are involved are ready to make that change and are the people who have to decide upon it. It is important to realize that in education a lot of the issues are beyond the possibility of being influenced. Now I don't mean by that, that it isn't often important to know what can be influenced and what can't. But I want to criticize the idea that almost anything can be manipulated, perhaps not now, so it is often argued, but later, after detailed and comprehensive research. I also think that a lot of things about which children and parents or children and teachers dispute are quite irrelevant. Education seems to suffer from the idea of the make-ability of men, as well as of that of the make-ability of society — though by this I don't mean to offer anyone an alibi for not changing something. An example might be the situation of an orphan, which is educationally of crucial importance, though it is not manipulable and still confronts us with a task. The important thing here is, first, to understand the child's situation. Good research concerning the changing-aspect means, of course, that kind of research which is able to indicate what has to be changed (and that has to include the justification for the envisaged change) and how it should be done. As justification it belongs to the philosophical debate which is carried by those involved in discussions about the good for the individual within a just society.

In all three aspects, the naturalistic tendency of Wittgenstein's philosophy of the way things are is present — not so much in the sense of leaving things as they are, but in that of accepting them as

they are. It exemplifies also once more the importance of dealing in education with the meaningful elements for those who are involved, and this implies that in an educational “science,” the focus should be on understanding instead of on explaining, i.e., looking for causal antecedents. Wittgenstein’s insistence on the impossibility of judging the framework is relevant both to understanding the nature of justification and to assessing the input of what is the case, on what ought to be the case, and prepares in this manner a new place for the relevance of stating facts. The kind of educational research argued for uses reflection and facts, empirical and philosophical approaches. In its insistence on the meaning for those involved, it doesn’t deal with the question of method, regarding it as another exemplification of a positivistic epistemology and a positivistic tendency in science. Neither does it understand scientific research exclusively in terms of causal relations. The theory-ladenness of knowledge demands that one should include in the scientific realm discussions of concepts, theories and models of explanation. These issues, as well as the justificatory arguments for certain desired states of affairs, belong as much to science as the “mere” stating of how things are. They can be as “objective” as any empirical research. It should be clear that Wittgenstein’s position, as developed earlier on, also implies that there is a proper place for a rightly understood educational science as distinct from philosophy of education. Only through our educational practice will it become clear “what is there for us” and “what is valuable for us.” Urging anyone to choose between “facts” and “concepts” is, according to him, blatant nonsense. In this matter, as is the case more generally for Wittgensteinian epistemology as ethics, there is no either/or. It is always language-and-the-world, always the individual-and-the-others.

In the above-mentioned paper, Dale argues that there are no facts of the matter that a social scientific inquiry could discover that would be relevant to resolving a dispute about whether or not basketball is a “better” game with the institution of a 45-second shot clock and 3-point goals (better than when deliberate stalls produced final scores like 12-10, for example, and Dean Smith’s North Carolina teams perfected the four-corners “offense”) (Dale 1991, p. 152). He continues: “Even if we could provide a sociological explanation for why different people firmly believe that one, and not the other viewpoint about basketball is correct, this knowledge would not be supportive evidence for the superiority of one claim over the other” (p. 152). Quite evident, one is inclined to say. Of course such issues cannot be decided on the basis of causal connections. But aren’t precisely those issues the fundamental ones in an educational debate? Are the basic characteristics of education and for that matter of educational research not of such a kind that precisely the discussion of the way how things ought to be belongs to the heart of the matter, again not only of education but also of educational research? To call that philosophy instead of educational research not only ignores the complexity of the problem (leaving out the stating of how things are as an element of the discussion), but also seems to be a mere verbal trick, as one could easily argue that educational research because of this has to be at least partly of a philosophical blend. The focus in educational research has to be on the content, and clearly the way education is conceived of determines to a large extent how to proceed. The foregoing is also a plea for research that aims to understand particular situations and problems, instead of aiming first of all at generalizability. This research, finally, doesn’t place itself within the manipulative interest in which science in general has its proper place. Its interest lies in human meaning, how that manifests itself in educational situations and thus brings forward the human condition.

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