

Lost in Translation: Ludwig Wittgenstein, Education and the Question of *Abrichtung*

As a landmark philosopher of language and of mind, Ludwig Wittgenstein is also remarkable for having crossed, with apparent ease, the “continental divide” in philosophy. It is consequently not surprising that his philosophy, particularly that of the *Philosophical Investigations* and other late works, has been taken up by philosophers of education in English. Christopher Winch (1998), Michael A. Peters (1999), Nicholas Burbules (2010), and others (e.g. Aparece 2005) have engaged extensively with the implications of the later Wittgenstein’s philosophy of mind and language for education. One challenge that is faced in this engagement is Wittgenstein’s use of the word “training” throughout his discussions of language learning and in his periodic references to education.

Wittgenstein develops his notion of “training” in famously redefining communication and meaning as *not* arising conceptually through “ostensive definition,” but rather in terms of “activity:” by following the rules of a particular “language games,” in the context a specific “form of life.” As he maintains in the *Philosophical Investigations*, to think of any particular type of language use –whether this use is in reporting, describing or even pointing– is also to think also of an activity:

to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life. It is easy to imagine a language consisting only of orders and reports in battle. – Or a language consisting only of questions and expressions for answering yes and no. And innumerable others. (1953, p. 8)

Among these innumerable others, Wittgenstein imagines languages that might be used for “reporting an event,” for “speculating about an event” and –significantly for this paper– for “a child us[ing] ...primitive forms of language when it learns to talk” (p. 4). Speaking further of this last example, Wittgenstein emphasizes that “here the teaching of language is not explanation, but *training*” (1953, p. 4). Training, in other words, is a form of life, a kind of language game, in which “the child learns... language from the grown-ups” (1958, p. 77). Imagining a “society” in which “the only system of language” consists just of commands made by one type of person upon another, Wittgenstein describes training further:

The child learns this language ... by being trained to its use. I am using the word “trained” in a way strictly analogous to that in which we talk of an animal being trained to do certain things. It is done by means of example, reward, punishment, and suchlike. (1958, p. 77).

It is here that problems begin to arise for many of Wittgenstein’s statements on teaching, learning and education. For Wittgenstein’s insistence on learning and training through reward and punishment is consistent and systematic. For example, appealing to the notion of “rule following” in games, Wittgenstein argues that “following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. We are trained to do so; we react to an order in a particular way” (1953, p. 81). And applying his notions of language learning and rule-following to education generally, Wittgenstein notes in his *Zettel* “any explanation has its foundation in training, adding parenthetically, “Educators ought to remember this.” (1967).

Wittgenstein’s insistence on “training” as basically being conditioned, through rewards and punishment, to “follow rules” and “obey orders,” has been given apologetic treatment by many of Wittgenstein’s interpreters. They have argued, for example, that Wittgenstein is being entirely “conceptual” (Glock 1996), or that “training” is clearly different from “drill” (Ryle 1949) or from “behaviorism” (Monk 2004). Others argue that Wittgenstein actually *is* a behaviourist, and that he used the term training for rhetorical effect (Huemer 2006; 2013). Finally still others claim that “training” can be interpreted in terms of Wittgenstein’s own references to “mastery of technique” (Aparece 2005; Stickney 2008), or that it can be

renamed as “ostensive teaching” (Specht 1969) or as “the development of confident action” (Winch 2002).

However, a careful look at the original German term *Abrichtung*, which lies behind Wittgenstein’s references to “training,” raises many further, unsettling questions. Gertrude Anscombe, student and translator of Wittgenstein, used “training” consistently for *Abrichtung* in the *Philosophical Investigations* and in Wittgenstein’s *Zettel*, and the same holds for Wittgenstein himself in moving between German and English in preparing his *Brown Book*. *Abrichtung*, however, is notably different from training. The standard German (*Duden*) dictionary defines it as directed toward “(an animal, esp. a dog) to train for particular action and abilities; dressage.” By way of illustration, the term appears in Goethe’s *oeuvre* when he writes that the “ass” Christ rode into Jerusalem would “not have been better trained” had it also been “driven to Mecca” (1827). Connotatively, the term carries with it meanings that extend to the breaking of an animal’s will. In a rare but error-riddled passage on the subject in English, Michael Luntley characterizes “*Arbrichtung* [sic]” as having “a very brutal tone,” saying correctly that it would never be used in German when referring to children (2008, p. 696). Assuming that a word’s meaning is indeed found in its use, it is also worth noting that this term would typically not even be applied to the family pet.

Based on his characterizations, Luntley concludes forcefully: “Any account of Wittgenstein on training must confront this issue and explain what is going on in the text when Wittgenstein assaults the reader with inappropriate language” (pp. 296-297). This paper argues that it is neither necessary nor helpful to see Wittgenstein’s language—despite its unyielding harshness—as “inappropriate” or an “assault” on his readers. It also acknowledges, but avoids speculation on, the biographical reality of a literal and brutal assault visited by Wittgenstein as a teacher on one of his 11 year-old charges in 1926 (Monk 1991, pp. 224, 232–233.).

Any cautious, constructive interpretive response to Wittgenstein’s startling affirmation of *Abrichtung* in education—of commanding children as animals, perhaps even to break their will—would have to consider unflinchingly why Wittgenstein deliberately chose such a forceful term in the first place. It would have to ask why Wittgenstein insisted on arbitrary brutality as being necessary in teaching and learning and induction into forms of life. It would also have to acknowledge the close connection of many influential Wittgensteinian terms and conceptions—from ostensive definition, rule-following and forms of life to language games—with this apparently necessary, arbitrary brutality. Finally, it would have to reflect further on Wittgenstein’s familiar claims; for example that “explanations come to an end somewhere” (1953, p. 5) in the light of *Abrichtung*. In many important cases, one could only conclude, explanation is forcefully brought to an end before it can even begin.

Any response to the question of Wittgenstein’s choice of the word *Abrichtung* would have to point to Wittgenstein’s insight that language must simply be learned *as such*, that there are no ways of *explaining* and grounding meanings outside of language. Adults cannot explain to a child *why* a specific word means what it does, or *why* a common sense rule is as it is. Instead, to follow one Swiss scholar, these adults will only have recourse to their own experiences of the inhumanity of their own *Abrichtung* (Giesinger 2008). All of this, of course, this would be the case *despite* the fact that such meanings and rules are themselves constitutive of forms of life, of communication and of human community itself. Acknowledging such far-reaching implications of Wittgenstein’s argument leads to a strange situation or contradiction, one that any researcher or practitioner would be tempted to avoid or at least minimize, but that will be explored in this paper’s conclusion: That what makes us human, what brings us into any or all forms of *human life* is precisely the *inhumanity* of their arbitrary rules and imperatives.

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