

# Wittgenstein and Teaching

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## 1. Introduction

Wittgenstein is a philosopher who often uses educational situations to examine philosophical puzzles. He is not interested in establishing a theory of teaching but "teaching" is important in his philosophy in various ways. He often illustrates the concrete activities of teaching: teaching color words, sensation words, how to read, how to count numbers, and more are discussed in his writings. Teaching is also treated as a general function that makes sense of expressions. He sometimes talks about teaching as preparation for the use of expressions and sometimes as what explains meanings. While he calls both training and explanation "teaching," he distinguishes them clearly. What and how to teach as philosophy, on the other hand, is his primary concern. Most interpreters of Wittgenstein have ignored the importance of teaching in his philosophy. They have noticed his interest in teaching but they do not understand why and how he is interested in it. They have merely mentioned that he uses the teaching and learning of language as examples.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that a clear picture of Wittgenstein's conception of teaching brings about a better understanding of his philosophy. I shall review his work in terms of teaching, and then discuss his grammatical concerns for concept-clarification and the pedagogical purpose of his philosophy as his two folded conception of teaching.

## 2. Wittgenstein's "Teaching"

Wittgenstein not only wrote about teaching but also had teaching experience. He was once a schoolteacher in a rural area near Vienna and a university professor in Cambridge. He taught pupils and students. He must have heard of an educational theory in 1919-20 when he attended the teacher training school oriented toward the progressive education movement in Vienna. How he taught in his lectures may be accessible through memoirs written by his students. But I will not consider here whether and how Wittgenstein's comment on teaching is influenced by Karl Bühler's child psychology, which was said to be taught in the teacher training school, or what kind of

teaching style he took in his lectures, either. Both topics are certainly interesting. However, I will here focus on only what he wrote about teaching, and what and how he is teaching us in his writings.

We can find many pedagogical terms throughout Wittgenstein's later writings: Kind (child), Schüler (pupil), Lehrer (teacher), Lernen (learning), Lehren (teaching), Abrichtung (training), Unterricht (instruction), Beibringen (imparting), Erziehung (education), Verstehen (understanding), Erklärung (explanation) and others. Various situations of teaching and learning are also illustrated: teaching a child words with ostension, teaching pupils the series of natural numbers in school, teaching how to draw, testing pupil's reading skill, and so on. While Wittgenstein used a few educational examples in *Philosophical Remarks*, with which he restarted philosophy in 1929 (PR secs. 3, 5, 6 and 23.), he came to consider more instructional occasions as his later philosophy developed.<sup>1</sup> His use of teaching was accordingly increased and extended. When we, however, look at his discussion of teaching carefully, we will see therein several different approaches toward teaching.

Wittgenstein's use of "teaching" is quite broad. It covers a wide range of the modes of teaching, like training and explanation. But he also discusses teaching in quite different ways. There are no strict borderlines among them; rather they are connected to each other, but at least the following five approaches can be differentiated:

- (I) illustrating teaching as a concrete, particular activity in his examples;
- (II) treating teaching as a general, primary function related to meaning;
- (III) questioning the way of teaching words as a method of concept-clarification;
- (IV) expressing his purpose of dealing with teaching;
- (V) making comments on his own teaching activity of philosophy.

(I) Wittgenstein illustrates many different language games of teaching and learning. Some of them are very detailed and various possible reactions of learners are considered. The teaching and learning of the number series, for example, is one of the most vivid and detailed ones (PI secs. 143-155, 179-192).<sup>2</sup> Others are simply and briefly mentioned without amplification. Wittgenstein sometimes describes ordinary language games and sometimes invents imaginary ones. He also illustrates abnormal as well as normal reactions in each type of language games.

(II) Teaching is seen as a general, primary function that makes sense of expressions. "I describe the language-game 'Bring something red' to someone who can himself already play it. Others I might at most teach it"(Z sec. 432 (RPP II sec. 313)).

The meaning of a word is what its explanation explains (PI sec. 560; BB 1). But also training is the foundation of explanation (Z sec. 419 (RPPII sec. 327)).<sup>3</sup> His consideration of the possibilities of teaching uncertainty and doubt may fall into this category (Z secs. 404-418).

(III) Wittgenstein asks himself or recommends that we should question, "How does one teach a child . . . ?"(PI 208) or "How did we learn the meaning of this word?"(PI sec. 77) when in conceptual difficulties. These questions are used just to give warning of conceptual confusions or the misunderstandings of our language-use, and to provide positive answers about concept-clarification, as well.

(IV) Related to (i), the reasons why he illustrates language games of teaching are expressed. "One thing we always do when discussing a word is to ask how we were taught it. Doing this on the one hand destroys a variety of misconceptions, on the other hand gives you a primitive language in which the word is used"(LC 1).

(V) Wittgenstein is involved in teaching philosophy. He often makes comments on his teaching. "What I want to teach you isn't opinions but a method"(MS 155, 79, quoted from Hilmy 1987, 5). "The remarks which I write enable me to teach philosophy well, but not to write a book"(MS 118, entry date 15 Sept. 1937, quoted from Hilmy 1987, 20).

Although Wittgenstein does not always use the word of teaching in each case of these five approaches, he is concerned with teaching. The five approaches to teaching are different but related to each other. He uses the examples of teaching, which get rid of the misunderstanding of our language-use and bring about concept-clarification, in order to teach readers his philosophical method. He wrote, "we now demonstrate a method, by examples; and the series of examples can be broken off. -Problems are solved (difficulties eliminated), not a single problem"(PI sec. 133). I will further discuss what he aims at when he is involved in "teaching" in the next section.

### **3. Wittgenstein's Conception of Teaching**

#### **(1) Grammatical Concerns**

Wittgenstein does not intend to establish a pedagogical theory at all when he talks about the teaching and learning of language. He actually has two objections to the theoretical attitude, which is an attitude of looking for the essence of words, generalizing phenomena, and asking for explanations even when we do not need any (cf. McGinn 1997, 16). First, he warns that what he is doing has nothing to do with empirical investigations. Second, and more importantly, he argues against the idea that everything can be explained by science.

This does not mean either that Wittgenstein denies the value of empirical research, or that empirical researchers cannot learn anything from Wittgenstein. What is wrong is to claim that Wittgenstein is involved in establishing a theory for empirical study. The applicability of Wittgenstein's philosophy and the intention of his philosophy are different. If that point is not clear, we will be unable to see what Wittgenstein's whole idea of teaching shows.

Thus, if we argue that Wittgenstein intends to contribute to building a theory for empirical research when he discusses how words are taught, we misunderstand his project. The better word for describing the project is grammatical.<sup>4</sup> Wittgenstein himself calls his approach "grammatical investigation." "Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language"(PI sec. 90). It is important to recognize that Wittgenstein's use of the concept of grammar is different from the traditional one. His "grammar" considers language not as a system of signs but as human activities with words, or our practice of using language (cf. McGinn 1997, 14). Grammatical investigation deals not with phenomena but with the possibility of phenomena, by examining our use of language. This investigation is used to resolve our misunderstandings of language, which are caused by its surface similarities, the temptation of generalization, and the theoretical attitude. "Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language"(PI sec. 109). His discussion of teaching, which brings about concept clarification, serves as a grammatical investigation.

## **(2) Pedagogical Purpose**

When Wittgenstein finished writing up to section 189 of *Philosophical Investigations*, which was supposed to be the end of the first part of the so-called pre-war version of the book, he characterized it as a textbook. "One could call this book a text-book. A textbook, however, not in that it provides knowledge (*Wissen*), but rather in that it stimulates thinking (*Denken*)"(MS 119, approximate entry date 3 Oct. 1937, quoted from Hilmy 1987, 6). As Hilmy points out (1987, 5), this remark echoes the point emphasized in the Preface to the *Investigations*: "I should not like my writing to spare other people the trouble of thinking. But, if possible, to stimulate someone to thoughts of his own." Wittgenstein teaches not a doctrine but a way of thinking in the *Investigations* and other writings. He has a specific pedagogical purpose, that is, teaching a method.

Henry Staten argues for Wittgenstein's pedagogical purpose of teaching us a method (Staten 1984). Staten tries to make clear what the method is, by describing it in

several different ways. "The method is," for example, "difficult in the extreme to teach or to learn, because it is unlike any other method. It is an entirely new *kind* of method, and learning it requires breaking the linguistic habits of a lifetime and acquiring new ones"(1984, 66). It is "a blind and mute method, taught only by being practiced"(1984, 66), or "the method of destabilization"(1984, 75). Staten quotes a passage from the *Investigations* in order to show how Wittgenstein teaches us the method:

Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations. -One says to oneself: How could one so much as get the idea of ascribing a sensation to a thing? One might as well ascribe it to a number! -And now look at a wriggling fly and at once these difficulties vanish and pain seems able to get a foothold here, where before everything was, so to speak, too smooth for it. (PI sec. 284 )

Wittgenstein illustrates an abnormal and a normal examples and shows how to bridge the gap between them. What he shows, again, is the skill of how to make sense of what at first sight appears not to make sense. It is the skill that allows us to reach something strange from what we are familiar with. In other words, the current use of our words, with which we are held captive, is to be overcome when we encounter a new use. There is no formula to carry on this skill because any used example may need to be passed over next time. It can be learned only through doing by oneself.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Wittgenstein's main concern throughout his life is philosophy as an activity of teaching the technique for freeing oneself from a picture that holds one captive. He is, it seems to me, aware of the difficulty of teaching the technique. It can be taught not by telling but by showing. The development of his philosophy was pushed through by the motif of showing, and that showing can be characterized as teaching.<sup>5</sup> In other words, his consideration of teaching and learning enables him to develop his philosophy. Examining possibilities of the teaching and learning of concepts is not only a method but also a methodological framework of his philosophy. Wittgenstein's interest in teaching is essential for his philosophy.

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## Endnote

- 1 C. J. B. Macmillan rightly calls this "pedagogical turn" (1982, 483).
- 2 Wittgenstein repeatedly uses this language game in other writings.
- 3 Cf. "I want to say: an education quite different from ours might also be the foundation for quite different concepts" (Z sec. 387 (RPP II sec. 707)).
- 4 G. P. Baker, P. M. S. Hacker, and C. J. B. Macmillan are a few scholars who put a great emphasis on the importance of teaching for Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations (Baker & Hacker 1983, 29 ff.; Macmillan 1982, 483.)
- 5 I have argued that the motif of showing as teaching runs through "elucidation" in the early, *Übersicht* in the middle, and aspect-change in the late period of Wittgenstein (Maruyama 2000).