Notes for Colloquium at Massey University, May 6th, 2004

RENOUNGING "THE WAY OF THEORY:"
INSERTING A WITTGENSTEINIAN PRACTICE
INTO OUR EVERYDAY PRACTICES

[Second revision]

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ABSTRACT: The aim in Wittgenstein's methods, is not so much "to hunt out new facts; it is rather,... to understand something that is already in plain view. For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand" (1953, no.89). The application of his 'poetic' methods leads to the foregrounding of what is usually ignored but which is visibly there in the background to all our daily affairs; they draw attention to what we all 'see' but usually do not 'notice' as being of significance: the spontaneous, living, bodily reactions we have to each other in terms of which our words have their 'life'.

• Being critical isn't being radical enough: "... it is not that before you can understand it you need to be specially trained in abstruse matters, but the contrast between understanding the subject and what most people want to see. Because of this the very things which are most obvious may become the hardest of all to understand. What has to be overcome is a difficulty having to do with the will, rather than with the intellect" (1980, p.17).

• The change needed is not a changed way of thinking – a changed set of ideas or theories – but a changed 'way of being', a change in one's Will, i.e., a change in how we 'orchestrate' or 'organize' our 'involvements' or 'engagements' with our surroundings.

• Vygotsky's (1962) notion of "interfunctional relations."

Notes on 'living beings':

Style, identity, developmental continuity

• Living bodies, organic forms are enduring, self-maintaining, self-reproducing, self-structurizing structures.
• They change internally by growth and differentiation into more internally complex forms, while retaining their identity as the identifiable individuals they are.
• In other words, there is always a kind of developmental continuity involved in the unfolding of all living activities.
• Thus, the earlier phases of the activity are indicative of at least the style of what is to come later – thus we can respond to their activities in an anticipatory fashion.
• In other words, all living activities give rise to what we might call identity preserving changes or deformations – as T.S. Eliot puts it: “In my beginning is my end.”
• The Cartesian world, you realize, is a dead world, a world of mechanical movement, a world of forces and impacts in which movement is thought of as a change in the spatial configuration of a set of separately existing parts – which, in their changes, they can 'wear out'!
• Living movement, living change taking place in time, confronts us, we shall find, with some quite new phenomena, needing some quite different concepts, if we are not simply to assimilate it to Cartesian forms of change – our sense of the 'style' of what is to come!
Internal relations:

- Even the most complex of ‘man-made’ systems, machines for instance, are constructed piece by piece from objective parts; that is, from parts which retain their character unchanged irrespective of whether they are parts of the system or not.
- But whole people as natural systems are certainly not constructed piece by piece; on the contrary, they grow.
- They develop from simple individuals into richly structured ones in such a way that their ‘parts’ at any one moment in time owe not just their character but their very existence both to one another and to their relations with the ‘parts’ of the system at some earlier point in time – their history is just as important as their logic in their growth.
- Because of this it is impossible to picture natural systems in spatial diagrams. As Capek (1965, p.162) remarks, “any spatial symbol contemplated at a given moment is complete, i.e., all its parts are given at once, simultaneously, in contrast with the temporal reality which by its very nature is incomplete and whose ‘parts’ – if we are justified in using such a thoroughly inadequate term – are by definition successive, i.e., nonsimultaneous” (in Shotter, 1984, pp.42-43).
- All changes ‘gesture’ or ‘point’ beyond themselves (Brentano -intentionality).

Meetings:

- Something very special can occur on those occasions when two or more of us approach each other bodily, face-to-face, and engage in a meeting, in a dialogical encounter.
- When someone acts, their activity cannot be accounted as wholly their own activity – for a person’s acts are partly ‘shaped’ by being responsive to the acts of the others around them – this is where all the strangeness of the dialogical begins (“joint action” - Shotter, 1980, 1984, 1993a and b).
- Our actions are neither yours nor mine; they are truly ‘ours’.
- Such activity is not simply action (for it is not done by individuals; and cannot be explained by giving people’s reasons).
- Nor is it simply behavior (to be explained as a regularity in terms of its causal principles).
- It constitutes a distinct, third sphere of activity with its own distinctive properties.
- This third sphere of activity involves a special kind of nonrepresentational, sensuous or embodied form of practical-moral (Bernstein, 1983) understanding, which, in being constitutive of people’s social and personal identities, is prior to and determines all the other ways of knowing available to us.
- What is produced in such dialogical exchanges is a very complex ‘orchestration’ of not wholly reconcilable influences – as Bakhtin (1981) remarks, both ‘centripetal’ tendencies inward toward order and unity at the center, as well as ‘centrifugal’ ones outward toward diversity and difference on the borders or margins.
- Activities in this sphere lack specificity; they are only partially determined.
- They are a complex ‘orchestration’ of many different kinds of influences.
- They are just as much material as mental.
- They are just as much felt as thought, and thought as felt.
- Their intertwined, complex nature makes it very difficult for us to characterize their nature.
- They have neither a fully orderly nor a fully disorderly structure, neither a completely stable nor an easily changed organization, neither a fully subjective nor fully objective character.
- They are also non-locatable - they are ‘spread out’ among all those participating in them.
- They are neither ‘inside’ people, but nor are they ‘outside’ them; they are located in that space where inside and outside are one.
- Nor is there a separate before and after (Bergson), neither an agent nor an effect, but only a meaningful whole which cannot divide itself into separable parts.
- But, as living activities, they have a ‘style’ and ‘point’ beyond themselves toward both
events in their surroundings, and what can come next in the future.

“How could human behavior be described? Surely only by sketching the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. What determines our judgment, our concepts and reactions, is not what one man is doing now, an individual action, but the whole hurly-burly of human actions, the background against which we see an action” (Z. no.567)... (cf also 1980, II, no.629).

“If it is true that as soon as philosophy declares itself to be reflection or coincidence it prejudges what it will find, then once again it must recommence everything, reject the instruments reflection and intuition had provided themselves, and install itself in a locus where they have not yet been distinguished, in experiences that have not yet been “worked over,” that offer us all at once, pell-mell, both “subject” and “object,” both existence and essence, and hence give philosophy resources to redefine them” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p.130).

Indeed, it is precisely their lack of any pre-determined order, and thus their openness to being specified or determined by those involved in them, in practice - while usually remaining quite unaware of having done so - that is their central defining feature.

And: it is precisely this that makes this sphere of activity interesting... for at least two reasons:
1) to do with practical investigations into how people actually do manage to ‘work things out’, and the part played by the ways of talking we interweave into the many different spheres of practical activity occurring between us.
2) for how we might refine and elaborate these spheres of activity, and how we might extend them into novel spheres as yet unknown to us.

New Forms of Understanding:

“Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead, is not the same. All our reactions are different” (no.284).

A focus on the expressive-responsivity of growing and living forms, both to each other and to the othernesses in their surroundings, and on their own particular and unique ways of coming-into-Being.
Each requires understanding in its own way.
While we can come to an understanding of a dead form in terms of objective, explanatory theories representing the sequence of events supposed to have caused it, a quite different form of engaged, responsive understanding becomes available to us with a living form.
It can call out spontaneous reactions from us in way that is quite impossible for a dead form.
It is this that makes these two kinds of understanding so very different from each other.
While we can study already completed, dead forms at a distance, seeking to understand the pattern of past events that caused them to come into existence, we can enter into a relationship with a living form and, in making ourselves open to its movements, find ourselves spontaneously responding to it.
In other words, instead of seeking to explain a present activity in terms the past, we can understand it in terms of its meaning for us, i.e., in terms of our spontaneous responses to it.
It is only from within our involvements with other living things that this kind of meaningful, responsive, anticipatory understanding becomes available to us.

The importance of 1st-person avowals: indicative of the ‘style’ of a person’s ‘way of acting’
The importance of relationally-responsive understandings.
These contrast it with the representational-referential understanding more familiar to us in our traditional intellectual dealings.
These understandings can only occur in conversation-like exchanges, i.e., only in truly reciprocally or mutually expressive-responsive exchanges.

**Wittgenstein’s methods:**

“... philosophy ought really to be written only as a poetic composition” (1980a, p.24).

What kind of understanding are we seeking here? It will be useful to remind ourselves that he wants "to bring words back from their metaphysical use to their everyday use" (1953, no.116).

In other words, we want, so to speak, to feel so 'at home' in the 'landscape' of all our uses of our language that we know our 'way about' inside them all without needing to consult a map, i.e., without the need for 'inner mental representations'.

The everydayness of his methods: 'instructive', 'attention directing' talk:

In other words, what Wittgenstein wants to draw to our attention in his remarks, is that to gain the practical kind of understanding he seeks, we can in fact make use of some of the very same methods we use in gaining that practical kind of understanding in the first place. Thus, in his remarks, to draw our attention to how people in fact draw each other's attention to things, he can use the self-same methods as they themselves use!

This, then, gives us a first clue to Wittgenstein's methods. For, although they are as many and as various as those we use in life itself, they are all related in that they work in just the same way as our 'instructive', 'directive', and 'organizational' forms of talk in everyday life work. For example, we 'give commands' ('Do this,' "Don't do that"); we 'point things out' to people ('Look at this!'); 'remind' them ("Think what happened last time"); 'change their perspective' ("Look at it like this"); 'place' or 'give order' to their experience ("You were very cool... or: you acted like a madman"); 'organize' their behavior ("First, take a right, then... ask again..."); and so on.

All these instructive forms of talk 'move' us, in practice, to do something we would not otherwise do: in 'gesturing' or 'pointing' toward something in our circumstances, they cause us to relate ourselves to our circumstances in a different way - as if we are continually being 'educated' into new ways.

Indeed, as one of his methods, he asks how we were first taught our words. For, among other things, such a consideration brings to our attention the original circumstances of the teaching, where "one thing that is immensely important in teaching is exaggerated gestures and facial expressions" (1966, p.2), that emphasize the "characteristic part [they play in].

It is the gestural function of these instructive forms of talk that is their key feature, that gives them their life: for they 'point beyond' themselves to features in the momentary context of their utterance.

Wittgenstein uses these 'instructive' or 'educative' forms, then, in drawing our attention to what is there, in the circumstances of our talk, before our eyes, that we fail to see. Where his remarks draw our attention to what is, in fact, already known to us.

He calls them "reminders;" For, "something that we know when no one asks us, but no longer know when we are supposed to give an account of it [cf. Augustine], is something we need to remind ourselves of" (1953, no.89).

Poetic juxtapositions: Fundamental to the nature of certain special moments is that fact that they are, what we might call either, "arresting," "striking," or "moving moments." They are moments that matter, that make a difference in our lives. In the dialogical intertwining of two or more responsive
activities in an unusual or novel combination, the routine flow of our activity is seen as if in bold relief, emphasizing a new aspect. Our position shifts from automatic or the usual taken-for-granted stance, and we are ‘moved’ to notice ways in which to relate ourselves responsively to aspects of it that might not otherwise have occurred to us. And, as long as the gaps introduced by the juxtapositions we use are not too great, our bodies responsively create ways of bridging them, and in so doing, fleetingly, create a new form of life, the origins or seed of a new way of seeing and acting.

Further methods:

This then gives us some further clues to some of his other methods. Indeed, there is a set of three methods and the goal they seem at which they seem to be aimed, which we can see as working in sequence:

-1) First, his remarks can work to arrest or interrupt (or ‘deconstruct’) the spontaneous, unself-conscious flow of our ongoing activity, and to give “prominence to distinctions which our ordinary forms of language easily make us overlook” (1953, no.132).

-Thus his talk is full of such expressions as "Think of...," "Imagine...," "It is like...," "So one might say...," "Suppose...," and so on, in which he confronts us with a concrete scene or vignette featuring a particular aspect of human conduct. Where these are all designed "to draw someone's attention to the fact that he [or she] is capable of imagining [something]... and his acceptance of the [new] picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with this rather than that set of pictures. I have changed his way of looking at thing" (1953, no.144).

-Thus, in provoking us to bring new responses to our words and actions into play, he shows us further possibilities in a circumstance that previously we had overlooked. Alone, however, such a move could be more confusing than clarifying.

-2) This suggests to us a second method that is often of importance: By the careful use of selected images, similes, analogies, metaphors, or ‘pictures’, he also suggests new ways of talking that not only orient us toward sensing otherwise unnoticed distinctions and relations for the first time, but which also suggest new connections and relations with the rest of our proceedings.

-Indeed, the idea of language-games falls into this category: “Language-games are the forms of language with which a child first begins to make use of words... If we want to study the problems of truth and falsehood, of the agreement and disagreement of propositions with reality, of the nature of assertion, assumption, and question, we shall with great advantage look at primitive forms of language in which these forms of thinking appear without the confusing background of highly complicated processes of thought. When we look at such simple forms of language use the mental mist which seems to enshroud our ordinary use of language disappears. We see activities, reactions, which are clear-cut and transparent” (1965, p.17).

-3) This brings us to a third, and perhaps most important of his methods, making comparisons: By the use of various kinds of objects of comparison, e.g., other possible ways of talking, other "language games" both actual and invented, etc., he tries "to throw light on the facts of our language by way of not only similarities, but also dissimilarities" (1953, no.130). For, by noticing how what occurs differs in a distinctive way from what we otherwise would expect, such comparisons can work, he notes, to establish "an order in our knowledge of the use of language: an order with a particular end in view; one of many possible orders; not the order" (1953, no.132).

The importance of the use of comparisons - often the comparison, or the bringing into living contact, of different scenes (see note 15) - cannot be overemphasized.

Such dialogical juxtapositions work in a living way to create a circumstance in which
differences are realized and articulated: here, we use our words like this; there, we use them like that. That is, in providing new occasions for the realizing of new differences, they create a new 'movement' of thought, a new 'gesture'.

-Indeed, if we turn to some remarks of his on how we understand the theme in a piece of music, we find him likening the music's movement to human speech and other gestural movements. "... the theme... is a new part of our language; it becomes incorporated into it; we learn a new gesture" (1980, p.52). But: "Doesn't the theme point outside itself?," he asks. "Yes, it does! But that means: - it makes an impression on me which is connected with things in its surroundings - e.g., with our language and its intonations; and hence with the whole field of our language-games" (1981, no.175).

-In other words, such dialogical juxtapositions bring to life new gestures, new ways of pointing beyond our immediate circumstances to bring to light new connections and relations between and within them. Indeed, as we cross boundaries and 'move' from functioning within one language game to another, we can experience the changed commitments, urges, wants, desires, and temptations, as well as the ways of handling, looking, and evaluating, associated with each.

-4) Where the point of all these methods, and the slow and painstaking exploration of the landscape of our uses of language they engender, is expressed in his notion of a "perspicuous representation (Ger: übersichliche Darstellung):" "A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of our use of words. - Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in 'seeing connections'" (1953, no.122).

-If we are 'to find our way about' inside our own linguistically shaped forms of life, we need to grasp the 'landscape' of their internal relations, or their 'grammatical geographies', so to speak.

-But to achieve such a synoptic sense of its immense complexities, as well as curing ourselves of the many temptations to see it as much more simple than it in fact is, we also have to explore its grammatical geography close up, in detail, without end.

Remarks of relevance to his methods:

“Nothing is hidden” (1953, no.435)

“... it is, rather, of the essence of our investigation that we do not seek to learn anything new by it. We want to understand something that is already in plain view. For this is what we seem in some sense not to understand” (no.89).

“We must do away with all explanation, and description alone must take its place. [For] these are, of course, not empirical problems; they are solved, rather, by looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: in spite of an urge to misunderstand them” (1953, no.109).

“When philosophers use a word - 'knowledge', 'being', 'object', 'I', 'proposition', 'name' - and try to grasp the essence of the thing,” he comments, “one must ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home? - What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (no.116).

“The problems are solved, not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known” (1953, no.109). “Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is” (1953, no.124).
“It is the business of philosophy, not to resolve a contradiction by means of a mathematical or logico-mathematical discovery, but to make it possible for us to get a clear view of the state of mathematics that troubles us: the state of affairs before the contradiction is resolved... The fundamental fact here is that we lay down rules, a technique, for a game, and then when we follow the rules, things do not turn out as we had assumed. That we are therefore as it were entangled in our own rules.

This entanglement in our own rules is what we want to understand (i.e., get a clear view of).

It throws light on our concept of meaning something. For in those cases things turn out otherwise than we had meant, foreseen. That is just what we say when, for example, a contradiction appears: “I didn’t mean it like that.”

The civil status of a contradiction, or its status in civil life: there is the philosophical problem” (no.125).

“Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us” (no.126).

“The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there is something one couldn’t do. As if there really were an object [a mental state or process, a social structure or set of rules or norms, an oppressive State apparatus], from which I derive its description, but I were unable to show it to anyone. – And the best that I can propose is that we should yield to the temptation to use this picture, but then investigate how the application of the picture goes” (no.374, my additions).

“Disquiet in philosophy might be said to arise from looking at philosophy wrongly, seeing it wrong, namely as if it were divided into (infinite) longitudinal strips instead of into (finite) cross strips. This inversion of our conception produces the greatest difficulty. So we try as it were to grasp the unlimited strips and complain that it cannot be done piecemeal. To be sure it cannot, if by a piece one means an infinite longitudinal strip. But it may well be done, if one means a cross-strip. - But in that case we never get to the end of our work! - Of course not, for it has no end. (We want to replace wild conjectures and explanations by the quiet weighing of linguistic facts) (1981, no.447).

References: