

I Am in Training: Wittgenstein on Language Acquisition

Megan J. Laverty

Teachers College, Columbia University

Norm Friesen's analysis of Wittgenstein as a tragic philosopher of education draws upon an understanding of Wittgenstein's German influences: Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Karl Kraus, Alfred Loos, Otto Winingen, and Oswald Spengler. According to Friesen, these influences share "a dark view of the world and our place within it," which inspired Wittgenstein's deeply pessimistic philosophy of education. Friesen argues that Wittgenstein deliberately brings the experience of learning a language into relation with the way "we talk of an animal being trained to do certain things" in order to highlight that the process of becoming a cultured or "conventionalized" being — otherwise known as humanization — necessarily entails "renunciation and brutality." Friesen may be right that English-speaking philosophers of education have failed to appreciate the full force of Wittgenstein on *Abrichtung* — the breaking in of an animal by means of obedience training or dressage — but he does not go all the way to establishing that *Abrichtung* is characteristically brutal and harsh.

Wittgenstein uses the word *Abrichtung* to describe language learning and education. As Wolfgang Huemer explains, in German the term is "exclusively used for animals, for training dogs to sit down on the command 'sit,' or horses to gallop when the rider performs a certain bodily movement."¹ Thus, to German speakers, Wittgenstein's suggestion that "we have to *abrichten* our children" seems quite drastic; it implies that children are animals. According to Friesen, English-speaking philosophers of education are inclined to explain away Wittgenstein's reliance upon the term, and so make his philosophy of education appear far more progressive than it is.

Friesen identifies Freud's influence on Wittgenstein's thinking. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud argues that civilization presupposes the repression of our own instinctual natures (comprising aggression and sexual desire). The child's initial desire for the mother is frustrated by the presence of father, and the child is forced to renounce his or her aggressive response towards the father. Friesen sees a similar renunciation in Wittgenstein's analysis of language learning in early childhood. The child's assimilation into pre-existing forms of life requires that he or she be alienated from his or her animal nature, which is, by negative implication, antithetical to rules and conventions. Our original nature — that which lies on the other side of socialization — must remain unspoken; it eludes reflection and articulation, a notion captured in Wittgenstein's famous sentence: "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."² Wittgenstein's anthropology, with its emphasis on "the child's transformation from a creature of nature into a ... rule-following or 'conventionalized' being," culminates in a tragic paradox: what makes us human is "the inhumanity of our conditioning."³

Friesen's reading of Wittgenstein is deeply compelling, yet it does not explain whether Wittgenstein's meaning truly gets lost in translation. As David Bakhurst

remarks, Wittgenstein also describes teaching and learning as *Unterricht*, which means “tuition,” or “instruction.” He uses the term “*Abrichtung*” to emphasize the fact that language acquisition does not occur by explanation, contra Augustine.⁴ As Wittgenstein asserts, “children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc. — they learn to *fetch* the books, *sit* in armchairs, etc. etc.”⁵ The underlying claim is that in learning a language the child “learns to react in such-and-such a way.”⁶ Here, Wittgenstein reminds us that children’s initiation into language does not consist in the transmission of statements of fact. It involves learning responses and behaviors.⁷

As with trained animals, children begin from a place of trust. With time, they develop the abilities and dispositions necessary for membership in a linguistic community. This occurs through their immersion in language-games that are constituted as social “forms of life.” The pattern of their natural development is largely the same. From birth, children are included in the activities of a shared form of life. Initially, their speech, gestures, and behavior are given meaning by adults. These meanings are internalized as children seek to align their speech, gestures, and behavior with community expectations. To quote Bakhurst: “a movement that began in the space of stimulus-and-response becomes a true gesture.”⁸ The learning does not stop here, however. As Gilbert Ryle explains, children “advance beyond their instructions ... to discover new things for themselves.”⁹ They learn how to use the language *and* to extend its use. When children encounter situations, they do not simply subsume those situations under familiar words; they redeploy familiar words creatively. Thus, training is transformative. It establishes a continuum between the pre-linguistic child and the mature speaker of a language. Stanley Cavell illustrates this continuum with an anecdote about his daughter learning the word “kitty.”¹⁰ He describes how she uses it in the context of her interactions with cats *and* fur objects. While it is premature to claim that Cavell’s daughter understands the meaning of the word “kitty,” she *is* on the way to mastering it.

Does Wittgenstein use *Abrichtung* to underscore the harshness or brutality of a child’s early socialization? Animal dressage or obedience training need not be harsh or brutal. Humans have a long history of training animals, and we know anecdotally that trainers are intensely involved in the lives of their animals.¹¹ The training occurs, Raimond Gaita proposes, “in the context of a life between human beings and animals.”¹² It extends and deepens those shared aspects of life and is interdependent with the moral possibilities for both trainer and *animal*. The training involves a set of practices or routines that enable the human trainer and animal to give and withhold assent. It is not uncommon for trainers to talk of a certain animal as being “bloody-minded” or as having a “professional curiosity.”¹³ The giving and withholding of assent is a moral response; therefore, training can be understood to enable animals and humans to treat one another as persons or individuals.¹⁴ That said, the training relationship may not always serve to protect animals (and, in rare cases, humans) from neglect, maltreatment, or violence. Conceiving of *Abrichtung* as inhumane, as Friesen does, undermines the conceptual resources needed to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable forms.

If trainer and animal are engaged in a moral relationship, then Wittgenstein's reference to *Abrichtung* in the context of educating children is not as drastic as it first seemed. In the language of Cavell, we might develop the point by suggesting that the acquisition of language and understanding relies upon acknowledgement. At this point, I foresee that Friesen may object that I am overlooking the harsh implications of *Abrichtung*. He might argue that training makes the value of an animal — and, by implication, a child — conditional upon whether it masters the requisite behaviors, skills, or techniques: the animal is rewarded if it obeys and punished if it disobeys. The animal is forced to fulfill the human trainer's expectations for what constitutes its purpose in life, be it transport, racing, equestrianism, or hunting. This seems to fit with Friesen's analysis of humanization as a gradual and painful process by which we overcome our animal or instinctual nature.

But, we could also imagine a situation in which the training aims to enhance an animal's or a child's natural abilities. Here, I am thinking of the majesty of an equestrian showjumper, the beauty of a racing steed, or the tenacity of a goshawk. As Wittgenstein tells us, the moves and gestures that bring a dog to retrieve are not going to work with cats, nor are cats going to be trained to retrieve. Analogously, it can be argued that socialization creates a developmental continuum from our pre-linguistic activity to our conventionalized self: with both striving for meaning and self-expression. Jonathan Lear reads Freud along these lines, as does Huemer in his analysis of Wittgenstein on concepts and capacities. In both cases, *pre-conceptual* processes are considered to be *proto-conceptual* because "they are *that from which* concepts emerge."¹⁵ Thus, if someone learns to speak, he or she learns to say *something*. As Rush Rhees writes: "He learns what can be said; he learns — however fumblingly — what it makes sense to say."¹⁶

1. Wolfgang Huemer, "The Transition from Causes to Norms: Wittgenstein on Training," *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 71 (2006): 205-225, 207.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden (London & New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1922), 189.

3. Norm Friesen, "Training and *Abrichtung*: Wittgenstein as a Tragic Philosopher of Education," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 49, no. 1: 68-77.

4. David Bakhurst, "Training, Transformation, and Education," *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* 76 (2015): 301-327. See Huemer, "Transition from Causes to Norms," 205-225.

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe & G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1975), § 476 (emphasis added).

6. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, § 538.

7. See Will Small, "Teaching and Telling," *Philosophical Explorations: An International Journal for the Philosophy of Mind and Action* 17, no. 3(2014): 372-387.

8. See Bakhurst, "Training, Transformation, and Education," 313.

9. Gilbert Ryle, "Teaching and Training," *Collected Papers: Collected Essays 1929-1968* (London: Routledge, 2009), 466.

10. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality and Tragedy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 171-172.

11. Raimond Gaita, "Animal Thoughts," *Philosophical Investigations* 15, no. 3 (1992): 227-244.

12. Gaita, "Animal Thoughts," 242.

13. See Helen McDonald, *H is For Hawk* (London: Vintage Books, 2014).
14. See Alice Crary, "Dogs and Concepts," *Philosophy* 87, no. 340 (2012): 215-237; and Gaita "Animal Thoughts."
15. Jonathan Lear, *Love and Its Place in Nature: A Philosophical Interpretation of Freudian Psychoanalysis* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998).
16. Rush Rhees, *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse*, ed. D. Z. Phillips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 49.