

Wittgenstein, Social Views, and Intransitive Learning

Steinar Bøyum

Abstract: Wittgenstein often refers to matters of learning, and there have been efforts to extract a social conception of learning from his writings. In the first half of this paper, I look at three such efforts, those of Meredith Williams, Christopher Winch, and David Bakhurst, and I say why I think these efforts fail. As I go on to argue, though, there is a fairly trivial sense in which learning is a social rather than a psychological phenomenon: ordinarily, there are public criteria for whether someone has learned something. Yet in the second half of the paper, I point to an exception to this general rule. Taking a cue from Wittgenstein, I call this “intransitive learning,” as it refers to learning experiences where we cannot say what we have learned or where there simply isn’t anything in particular that we have learned. This is a use that is not easily accommodated by received definitions of learning. It also represents a genuinely psychological use of the word “learn.” In contrast to ordinary cases of learning, claims about intransitive learning function like expressions and are marked by first-person authority.

Wittgenstein, Social Views, and Intransitive Learning

Introduction

Learning seems to play an important part in Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings. He often appeals to how children learn—language in particular—and some of his more famous passages explore matters of instruction. It is no wonder, then, that some of Wittgenstein's readers have tried to extract a conception of learning from his writings. A recurring phrase in these attempts is that learning is *something social*. In the following, I shall try to say what that might mean, whether it is true, and whether it is Wittgenstein's view.

At the outset, the claim that learning is social is little more than a slogan, and, unfortunately, in many treatments it remains a mere slogan. However, there have been serious efforts to turn it into something more substantial. In the first half of this paper, I shall look at three such efforts, those of Meredith Williams, Christopher Winch, and David Bakhurst, and say why I think these efforts fail. Yet as I will point out next, there is a fairly trivial but still important sense in which learning *is*, after all, a social rather than a psychological phenomenon. There are exceptions, though, and in the last part of the paper, I shall point to a remarkable use of the word "learn" which *is* genuinely psychological. In other words, in the first half I shall review and reject three claims that learning is essentially social, and in the second half I shall claim that there is an obvious sense in which most kinds of learning are social, and a not so obvious sense in which one kind of learning is psychological. Since the first sense is rather trivial, and the second sense is rather peculiar, I'll spend most time on the second.

1. Social Conceptions of Learning

Williams, Winch, and Bakhurst all defend a social view of learning. Although their works are very different, they have several things in common: First, they take Wittgenstein to have held a theory or view that learning is essentially social, and they derive this social thesis mainly from the rule-following remarks. Second, they are not merely referring to the ordinary fact that most learning take place in social contexts. Something *deeper*, more *necessary*, and more *philosophical* is at stake for them. Third, they mainly attack a mentalist idea of learning, and they take what is often called the Cartesian view as the root of many or most evils regarding learning. Fourth, they take the social thesis to imply a criticism of theories of learning within psychology, in particular behaviourism and cognitivism. And fifth, they align Wittgenstein's views with a tradition within psychology and educational research that is variably called socio-historical or socio-cultural theory, represented, for instance, by Vygotsky.

I shall now take a brief look at each of the three philosophers mentioned, and trace the common roots of their views, before saying what I find problematic about them.

1.1. Meredith Williams

First is Meredith Williams' account of the essentially social character of learning (1999). Although Williams argues against certain aspects of Kripke's sceptical solution, she follows him in seeing social agreement as the answer to a deep philosophical problem about the source of normativity. What Wittgenstein shows with his rule-following argument, she claims, is that one can only distinguish between correct and incorrect applications on the grounds of a possible discrepancy between the individual and the community. Social agreement is thus a condition of the very *possibility* of rule-following, and, by implication, of

meaning and mind. And if rule-following is essentially social, it follows that all learning which involves coming to follow rules is essentially social, too. This includes above all the learning of language, but actually all learning which is a matter of continuing in the right way.

For Williams, a certain conception of learning is not only an implication of Wittgenstein's solution to the rule-following problem; learning is also a part of that solution. Whereas community agreement accounts for the *normative* aspect of rule-following (the possibility of an application being correct or incorrect), it is the process of learning that explains what she calls the *necessity* aspect (our sense that an application follows from or is constrained by the rule) (1999, pp. 168–178). By being trained in certain “bedrock techniques,” e.g. counting, these are internalized to such a degree that they become second nature, and we feel that “6” *must* come after “5,” or that this is *obviously* the same kind of thing as that.

Yet even for Williams, the normative aspect is more fundamental than the necessity aspect. First, even though we *feel* that particular applications are necessary, in the sense that they follow from or are constrained by the rule; they are not, she thinks, necessary in a *philosophical* or *metaphysical* sense. At bottom, they are arbitrary—the rule doesn't *really* determine anything. Second, if the two aspects are in conflict, as in Wittgenstein's example with the wayward pupil, who treats as obvious what we don't, the individual's felt necessity must give way to community verdict. Hence, social agreement is rock bottom for Williams, and to learn is, in its deepest sense, to conform.¹

1.2. Christopher Winch

Next up is Christopher Winch (2002). According to Winch, “the necessarily social nature of learning ... is a consequence of the social nature of human life” (ibid., p. 183). Society consists of normative or rule-governed practices, and early learning is to be introduced to and initiated into these. Despite otherwise leaning mostly on Baker and Hacker, Winch is in this respect influenced by Norman Malcolm’s reading of Wittgenstein. And despite all the differences between Winch and Williams, their justification for the social view of learning comes down to the same thing: Wittgenstein’s rule-following remarks read as posing a question to which community agreement is the answer.² Without social institutions there can be no such thing as right and wrong, and this implies that normative learning is necessarily social too. To learn something is to get something right, and nothing can be right for only an individual.

It is vital to Winch that the dependency on others in learning is not a matter of *fact*. It is not that other people are empirically necessary for learning most things. It is even less that cooperation is a particularly effective method of learning, though that is also probably true, but something “far deeper,” as he puts it (2002, p. 7). Others are, he claims, *logically* necessary for anyone to have learned anything. Learning is not, or not just, a *causal* chain between society and the individual, with society exercising an *influence* on the child’s mind. It is, or involves, a *grammatical* chain from society to individual, which unlike the causal chain is unbreakable. Winch lauds Rousseau for prefiguring Wittgenstein’s insight into the social dimension of humans in general and of language in particular, but castigates him for failing to observe that this is not a mere empirical connection, but a grammatical one.

Learning is coming to master rule-governed practices, and since these are intrinsically social, then so is learning.

1.3. David Bakhurst

Last man out is David Bakhurst (2011). He differs from the other two in that he does not for the most part rest his views directly on Wittgenstein, but on John McDowell. That makes things a bit more complicated, since we have to consider Bakhurst's reading of Wittgenstein, McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein, and Bakhurst's reading of McDowell's reading of Wittgenstein; and these may differ (and actually they do).

Bakhurst claims that the views of Wittgenstein and McDowell, as well as of Vygotsky and Bruner and others, all converge on a new and radical social vision of the mind, with the potential to transform even some sciences completely, psychology in particular (2011, p. 109). In this vision, our human powers, in particular our responsiveness to reasons, are social in nature and origin. And like Winch and Williams, Bakhurst is eager to deny that the individual's dependency on society is merely empirical. It is a philosophical or even transcendental condition. The mind is *essentially* socio-cultural.

In *Mind and World*, McDowell asks how human beings, who are parts of nature just like animals, can come to inhabit the space of reasons (1996).³ More specifically, how can sensibility, which is a natural phenomenon, implicate conceptual capacities? McDowell's answer, which makes a huge impression on Bakhurst, is that human beings are initiated into the space of reasons by upbringing, or *Bildung* (McDowell 1996, pp. 84–88).⁴ The child is, as it were, born a mere animal, but acquires a second nature as she develops conceptual capacities, which let the world come into view for her, as even her sensibility is shaped by

concepts. For Bakhurst, this means that man, mind, and rationality are essentially social phenomena.

Now McDowell's appeal to second nature is crucial to his attempt to steer a path between what he calls bald naturalism and rampant platonism, and it does restore matters of learning and upbringing to a central position in philosophy. But where does Bakhurst's idea of the essentially social come from? McDowell often talks about the *human* in *Mind and World*, but the only place, I think, where he talks about the *social* is as part of a criticism of communitarian or social-pragmatist readings of Wittgenstein (1996, p. 93).⁵

Obviously, learning and upbringing are social phenomena in a more down-to-earth sense (McDowell 1996, p. 195). If the social thesis simply said that human beings, both as a race and as individuals, would have been very different if they did not live together with others, it would be quite true. A child left on his own in the woods would not learn much, and feral children are both rare and not very human-like. The point is, however, that Bakhurst means something more than that, something *deeper* than the fairly trivial remarks about humans as social animals. Yet such a distinctively *philosophical* idea of the social nature of mind I cannot find in *Mind and World*.⁶

What is, then, the basis of Bakhurst's social thesis? To some degree, Bakhurst's theory comes from a tradition within Russian philosophy and psychology, but it is also based on his own reading of Wittgenstein, which is *different* from that of McDowell, though Bakhurst is not always clear about that difference. Bakhurst refers supportively to Malcolm's interpretation of Wittgenstein's rule-following remarks, which shows, he says, that language is necessarily social and that membership in a community is a condition of the

very possibility of mind and meaning. This reading is even more prominent in an earlier paper of his, tellingly called “Wittgenstein and Social Being” (Bakhurst 1995). My hypothesis, therefore, is that Bakhurst has approached McDowell with his earlier understanding of Wittgenstein at the back of his mind, and then read his own community view into McDowell’s appeal to *Bildung*. In so doing, he may not have been sufficiently receptive to how McDowell *rejects* this way of reading Wittgenstein.⁷

1.4. What is Wrong With These Social Conceptions

Despite, on the surface, looking like three very different conceptions of learning, we have now seen that these social accounts boil down to very much the same thing, namely, a community reading of Wittgenstein’s rule-following remarks, though more in the region of Malcolm than of Kripke. Hence, they also become vulnerable to the criticism that has been directed against this kind of reading, for instance by McDowell himself.

From the perspective of that criticism, one might wonder whether this kind of philosophical learning theory is part of the problem rather than the solution. The danger is that it perpetuates the fantasy of some item that can and must ground normative learning by determining in general which way is the right way to continue. Perhaps the fateful step has then already been taken. When a gap has first opened up between rule and applications, it is of lesser importance whether we put in community agreement or acts of interpretation to try to bridge it. The solution, rather, is not to bridge the gap, but to question the very idea that there always is such a gap.

It is true that Wittgenstein sometimes refers to how words are learned, and often in social and practical contexts. Yet it seems more in line with his philosophy to see such remarks,

not as elements or indications of a social-pragmatic *conception* of learning, but as an aspect of his *method*, a way to dispel confusions that social pragmatism treats as questions to answer.⁸

Meredith Williams, for instance, takes Wittgenstein's rule-following remarks to be an attack on what she calls the Classical View, the view that rules guide us in our applications and serve as a basis for justification (1999, p. 158). In contrast, I do not think that the Classical View needs to be a particular philosophical view at all. It might be a fairly obvious and innocent grammatical remark, for which it is the task of philosophy to make room, rather than to undermine.

Put differently, Williams does not distinguish between what McDowell calls naturalized and rampant platonism. With regard to rules, rampant platonism would be the position that all the applications are, in a queer sort of way, already contained within the rule, perhaps even independently of how humans actually deal with the rule. Naturalized platonism, or what Finkelstein calls innocent platonism, is the view that for those who have learnt to follow the rule, the rule itself calls autonomously for certain applications—only in exceptional circumstances do we have to interpret the rule (Finkelstein 2003, pp. 86–87). For Williams, however, any view that the rule *itself* is what justifies applications amounts to bad platonism, and therefore she needs something else to provide that justification. Admittedly, Williams does note that what she calls “bedrock practices” do not need justification, but what she means by that is just that we do not *in fact* justify them. She does think, however, that they need a *philosophical* or *metaphysical* justification (Williams 1999, p. 194).

Community agreement does not figure in justifications for particular applications, but it still

constitutes the distinction between correct and incorrect, according to Williams. It is thus part of a general explanation of meaning that goes *beyond* the kind of instructions and explanations we actually give in particular contexts, and that is exactly what goes against the grain of Wittgenstein's later thought.

But do these thinkers have to buy into Wittgenstein wholesale? Can't they just extract a social view from Wittgenstein and throw away his conception of philosophy? This seems to be what Bakhurst is trying to do with respect to McDowell. He takes McDowell's notion of *Bildung* as the first building block of a theory or more detailed account of how the formation of a second nature takes place. He notes that McDowell himself has a "Wittgensteinian aversion" to such constructive philosophizing, but he thinks that his views can and should be theoretically developed (Bakhurst 2011, p. 152). Bakhurst himself proceeds to fill out the picture, by giving an account of how children acquire concepts.

In doing so, Bakhurst may underestimate how McDowell's avoidance of constructive philosophy is not a mere "aversion." The idea of second nature (and even less the idea of upbringing) is not *in itself* a novel theoretical notion. What's interesting is the *use* McDowell makes of the notion. Proponents of community-readings (e.g. Williams and David Bloor) also appeal to the notion of second nature, but the appeal plays a very different role for them than it does for McDowell. They invoke the notion to refute a possible criticism of the social view: if the community decides what is right, how is it that we can follow a rule without first checking what the community says? The answer is second nature. McDowell, on the other hand, appeals to second nature on a deeper level, namely, in order to stop the general question of what fixes the rule from even arising. It is thus meant as a reminder that

can loosen the grip of a dualism of reason and nature, a dualism that generates philosophical confusions, e.g. about rules. To take the appeal to second nature out of this context in which it is meant to dissolve a dilemma is, therefore, to miss the point. For as McDowell says: “The ‘quietism’, the avoidance of any substantive philosophy, is really the point” (1996, p. 176).⁹

2. Social and Psychological

2.1. A Sense in Which Most Learning Is Social

Although I may not have argued my case with the required depth and detail here, I do think that nothing so far ought to convince us of a Wittgensteinian thesis that learning is social in any deep sense.¹⁰ Of course, there may be *other* ways in which learning is social in a deep sense. Yet what I want to do now, rather, is to ask whether there is some non-deep sense in which learning is social. And obviously there is.

One trivial, but still important sense in which learning is social, is that in most *ordinary* cases of learning there are public criteria for whether someone has learned something. As Cora Diamond writes, “the kind of publicness that characterises a concept ... can be seen in the place of the concept ... in the life people share” (1989, p. 22). And the kind of publicness that characterises the concept of learning is that others, as well as the learner herself, can typically tell whether she has learned some particular thing, as long as they have the relevant access to what she is doing and saying. Whether a child has learnt the capitals of Europe is seen from whether he can tell us the capitals of Europe. Whether he has learnt how to tie his shoes is seen from whether he can tie his shoes.

Moreover, the learner *himself* can usually only establish whether he has learned something on the basis of, as it were, observation. He can, if he is confident, say, “Now I have learned how to ...,” without actually having done the thing, but if he then tries to *show* what he has learned, and fails, then he was wrong—he hadn’t learned it. In cases of conflict, what you *are* able to say and do overrides what you *think* you are able to say and do.¹¹

This is all very sketchy, of course, but I hope it is enough to establish the following: The concept of learning does not typically function as a *psychological* verb, in Wittgenstein’s sense: “Psychological verbs [are] characterized by the fact that the third person of the present is to be verified by observation, the first person not” (1991b, p. 160). In ordinary cases of learning, there is no such thing as first-person authority, and no such asymmetry between first and third person. In matters of learning, we relate to ourselves much as we relate to other persons. And another way to put the same point is by saying that learning is “something social.”

We could recast this point in somewhat dangerous terms: Learning is not an inner state of mind. It is out there, in the public, social world. But then we must immediately remind ourselves that this is no more than a fairly trivial remark on the grammar of learning. It is not trivial, though, in the sense that it is easily forgotten, for instance, in parts of psychology.

2.2. Intransitive Learning

So there is a sense in which learning is a social, not a psychological concept. However, there are exceptions to this general rule, and in what remains of this paper I shall examine an exception that is especially interesting. Taking a cue from Wittgenstein, I shall call this kind

of learning *intransitive learning*, as it refers to learning experiences where we cannot say what we have learned or where there simply isn't anything in particular that we have learned.

There are three reasons why I am interested in this phenomenon. First, it is not easily accommodated by received definitions of learning. Second, it is interesting in its own right, since it is often felt to be very important to the learner. And third, it represents a psychological use of the concept of learning, different from its normal social or public use

As far as I can tell, most definitions and analyses of the concept of learning assume that when we learn, there is *something* we learn, something we *acquire*, usually something *new*, be that a skill, an attitude, or a piece of knowledge. Yet these assumptions are, if not outright contradicted, then at least put in some doubt by what I call intransitive learning. This kind of learning typically occurs in the context of what is sometimes called learning from life. After major experiences in life, like family breakdown, serious illness, or the death of someone close, we are often inclined to say that we have *learned* a lot. But what did we learn? Sometimes we cannot say, or we can only repeat something we already knew, but we will still say that we have learned.

In his novel, *A Long Way Down* (2006), Nick Hornby tells the story of Martin Sharp. Martin is a middle-aged man who used to have a happy life, with a nice family and a well-paid job as a television host. Unfortunately, he commits the crime of sleeping with an underage girl, for which he has to spend three months in prison. The experience ruins his life and brings him to the brink of suicide. At one point, a friend of his challenges him to do something wild (throwing a party for complete strangers) because, she says, at least they will learn

something from it, about each other and about themselves. This leads Martin to reflect on what one can ever learn from life:

And anyway, what does or can one ever learn, apart from times tables, and the name of the Spanish prime minister? I hope that I've learned not to sleep with fifteen-year-olds, but I learned that a long time ago—decades before I actually slept with a fifteen-year-old ... And yet just about everyone I've ever interviewed has told me that by doing something or other—recovering from cancer, climbing a mountain, playing the part of a serial killer in a movie—they have learned something about themselves. And I always nod and smile thoughtfully, when really I want to pin them down: What did you learn from the cancer, actually? That you don't like being sick? That you don't want to die? (Hornby 2006, p. 270).

Martin continues to mull about what he may have learnt from his ordeals. He notes again that what he may have learned are things he already knew:

In the last few months, I have been to prison, lost every last molecule of self-respect, become estranged from my children and thought very seriously about killing myself ... What was I supposed to learn? True, I have discovered that I was quite attached to my self-esteem, and regret its passing. Also, I've found out that prison and poverty aren't really me. But, you know, I could have had a wild stab in the dark about both of those things beforehand (ibid., p. 271).

In these passages, Nick Hornby uncovers a small, but nevertheless important part of the grammar of learning. In the aftermath of major life experiences, but also sometimes from minor, and sometimes even from encounters with art, we may be inclined to say that we have *learned* something, but still not be able to say *what* we have learned. Alternatively, we may simply repeat something we knew perfectly well in advance, like “family is really important,” or “you cannot control everything in life.” We say things like, “It was then I learned that ...,” but then we follow up with a truism that most would agree to anyway.

However, Martin reacts to this phenomenon with a cynicism that we do not have to adopt. He suspects that to talk about “learning” in cases like these is merely something we do “in order to turn the experience into something that might appear valuable, rather than a complete and utter waste of time” (ibid., p. 270). In other words, he suspects that people

have not really learned anything at all. They simply express themselves in terms of learning so as to convince others, or themselves, that it was somehow “worth it”—a kind of theodicy of life itself.

Now Martin may be right—about *some* cases. Our use of the word “learn” in situations like these *can* be empty, but not necessarily so. There are sincere expressions of learning where we cannot specify what we have learned or only specify it with truisms. These cases may be unusual, but no less important for that. Indeed, they tend to be used about some of the most significant experiences in life. Acknowledging such expressions is crucial to understand things like “learning from life” and “life experience.” The fact that an old woman, with a rich and eventful life, full of joys and sorrows, can only say what she has learned from life by truisms that we would all agree to anyway, does not mean that she did not really learn anything or that what she learned was insignificant.

Wittgenstein occasionally distinguishes between transitive and intransitive uses of certain expressions. We may, for instance, say that we have an experience of longing without specifying anything in particular for which we long, and he calls this an intransitive use of the word “long”. There is then the temptation to think that there really is an object for this experience but that we do not know what it is.

Now this is a characteristic situation to find ourselves in when thinking about philosophical problems. There are many troubles which arise in this way, that a word has a transitive and an intransitive use, and that we regard the latter as a particular case of the former (Wittgenstein 1991a, p. 160).

My claim is that this is a fairly good analogy to the concept of learning. Normally we use it transitively, we say we learned this or that, but sometimes we use it intransitively. Then we just say that we learned a lot, without saying what we have learned, and, when asked, we

are either not able to specify what we learned at all or we can only specify it with something we already know. Wittgenstein's argument implies that we should not try to explain away the intransitive use and cast it in the mould of transitive learning.

When we are not able to say what we have learned, we may be tempted to add that *of course* there was something we learned, because you *cannot* learn without learning something, and you *cannot* learn something if that "something" was there all along. This temptation should be resisted. True, in particular cases it may not matter whether we say that we learned something, but we don't know what; or that we learned, but not anything in particular. What is important philosophically is that we do not insist that only the first alternative can be right. For then we are in thrall to a picture, in Wittgenstein's sense, which inclines us to think of what is learned as something that, as it were, hovers behind the expression of learning, and which in the intransitive case is so shadowy that we cannot see it clearly enough to describe it.

The same goes for the temptation to say that what is learned in intransitive learning is tacit or implicit. Now calling some content tacit or implicit seems most natural when the content in question can be made explicit. If it cannot be made explicit, the contrast that gives sense to calling it implicit is gone, and it is no longer clear what is meant by "implicit." And indeed, sometimes it does happen that we are at first unable to say what we learned from some experience but then later we become able to do so. It is then natural to say that something that was implicit has been made explicit. However, it is not always the case that intransitive learning is made explicit retrospectively. It may happen, or it may not. The point is that insofar as calling the learning implicit is motivated by the idea that there must be an object

of learning somewhere behind the scenes, then the danger is that we keep alive the source of the confusion.

Perhaps we would want to say that in cases of intransitive learning what we learn is something about *life*, or about *oneself*, or what it is to be *human*, or something of the sort. But I am not sure whether this adds anything. These phrases say very little, almost nothing. They are, as it were, *unsaturated*, to appropriate Frege's term. Nevertheless, in *particular* cases it does sometimes happen that we express intransitive learning with unsaturated phrases like "I learned something about myself that year." Admittedly, it does not say much on its own, but it is not uncommon and often points to learning of great import. Indeed, with regard to a major life experience, one could easily get suspicious of someone who claimed that he learned something very specific from it. To say, after a painful divorce, that one has learned "something about life" seems normal and natural. But to say that what one learned from the divorce was "to always to put the toilet lid down" (because your wife used to complain about it) would seem like a joke or a symptom of a very nerdy personality.

The analogy to Wittgenstein's notion of the intransitive is not perfect, as I include in the concept of intransitive learning cases where we actually *say* what we have learned, but where what we have learned is something we already knew. In these cases, learning is best seen as intensification of already existing knowledge, rather than as acquisition of *new* knowledge. You learn something, but nothing new. You knew it before, but now you *really* know it. The crucial distinction here may be expressed in numerous ways. One way is through a contrast between knowledge and perception: "I have always known that family is important, but now I *see* it." It may also be captured in a distinction between (just) words

and (genuine) knowledge. A man who has experienced losing his freedom may say, "It is one thing to *talk* about freedom, quite another to *know* what it is." This would be a matter of making the word "freedom" one's own, realizing what it *really* means: "Only now do I know what freedom means." As indicated, speakers may here stress certain words to express how there is now an extra dimension to their knowledge. Indeed, this kind of learning is often only detected in other people from *how* they say their words, not from the words themselves.

In cases of intransitive learning, do we not simply use "learn" in a different sense than usual? I do not think so. We can compare with what Wittgenstein calls secondary sense (2003, p. 184). When Wittgenstein notes that he is inclined to say that Wednesday is fat and Tuesday lean, he asks whether "fat" and "lean" are here used in their ordinary sense. And he answers that they are used differently, but that one can only explain their meaning in this context by referring to their ordinary use. Now the intransitive use of "learn" may not be strictly a case of secondary sense. After all, the distance between the transitive and the intransitive use is clearly far less than that between, to take another of Wittgenstein's examples, the word "yellow" used about physical objects and the same word used about the vowel "e." Nevertheless, in contexts of intransitive learning we also use "learn" in a different way than usual but still, we are inclined to say, with the same meaning. As Wittgenstein notes in the case of secondary sense, "I want to use *these* words (with their familiar meanings) *here*" (2003, p. 184). That is why it is nothing like "bank" and "bank," where we are not inclined to say that the meaning of "bank" in the one use carries over to the meaning of "bank" in the other. But in cases of secondary sense, and in the case of intransitive

learning, the meaning is so carried over from its ordinary use. It is crucial for us to use the word “learn” here. Another word, say, “I feel differently now than before,” won’t do.

We saw earlier how Martin Sharp suspected that when people talk about what they “learned” from this or that major experience, it is all just talk. How do we determine, in a given case, whether the expression of intransitive learning is genuine or empty? Given their often strongly felt significance, one would like to think that cases of intransitive learning *change* us in some way. But do they? What *criteria* are there for ascribing intransitive learning to someone? There are criteria, but they are typically vague and highly context-dependent, which makes them difficult, perhaps impossible, to articulate in advance.

A tempting answer is that intransitive learning results in a new *attitude* to life. However, “a change in attitude to life” does not say much unless it is specified, and if we specify it, it will soon cease to be common to all cases. Sometimes, intransitive learning can lead to a change in one’s whole way of life. At other times, the change may be small, but still significant, say, a new tone of voice when speaking about certain things. And at other times again, it can be hard to tell what changes it led to, even for the person himself, though that does not exclude there being changes.

In cases of ordinary, “transitive” learning, at least the most typical, there are fairly clear and concrete criteria by which others can judge whether someone has learned some particular thing, say, the times tables or tying shoelaces.¹² As mentioned, the learner herself can usually only say what she has learned on the basis of what she is now capable of doing. First-person claims about ordinary, transitive learning are, to borrow David Finkelstein’s formulation, “only as good as the evidence that backs them up” (2003, p. 119).

When it comes to intransitive learning, though, first-person authority applies. The learner herself is the one to say whether she learned in this sense. Others can, as it were, make hypotheses about it on the basis of her words and actions. Yet in the end those hypotheses will have to be corroborated, or repudiated, by the person herself. And the learner is entitled to avow such learning even without “evidence,” that is, without citing particular things that she now knows or is doing differently. I do not have to observe what I am capable of doing in order to say that I have learned “something about life,” for instance after having recovered from serious illness.

That is not to say that we can never be wrong about our own intransitive learning. If a man coming out of prison says he has “learned a lot from it,” but he keeps on doing and saying the same old stupid things, we are entitled to suspect that he has not learned anything at all. And the same man may start to doubt it himself, and even admit he was wrong. On the other hand, it does seem possible for someone to say that they have learned something about life from some experience, and although we cannot notice any change in their behaviour, we are still inclined to trust them and take their word for it, especially if we know them well. We are probably more inclined to think that such an avowal of learning without any apparent consequences is disingenuous in the case of strangers than in the case of friends. As indicated, one way of summarizing the differences between ordinary and intransitive learning, is to say that in contexts of intransitive learning, “to learn” *does* function as a psychological verb, in Wittgenstein’s sense. Here’s the earlier quote in full:

Psychological verbs [are] characterized by the fact that the third person of the present is to be verified by observation, the first person not.

Sentences in the third person of the present: information. In the first person present: expression. ((Not quite right.))

The first person of the present akin to an expression (Wittgenstein 1991b, §472).

Whereas first-person claims about ordinary learning are like reports, first-person claims about intransitive learning are like expressions, which is why it is tempting to talk about learning *experiences* here. “I have learned to tie my shoes,” on the other hand, is not an expression of *learning*, though it can be an expression of *confidence*.

Admittedly, we are sure to find differences, too, between expressions of intransitive learning and expressions of mental states. As Wittgenstein would surely have urged, we must be wary of drawing dramatic conclusions based on a consideration of the similarities alone. Nevertheless, I hope to have brought out that there are ways of applying the concept of learning which do not quite fit received definitions, and which are, at least, “akin” to expressions.

2.3. Summary

I’ll end with a short summary. I started by looking at three efforts to attribute to Wittgenstein a conception of learning as essentially social. Next, I stated why I think these efforts come to nothing. First, they misconstrue the *status* of Wittgenstein’s remarks on learning, reading them as elements of a theory rather than as aspects of his method. Second, they attempt to *answer* the question of what in general fixes a rule, whereas Wittgenstein would have wanted to dissolve it. By correcting these two defects, we stop the spring from which the social conceptions flow.

In the second half of the paper I tried to show that there is *both* a sense in which learning is social *and* a sense in which it is psychological. The first sense has to do with the *absence* of first-person authority in most ordinary cases of learning. The second sense has to do with the *presence* of first-person authority in cases of what I called intransitive learning. So to the question of whether learning is a social or a psychological phenomenon, the answer is “both” or “it depends.” That answer may be boring, but then again, the truth often is.¹³

NOTES

¹ It is true that, for Williams, learning is not social in the same sense for the child as for the adult (1999, pp. 178–183). She conceives of meaning-making as a two-step borrowing: The child borrows meaning from the adult, and the adult borrows meaning from the community. Put differently, the learner depends on the teacher for making sense, and the teacher depends on the community for making sense. For the child, the community is an external force judging her, personified in her parents. But by having been trained into a culture, Williams argues, the adult has become a master of its language, and the community is no longer an external power judging him. Though a community is required to provide my words with a normative background, I do not have to check with others in order to speak. Yet even the “autonomy” of the master is subservient to social agreement: if you don’t do what the others are doing, you will not only fail to make sense, but you actually have a disorder, Williams says (1999, p. 181). So much for autonomy, one is tempted to add.

² Although the main impetus for Winch’s social view comes from Wittgenstein’s rule-following argument, it also comes from the private language argument, which according to him shows the incoherence of the kind of private objects that traditions within learning theory typically rest on (the cognitivist tradition, which focuses on the brain rather than the mind as a mental phenomenon, falls foul of the rule-following argument, but not the private language argument.)

³ “The logical space of reasons,” a term derived from Sellars, is the space of normativity, where one thing is a reason or justification for something else. McDowell extends that concept to include not only epistemic facts and relations, but also intention and meaning (since they, too, have to do with

responsiveness to reasons). The space of nature, on the other hand, is the space of natural facts, linked by laws, not reasons. This corresponds to how the natural sciences conceive of the world.

⁴ Bakhurst often translates McDowell's use of *Bildung* with "education", but that does not seem quite right, since McDowell describes it as "the normal coming to maturity of the kind of animals we are" (1996, p. 88). "Formation" or simply "upbringing" would be better here.

⁵ Even in the earlier paper, "Wittgenstein on following a rule," where McDowell seems more sympathetic to a kind of community reading, it is one very different from standard community readings (1984).

⁶ Bakhurst does offer one direct quote from McDowell to support his social view: "the language that makes the orientation [towards reality] possible is essentially the possession of a *we*" (McDowell 2009, p. 149). But that quote is from a paper where McDowell expounds the views of Gadamer, and though he is sympathetic to Gadamer, they cannot automatically be taken as exactly his own. Besides, McDowell does not elaborate what "essentially" means here, and there are fairly obvious and rather non-philosophical senses of "essential" in which it is trivially true that human beings are essentially social.

⁷ It is true that Bakhurst finds a fault with "some versions" of communitarian readings of Wittgenstein, but his ground for criticizing them is that we do not *actually* justify our judgements by appealing to community agreement (2011, p. 147). As far as I know, though, this is a point that intelligent community readings incorporate, e.g. Malcolm and Williams. The talk about "some versions" seems therefore to confirm rather than refute that Bakhurst supports a kind of community reading. It must be said, though, that Bakhurst is somewhat slippery when it comes to Wittgenstein. He does, as mentioned, rest on Malcolm's community reading, but he also refers quite supportively to Baker and Hacker, and, of course, to McDowell. But as these have fairly different views of Wittgenstein, Bakhurst's understanding of Wittgenstein remains a bit elusive.

⁸ I do not mean to imply that the remarks on learning serve one and only one function for Wittgenstein.

⁹ The appeal to second nature is thus part and parcel of McDowell's project, "... [to] dislodge the background that makes such questions look pressing" (1996, p. 178). Of course, that requires philosophical work. You do not dislodge a dualism by merely saying that you dislodge it. Nor do you dislodge it by keeping quiet.

¹⁰ To a large degree, I have here adopted a view of Wittgenstein in line with that of McDowell in *Mind and World*, partly out of simplicity, since Bakhurst is so influenced by him, though I also draw on David Finkelstein's *Expression and the Inner* (2003), as well as Goldfarb (2012), Gustafsson (2004), and Minar (1991).

¹¹ I do not deny that there are additional criteria for whether someone has learned something. It also seems essential to learning that one has acquired the relevant ability in a certain way, for instance by experience or instruction, but not by a pill or an accident.

¹² It should be added, though, that "ordinary learning" covers a great variety of types of learning, so there may be significant differences among them in this respect. There may also be cases situated in the middle of the continuum between ordinary cases like learning times tables or how to tie shoes, and cases of intransitive learning, for instance, learning to become more sensitive.

¹³ For their helpful suggestions concerning earlier drafts of this article, I would like to thank Martin Gustafsson, Lars Hertzberg, Rupert Read, Akylina Samara, and Richard Sørli.

REFERENCES

Bakhurst, D. (2011) *The Formation of Reason* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell).

Bakhurst, D. (1995) Wittgenstein and Social Being, in D. Bakhurst and C. Sypnowich (eds) *The Social Self* (London, SAGE).

Diamond, C. (1989) Rules: Looking in the Right Place, in D. Z. Phillips and P. Winch (eds) *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars* (London, Macmillan).

Finkelstein, D. (2003) *Expression and the Inner* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press).

Goldfarb, W. (2012) Rule-Following Revisited, in J. Ellis and D. Guevara (eds) *Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Gustafsson, M. (2004) The Rule-Follower and his Community: Remarks on an Apparent Tension in Wittgenstein's Discussions of Rule-Following, *Language Sciences*, 26.2, pp. 124–145.

- Hornby, N. (2006) *A Long Way Down* (New York, Riverhead Trade).
- McDowell, J. (1996) *Mind and World: With a New Introduction* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press).
- McDowell, J. (1984) Wittgenstein on following a rule, *Synthese*, 58.3, pp. 325-363.
- McDowell, J. (2009) *The Engaged Intellect: Philosophical Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press).
- Minar, E.H. (1991) Wittgenstein and the 'Contingency' of Community, *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly*, 72.3, pp. 203–234.
- Williams, M. (1999). *Wittgenstein, Mind, and Meaning: Toward a Social Conception of Mind* (London; New York: Routledge).
- Winch, C. (2002) *The Philosophy of Human Learning* (London ; New York: Routledge).
- Wittgenstein, L. (1991a) *The Blue and Brown Books: Preliminary Studies for the "Philosophical Investigation"* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell).
- Wittgenstein, L. (1991b) *Zettel*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell).
- Wittgenstein, L. (2003) *Philosophical Investigations: the German Text, with a Revised English Translation*, 3rd ed (Malden MA: Blackwell).