

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology

Malcolm Budd



Routledge Revivals

Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology

First published in 1989, this book tackles a relatively little-explored area of Wittgenstein's work, his philosophy of psychology, which played an important part in his later theories. Writing with clarity and insight, Budd traces the complexities of Wittgenstein's thought, and provides a detailed picture of his views on psychological concepts. A useful guide to the writings of Wittgenstein, the book will be of value to anyone concerned with his work as a whole, as well as those with a more general interest in the philosophy of psychology.

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‘How can one learn the truth by thinking?
As one learns to see a face better if one draws it.’

Ludwig Wittgenstein
Zettel 255

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PREFACE

The three areas to which Wittgenstein devoted his greatest energies in the second half of his life were the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mathematics and the philosophy of psychology. His thoughts in these different fields intersect in numerous ways and it is not possible to examine adequately his contribution to one of these subjects in total isolation from his treatment of related issues in the others. This is especially true of his philosophy of psychology, for not only is it imbued with his later thoughts about the nature and understanding of language, but a considerable part of his interest in the philosophy of psychology derived from his dissatisfaction with his early philosophy of language and its underlying conception of mental representation. What I have tried to do is to disentangle the main threads of Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology from his more general philosophy of language, but only in so far as the resulting picture remains a faithful image of his thought. Although the lines I have traced overlap with ones that extend into other areas of philosophy and elaborations of the picture I have drawn are possible at many points, I believe that only a misplaced piety would balk at the attempt.

Wittgenstein's work in the philosophy of psychology can be considered from two points of view: its relevance to psychology and its importance within philosophy. Wittgenstein claimed that the science of psychology is barren and confusion is endemic in it. This is not due, he maintained, to the fact that psychology is a young science that is still struggling to find appropriate ways to

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investigate its subject matter. The kind of confusion that reigns in psychology is, he believed, conceptual confusion: psychologists are prone to unclarity about everyday psychological concepts and the sophisticated experimental methods they employ fail to deal satisfactorily with the problems addressed, which are really of a philosophical nature. These problems can be resolved, so Wittgenstein thought, only by gaining a proper understanding of the psychological concepts from which they arise. His own work in the philosophy of psychology attempts to represent our ordinary psychological concepts in such a manner that the problems that stem from confusion about the nature of these concepts are dissolved. And it is here that its interest to philosophy lies, whether or not its claims about the science of psychology are unfounded, exaggerated, or dated.

I have not attempted to provide a comprehensive treatment of Wittgenstein's work in the philosophy of psychology: it is hard to understand what this would be. Moreover, even if it were possible to give a truly comprehensive account, I am sure this would not be desirable. It may be true that the treatment of each psychological concept casts light on the correct treatment of all. That was Wittgenstein's claim. But the extraordinarily large number and great variety of psychological concepts that Wittgenstein examines (cursorily or at length), the numerous interconnections between his different psychological investigations, the provisional or uncertain nature of many of his remarks, and the recurrent themes and targets demand a selective treatment. It is certainly not true that Wittgenstein's treatment of each new psychological concept further illuminates his own philosophy of psychology.

It will be obvious to readers familiar with Wittgenstein's work that there are aspects of his thought about which I am silent: there are matters Wittgenstein thought about in an interesting way that I have not included and the subjects I have chosen to consider involve nuances and ramify in ways I have ignored. I have selected topics that highlight the distinctive features of Wittgenstein's approach to the philosophy of psychology and these topics include, I believe, his central contributions to the subject. What is needed for each of the topics is a vantage-point from which Wittgenstein's investigation can be most easily

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surveyed: I have tried to identify such a position and to use it to provide a perspicuous representation of his thought.

Wittgenstein's conception of the nature of philosophy is liable to render his examination of psychological concepts problematic for those with a different and more liberal conception of philosophy. For Wittgenstein is often concerned not so much to delineate the grammar of psychological words as to expose his reader to and inoculate him against seductive misconceptions of that grammar. Despite the hazardous nature of the enterprise, I have been particularly concerned to articulate what seem to be Wittgenstein's positive suggestions wherever there are traces of them, even if these traces are faint.

The references to Wittgenstein's writings in the Notes not only identify quotations, and places where Wittgenstein maintains (so I believe) the views I attribute to him, but also direct the interested reader to passages in Wittgenstein's works which develop the points in the text at greater length or which contain related considerations. It should not be forgotten that Wittgenstein published none of the works that contain his later philosophy and that have appeared since his death under his name. He would certainly have rejected many of the published remarks as inadequate, misleading, or mistaken.

Chapters II, III and IV are based upon three of my published papers: 'Wittgenstein on Meaning, Interpretation and Rules', *Synthese*, vol. 58 no. 3, March 1984, 'Wittgenstein on Sensuous Experiences', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 36 no. 143, April 1986, and 'Wittgenstein on Seeing Aspects', *Mind*, vol. XCVI no. 381, January 1987. These papers have all been rewritten, in places heavily, and there are both additions and omissions. I am grateful to Kluwer Academic Publishers and Basil Blackwell for permission to make use of this material. I am also grateful to Basil Blackwell for permission to quote from Wittgenstein's works.

My greatest debt is undoubtedly to Colin McGinn, with whom I frequently discussed Wittgenstein's work and also many issues in the philosophy of psychology when we were colleagues. His energy, clarity of mind, and cheerfulness have always had a beneficial effect on my own thinking. My discussions with him and the graduate seminar we gave on some aspects of

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Wittgenstein's work were the stimulus that led to my decision to write this book. But he has not seen what I have written and is unlikely to agree with all of it.

I am grateful to Wendy Robins for the hard work she put into the preparation of the final typescript.

Malcolm Budd

1 June 1988

I

INTRODUCTION

WITTGENSTEIN'S CONCEPTION OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF PSYCHOLOGY

What did Wittgenstein understand by the philosophy of psychology? A skeleton answer would be this: the aim of the philosophy of psychology is the construction of perspicuous representations of everyday psychological concepts; this aim is achieved by the delineation of the grammar of psychological words; the importance of the philosophy of psychology derives from its underlying purpose, which is the dissolution of philosophical problems about the nature of the mind; these problems can be treated successfully only by attaining a synoptic view of the ordinary language of psychology; the philosophy of psychology is purely descriptive and in no way explanatory. But this answer must be fleshed out if it is to be illuminating.

We must begin from Wittgenstein's conception of the nature of philosophy. For he had a distinctive vision of philosophy that determined both the way he worked in any area of philosophy and what he tried to achieve. The foundation of his thought is that philosophical investigations are conceptual investigations.¹ Accordingly, his researches in the philosophy of psychology are researches into psychological concepts. But since there are very different kinds of investigation into concepts, the characterisation of Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology as an investigation of psychological concepts is informative only in the light of a clear understanding of the kind of conceptual investigation he engaged

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in. Now Wittgenstein insisted that it would be misleading to describe such an investigation as a search for an *analysis* of a concept, if this suggests that there is something hidden in the concept that he wished to bring to light and that the discovery of this would be a new piece of information. On the contrary, he believed that everything of philosophical interest lies open to view and he regarded all the relevant facts about the concept as being already known. So there is nothing for which an *explanation* is being sought.²

But if this is so, what sort of enterprise is a conceptual investigation of the kind Wittgenstein practised? An initial answer is that it is an attempt to *describe the use of words* in which the concept under examination is manifested. It is therefore an investigation of what Wittgenstein referred to as the 'grammar' of words:

Grammar describes the use of words in the language.³

Grammar does not tell us how language must be constructed in order to fulfil its purpose, in order to have such-and-such an effect on human beings. It only describes and in no way explains the use of signs.⁴

The importance of the idea of grammar in Wittgenstein's thought is clearly revealed when seen against the background of the attitude to language that he adopted in his philosophical work. To put the matter briefly: he rejected the idea that the meanings of words should be explained by reference to psychological causes and effects of the use of words; he renounced any interest in an explanation of the operation of language as a psychophysical mechanism;⁵ he recommended his conception of the meaning of a word as its use in the language; and he restricted his philosophical examination of language to a description of its grammar.

It follows from this account of a conceptual investigation that Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology is an investigation of psychological concepts (everyday psychological concepts)⁶ restricted to the description of the use of psychological words. Now the construction and assessment of mind-models – hypothetical mental mechanisms postulated to explain psychological capacities, conscious experience and observed behaviour – is the task of the

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science of psychology, not philosophy. Hence, the nature of the mind and its activities, in the sense in which Wittgenstein was interested in them, is not concealed but lies open to view as it is revealed in the ways in which psychological words are used.⁷

But if Wittgenstein's aim was only to describe the use of psychological terms, what kind or kinds of description was he striving for? And why is a description of the required kind worth having? What is the importance of the investigation?

A preliminary answer to the first question is this: the kind of description of the use of psychological words that was the goal of Wittgenstein's investigation is not one that aims for exactness, but rather one that tries to achieve a synoptic view (a comprehensive view, a view of the whole) by means of a perspicuous representation (*übersichtliche Darstellung*):

The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things.⁸

What is a perspicuous representation of the use of words? One of the few examples described by Wittgenstein *as* a perspicuous representation is the colour octahedron, which can be used as an illustration of the relations between colour-words and as showing what does and what does not make sense in the language of colour.⁹ A perspicuous representation is not, however, a single kind of construction, but any way in which the use of words and the similarities and differences between uses of words in the language is clearly revealed. For there is no single way in which the kind of reflective understanding of the meanings of words Wittgenstein tried to make accessible can be achieved. He therefore needed to devise a number of methods for the creation of a perspicuous representation of the uses of words. Undoubtedly his most distinctive method was the invention of primitive forms of language, language-games, in which the ways in which words function are easy to grasp, and which throw light on our own language when used as objects of comparison, showing up both similarities and differences.¹⁰

We have seen that Wittgenstein wanted to achieve a certain kind of understanding of psychological concepts. This understanding is produced by a perspicuous representation of the use of psychological words and it consists in seeing the connections

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between them. It enables one to move easily from one to another: the ideal is a mastery of their similarities and differences akin to the mastery of a musician who can modulate from any key to any other.¹¹ And it is because Wittgenstein aimed to gain a synoptic view of psychological concepts that he explored so many of them: the treatment of each, he thought, casts light on the correct treatment of all.¹² But we have still not explained why a perspicuous representation and a synoptic view is a desirable goal.

Now it is an essential thesis of Wittgenstein's later philosophy that it is not easy for someone to describe correctly the way in which *he himself* uses a word; when he tries to do this he is liable to go wrong; and if he goes wrong in his description of a psychological word, he is enmeshed in a philosophical confusion about the mind.¹³ The importance for Wittgenstein of the idea of a perspicuous representation of the grammar of words derives from the fact that philosophical confusions engendered by misunderstanding one's own language in reflection upon it are removed or discouraged by correct description of this synoptic kind. The kind of description he aspired to – an arrangement of what we have always known¹⁴ – gains its significance from the philosophical problems in which one becomes entangled unless one has secured a bird's-eye view of the linguistic domain. Without such a viewpoint, the function of a psychological concept in our thought about the mind will be misrepresented or rendered problematic.

But why should it be hard to describe the use of a word correctly, if there is no difficulty in using it in the right way? Why doesn't our understanding of the word, our practical mastery of it, ensure that we do not fall into error if we set out to describe its use?

Wittgenstein offered many reasons against such a simple view of the matter. In the first place, there is the general point that the mastery of a technique and the ability to give an accurate account of the technique are very different capacities, and there is usually no good reason why someone who has acquired mastery of a technique should also be prepared to give an account of the technique he has mastered. In particular, a description of the grammar of a word is of no use in everyday life; only rarely do we pick up the use of a word by having its use described to us;