

Introduction:  
Wittgenstein's Vision of  
the Human Subject and  
its Contested Implications  
for Social Understanding  
and Social Philosophy

RICHARD ELDRIDGE  
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

It is widely held that in *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein somehow forwarded a view of the human subject that is radically at odds with more traditional, explanation- or justification-seeking metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language. “We say only of a human being and what is like one that it thinks” (§360), we find there. There is no *res cogitans* that is separable from the body and that houses primitive representational contents. Meanings are instead originally laid down in linguistic practices that are interwoven with bodily activities. Human beings must make a contribution to their mastery of language: they must ‘get it’ with respect to what can correctly be called what, and there is more to doing that than simply responding to stimuli in a regular way. But the learning of language is not itself a feat of intellectual theorizing, and understanding language is not a matter of being in causally effective material states alone, stripped of any relation to broader matters of mood, sensibility, interest, and feeling. In Peter Hacker’s phrase, we find at the center of Wittgenstein’s thought “the human being, ... a living creature in the stream of life,” (Hacker 1999, p. 4) along with all the complexities of that life. Distinctively human practices, linguistic and otherwise, are normatively saturated, and this normative saturation cannot be unpacked as either caused or justified by any ‘third entity’ (besides human beings and the objects they engage with) such as Platonic forms, medieval universals, Cartesian innate ideas, or a language of thought. Nor can norm-governed, distinctively human practical life be explained under causal laws. As Goethe’s famous epigram has it, “Im Anfang war die Tat”: in the beginning of human, concept-mongering life was the deed, not the thought or idea, and not simply the course of the law-governed physical world. Or so at least runs the story.

What is less clear, however, are 1) the details of the contributions to language learning (as Wittgenstein sees them) that the individual human subject must make, 2) the arguments in favor of this *praxis* view of meaning (as well as whether they are sound), and 3) the positive implications of this view for how we are to understand human actions within normatively saturated practices. The first topic is a difficult exegetical matter, with answers ranging from Hacker’s flat view that *mastery of a technique within a practice* on the part of a human being is necessary and sufficient for normative competence to Cavell’s richer emphases on the standing contestation of some norms, on the endlessness and groundlessness of achieving understanding (of language and of the others who use it), and on the anxieties, resistances, and imaginative leaps that are bound up with this achievement.<sup>1</sup> The second topic is, if anything, even more vexed, with at

least Quinean naturalists and Chomskyan cognitivists arguing strenuously against Wittgenstein's vision of language and understanding.

Despite these unsettled exegetical and argumentative matters, Wittgenstein's vision, under one sense of it or another, has proven compelling enough for many to pursue the third topic, undertaking to extend that vision and to defend it. These further undertakings fall into two broad classes. A) There are works on the explanation of human action (for example, G. H. von Wright (1971), John Hyman (2015) and on the distinct, hermeneutic 'logic' of social scientific understanding (for example, Peter Winch 1958). Here the emphasis is typically on the difference between elucidations of actions that appeal to agents' points of view, beliefs, desires, and other attitudes, understood as commitments they have taken on within their cultural lives (rather than as 'internal entities') and explanations of natural events under law-formulations. B) There are works that develop what is taken to be a Wittgensteinian view about normative matters (for example, Paul Johnston (1999), Hanna Pitkin (1972), Raymond Geuss (2017, pp. 250-73). Typically, this work has displayed some resistance against ideal theory and a contrasting emphasis on situated, ongoing critical reflection on specific forms of contemporary moral or political practice.

Robert Vinten's (2020) new study, *Wittgenstein and the Social Sciences: Action, Ideology, and Justice*, takes up both A and B. Following generally along the lines of Hacker's reading of *Philosophical Investigations*, according to which philosophy is "not in any way theoretical," but is instead concerned only with "descriptions of norms of representations" (p. 15). Vinten proposes that Wittgenstein's work can be useful in "overcoming confusions" (p. 2) about both social scientific understanding and political theory.

Following Winch, Vinten argues that the social sciences, in focusing on actions, reasons, and motives rather than habitual behavior and causes, employ methods of investigation that are essentially different from the uses of experimentation, measurement, and law-formulation that are central to the natural sciences (Ibid.). Yet the social sciences, Vinten holds, are also genuine sciences (in a broader sense of "science," following John Dupré (1992), not simply varieties of humanistic, hermeneutic interpretation, insofar as they may be systematically practiced and involve attention to phenomena other than texts and utterances.

In political theory, Vinten suggests that Wittgenstein can help us to challenge the "dominant liberalism" of our day as a form of ideal theory (p. 6). Given Wittgenstein's *praxis*-based view of meaning and the ubiquity of contestations both among and within practices about what is to be done (or said) when,<sup>2</sup> we would do better to accept "the ubiquity of the possibility of disagreement" (p. 192), and thence to make concrete, specific judgments of comparative injustice without appealing to ideal theory (p. 188).<sup>3</sup> No ideal theory could fulfill the irenic philosophical dream of fully reconciled social life founded on reasoned argument.

Each of the commentators on Vinten's book takes up a crucial aspect of his position. Paul A. Roth questions the quickness of Vinten's reliance on a Wittgensteinian *praxis* understanding of meaning: he proposes that we need more attention than we get to topics 1 and 2. He goes on to worry about the absence of focused attention to specific methodologies and achievements in the now quite developed and articulated natural and social sciences, as well as a parallel lack of attention to the specific methodologies of the putatively autonomous social sciences. He finds Vinten's suggestions about how to do non-ideal political theory likewise too schematic. Daniel Little argues against Vinten's 'austere', Hacker-derived picture of philosophy as conceptual analysis that is *toto genere* separate from empirical considerations. (Like Roth, he points to the need for more attention to topic 2). This separation has the unfortunate effect of separating metaethics from substantive normative ethics (in a way that may be at odds with a *praxis*-based account of meaning). He suggests that some forms of causation may be at work within the social world: we can be anti-positivist without being anti-explanation, and Little points to some specific cases of successful social explanation in structurally oriented and field oriented sociology. Like Roth, Little wishes for more specific details about how to derive normative ethical and political content from an understanding of human beings as essentially animals embedded in norm-saturated practices.

Where Roth and Little seek largely to qualify and rein in Vinten's argument, Rupert Read, Richard Raatsch, and Rafael Azize all wish to push it further than Vinten himself does. Read takes Vinten's defense of forms of social science that are distinct from natural science to be itself too much "in thrall" to the cogni-

tive prestige of the natural sciences. In light of Wittgensteinian ideas, we would do better to practice more explicitly hermeneutic social *studies* and in doing so to wean ourselves from the dominance of technological-instrumentalist stances that both inform the practices of the natural sciences and distort our social life. Richard Raatzsch is even more skeptical than Vinten about any form of political *theory*. Turning to Bertholt Brecht and Robert Gernhardt (with dashes of Marx and Adorno), Raatzsch proposes that some poems might help us really to *see* the falsity or incorrectness, or unfulfilling, mechanical, less than whole-hearted character, of our contemporary lives. Like Read, Raatzsch finds that the cultural situation is grave, and he looks to something other than either science or theory—if not to save us, at least to alert us to the perils posed by our current forms of social and cognitive life. Based on reading of *Philosophical Investigations* inspired by Cavell, Rafael Azize develops a picture of human life as pendular in being posed, always, between acknowledgment of immersion in the common and its values, on the one hand, and assertions of independence and self-reliance in value stance and commitment. This thought about the situation of the human subject leads him to endorse a form of political liberalism that includes patience, courage, and engagements with and against others as a means of keeping open the possibility for the fruitful development of lived practices in the direction of freedom.

Explanation vs. understanding; the *Naturwissenschaften* vs. the *Geisteswissenschaften*; theory vs. poetry; liberalism (and neoliberalism) vs. some more ‘open’, non-ideal, critical post- or neo-liberalism;—these are heady and significant themes. Vinten’s book, the criticisms put forward by his commentators, and his replies present a number of vital yet contentiously opposed ways of making use of Wittgenstein’s mature work in relation to contemporary social and cognitive practical life.

## NOTES

- 1 For a summary and assessment of the range of exegetical options regarding Wittgenstein’s view of what rule-following competence consists in, including Dummett, Stroud, Taylor, Rorty, Kripke, and others along with Hacker and Cavell, see Eldridge 1997, pp. 199-241.
- 2 It is not that every norm is everywhere contested on every occasion—far from it. Rather, the claim is that no practice is ever unfringed with some contestations on some occasions.
- 3 For my part, I wonder whether some comparatively ideal theory is required in order to make specific judgments of comparative injustice that have some chance of being broadly accepted as justified. In some forms of ideal political theory—for example, in Rawls’ mature account of justice for societies characterized by moderate scarcity, toleration of fundamental religious and metaphysical disagreement, and commitment to fair cooperation and competition—both the objects of study (modern societies) and the ideal used to assess them (the theory of justice) are historically developed and situated, not static or Platonic, while also having very broad scope. This point is compatible with further wondering whether current large-scale social life and its local sub-forms in all or most parts of the world continue to display the features to which Rawlsian theory responds.

## REFERENCES

- Dupré, John. 1993. *The Disorder of Things*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Eldridge, Richard. 1997. *Leading a Human Life: Wittgenstein, Intentionality, and Romanticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Geuss, Raymond. 2017. Wittgenstein. In: Geuss, *Changing the Subject*, pp. 250-73. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hacker, P. M. S. 1999. *Wittgenstein*. New York: Routledge.
- Hyman, John. 2015. *Action, Knowledge, and Will*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnston, Paul. 1999. *The Contradictions of Modern Philosophy: Ethics after Wittgenstein*. Milton Park: Routledge.
- Pitkin, Hanna Fenichel. 1972. *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Vinten, Robert. 2020. *Wittgenstein and the Social Sciences: Action, Ideology, and Justice*. London: Anthem Press.
- Winch, Peter. 1958. *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Wright, von G. H. 1971. *Explanation and Understanding*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.