

Ludwig Wittgenstein and his Followers

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Abstract

The article connects key ideas and themes from the later philosophical work of Ludwig Wittgenstein with current concerns regarding Workplace Innovation. We consider the work of three of his followers: Stephen Toulmin, Bo Göranson and Björn Gustavsen, and discuss the implications for social science and practical philosophy.

Keywords: Clinical intervention, dialogue, family resemblances, language games, learning from differences, tacit knowledge

Introduction

I accepted an invitation to contribute to a doctoral course at the University of Agder, dealing with the Philosophy of the Social Sciences, and was asked to talk about Ludwig Wittgenstein and his followers. When preparing the talk, and reflecting on the issues, I found what I regard as interesting links between the historic work of Wittgenstein and the current concerns of the *European Journal of Workplace Innovation*, which is hosted by the University of Agder. The key links are revealed through the work of the selected followers of Wittgenstein, including in Scandinavia, which continues today. There are implications for current debates.

This is not simply a piece of academic intellectual archaeology. I regard the issues here as of current practical importance. There is a need today for the kind of clarification which Wittgenstein provided. As you will discover, I regard myself as one of Wittgenstein's followers. I look forward to the dialogue which I hope will follow.

What would Wittgenstein do?

I faced an interesting challenge, as it was far from clear to me that Wittgenstein would have accepted the invitation to give such a talk. Those who taught me philosophy at Cambridge in 1969-70, such as Bernard Williams, did not address these topics through historical introductions. Cambridge academic philosophers did not like summary overview courses, and did not recommend overview texts. They did not like talking about philosophy. They wanted to be engaged in “doing philosophy”, tackling problems which have concerned philosophers over the centuries. My talk is not simply a conventional summary overview, but rather more of a personal reflection, linked to a call for action.

Ludwig Wittgenstein was not a traditional academic philosopher who analysed the work of other philosophers, and discussed schools of thought. He tried to discourage his own students from following careers as professional philosophers. As Göranson and Karlqvist showed in their play “Beyond All Certainty” (Göranson & Karlqvist 1995), Wittgenstein also tried to discourage his students from publishing their notes of his seminars, and thereby building a Wittgenstein industry. At the same time, this approach left a legacy of confusion after his death, not least because his advice was widely disregarded.

I followed Wittgenstein's advice. I moved from academic philosophy to study history, and then to work in artificial intelligence at Imperial College London. I took Wittgenstein's ideas with me; or at least I took what I hoped that I understood.

Who was Wittgenstein?

Wittgenstein had a professional background in aeronautical engineering, and a passionate interest in architecture, which led him to design and build his own house in Vienna. He did not have an obvious background for contributing to the philosophy of the social sciences, or working life. He concentrated on his own ideas, and was less inclined to review the literature written by others.

Wittgenstein had no particular interest in academic publications. Only one of his many books listed in the references below, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (Wittgenstein 1921) was published in his lifetime. He had tried to burn the *Tractatus*, as he thought it could be damaging to young minds, but this conclusion came too late. The book was in print. The later works were published without his approval.

Wittgenstein did not fit naturally into the Cambridge academic culture, where he developed a dominant role, as he had done in Vienna. He was not concerned about personal reputation. He had given away most of his considerable personal inherited fortune. For his last years he lived in Cambridge as a lodger with Georg Henrik von Wright, his successor as Professor at Cambridge. He spent many of his holidays in a Norwegian hut. He does not appear to have built up a wide range of personal friends.

A fellow lodger with von Wright was Wittgenstein's Norwegian student Knut-Erik Tranøy, whose wife Gene later became my father's second wife. Gene was given the mission of burning three bags of Wittgenstein's personal papers after his death, at specified locations which later housed Wittgenstein archives. She acted as instructed. Years later, von Wright frequently checked with me: what had Gene done with the papers? He monitored any houses of philosophers with past connections to Wittgenstein, in search of publishable papers. I think I may know the nature of the papers which were burnt. As Derek Jarman reported in his film *Wittgenstein* (Jarman 1993), the distinguished philosopher had a troubled and unconventional private life. His affections for others, including students, were sometimes expressed in letters, but were not always reciprocated, as reported by Edmonds and Eidinow (2001). When his former student and close friend Ben Richards died, Richards' Sussex farmhouse was besieged by philosophers seeking personal papers from Wittgenstein. The owners then asked me what the philosophers were looking for.

What was Philosophy to Wittgenstein?

Wittgenstein saw his philosophical task as essentially very simple: "to show the flies the way out of the fly bottle". He wanted to assist clear thinking, removing confusion. It was a form of academic therapy. With the same mission, he helped to explain mathematics to students at Cambridge Technical College, sitting with them in the canteen in the evening.

Wittgenstein's seminars at Cambridge University were improvised and dialogical. The resulting published versions were unauthorised, based on notes by his students, and largely comprised collections of short remarks. As with verses of the Bible, in the hands of ill-informed evangelicals, the remarks are often quoted out of context. His lectures were complemented by anecdotes and novel modes of explanation: Gene reported that Wittgenstein taught the rules of basketball, without the use of a ball, weaving in and out between the trees on the Backs. His audience knew "how to go on".

The Early Wittgenstein

While fighting for Germany in the First World War, Wittgenstein started to formulate the core radical philosophical ideas, based on mathematics and logic, which formed the basis of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, (Wittgenstein 1921). Together with his *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (Wittgenstein 1991), his work posed formidable challenges to established philosophers such as Bertrand Russell. Wittgenstein felt free to roam across the disciplines, without constraints, and he was not worried about the reputations of those he challenged.

Wittgenstein played a central role in the positivist Vienna Circle of the 1920s, for which the *Tractatus* was seen as a campaigning document. He declared that the world is comprised of facts, not things, and his view was based on a picture theory of truth. Language is used for descriptions of the world. On "matters whereof we cannot speak", he argued that we should

remain silent. This was seen at the time as effectively closing the door on many previous subjects for discussion.

Reconciling the Early and Late Wittgenstein

45 years ago, as a Cambridge philosophy student, I began to write an essay which tried to reconcile the ideas of the early and late Wittgenstein, including *Philosophical Investigations*. It was my choice. I cannot blame my supervisor, Roger Scruton.

I encountered a problem. As a social and political activist, I could not easily accept the idea that we should remain silent about so many matters which appear to be of great importance: such as religious belief, politics, ethics, aesthetic appreciation and personal relationships, which cannot simply be reduced to facts. How could Wittgenstein have believed this?

In *Philosophical Investigations* (Wittgenstein 1953) and the *Blue and Brown Books* (Wittgenstein 1958), Wittgenstein explored a fresh approach to language. It is not just used for description. There are more tools in the language toolbox. There is often a purpose to our use of language, with associated actions. This argument was emancipatory.

Wittgenstein memorably introduced the elementary model of language games through working life, with a dialogue between builders engaged in constructing a wall: “Slab”, one builder said as he passed the slab to the other builder. Tom Stoppard incorporated this in his play “Dogg’s Our Pet” (Stoppard 1971), and developed it further in “Dogg’s Hamlet”. Words were closely linked to actions. Language built up, alongside the building. The dialogue had a practical context.

Associated with this account of language is a richer account of knowledge, going beyond simple explicit knowledge in the form of propositions, and opening up discussion of implicit and tacit knowledge. Language draws on experience. We use it for aesthetic, political and religious judgements, and for expressions of emotion.

There is extensive discussion of phenomena such as pain. We can talk about our own pain experiences. We cannot experience the pain of others, such as from toothache, other than through conversation, in which we understand the meaning of words by reference to our own experiences when we use such words.

Wittgenstein here wrote about “the beetle in the box”. He suggests that each of us has a beetle, which we can see by carefully opening the box. We cannot see the beetles belonging to others, so when beetles are discussed, we think in terms of our own beetles.

Øyvind Pålshaugen (personal communication) enabled me to find an answer to my problem, after many years, and I was able to try to finish my essay. He pointed out that Wittgenstein had written a letter to his publisher, in which he noted that there were really “two volumes” of the *Tractatus*, only one of which could be written down. The second was “silent”. The single published volume was inherently incomplete, and such incompleteness was denied.

Let me explain what I think this means. Explicit knowledge is only part of the picture. We are obliged to remain silent if it is not possible to articulate our own tacit knowledge. It is not that we are to be compelled to be silent when speech would be possible. However, when we do use words, we should recognise that these are also actions, with meanings and consequences.

Language

As far as I am concerned, the key insights from Wittgenstein for the social sciences concern language, and the discourses in which we routinely engage, as participants and not merely as observers.

Wittgenstein was not a social scientist. He did not write about the social sciences as such. His students collected some of his remarks as if he had been writing about the social sciences. Later writers such as Winch drew on his remarks in order to set out “the idea of a social science” (Winch 1990).

Wittgenstein argued (Wittgenstein 1967) that in order to make sense of statements by an individual about personal religious belief, it was necessary to observe the individual’s actions. What practical difference is made by religious belief?

Wittgenstein talked of “forms of life”, in which language is used. This approach has been taken up with “communities of practice” (Wenger 1998), and anthropological studies (Douglas 1973). As we learn to use language we learn to follow the rules of how to use it, for different purposes in different situations. In Wittgenstein’s words, we learn to participate in different kinds of language games. Johannessen (1990, 1992, 2006) and Janik (1988, 1990, 1991, 1992) have explained the implications of this approach. Language games are embedded in forms of life. We become familiar with particular forms of life. If we move to a different form of life, we are likely to encounter new games. This has been seen as applicable in international relations (Hollis & Smith 1990).

“The meaning of a word is seen in its use in the language game”. It is not simply a matter of using dictionaries, or even encyclopaedias. This challenges the recurrent tendency to think that complex problems can be solved simply by defining our terms. Even if we agree to use a given set of terms, they will have different meanings in use. This is a problem in a field such as Corporate Social Responsibility, for which a new Dictionary (Idowu et al 2015) has recently been published, following the earlier four volume Encyclopaedia (Idowu et al 2013).

Speech and action are linked through “speech acts” Our utterances have illocutionary force (in action) and perlocutionary force (through action), as explained by Austin, in *How to do things with words* (Austin 1975) and Searle, in *Speech Acts* (Searle 1969)

In fields such as anthropology (Douglas 1973) and international relations (Hollis & Smith 1990), these insights are practically important. They open the way to alternative approaches to social science.

Followers

When I was a student of Moral Sciences at Cambridge University there were followers of Wittgenstein, such as Elizabeth Anscombe, Richard Braithwaite, Renford Bamborough and Roger Scruton. They had chosen to disregard Wittgenstein’s advice with regard to their own careers. They were professional philosophers. Memorably Anscombe, who had translated and edited much of Wittgenstein’s work, gave apparently improvised lectures on Wittgenstein each year: they tended to be word for word the same.

Von Wright gave a memorable series of visiting lectures, on “Explanation and Understanding” (von Wright 1971). He had succeeded in leaving Cambridge, and applying his learning to the social sciences. When working in Finland in the 1980s I was impressed by his influence on debates on technology, and on the peace movement. His students were applying his ideas to current issues.

I want to talk in particular about three followers of Wittgenstein with whom I have worked in Scandinavia: Stephen Toulmin, Bo Göranson and Björn Gustavsen. Each had a central focus on working life, in the context of the social sciences. I recall my delight and surprise in 1987 when, giving an invited talk to a Swedish audience, and drawing on Wittgenstein in my account of skill and the transfer of skill, I discovered the enduring appeal of Wittgenstein's work in Scandinavia. This prompted me to start working with Swedish colleagues, and then with Norwegian colleagues, in each case supported by Stephen Toulmin.

Toulmin

Stephen Toulmin was a renowned British-born philosopher of science and historian of ideas, who published many internationally influential books (Toulmin 1952, 1990, 2001).. He regarded Wittgenstein as his teacher. He had personally made the transition across disciplinary divides, having been an academic physicist, and researched radar in wartime. His writings display an immersion in the classics, and a capacity to refer to philosophers over the ages as if he had known them all personally.

Toulmin had attended Wittgenstein's seminars at Cambridge, in the company of Alan Turing, a fellow Kingsman. He was an eye-witness to the famous argument between Wittgenstein and Popper in Braithwaite's rooms in King's College, as described in *Wittgenstein's Poker*. (Edmonds & Eidinow 2001). Popper and Wittgenstein had been adversaries in Vienna, where Popper had been unusual in resisting Wittgenstein's dominance. In Braithwaite's rooms, when arguing about evidence for the external world, Wittgenstein picked up a poker, and waved it. Popper then cited this as a case of inappropriate behaviour, as one great philosopher appeared to threaten another. This contravened rules of good manners.

Toulmin left the UK in 1955, and was then based in a succession of universities in the USA, finally at the University of Southern California, where his focus was on international and multicultural relations, and on work with medical clinicians. His *Cosmopolis* (Toulmin 1990), *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (Janik & Toulmin 1996), and *Return to Reason* (Toulmin 2001) provide remarkable insights.

Göranson

Bo Göranson had a background in mathematics and computer science, and was a member of a theatrical family. His early research (Göranson 1982) examined the consequences of automation in the insurance industry. The research suggested that the impact of the loss of experience and tacit knowledge only really emerged over about three years. There have been similar conclusions with regard to retirement and restructuring.

Göranson drew on Wittgenstein for his work on professional knowledge and dialogue, which he often located in the context of theatre. This is set out in the six volume *Skill and Technology* series (1988 – 1995), and *Dialogue, Skill and Tacit Knowledge* (Göranson, Hammarén & Ennals 2006). This series arose from the 1988 Stockholm Conference on *Culture, Language and Artificial Intelligence*. Speakers included the philosophers John Searle (Searle 1990) and Hubert Dreyfus (Dreyfus 1990), and several philosophers who worked in the tradition of Wittgenstein, such as Allan Janik and Kjell S. Johannessen..

Göranson argued that there are limits to what can be achieved by analytical thinking. Göranson's work emphasises Dialogue Seminars, analogical thinking, and the significance of tacit knowledge.

The Dialogue Seminar, hosted by the Royal Dramatic Theatre from 1986, and supported by the award-winning journal *Dialoger*, bridged the gap between arts and sciences, and developed concepts such as “Performing Knowledge”. Toulmin contributed to Göranson’s series of “Philosophical Dialogues”, with “Imaginary Confessions” published in *Skill, Technology and Enlightenment: On Practical Philosophy* (Göranson 1995). Great thinkers were presented as human beings. Göranson and Karlkvist’s “Beyond All Certainty” (1995) was published in the same volume.

Göranson developed the Dialogue Seminar Method as a means of accessing tacit knowledge in organisations, such as Combitech and Vattenfall, thus changing corporate culture. The results included a flow of PhD theses, and research on age and tacit knowledge.

Bjorn Nelson and Daniel Alvunger (Alvunger & Nelson 2014) have built on the work of Göranson, taking Dialogue Seminars into the new application field of Vocational Teacher Education, and exploring issues of Vocational Knowledge (Nelson, Alvunger & Ennals 2015). This has led them into new work on regional development, approaches to community learning, and consideration of the role of dialogue in engaging with migrants. Much was learned from the EU COHAB project, involving five countries around the South Baltic Sea. Using metaphors and analogical thinking, they supported dialogue between vocational education professionals across borders.

Gustavsen

Bjorn Gustavsen was trained as a lawyer, and was a leading figure in developing Norwegian legislation to improve the work environment. He developed an account of *Dialogue and Development* (Gustavsen 1992) which he applied in regional development, and in national programmes in Sweden and Norway. Interestingly, very similar principles for “democratic dialogue” were set out and followed by Göranson, and by Jurgen Habermas.

Gustavsen drew heavily on Wittgenstein as he developed dialogues with practitioners and researchers. See also *Work Organisation and Europe as a Development Coalition* (Ennals and Gustavsen 1999), *Creating Connectedness* (Gustavsen, Finne & Oscarsson 2001), and *Learning Together for Local Innovation: Promoting Learning Regions* (Gustavsen, Nyhan & Ennals 2007). His work emphasises dialogue conferences and development coalitions. However, Gustavsen was not simply concerned with following organisational processes.

As a facilitator, Gustavsen used his considerable experience and tacit knowledge to identify and deal with issues of power. Such insights could not fully be written down, but must be learned through experience. Some of his followers and students did not understand this, and regarded the dialogue conference as a “method” in itself, with the facilitator regarded as an “action researcher”. Similar points could be made about Göranson and the Dialogue Seminar Method. How can a method become independent of the originator? How can others “know how to go on”?

Both Göranson and Gustavsen, separately, welcomed advice and support from Stephen Toulmin, John Shotter and Øyvind Pålshaugen. There have thus been indirect connections between the research traditions.

Return to Reason

In *Return to Reason* (Toulmin 2001), which was based on lectures given at Harvard and Cambridge, Toulmin analysed the systemic myths which had underpinned conventional intellectual thinking for centuries.

He exposed the myth of “stability” which had prevailed since the time of Newton, where the heavens were seen as providing an example of order and stability for the nations of Europe.. He explained it in terms of a yearning for political stability in Europe after lengthy war, but it was a yearning which led to intellectual distortions. For example, this meant ignoring the constant element of chaos.

He then turned his attention to the myth of “equilibrium”, which provided a distorted basis for economics in the twentieth century. Economists had become addicted to pseudo-mathematical formulae and systems Toulmin died before the 2008 financial crash, but he had in effect explained it in 2001. Financial market systems are not self-correcting. They can break, with profound consequences. Keynesian economists, many based at King’s College Cambridge, had also warned of the dangers, but were disregarded.

Toulmin challenged the myth of objective detachment in the social sciences. With Giddens (Giddens 1984), he argued that we are ourselves engaged in the problems under study. He argued that social scientists, in their research, should adopt the clinical model of intervention, as seen in medicine. He wrote with enthusiasm about Action Research, which he saw as offering a way forward, and he highlighted work in Scandinavia led by Göranson and Gustavsen. Our utterances and publications must be seen as actions. This implies a central role for Action Research.

Intellectual Emigration

In the UK, the academic environment has been largely unsympathetic to the ideas of Wittgenstein, and their radical implications. It is not surprising that, independently, Toulmin and I, both from King’s College Cambridge, found intellectual homes in Scandinavia. We have been fortunate to work with stimulating colleagues.

Workplace Innovation

The argument shifts from the past to the present. Today it is common to collaborate across borders of countries and disciplines, despite the distinctive patterns of reasoning, and academic institutional structures, which have developed. The implications and complications of that collaboration and multi-disciplinarity are not always understood. It is easy to assume that partners share our views and objectives. Life can be more complicated.

In recent years there has been increasing interest in Workplace Innovation, with a focus on change arising from the workforce, rather than from technology or top-down management. The focus has been on practice, rather than theory. Older workers have also begun to receive attention, as it is recognised that they have accumulated considerable experience, skill and tacit knowledge, and their departure may have an adverse effect on the organisation. The European Commission has seen the need to bring together researchers and practitioners with relevant experience and objectives, from 30 countries across Europe, to build a network to support mutual learning: the European Workplace Innovation Network.

Research in these fields has been complicated by the number of different perspectives being deployed, for example approaches to age focussing on learning, health and work ability, and with different approaches to economics and organisations. Typically these perspectives are incompatible, and rely on different models of explanation, expressed in varied language. We cannot expect to arrive at a single overall conclusion which satisfies the full range of criteria.

The debate tends to involve practitioners, who seek to learn from the experience of others. Academic researchers have shown relatively little interest, as the field is multi-disciplinary and messy. The European Commission are interested for economic reasons, as they try to take forward an integrated policy programme for the European Union, and they care little about academic theory.

We could imagine ourselves back in a seminar by Wittgenstein. He liked to consider practical cases. He tended not to criticise particular schools of philosophy. In a complex world, he noted that language enables us to link previously separate phenomena. Language enables us to identify “family resemblances”. We may know what we mean when we use a word. We assume that others use the same words with the same meaning. We think that we “know how to go on”, but we may be mistaken.

The European Workplace Innovation Network (EUWIN) brings together practitioners and cases from over 30 European countries, with widely varying histories, cultures, economic contexts, and political pressures. It provides an arena for a new set of dialogues. To assist in this, Totterdill (2015) has developed a vocabulary intended to demystify the key factors affecting Workplace Innovation. He has described four “bundles of innovative practices”, (work organisation, learning and reflection, structure and system, and workplace partnership) and he then added the “essential Fifth Element”, which, he argues, brings these together and sparks ongoing innovation. He has been right to resist pressure for precise definitions, which would go beyond the effective use of the language. We may ask what kind of “form of life” has developed to address these issues. What are the distinctive “language games”?

Wittgenstein argued that we should make sense of statements of belief by looking at associated actions. We need live cases which can be interrogated. As we do so, we face the problem of numerous perspectives. We have to accept that there is no “one best way”.

Wittgenstein introduced the idea of “seeing as”, to address the phenomenon of multiple perspectives, which cannot simply be collapsed into one. His “duck-rabbit” could be seen as a duck, or as a rabbit, or indeed as a duck-rabbit. When we consider cases against the background of other cases, we are building on this insight.

We need to recognise that workers are also individuals facing medical problems. We all age. Workers are also earners, members of families, and members of society. We cannot claim objective detachment.

We can describe the sensation of seeing a fresh interpretation of a set of data. Such flexibility and vision would be welcome in the often compartmentalised world of working life, for example as we consider the health of older workers, and the way that workplace innovation can influence decisions on retirement.

Conclusion: No final words

Wittgenstein would not have favoured a continued central focus on his published writings. The one book he had wished to publish, the *Tractatus*, he later wished to burn. The other books were edited by his students, and published over subsequent decades, without his permission. He opposed the Wittgenstein industry. What does this mean for Wittgenstein's followers today?

Wittgenstein would not have favoured an abstruse academic debate between philosophers. He advised his students not to become professional academic philosophers. He had set out key ways of thinking, ways of "freeing the flies from the fly bottle". He showed different "ways of seeing". He introduced "forms of life" and "language games". It is now a matter of engaging, playing those games, and helping our fellow players to know how to go on.

The workplace today is a suitable case for treatment. Warring theoretical structures, drawn from rival paradigms, have failed to communicate, and failed to find practical ways forward. We can follow Wittgenstein's example, and find family resemblances which cross boundaries, and lay the foundations for dialogue. We can identify interesting cases, and learn from differences.

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