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"Bring Me an Apple!" Wittgenstein on Meaning, Customs and Training

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Abstract This paper explores remarks in Wittgenstein's later philosophy that implicitly engage with contemporary reflections on habits, customs, and practices. It begins by presenting his idea that our diverse activities, ranging from following rules to playing chess, constitute customs that we learn through training, much like animals. It then traces how the theme of training emerges from the outset of the *Philosophical Investigations*, particularly in relation to meaning and language learning. As will be shown, for Wittgenstein, learning fundamentally rests not on understanding or explanation, but on training; yet training alone cannot fully account for how practices are learned. It is decisively shaped by both our individual and species-specific nature and is complemented by a 'feeling', refined through experience and education, that enables us to recognise when to modify, reinterpret, maintain, or abandon a learned rule, rather than follow it 'blindly'.

Keywords Wittgenstein. Meaning. Customs. Training. Learning.

Index 1 A Short yet Essential Introduction. – 2 Customs and Training: An Overview. – 3 A Methodological Interlude. – 4 Training vs. Explanation. – 5 The Whole Story with Learning.

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A dog, if you point at something,
will look only at your finger.
(David Foster Wallace, *E Unibus Pluram*)

1 A Short yet Essential Introduction

In light of the overarching theme of the issue in which this paper[1] appears, I have found it fitting to explore certain remarks in Wittgenstein's later philosophy – especially, though not exclusively, in the *Philosophical Investigations* – which, in my view, implicitly engage with, or, so to speak, intertwine in various ways with, many of the reflections on habits, customs, and practices (both human and non-human) that have emerged over the course of a long and uneven intellectual journey. This journey spans, at the very least, what the subtitle of a significant book on the subject describes as "from Aristotle to the cognitive sciences" (Piazza 2018), and includes numerous insights developed by key figures in contemporary philosophical pragmatism. In particular, both Wittgenstein and the pragmatists[2] share a view that is non-rationalistic with respect to human action, non-behaviourist with respect to human behaviour, and non-mentalist with respect to the mental. While it remains largely in the background, this view will serve as the point of reference for the present paper.

2 Customs and Training: An Overview

I shall focus on two groups of scattered remarks found in various texts – both manuscripts and typescripts – by the later Wittgenstein, with the primary aim of highlighting how these remarks are interconnected. Among those in the first group, the most frequently cited is probably the one in section 199 of the first part of the *Investigations*, where Wittgenstein writes that "[t]o follow a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs*

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2 A detailed discussion of these and other features of contemporary pragmatism can be found in Dreon 2022, esp. 1-69.

[*Gepflogenheiten*] (usages [*Gebräuche*],[3] institutions [*Institutionen*])" (PI, I, § 199). The second group consists of those remarks in which Wittgenstein observes that each of these customs (or usages, or institutions), along with many others that could easily be listed, is learned by children from adults through training. The key term of this second group is 'training', which, as Wittgenstein clarifies in a passage from *The Brown Book*, he uses "in a way strictly analogous to that in which we talk of an animal being trained to do certain things [...] by means of example, reward, punishment, suchlike" (BrB, 77). This analogous use of the term becomes even clearer in Wittgenstein's writings in German – the language in which he always wrote – as opposed to *The Brown Book*, which was dictated in English. The German word translated as 'training' is *Abrichtung* (verb: *abrichten*)[4] (see, for example, PI, I, § 6). This is precisely the term ordinarily used – alongside *Dressur* (verb: *dressieren*) – to refer to the training of animals, whether dogs, goats, magpies, or other species.[5]

The connection between the two groups of remarks just outlined is quite evident. Wittgenstein seems to suggest that, for example, obeying an order (see PI, I, § 206) is a custom, "an established usage [*ständiger Gebrauch*]" (PI, I, § 198) – in short, "a practice [*Praxis*]" (PI, I, § 202) that one learns by engaging in it through training, that is, by practising it. In a nutshell, practice requires practice. Consider the order: "Bring me an apple!". As Wittgenstein writes, "[o]ne is trained [*abgerichtet*] to do so [i.e., to obey an order], and one reacts to an order in a particular way" (PI, I, § 206) – that is, by doing what the order instructs: in our example, bringing an apple rather than, say, a book; bringing it instead of eating it, and so on.

Three points deserve attention here. The first is that training requires time and involves various methods and techniques – for example, repetition, correction, and different forms of behavioural adjustment. As we have already seen, Wittgenstein lists some of these but leaves the list open-ended: we are trained – in the way animals are – to do certain things "by means of example, reward,

3 'Usages' is the English translation of the German *Gebräuche*, whose singular form is *Gebrauch*; in other contexts, *Gebrauch* is rendered as 'use' (see, for example, PI, I, § 43). According to a well-known paper by Gilbert Ryle, 'use' should not be confused with 'usage': for whereas use is "a way of operating with something", "[a] usage is a custom, practice, fashion or vogue. It can be local or widespread, obsolete or current, rural or urban, vulgar or academic. There cannot be a misusage any more than there can be a miscustom or a misvogue. [...] By contrast, a way of operating with a razor blade, a word, a traveller's cheque or a canoe paddle is a technique, knack or method. Learning it is learning how to do the thing; it is not finding out sociological generalities, not even sociological generalities about other people who do similar or different things with razor blades, words, traveller's cheques or canoe paddles" (Ryle 1953, 174-5).

4 On the significance of *Abrichtung* in Wittgenstein, see also Borutti 2025, esp. 66-72.

5 In the case of horses, German also has the noun *Zureiten* (verb: *zureiten*).

punishment, *suchlike*" (BrB, 77; italics added). In the *Investigations*, we find perhaps the most detailed description of a case of teaching "by means of *examples* and by *exercises*" (PI, I, § 208):

> I do it, he does it after me; and I influence him by expressions of agreement, expectation, encouragement. I let him to go his way, or hold him back; and so on. (PI, I, § 208)

The second point is that the success of training reveals itself over time in the range of things one does and the manner in which one does them. This reference to temporal extension allows Wittgenstein to underline the problematic nature of the view that a rule – for example, the rule governing the use of the word 'plant', or the concept or "general idea" (WLC, 83) of a plant – determines in advance all its future applications, so that anyone who understands a rule already possesses, ideally or potentially, all its applications, even if they never actually apply it. Those who reason in this way, Wittgenstein observes, think that "the use of a word is like pulling a thread from a bobbin: it is all there and needs only to be unwound" (WLC, 83). In short, the concept or general idea is seen here as a mechanism that is static, i.e., fixed and unchanging over time, and yet determines what will happen over time (see WLC, 83). From this perspective, training appears doubly external to the concept or general idea, because what is learned is thought to be something that: a) already exists independently of any specific training; and b) could, in principle, be learned – or activated – without any training at all. The third and final point is that the same training may elicit different responses or reactions. Wittgenstein notes that, given the same order – "Bring me an apple!" – and the same training, one person may react "*thus*", for example by bringing an apple, and another "*otherwise*" (PI, I, § 206), perhaps by eating it. This naturally raises the question: "Who is right, then?" (PI, I, § 206) – that is, on what basis can we say that only the first person, and not the second, understood and obeyed the order "Bring me an apple!"?

3 A Methodological Interlude

There are at least two approaches to the remarks we have just mentioned, which more generally correspond to two possible ways of approaching Wittgenstein's philosophical remarks as a whole. One might be tempted – and this is the first approach – to find in his remarks a conception, doctrine, or theory that offers an explanation – at least an outline of one – of what a custom or practice is, identifying the conditions or causes – whether neurophysiological, psychological, or sociological – underlying its

emergence and consolidation. The limitation of this approach is that it seems to attribute to Wittgenstein, contrary to his explicit statements,[6] a theoretical stance and purpose whose results could be compared with other opposing or rival conceptions, doctrines, or theories. Furthermore, Wittgenstein himself excludes the possibility that all his remarks on children, their training, and so on should be understood as part of, or as a contribution to, child psychology. Indeed, after asking himself whether he was doing child psychology, he replies that what he was actually doing was "making a connexion between the concept of teaching [*Lehren*] and the concept of meaning [*Bedeutung*]" (Z, § 412).[7]

The second approach – much more in line with the note from *Zettel* just quoted – consists in viewing Wittgenstein's observations on customs and training as a 'tool' in the service of the "work of clarification [*Klärungswerk*]" (CV, 16) that he takes to be the primary task of philosophy. While not ruling out – and indeed considering it entirely legitimate – that someone might find in these remarks material for constructing their own theoretical edifice, I maintain that the second approach not only better corresponds to the way Wittgenstein conceived of philosophical work, but can also 'teach' something to those who, unlike him, aim to develop theories and provide explanations. Moreover, although this aspect is not often emphasised, Wittgenstein himself does not appear to exclude the possibility that his work of clarification "*might* also give a new direction to scientific investigation" (RPP I, § 950).[8]

6 Many quotations could be given in this regard, but I will limit myself to one: "It was correct that our considerations must not be scientific ones. […] And we may not advance any kind of theory. There must not be anything hypothetical in our considerations. All *explanation* must disappear" (PI, I, § 109).

7 This remark presupposes Wittgenstein's distinction between factual investigation (such as that carried out in the field of child psychology) and conceptual investigation, which he equates with philosophical investigation (see RPP I, § 949). According to Wittgenstein, failing to understand this distinction is one of the sources of what he terms 'metaphysics': "The essential thing about metaphysics: that the difference between factual and conceptual investigations is not clear to it. A metaphysical question is always in appearance a factual one, although the problem is a conceptual one" (RPP I, § 949).

8 In the remark from which the quotation is taken, Wittgenstein presents a series of considerations aimed at clarifying the sense in which a philosophical investigation is conceptual rather than factual, explicitly referencing Goethe (see RPP I, § 949). He begins by noting that the task of "natural history" (RPP I, § 950) is to describe different plants, for example. Once all these plants have been described "in full detail", someone – inspired by what we might call 'a philosophical spirit' – might come to see "analogies which had never been seen before" (RPP I, § 950). By saying things like "'compare this part, not with this one, but rather with that'", this person "establishes a new order among these descriptions", which "*might* also give a new direction to scientific investigation" (RPP I, § 950).

4 Training vs. Explanation

As can easily be imagined, the idea of making a connection between the concept of teaching (and training) and that of meaning (see Z, § 412) is entirely absent from the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, where there is no mention of children learning or teachers teaching.[9] For Wittgenstein, questions such as how a child learns their native language, and which strategies are most effective in helping them to do so, are factual questions that – like all facts – fall within the domain of science, specifically psychology, which, as Wittgenstein famously states, "is no more akin to philosophy than is any other science" (TLP, 4.1121). In a letter to Russell dated 19 August 1919 from Cassino, Wittgenstein reiterates his position on the matter: "the kind of relation of the constituents of thought" – "which correspond to the words of Language" – "and of the pictured fact is irrelevant. It would be a matter of psychology to find it out" (WC, 98-9).

It was during the first half of the 1930s that Wittgenstein's writing – particularly *The Brown Book* – began to refer increasingly to children learning and adults teaching. One might almost say that this signals a decisive change in atmosphere compared with that of the *Tractatus*. According to some scholars, Wittgenstein's experience as a primary school teacher between 1920 and 1926 may have contributed to this shift.[10] In this regard, there is a note in *Zettel* that appears to refer directly to his time as a primary school teacher: after writing that "[a]ny explanation has its foundation in training", Wittgenstein adds in brackets that "[e]ducators[11] ought to remember this" (Z, § 419).[12] I shall not pursue this issue further here. It is enough to observe that, particularly in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein frequently evokes scenes of teaching and learning,

9 If any such references are to be found, they are hidden within certain suggestions in proposition 4.002, such as the idea that "[e]veryday language is part of the human organism and no less complicated than it" and that "[t]he tacit agreements underlying the understanding of everyday language are enormously complicated" (TLP, 4.002). However, these suggestions primarily serve to remind us that "[i]t is humanly impossible to immediately gather from it [i.e., everyday language] the logic of language" (TLP, 4.002).

10 Concerning Wittgenstein's experience as a primary school teacher, see Monk 1991, 192-233, Bartley III 1974, and Wünsch 1985.

11 In recent years, a substantial body of literature has emerged concerning Wittgenstein's views on education and their potential implications for the philosophy of education and educational sciences. For an overview, see Peters, Stickney (eds) 2017 and Peters, Stickney 2018.

12 It should not be forgotten that one of the key targets of the Austrian school reform introduced after the end of the First World War – during which Wittgenstein became a primary school teacher – was the so-called *Drillschule*, which was characterised by rigid and repetitive teaching methods. It is possible that this note in *Zettel* also contains an implicit criticism of the pedagogical ideas that underpinned the reform.

which seem to play a significant role in his philosophical work of clarification. After all, as is well known, the *Investigations* opens with a lengthy quotation from Augustine's *Confessiones* (Book I, Chapter 8), in which Augustine recounts how he learned his native language from adults.[13]

Let us now examine how Wittgenstein introduces the theme of training in the opening sections of the *Investigations*. At the start of section 5, aiming to dispel the "haze" or "fog" surrounding "the working of language" that prevents us from having a "clear vision" of it, Wittgenstein proposes that we should "study the phenomena of language in primitive kinds of use" (PI, I, § 5). Among "such primitive forms of language" (PI, I, § 5) – that is, among such language-games –[14] he includes those that a child employs when learning to talk. Following this methodological proposal, Wittgenstein immediately adds a clarification: "[h]ere [that is, when it comes to teaching a child their native language] the teaching [...] is not explaining [*kein Erklären*], but training [*ein Abrichten*]" (PI, I, § 5).[15] Why does Wittgenstein make this addition, and why is it – so I shall argue – important and far from marginal?

What should be noted first is that, in the closing remarks of section 5, Wittgenstein is still continuing his discussion of Augustine and the way in which the latter tells us how he learned his native language. In fact, if, after reading section 5, we return to the passage from the *Confessiones* with which the *Investigations* opens, we realise – perhaps not without some surprise – that the protagonist of the story Augustine tells is none other than the child Augustine himself. In this story, the adults do not appear particularly interested

13 I reproduce here, in its English version, the full passage quoted by Wittgenstein: "When grown-ups [adults] named some object and at the same time turned towards it, I perceived this, and I grasped that the thing was signified by the sound they uttered, since they meant to point *it* out. This, how ever, I gathered from their gestures, the natural language of all peoples, the language that by means of facial expression and the play of eyes, of the movements of the limbs and the tone of voice, indicates the affections of the soul when it desires, or clings to, or rejects, or recoils from, something. In this way, little by little, I learnt to understand what things the words, which I heard uttered in their respective places in various sentences, signified. And once I got my tongue around these signs, I used them to express my wishes" (PI, I, § 1, note 1).

14 See section 7, in which Wittgenstein specifies: "I will call these games", i.e., "the games by means of which children learn their native language [*Muttersprache*]", "'*language-games*' and will sometimes speak of a primitive language as a language-game" (PI, I, § 7).

15 On the importance of distinguishing between explaining and training, with particular reference to the role this plays in the opening sections of the *Investigations*, see, for example, Moi 2017, 28: "We don't teach a little child to speak by *explaining* how words are used. We *train* the child until he or she becomes adept enough to understand explanations [...]. The distinction between *training* and *explaining* is crucial. Training is constant practice; explaining is giving reasons".

in him. They speak, name objects, utter sounds, etc. Augustine, however, observes them and, in observing them, engages in various activities: he perceives, grasps, draws inferences from what he sees, etc. Eventually, once he has mastered these signs, he is able to use them – just as adults do – to express his needs and desires.

It is true that the child Augustine can only observe because, like any child who cannot yet speak, he "cannot as yet *ask* what the name is" (PI, I, § 6). Nevertheless, as Augustine recounts it, he does many things inwardly that, one might say, children at this stage do not do: he searches for and invents explanations, makes conjectures, tests them, etc. That is why, in section 32 – recalling Augustine's story for the last time – Wittgenstein comments, thereby revealing one reason for beginning the *Investigations* with the quotation from *Confessiones* (I, 8), that one might say something like this:

> Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a foreign country and did not understand the language of the country, that is, as if he already had a language, only not this one. Or again, as if the child could already *think*, only not yet speak. And "think" would here mean something like "talk to himself". (PI, I, § 32)

This Augustinian description of language learning is precisely what Wittgenstein's warning that "any explanation has its foundation in training" (Z, § 419) directly opposes.

What Wittgenstein makes explicit in section 32 is already foreshadowed in section 6, where he observes that children can be taught to use certain words and to respond in specific ways to the words of others through what he calls "ostensive teaching" (PI, I, § 6). This consists "in the teacher's pointing to the objects, directing the child's attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word" (PI, I, § 6). Here, as Wittgenstein immediately points out, he speaks of "ostensive teaching" and deliberately avoids "ostensive explanation", since it is misleading to speak of an explanation in cases where "the child cannot yet *ask* what the name is" (PI, I, § 6). If we take Augustine's account at face value, we must conclude that the child Augustine already knew perfectly well how to "*ask* what the name is" (PI, I, § 6) – even if he could only ask it, so to speak, inwardly, in a language that was not the one he was later forced to learn in order to express his needs and desires to others.

What Wittgenstein seeks to highlight – here as elsewhere – is the picture, model, or paradigm that guided Augustine in telling his story about how he learned his native language, and that continues, more or less consciously, to inform many philosophical and scientific theories of language and its acquisition. Part of Wittgenstein's philosophical work consists in weakening the hold of this picture

and the mythologies that accompany it. In particular, with reference to our present discussion, Wittgenstein aims to challenge the 'rationalist' conception of human beings and their language – one of the picture's most distinctive features. This aim also underlies his references to primitive forms of language (such as the language of the builder A and assistant B in section 2), which children – as we can readily concede – learn "from the grown-ups [adults] by being trained to its use" (BrB, 77). Above all, as we have seen, he is guided by this aim when stressing that, in such cases, we can "use the word 'trained' in a way strictly analogous" (BrB, 77) to the way in which it is used for animals.

When Wittgenstein makes this point – and it should be emphasised at once – he does not intend to advocate any form of biological or naturalistic reductionism. Rather, he suggests that animals can sometimes – and it is important to stress that 'sometimes' does not mean always – serve as a more illuminating term of comparison than, for example, philosophers engaged in reflection or scientists conducting experiments. In this sense, much of what Wittgenstein says in the above-mentioned sections of the *Investigations* can be seen as consistent with the heuristic maxim he later formulates in *On Certainty*: "I want to regard man here as an animal [*Tier*]; as a primitive creature, to whom one grants instinct, but not reasoning" (OC, § 474). That this is a heuristic maxim is clear: Wittgenstein is not asserting, in any ontologically reductionist spirit, that human beings are in reality animals. Rather, he invites us to take off – at least for a while – the rationalist spectacles through which we habitually observe human beings and their behaviour.[16] Take, for example, the confidence with which we typically bring an apple (and not, say, a corkscrew) to someone who order us to bring them one. But what kind of confidence is this? Wittgenstein tells us that he wants to conceive of it "as something animal" (OC, § 359) – that is, as something immediate, that is, not mediated by reasoning, reflection, or thought. As has been written to clarify this issue:

> Training does not presuppose understanding, but only patterns of reactions on the part of the trainee. A child will look in the direction in which one points, while a cat will look at the pointing finger. (Glock 1996, 112)

Once again, three things should be noted here. First, Wittgenstein states that he wants to regard humans as animals, not machines.

16 On this metaphor, which has a rather long history, see PI, I, § 103: "The idea is like a pair of glasses on our nose through which we see whatever we look at. It never occurs to us to take them off".

Obeying the order "Bring me an apple!" by actually bringing an apple – without reasoning, reflecting or thinking about it – does not mean doing so passively or mechanically. After all, even in the case of a horse trained to jump an obstacle, it would be odd to say that it does so passively or mechanically. Second, if someone were to ask me why I brought an apple to the person who ordered me to do so, I would not usually answer: "Because I have been trained to do so", but rather: "Because I was ordered to bring an apple". In short, saying that we have been trained to obey such an order in this way does not mean that training mediates between the order and its execution; rather, it means that we usually obey the order immediately. Between the order and its execution there is usually nothing, not even training. Third, an order, like everything else we do and say, is always given and obeyed in specific circumstances and for a variety of purposes. For example, someone might give me the order "Bring me an apple!" not because they want to eat an apple, but to test whether I am always so passive and obedient. And I might disobey that order not because I have failed to understand it or am unsure how to carry it out, but because I wish to assert my autonomy. Of course, there are also circumstances in which I might be unsure how to carry out an order as seemingly trivial as "Bring me an apple!". For example, I might ask myself – I will leave it to the reader to imagine the situation – whether bringing a glass apple would counts as obeying the order. Clearly, this is far removed from the primitive forms Wittgenstein evokes at the beginning of the *Investigations*. In the cases just considered, various kinds of reflection may intervene between the order and its possible execution, giving rise to the most diverse responses. However, as Wittgenstein observes, these "more complicated forms" (CV, 36) are refinements of those primitive forms. It is precisely because we have been trained to react in a certain way to an order that, in particular circumstances, we can later ask ourselves whether that is in fact how we should obey it. In Wittgenstein's words:

> The origin & the primitive form of the language is a reaction; only from this can the more complicated forms grow.
>
> Language – I want say – is a refinement, 'in the beginning was the deed'. (CV, 36)

There is a note in *Zettel* that may help to clarify the passage just quoted. In it, Wittgenstein distinguishes between a behaviour that is "the result of thought" and a "primitive" behaviour that functions

instead as "the prototype of a way of thinking" (Z, § 541).[17] This means that if I am able to think about whether and how I should obey an order, and to reach the conclusion that what I should do is this, it is because I first learned to obey an order – so to speak – without thinking about it.[18]

5 The Whole Story with Learning

However tempting it may be, we must be careful not to succumb to the enthusiasm of believing that training alone offers a complete solution to the problem of meaning that Wittgenstein was addressing. Focusing exclusively on training would not move us forward; on the contrary, it would set us back. Indeed, if we reduce meaning solely to training, we risk reviving the idea of meaning as something fixed, determined by a rigid process or a kind of (causal) mechanism – an idea that Wittgenstein considered too narrow and explicitly sought to overcome. As we shall soon see, although meaning depends on training and customs, it does so only in part.

Actually, what we have seen so far represents only one aspect of the clarification that Wittgenstein aimed to achieve. Two further points help to complete the picture. The first stems from the insight that while training is fundamental to learning – and therefore to the acquisition of language and meaning – it is not the whole story. Training alone cannot account for everything in either humans or animals; clearly, humans and animals cannot be trained to do just anything, nor can the same training always produce the same results in different individuals. This (or something very similar) is what Wittgenstein has in mind when, in section 441, part I of the *Investigations*, he refers not only to "a particular training, a particular education",[19] but also to our nature as the condition under which, for example, "we are predisposed to express wishes in certain circumstances" (PI, I, § 441) or to obey an order such as "Bring me an apple!". The point here is that responses to training – whether facilitative or resistant – are linked to the nature of both the species

17 The primitive behaviour or reaction to which Wittgenstein refers consists of tending to or treating "the part that hurts when someone else is suffering – and not only when we ourselves are suffering" (Z, § 540). He concludes that this reaction – for example, gently stroking the hand of a child who is holding their own hand while crying – is primitive in that it is "not the result of thought" (Z, § 541). This could be the thought that, if the child is holding their hand while crying, they must really be suffering, or the thought that, unlike in my own case, I can only tell from their behaviour whether they are really suffering.

18 For further research on the concept of the primitive and its role in Wittgenstein's philosophy, see Perissinotto 2002.

19 The nuanced distinction between training and education, which is relevant to the second point I referred to, will be touched on later.

and the individual.[20] This explains why you cannot train a magpie in the same way as a horse, or a horse in the same way as a human, nor can you expect them to learn the same things. It also explains why, even when species-specific differences are taken into account and magpies are trained as magpies, there is still no guarantee that the training will be successful or unfold as expected. This may be due to the evident differences between individuals (on which, as is well known, Darwinian theory is based), whereby, despite receiving the same training and the same order – "Bring me an apple!" – "one person reacts […] *thus*, and another *otherwise*" (PI, I, § 206): for example, one brings the apple and another eats it.[21] In short, it must be recognised that training is conditioned by both differences between different species (interspecific differences) and differences between individuals of the same species (intraspecific differences).

One might say – and indeed, several of Wittgenstein's later remarks suggest – that much as it is impossible to teach a dog to fetch a stick if, every time one is thrown, it rushes off in the opposite direction, so too it may be impossible to teach the rule of addition to a child who persistently and confidently insists that "7" is the correct answer to the question "What is 2+2?". Wittgenstein addresses this issue in sections 185-7, part I of the *Investigations*. Here, he imagines a pupil who, when asked by the teacher to continue adding 2, writes: 1000, 1004, 1008, and 1012, once they reach 1000. When the teacher objects that this is not how the series should be continued, the pupil replies as follows: "'Yes, isn't it right? I thought that was how I *had* to do it'" (PI, I, § 185). Wittgenstein concludes:

> This case would have similarities to that in which it comes naturally to a person to react to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction from fingertip to wrist, rather than from wrist to fingertip. (PI, I, § 185)

20 I believe it is useful to reiterate here the methodological, rather than theoretical, intent underlying these and other similar considerations by Wittgenstein. He makes this intent quite clear in a much-cited remark from the second part of the *Investigations*: "If concept formation can be explained by facts of nature, shouldn't we be interested, not in grammar, but rather in what is its basis in nature? — We are, indeed, also interested in the correspondence between concepts and very general facts of nature. (Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality). *But our interest is not* thereby thrown back on to these possible causes of concept formation; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history – since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes" (PI, II, § 365; italics added). For discussion of this and related remarks, see Perissinotto 2016.

21 What remains open, however, is the question of on what grounds we can say that one person has understood and obeyed, while another has not. Here, I will simply note that Wittgenstein's concern is not to answer this question, but to show that, rather than clarifying matters, it is more likely to mislead us. This elliptical observation, however, would merit further exploration in another paper.

However different the cases of the dog and the child may be, they highlight two aspects. The first is that any kind of training is based on the trainee's instinctual behaviours. Although Wittgenstein does not dwell on the topic, his use of the word 'instinct' closely parallels its use in ethology. Instinct is not merely a reaction or response to a stimulus, but rather a specific way of reacting or responding to a particular stimulus. For example, a hole in a wall is a stimulus for a mouse, which reacts or responds by entering it and making it its nest, but it is not a stimulus for an elephant. The second aspect is that within certain limits, even instinct – especially in humans – can be modulated in different ways, making training difficult or even impossible, sometimes leading the trainer to say: "I really don't know what to do!". Once again, I would like to note that Wittgenstein does not intend to develop a kind of anthropology based on instinct, but rather to emphasise that, in some respects, it can be illuminating to "regard man […] as an animal; as a primitive creature, to whom one grants instinct, but not reasoning" (OC, § 474).

As has been said – and as is typical of Wittgenstein and his method – other considerations of a different kind can be identified alongside these. Wittgenstein devotes several remarks to a complementary issue, which likewise aims to highlight that training marks the beginning, not the conclusion, of the story. This point, which I have referred to as the second point, is encapsulated by the following questions: if the basis of all learning (particularly language learning) is training, and we learn through training rather than by asking for and receiving explanations, what are the limits of training? And which aspects of linguistic use cannot be reduced to training and to the primitive, instinctual reactions on which it relies?

We can sketch an answer to the first question by noting that Wittgenstein, of course, insists on reminding us that we have learned our language through training, and that this is how children have learned their native language throughout the centuries. However, he also acknowledges that there is no guarantee that learning will continue to be successful, and indeed it makes no sense to look for something that guarantees it. The best thing is to recognise that teaching and learning one's own language are rather strange phenomena. As Wittgenstein puts it:

> What a strange phenomenon that a child can actually learn human language! That a child who knows nothing can start out and learn by a sure path this enormously complicated technique. (RPP II, § 128)

Faced with this 'wonder', which arises when, for example, one realises "how a child starts *with nothing* and one day uses negations, just as we do" (RPP II, § 128), Wittgenstein neither takes the scientific

route – as Chomsky (1966) famously did –[22] which consists in searching for a theory to explain how and why this happens, nor does he indulge – as Kripke (1984) and Cavell (1999) did, albeit for different purposes – the sceptic's fears that it may cease to happen or even that it never really happened. According to Wittgenstein, it is better, figuratively speaking, to cultivate that sense of wonder and put it fruitfully to use in his work of clarification. This is evident, for example, in the way he addresses the idea that a rule is such if, so to speak, it guides us and compels us to call a red thing 'red', to bring an apple in response to the order "Bring me an apple!", or to reply that "2 + 2 = 4". Wittgenstein does not intend to exclude the possibility that there is such a thing as what we might call 'feeling guided and compelled by the rule'. But when confronted with the question: "What is it that compels me?" (RFM, VII, § 27), he offers two alternatives. One possible answer is that what compels me is the expression of the rule, together with the way I have been educated. Wittgenstein presents this first alternative as follows: "What is it that compels me? – the expression of the rule? – Yes, once I have been educated in this way" (RFM, VII, § 27). This means that it is not the rule itself that compels me to follow it, but rather I who follow it, in the way I have learned to do. In other words, it is not the rule that applies itself, but rather I who apply it. And applying a rule is something I have been taught to do, along with many other things. Yet Wittgenstein asks: why can't I say that the rule "compels me to follow it" (RFM, VII, § 27)? His answer – which reflects the second alternative – is that, yes, you absolutely can say that, if you wish. But if you do, you must be aware that, in saying so, you are thinking of the rule "as a spell that holds us in thrall" (RFM, VII, § 27).

Let us now turn to the second question. This leads us to one of Wittgenstein's oft-repeated insights (see, for example, PI, I, § 198), namely that there exist certain (and not so infrequent) circumstances in which the rule we have been trained to follow no longer 'tells' us what to do – or even appears no longer to be a rule at all. Let us consider a simple example. I have learned to call red things 'red'. And I have learned it precisely "in so far as there is an established usage, a custom" (PI, I, § 198) into which I have been trained. Well then, if more and more people began calling a jacket 'green' when I would call it 'red', I would inevitably find myself at an impasse and would probably have to choose between several alternatives: a) "The others are mocking me"; b) "Either I or the others must have an eye disease"; c) *à la* Davidson (see, for example, Davidson 2005),

22 Following Wittgenstein, Malcolm (1995, 71) criticised Chomsky, observing that, in Chomsky's view a child's acquisition of language appears as "a highly intellectual performance".

"They call 'green' what I call 'red'," meaning "We are simply not speaking the same language"; and so on.[23] This example shows that, although we typically (often and mostly) "follow the rule *blindly*" (PI, I, § 219) – that is, without reasoning, reflection, or thought – certain circumstances may prompt what might be described as a reflective return to the rule. Such circumstances lead us to reflect on the rule we have been following – whether that means modifying or reinterpreting it, abandoning it and inventing new ones, or continuing to uphold it with conviction. According to Wittgenstein, while in most cases rule-following involves a kind of 'blindness' to the rules, it also requires the ability to recognise – through a kind of sensitivity or feeling – those cases "where we play, and make up the rules" and "even […] alter them – as we go along" (PI, I, § 83).[24] What becomes evident is that, while training might suggest – if considered in isolation – the idea of blind adherence or unreflective application, this idea is in fact combined with and complemented by the further idea, repeatedly emphasised by Wittgenstein, that the custom or usage to which training introduces us is something dynamic and never static; that is, the use of meanings and the application of rules also involve (among other things) the development of a kind of "feeling for the rules" (LC, 5).[25]

This brings us back to a point I mentioned at the very beginning of this paper. Let us revisit it by considering a few remarks from Wittgenstein's *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*. As stated earlier, learning that results from training requires a certain amount of time and is demonstrated over time. If, as Wittgenstein invites us to do, we first "[l]ook at *learning* – and [then also] the *result* of learning" (LW I, § 926), it becomes clear that "[a]n important fact […] is that we learn certain things only through long experience and not from a course in school" (LW I, § 925). This is especially evident in the field of aesthetics, where what one learns is to express judgements, to form a taste, and to see things in a particular way. Let us consider two examples here as well. The first, offered by Wittgenstein, is well known: the art expert or connoisseur. Such a person is perfectly capable of saying things like: "'This picture was

23 See also LC, 62: "If you suddenly wrote numbers down on the blackboard, and then said: 'Now, I'm going to add', and then said: '2 and 21 is 13', etc. I'd say: 'This is no blunder'. / There are cases where I'd say he's mad, or he's making fun. Then there might cases where I look for an entirely different interpretation altogether".

24 Incidentally, we might observe that Wittgenstein has already 'resolved' in advance the tension which, according to Davidson (2025, 143), exists "between the thought that what a speaker intends by what he says determines what he means and the thought that what a speaker means depends on the history of the uses to which the language has been put in the past".

25 For an in-depth discussion, I would refer to my paper Valeri 2024.

not painted by such-and-such a master'" (LW I, § 925). Note that, as Wittgenstein emphasises, this verdict is "not an aesthetic judgement, but one that can be proved by documentation" (LW I, § 925). Of course, there was training and a period for learning, during which that person "probably had to look at and compare a large number of pictures by various masters again and again", but eventually "he looked at a picture and made a judgement about it" (LW I, § 925). Wittgenstein then asks, "[h]ow did he learn it? Could someone have taught him?"; and his answer is: "Quite. – Not in the *same* way as one learns to calculate. A great deal of *experience* was necessary" (LW I, § 925).

In short, learning (and being trained) is, as Aristotle would say, said (and done) in many ways. Learning (and being trained) to calculate is not the same as learning to speak, to judge, or to shape a cup out of clay. There are cases – including the way in which we learn to say the right word at the right moment – in which, when training someone, one "sets up certain *rules*, but only a few, which are of such a kind that a person usually learns them through experience anyway", and "what is left, the most important part, is *imponderable*" (LW I, § 921). Only extended education, reinforced by experience, can lead someone to know how to do certain things well or to express judgements and evaluations appropriate to the situation. This is why we can say, in a concise formula, that training is the foundation of education, but it is not the whole of education.

Obviously, what has just been set out does not mean or imply that everyone can learn from experience, or that they can do so in the same way. Observe that, in the passages cited above, Wittgenstein seems to speak of experience in the rich sense we use when we say of a man that he is a man of experience, or that, like Ulysses, he has had many experiences. But even of experience so understood, we could ask what Wittgenstein in *On Certainty* asks of experience understood in the sense of perception or observation of things and events: "But how *does* experience *teach* us this? *We* may gather it from experience, but experience doesn't counsel us //force us// to gather anything from it" (OC, § 130). We are again confronted with the dual aspect of Wittgenstein's considerations: if experience can teach us something, it does not follow that we can always – or in the same way – learn from it.

Let us now consider a second example, not from Wittgenstein himself, but taken from a commentary on Wittgenstein (Stickney 2020). Here we are presented with the case of a teacher – let us suppose it is an art lesson – who invites their pupils, when faced with a picture of a tree, to see the depicted tree differently; for example – this is my example – to see the tree's crown as the hair of a face. Indeed, "[i]f the teacher commands, 'Now see the tree like *this*', there is no guarantee that pupils see the alternate aspect to

which the teacher points" (Stickney 2020, 1293). This is because, we might say, seeing the tree's crown as hair "is unlike putting on new glasses or playing dress-up", that is, "[i]t is not simply a matter of attaching new pictures to the corresponding thing, but of gradually coming, through training and enculturation [what Wittgenstein calls 'education'], to react differently while seeing" (Stickney 2020, 1293).

This final example resonates with many of the points I have sought to illustrate in this paper. But to understand it properly, it must also be connected to what Wittgenstein says, for example, in the following note from *Zettel*, which is also taken up in the *Investigations*: "I want to say: an education quite different from ours might also be the foundation of quite different concepts" (Z, § 387; see PI, II, § 366). This shows that becoming who we are requires a delicate balance – by no means guaranteed – between the education we receive and how we respond to it.

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