"DON'T THINK, BUT OBSERVE:"
WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WORK OF LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN FOR SOLUTION-FOCUSED BRIEF THERAPY?

By Steve de Shazer

Understandably, I have often been asked about my interest in and frequent citation of Wittgenstein's work in both my writing and my training seminars. Since I maintain that SFBT is a practice or activity that is without an underlying (grand) theory, it seems at least strange if not contradictory to refer over and over to a philosopher's work. This mistakenly leads some readers and seminar participants to the idea that Wittgenstein's work might actually provide the (missing) theory. However, as they quickly discover, if they are looking for a philosophical system or theory, reading Wittgenstein is at least disconcerting and confusing since he does not provide such a system or theory. Rather, his work is "non-systematic, rambling, digressive, discontinuous, interrupted thematically and marked by rapid transitions from one subject to another" (Stroll, p. 93). This means that the reader has to work hard to follow the criss-crossing of the various threads of the argument. Wittgenstein deliberately uses this approach in very subversive and strategic ways designed to make the reader look again and thus think in new and different ways.

It might not be overstating things to call Wittgenstein the greatest philosopher of the twentieth century. (His work is certainly different from that of any other philosopher.) Many people inside and outside the field of philosophy have given him the label of "genius," starting with Bertrand Russell. For instance Stroll (2002), who calls him "the greatest modern philosopher," says that

> the later Wittgenstein stands at the end and outside of that [philosophical] tradition and can be thought of as turning it on its head. The tradition sees the ordinary person as confused and in need of philosophical therapy. Socrates is the paradigmatic philosopher on this view. He walked around Athens questioning his fellow citizens and quickly exposed the shallowness and inconsistencies of the thinking about fundamental issues. For Wittgenstein the emphasis is in the other direction. It is philosophers like Socrates and his successors who "tend to cast up a dust and then complain they cannot see" and who need help (p. 5).

Philosophy, from its very start over 2000 years ago has focused on the perplexity and complexity of the individual, seeking insight into and understanding of the individual person and his or her inner processes and states. Philosophers sought the essence of the thing — "thought," "knowledge," "being," "object," "time," "I," "name," etc. Psychology, a relatively recent offshoot of philosophy, has continued this focus on the individual's mind, emotions, and behavior. Psychology, and its "cousin" psychiatry, has worked to understand what inside the troubled individual has gone wrong - diagnosis - and how to fix it. Wittgenstein, talking about classifications (like diagnosis) in general, remarked that:

> The classifications made by philosophers and psychologists are like those that someone would give who tried to classify clouds by their shape (PR #154).

Wittgenstein looked at traditional philosophy's project in quite a different way:

> When philosophers use a word — "knowledge," "being," "object," "I," "proposition," "name" — and try to grasp the essence of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language-game which is its original home?
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> What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use (PI #116).

For Wittgenstein, "everyday use" is the bedrock of his activity, his practice as a philosopher. For instance, he offers this approach to a traditional, philosophical puzzle:

> Compare *knowing* and *saying*:
> how many feet high Mont Blanc is —
> how the word "game" is used —
> how a clarinet sounds.
> If you are surprised that one can know something and not be able to say it, you are perhaps thinking of a case like the first. Certainly not of one like the third (PI #78).

Clearly, the various uses of the words "knowing" and "saying" are striking and obvious. The difficulty arises when we start to think that words carry their meaning around with them rather than seeing that meaning arises out of use. That is, knowing how a clarinet sounds and knowing the height of Mont Blanc are two very different uses of the word "knowing." And saying what you know in each case is a very different kind of activity. There is nothing mysterious here. We were all trained to use these words and we would not expect ourselves or anyone else to be able to say how a clarinet sounds. The mystery developed because philosophers traditionally wanted to find the essence of "knowing" and "saying" and therefore became confused when the words were removed from the contexts in which they normally are used.

In the course of his work, Wittgenstein seems to have had various targets in mind: "nearly all the major problems of traditional philosophy - change, universals, abstract ideas, skepticism, meaning, reference, and mind - derive from the thought of Plato and Descartes" (Stroll, p. 105) as well as Kant and Wittgenstein's own early work. As Williams (2002) puts it:

For Descartes, both immediacy and intentionality are explained in terms of the special infallible knowledge that the thinker has of the contents of his own mind. This epistemological mark of the mental privileges the subjective over the public and/or social as the starting place for language, belief, and knowledge (Williams, p. 2).

This individualistic point of view, with the individual having a special, infallible knowledge of the contents of his or her own mind, is essential to traditional psychology and psychiatry. Furthermore,

> Wittgenstein is fundamentally opposed to the picture of mind according to which experience or knowledge is some kind of amalgam of given sensory data and active mental construction and operation. Wittgenstein repudiates the metaphysics of both a Cartesian and a Kantian variety. Grammar, rules, concepts are not the a priori metaphysical or epistemological conditions for the possibility of experience, judgment, and action. Grammatical propositions, rules, and concepts can be abstracted from our ongoing practices, from our language games, but they do not ground those games (Williams, pp. 3-4).

What Wittgenstein calls "language-games" can be simply described as slices of everyday life, the home base of words and concepts. He describes language games "in three ways: As a methodological tool in examining philosophical theories, as akin to the way in which children learn [training], and as an explanatory device describing language use in relation to other forms of acting" (Williams, p. 220). These are the everyday practices and activities in which words are used which provide words with their meanings. Wittgenstein lists several as examples within his definition of the term:

The term "language-game" is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of a language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

> Giving orders, and obeying them —
> Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements —
> Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) —
> Reporting an event —
> Speculating about an event —
> Forming and testing an hypothesis —
> Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams —
> Making up a story; and reading it —
> Play-acting —
> Singing catches —
> Guessing riddles —
> Making a joke; telling it —
> Solving a problem in practical arithmetic —
> Translating from one language to another —
> Asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying
> (PI #23).

As Wittgenstein points out over and over, the everyday use of words is a social, interactional, activity[1].

For most of the 20th century the concepts of traditional psycho-therapy were, and continue to be, firmly within the traditional philosophical framework. For instance, emotions were seen as something inside the individual. Sometimes these emotions were seen as triggering, perhaps even causing, an individual's behavior. (Certainly all of us at times use our emotions as a providing a reason for doing what we did; this is a normal way of talking.) Thus the psycho-therapeutic emphasis on the individual's controlling or managing his or her emotions.

Such mental-process accounts draw on certain misconceived propositions, such as sensations are private, acts of imagination are voluntary, people act on their intentions and beliefs, and so on. The propositions are misconceived, according to Wittgenstein, because they are taken as empirical claims describing interior states and causes of behavior. In fact, their status as grammatical propositions reveals them to be norms of our psychological language games. They are propositions like "The bishop in a game of chess moves diagonally." This proposition expresses a rule of the game, not an empirical claim about how bishop-shaped figurines move in the world.

Sometimes they roll off the table (Williams, p. 10).

Wittgenstein sees emotions in a very different way. For instance, he would point to the context in which an individual experience the emotion. He would remind us that in our ordinary use of these words, "anger," "fear," "anxiety," "better," "depressed," etc. there are other people involved and that whatever happened both before and after have something to do with the emotion we felt. That is, the emotion, "anger," "better," "depressed," etc., cannot be understood when it is cut off from the context which is its home; doing so makes the emotion into something mysterious and separate from everyday life.

Of course, as Wittgenstein would point out, this is something we already know but the traditional world-view (inevitably based in large part on traditional philosophy and psychology) confuses us and gives us the urge to want to dig deeper and see what lies behind and beneath: to understand the essence of "better" or "anger." We automatically forget the context of everyday life and are puzzled. Thus Wittgenstein saw his job — at least in part — as providing us with reminders of what we already know.

For Wittgenstein, any and all inner-processes and states, such as feeling angry, feeling better, thinking, etc. are connected to and — at least in part — defined by some outside context.

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

Sentences in the third person of the present: information. In the first person present: expression.

The first person of the present akin to an expression (Z #472). That is, if an individual says "I feel depressed" this is an expression of his emotional or feeling state and is similar to an exclamation such as "ouch." It is not an empirical statement. It is not as if he or she were reporting on his own observation of himself. It is not a statement of knowledge. Since the first person present is not a report about something he knows about himself but is just an expression, he cannot be wrong about it. Of course, since he cannot be wrong, he also cannot be right. It is just an exclamation.

However, when we say "He is depressed" we are reporting on our observations — which again points to the context: we see him behaving in ways similar to how we saw other people behave who said they were depressed. Of course we could be wrong and only he can confirm or disconfirm our observation.

Wittgenstein's way of describing things reminds us to observe what is going on and reminds us to look at everyday life — including language as it is actually used — as the home of our concepts and descriptions. It is these descriptions of everyday life that replace the explanations and theories of traditional philosophy and psychology.

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[1] **"Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting, are as much a part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing" (PI #25).**

References

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