Wittgenstein, Reflexivity and the Social Construction of Reality

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Despite of the complex and changing nature of Wittgenstein's influence on twentieth century philosophy (Hacker 1996), a place even for a minority of contemporary Wittgensteinian scholars seems assured. While Wittgenstein read and criticised many of the main figures in the psychology of his time, including William James, Wolfgang Köhler and Sigmund Freud, Wittgenstein's position in psychology is rather more tenuous and summarized in simplistic narratives (e.g., Hergenhahn 2008). For example, even Bem and Looren de Jong's (2006) nuanced account of central positions in theoretical psychology attributes "Wittgenstein's major force in undermining positivism" to his "change of mind, turning away from his earlier positivist ideas towards a contrasting account of language and meaning" (p. 65). Furthermore, Wittgenstein's philosophical threat to the "positivist ideal of observation language as the (demarcation) criterion for legitimate science" is described as inspiring hermeneutics and social constructionism. Emphasising the latter approach, they note that "it is hardly surprising that some philosophers developed a relativistic viewpoint out of this. For example, the social psychologist Kenneth Gergen interprets this idea that all seeming assessments of facts are forms of social exchange" (p. 65).

A similar theme (and focus on Gergen) is developed in much more detail by Fiona Hibberd (2005). Hibberd's explicit target is social construction, a position which "emphasises the historicity, the context-dependence, and the socio-linguistically constituted character of all matters involving human activity" (p. viii). Using a *picture* of levels which is internal to much of the discourse about psychology and its problems, Hibberd distinguishes between two levels of Wittgenstein-inspired social constructionism. At what could be called the lower, applied *level* of psychology, she describes social constructionism as the view that "the psychological processes of human beings are, it is said, essentially social, and are acquired through the public practice of conversation" (p. viii). Although the issue cannot be addressed here in detail, there are good reasons to think that social constructionism presents a distorted form of the Private Language Argument and mispresents the impact of the PLA on the human sciences (e.g., to challenge accounts of subjectivity or privacy in any contemporary position which resemble those of Augustine or Descartes). Acknowledging the diversity of social constructionist or discursive psychology writings, Hibberd notes that "some versions of constructionism extend this emphasis to the conceptual and methodological practices of psychologists, and to the epistemological and semantic assumptions which ground these practices; to the "meta-issues" of the discipline" (p. viii).

But does Wittgenstein advocate the social construction of external and internal reality? And would Wittgenstein support the notion of his later work as providing the kind of meta-theory that might either stand-above (as an abstract or second-order reflection) psychology and its practices or, in a nod to the enduring appeal of foundationalism, the lower tier or metatheoretical level "consists of a network of philosophical assumptions, largely about semantics, upon which the social constructionist theories of the upper level may depend" (p. ix)?

Answers to these questions can be provided with support from Wittgenstein's writings and a measure of critical philosophical exegesis. Focusing on the first issue of whether Wittgenstein's philosophy functions as or supports social constructionist meta-theory, it is useful to examine the implications of Wittgenstein's (1953) remarks about the potential for an "entirely analogous" treatment of the problems of mathematics to those of psychology. Reconsidering the detail of these neglected remarks contrasts with the enduring legacy of logical positivist comparisons of psychology with natural sciences such as physics. While Wittgenstein denied that metamathematics has the philosophical significance that some claim, it seems reasonable to think that his alternative metamathematical "game analogy" remarks may usefully inform our understanding of the limits of reflexive work in psychology.

Wittgenstein (1956) was highly critical of problems with accounts of the foundations of mathematics: "The *mathematical* problems of what is called foundations are no more the foundation of mathematics for us than the painted rock is the support of a painted tower" (V, §13)". It is reasonable to think that he did not wish to establish or deny contemporary forms of metapsychology or, perhaps better, metatheorizing. For example, Gergen's descriptions of the different methods that metapsychology employs to highlight what cannot be investigated by the use of the discipline's methods seems reasonable. But Wittgenstein would undoubtedly be critical of attempts to claim that the "meta" in "metapsychology" implies that this work provides the foundations for psychological practices. For example, problems identified in a metapsychological position would not undermine the actual practices of psychology. Also while metapsychology could be a complicated combination of theory and Wittgensteinian philosophy, it is only "about" psychology in the sense that it involves different methods, concepts and skills to describe psychology and it is not "below" the discipline in a foundationalist sense.

One useful task here is to extend to psychology the game analogy that Wittgenstein used to understand mathematics (V, §12) and metamathematics. The analogy serves as a simplified "object of comparison" (Wittgenstein 1953) and does not play a foundational role because, for example, the discovery of non-analogous aspects of the game account do not lead the practices of psychology to be undermined. The point of the game analogy of psychology is to clarify the relations between the tasks, skills and resources of philosophers and those of reflective psychologists. The game analogy is, therefore, not a metapsychological theory that is being used to set up a new game for psychology. In fact, the irony of the game analogy is that it is a means of showing the limits of Wittgenstein's philosophical remarks to psychology. What the game view highlights, according to Monk (1990), is that "you cannot gain a fundamental understanding of mathematics by waiting for a theory" (p. 307). This is simply because "the understanding of one game cannot depend upon the construction of another" (p. 307).

A further comparison between mathematics and psychology further undermines the strong links between Wittgenstein's later philosophy and social constructionism. In a point which is directly analogous to arguments in psy-

chology about the objectivity of psychological phenomena in reality (i.e., independent of the languages and theoretical terms used to described or demarcate those phenomena; Greenwood 1992), Wittgenstein (1953) discussed whether it makes sense to say that mathematical truth is "independent of whether human beings know it or not!" (p. 226). The relevance of Wittgenstein's analysis is obvious when we compare it to the possibility that "psychological truth is independent of whether human beings talk about it or not" and examine Greenwood's (1992) view that theoretical descriptions of psychological reality are "linguistically objective". Greenwood's argument is against social constructionists such as Potter (1992) who deny linguistic objectivity and argue that "the central trope of realism . . . is the constructed distinction between 'the phenomenon' and 'the description'" (p. 132).

In Wittgenstein's treatment of this issue, he quickly shifts the discussion away from confronting the misleading and useless *picture* of an extra-linguistic objective reality. Instead, he imagines the contexts in which metamathematicians argue about the following propositions: "human beings believe that twice two is four" and "twice two is four". Clearly in the context of the debate about the social construction of reality the proposition could be changed to "human beings say with conviction that twice two is four". And to make it more relevant we could change this example to explore the "kind of certainty" involved in a language game where an individual may ask: "Am I less certain that this man is in pain than that twice two is four?" (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 224; i.e., the important reminder that such comparisons are not intended to define different kinds of certainty so much as to reveal similarities and differences where "The kind of certainty is the kind of language-game" (p. 224).

What does Wittgenstein have to say in an analysis that shifts from one about "knowledge of an independent reality" to "human belief in a particular proposition such as that a particular man is in pain"? Wittgenstein's (1953) reply to such metapsychological picture painting is to state that it perhaps means "human beings have *arrived* at the mathematical proposition" (p. 226). This example alone looks very different to what some of the more radical and incoherent social constructionists have been inspired by Wittgenstein to say about the nature of psychology and psychological theories. The main point here is that Wittgenstein writes about such propositions and their meaning without ever suggesting he would endorse a view that they are "social constructions". Moveover, there is no evidence here that Wittgenstein's position in this particular example is similar to a central belief that Hibberd attributes to social constructionists that "the theories and knowledge we have today could be different and, more radically, there is no reason why our current conceptions of theory and knowledge cannot be transformed" (p. 3).

There is no relativist openness to the possibility, which might seem real to realists in this instance, that changes in our "language system" (Gergen and Gergen 1991) might occur in such a way that a prior objective psychological phenomenon no longer seemed to exist in the present. Perhaps a good example with psychology would be an argument based on research that particular individuals who appear to be in pain are in fact "only exhibiting writhing behavior". The point from Wittgenstein is that if such a change occurred and our equivalent of "twice two is five" was part of "a system of internally related propositions, it would be a nonsense to insist it would nevertheless still be four, since we would be talking about a different calculus or technique" (Baker and Hacker 1985, p. 293). In other words, one might want to claim - from the perspective of the old calculus or game – that "twice two really still is four" and describe "twice two is five" as odd without claiming that the latter proposition was "less objective" or "wrong" (i.e., possible responses to the question "what would it mean to say 'Even though everybody believed that twice two was five it would still be four'?" (Wittgenstein 1953, p. 226).

Such detailed considerations of Wittgenstein's influence which invite new comparisons for psychology that are not acknowledged nor identified by Hibberd and other critics of Wittgenstein's influence on psychology. Instead, her target is claims such as Gergen's "that language acquires meaning through its use in socio-linguistic practices", a claim she says "results from the influence on constructionist thinking of Wittgenstein's *post-Tractatus* view that the meaning of a word is its use" (p. 133). Untangling her analysis in which Wittgenstein's influence on Shlick and Gergen leads to the revelation that many social constructionists are, metatheoretically, logical positivists, cannot be examined in in the limited space and time available here. Interestingly, the fact that Hibberd cannot attribute a social constructionist metatheory to leaders in the area such as John Shotter and Jonathan Potter may indicate that they have worked through some of those issues to the point that they are less threatened by criticisms of self-referential inconsistency at psychology's meta-level (or in the foundations). Although the treatment of social constructionism here is necessarily brief, the failure of both social constructionists and realists such as Hibberd to address the details of all of Wittgenstein's philosophy provides some evidence that both approaches contain ideas and arguments that are open to Wittgensteinian criticism.

Similarly, the possibility of other non-constructionist Wittgensteinian projects relevant to psychology is ignored by both sides. For example, Bennett and Hacker's (2003) *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* is a clear indication that Wittgensteinian-inspired work could engage empirical and applied psychologists. This work can also be conducted without the confusion of thinking that philosophers are "doing psychological theorizing" or proposing to replace specific forms of experimentation and investigation in psychology with philosophical description. Although such confusions persist about the differences between philosophy and psychology (despite occasionally similar content), the failure of both sides to engage with the detail and breadth of Wittgenstein's conceptual investigations invites a sociohistorical analysis of the sort that Bourdieu (2004) identified as the need for a *science of science.* That is, while Wittgenstein continues to inspire the philosophical working through of issues that appear as ongoing conceptual confusions in the metatheoretical debates between social constructionists *and* realists, *pace* Wittgenstein "it is not sufficient to show or even to demonstrate that a problem is a false problem in order to have done with it" (p. 7).

Conclusion

Contemporary theoretical and empirical psychology continues to provide philosophers with rich material to explore and critique. Psychologists, in contrast, continue to seek support for their existing applied and conceptual work even though most are not reflexive to the degree that they engage actively with philosophers such as Wittgenstein. But regardless of the degree to which Wittgenstein's status as a philosopher is of interest to people in the human sciences, history textbooks reflect that Wittgenstein inspired work on the social construction of external and internal reality which positivists, realists or the increasingly unreflective masses in psychology must take seriously. Hibberd

was presented as one example of an increasingly common story in psychology in which the influence of Wittgenstein's later work is seen as encouraging an indefensible and incoherent relativism. In other words, the virtue of self-critical reflection on the limits of psychological knowledge is revealed as self-referentially inconsistent metatheory. The twist in Hibberd's realist tail is her analysis that most social constructionists actually support a framework that has much in common with logical positivism. In contrast, the twist in my criticism of Hibberd's dismissal of Wittgenstein through being the main inspiration for social constructionist metatheory is that many social constructionists are equally susceptible to Wittgensteinian criticism.[*]

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[*] Writing of this chapter was supported by a fellowship from the Gerda Henkel Foundation.