

Learning to Speak

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Rush Rhees's *Wittgenstein and the Possibility of Discourse* constitutes both an extension and a critique of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. The theme of the book is the question that Rhees argues was central to Wittgenstein throughout his career: what it means to say something. While working through this problem, Rhees argues that the *Investigations* picture of acquiring language through training is misleading. To my knowledge, this discussion has so far received no serious attention from Wittgenstein scholars. In this paper I shall bring together Rhees's various remarks into a coherent critique in an effort to make clear its importance.

The concept of "training" is central to the conception of language-acquisition found in Wittgenstein's middle and later philosophy. In the *Brown Book*, Wittgenstein writes that the training of a child to speak is comparable to training an animal. He asks us to "imagine a society" in which "the only system of language" involves requesting and delivering building materials (77). On the question of language-acquisition, Wittgenstein writes:

The child learns this language from the grown-ups by being trained to its use. I am using the word "trained" in a way strictly analogous to that in which we talk of an animal being trained to do certain things. It is done by means of example, reward, punishment, and suchlike (77).

Wittgenstein does not say that an animal could learn language, but that the child learns language in a way that is "strictly analogous" to the way that an animal is trained. We gain insight into human language-acquisition by reflecting on the system of reward and punishment used to modify animal behavior.

Rhees criticizes the *Brown Book* view. First, animal training does not seem analogous to human language-acquisition, for an animal cannot say anything. For example, we can train a "very intelligent parrot," but unlike a child, it will never be able to do anything other than imitate sounds that it has heard. Rhees's point "is that if [the language learner] can speak he has got something tell you or ask you" (187). Not only is an animal unable to say something, but there is a sense in which the animal does not understand commands, either. Rhees imagines a ploughman training a horse to respond to orders. The horse may stop when its master says "whoa" and go when he says "gee-up," but the horse does not know what "going" or "stopping" mean. Why not? Because "to know that, he would have to be able to use the language himself" (132). For example, the horse should know what its master is talking about even when he is not shouting orders, know what an order is even when not being directed to the horse, and distinguish going from stopping in the case of other horses (132-3). Furthermore, if a child is trained to speak, then it can train others when it grows up just as it was trained. If a person trains an animal, however, then the animal cannot grow up to train other animals. The difference between a trained animal and a child who can say something is so great as to render the analogy unhelpful.

Second, Wittgenstein's analogy suggests that learning to speak is something like learning a highly complicated form of animal behavior. The difference between human beings

and animals cannot be accounted for in a sublimed concept of behavioral complexity. For example, Rhees discusses the importance of "and so on" for learning rules, and says that if we make it central for an account of learning to speak then "[i]t is not even like *Abrichtung*, in the sense that when it is learning to ask questions and answer them, you cannot be brought to this by being trained to it, as a dog might be trained to obey orders or do complicated tricks" (242). The point is that if speaking were a complex animal behavior, then saying or asking something would become a matter of "complicated tricks," which would raise the question why dogs could *not* learn to do it. Is it because they are not intelligent enough? The difference shows in the asymmetry between human and animal ways of living, in the fact that speech is internal to human society but not to associations of animals. It is within the context of a community of speakers that the concept "behavior" has its sense. Speech is not added to behavior; rather, what we mean by behavior is shown in our speech. Because the animal way of living does not involve speaking, it does not make sense to train an individual animal to do it.

Unlike in the *Brown Book*, one of Wittgenstein's principal goals in the *Investigations* is to reveal the temptations and inadequacy of the Augustinian picture of language. One aspect of this picture is thinking that learning language presupposes understanding an explanation of words given within language.¹ In contrast, Wittgenstein depicts language-acquisition as training in the use of expressions. The explicit comparison between animal and human training found in the *Brown Book* is now absent, which is not to say that it does not subtly inform Wittgenstein's view. Speaking of the examples in § 1, Wittgenstein writes: "A child uses such primitive forms of language when it learns to talk. Here the teaching of language is not explanation, but training" (§ 5). An important aspect of this training is the ostensive teaching of words (§ 6). Wittgenstein goes on to give examples of being trained to ask what something is called (§ 27), read a table in response to a command (§ 86), manipulate equations (§ 189), react to signposts (§ 198), and generally follow rules and obey orders (§ 206). Rhees writes:

We bring in the idea of *Abrichtung* (training) in order to show how it is possible to teach people to understand what is said: without explaining what it means: in order to get over the difficulty that we cannot teach them the meanings of words by explaining the meanings of words: or teach them how to use words, by explaining to them how words are used (51).

It is also important to show, as Wittgenstein does, that learning language involves learning rules. We learn the rules when we learn the expressions. Rhees writes:

If you ask what we learn when we learn the language, the easiest answer seems to be, "the rules"; just as that seems to be the easiest answer when you ask what we learn when we learn the meaning of a word (241).

The idea of the rules brings out the importance of "and so on," of knowing how to go on, as well as the notion of

¹ For a recent example of a philosopher who falls into this very confusion, refer to my *Anonymous Sceptics*, p. 99.

correct and incorrect. For Rhees, the problem comes when training and “learning the rules” dominates an account of learning language. But why should it not dominate the account, and if it should not dominate, then what should we emphasize in its place?

First, Rhees argues that learning to speak is not learning the meanings of expressions, nor is it learning the expressions themselves. The problem is that “a creature might learn to react correctly to a number of words without ever learning to speak with people” (51). It then looks as if an animal could learn to do it. The notion of “reacting correctly” is a way to get around the problem that learning the meaning of a word seems to be a more advanced type of language-acquisition. Rhees writes: “What is it you teach him when you teach him the meaning of the word ‘pain’?” is not like ‘What is it you teach him when you teach him to speak?’” (64). It seems that learning to speak could not be learning the meanings of expressions, as if it were like learning an additional language, so it must be something else: learning the use of expressions. The problem is that teaching the use of expressions would only be helpful to someone who could speak already (50, 62). In other words, learning expressions is a higher order of language-acquisition: a child can understand an explanation of expressions only if she can already use some expressions, but a child can only be taught expressions – in the sense that she can learn from an adult what to do with them or how to use them – if she can already say something and understand what is said.

In Rhees’s view, Wittgenstein did not want to say that when we teaching someone to speak “we teach him the *meanings* of various expressions,” but at the same time “he still clung to the idea that we teach him particular expressions” (62). Certainly, it is confused to say that teaching someone to speak is like teaching them a *particular* skill analogous to learning to use a particular expression (65). Rhees assumes the role of interlocutor:

What is the objection to saying that the learning of these various expressions is learning to speak? There is not any single thing which is learning to speak, comparable to learning the use of any of these expressions. But knowing the use of various such expressions – being able to use them on the occasions in which they arise in connection with other people – that is speaking (74).

The problem with the view that speaking is “knowing the use of various such expressions” is that “if [someone] can speak, he can go on to say and ask other things” (74). What can Rhees mean here? Suppose that we compare expressions to tools. I may give a child a box full of tools and show him how to use them, but we cannot infer from this fact that he will learn how to use tools that are not in the box. Rhees is pointing to the fact that learning to speak involves learning new expressions and saying new things. The view of language-acquisition as learning the use of expressions makes it difficult to see how the child can go on in this way.

A second problem with training is that it construes learning to speak as a systematic activity. The model is a classroom exercise, e.g., teaching a child the names of objects (191). The teacher writes or says something, the pupil imitates her, and then the pupil is able to continue on his own. But does it make sense to suggest that children learn to speak in this way? Rhees writes: “Learning to speak is not learning ‘how people do it’: as though one might be guided through the motions of a drill until one was able to go on with it alone” (70). How could a conversation, for example, be something that a child could go on

with alone? We may answer that a child could be drilled in how to talk with people. In a discussion of “the difference between a jumble of meaningful sentences and a sensible discourse,” Rhees says that the difference is

something that [the child] learns, although it is not something you can teach him by any sort of drill, as you might teach him the names of objects. I think he gets it chiefly from the way in which the members of his family speak to him and answer him. In this way he gets an idea of how remarks may be connected, and of how what people say to one another makes sense (191).

Why not teach a child “how to carry on a conversation”? It is absurd to imagine teaching a child a *specific* conversation, for example, teaching a child a particular set of responses about the weather. “I will say that it is raining outside, and you will respond that you want to go outside anyway, and then tomorrow we will have this conversation.” If we cannot train a child to carry on a particular conversation, however, then perhaps can we train a child to understand what a conversation about the weather is, what a conversation about chores is, etc. On this suggestion, we can train the child how to conduct various types of conversations. This view runs into the problem of logical reversal: we can train a child in what it makes sense to say in a given type of conversation only if the child already knows what a conversation of this sort is.² For example, we could not teach a child how to conduct a conversation about the weather unless a child already knew what it was to *have* a conversation about the weather; but if the child knows this, then what would we teach him? We can say more generally that it is not drills and exercises that make speech possible, but speech that makes drills and exercises possible.

Third, the idea of training suggests that we learn to speak through imitation. For example, a child hears her brother asking “Is dinner ready?” and then asks this question herself. She hears her brother say “Yes” when asked whether he is hungry, and so learns to say “Yes” when asked the same question. Could we learn to speak by imitating what is said by others? Rhees writes:

[I]s there something misleading in the suggestion that learning to ask questions and to answer them is something like learning how the game is played? For if it were like this then you ought to be able to show a person how to ask questions and to answer them. Can I show you what you have to learn? I do not deny that imitation does play a role; that if the child did not watch and listen to other people speaking and asking questions, he would never have learned to do that himself. All the same, there is a difference between his imitating the questions which they are asking, and his asking a question himself when he really wants to know something (243).

His point is that it must make sense to ask a child in certain circumstances, “Do you really mean that or are you just imitating what your brother said?” An imitated question is logically parasitic on a genuine question, and it is the genuine question that the child must learn to make as he learns to speak. Rhees writes: “If someone learns to speak, he does not just learn to make sentences and utter them, nor to react to orders either. He learns to say something” (49). Hence, it is not as if the child can observe

² The interlocutor does suggest at one point that we could describe different sorts of conversations and say of one who has learned to speak that “he has learned to do that sort of thing” (64). Rhees says that this remark is all right so long as we do not think of it as going through the motions, i.e., learning to respond in appropriate ways. “The difference between going through the motions and really speaking is like the difference between going through the motions and really suffering” (64).

the adults speaking, and then say the same things that they do and in this way be speaking himself. It is not like picking up the rules of a game by watching what the players do and then imitating them. Rhees writes: "The child may learn to play 'Pat-a-cake, pat-a-cake, baker's man' with its hands, and so forth, joining in with the adults; but learning to speak with them is something different from that" (177).

Fourth, the notion of training implies a distinction between the training period and subsequent time when the pupil is able to use his training. For example, a worker is trained to run a metal working machine, and then goes on to use the machine to fabricate parts after the training is complete. Against this view of language-acquisition, Rhees writes:

Learning the language is not what enables you to speak. ('Before he can speak he must learn the language.')(47)

Rhees's point is that an internal relation exists between learning to speak and speaking, whereas an external relation exists between being trained to run a machine and making something with it. In the latter case, we can imagine that the worker receives the training, i.e., learns to use the machine, but never gets the chance to fabricate parts with it: perhaps he is assigned to a different job. We could imagine him lamenting, "Why did you train me if you did not want me to *make* anything?" In contrast, it would not make sense to say that a child learned to speak, but never got the chance to say anything. The child could not say, "Why did you train me to speak if you did not want me to say anything?" The child learns to speak as it speaks. The criteria for a child's having learned to speak is telling someone something, asking a question, replying to a question, and so forth.

Fifth, the notion of training implies that we could learn to understand what is said, but renders it mysterious how misunderstandings are possible. Rhees remarks that different "ways of speaking" go with different practices such as law or construction. When we learn how to talk in these contexts, then

we learn what it makes sense to say. And the sense in which I may misunderstand what you say – not just fail to understand it. [A person] learns to speak when he is able to do *this*. And this is not like learning a technique.

Wittgenstein seems to think you could learn to *understand* by *Abrichtung*, and understand in a way that does not yet allow for misunderstanding. In that case, I do not think it is understanding what is said (77).

Assume the example of a child's misunderstanding. A child goes trick-or-treating at Halloween and is greeted at the door by an adult holding a plastic pumpkin filled with candy. The adult says "Here is your treat," and the child grabs the handle and tries to pull the whole container away rather than an individual candy. The child did not completely fail to understand what was said in the way that it would had the adult asked for the child's interpretation of the *Tractatus*; rather, the adult's remark could be understood in more than one way, and the child took it the wrong way. Rhees's point is that learning to understand allows for misunderstanding a particular remark, but training in a technique does not allow for misunderstanding how it is applied – the pupil either masters the technique or not. Of course, we may be trained to do something, and can say that we understand what we have been trained to do; but it is nonsense to say that we have been trained to understand speech, since understanding speech involves understanding, misunderstanding, and half-understanding what is said. Could we be *trained* to half-understand what is said?

It is impossible in this brief space to do justice to the depth and subtlety of Rhees's critique, for to do so I would have to set his remarks within the broader context of his criticisms of Wittgenstein's analogies of games and institutions. Nevertheless, I hope to have given an accurate account of Rhees's discussion, and made clear why I think that it is important.

Literature

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