

Wittgenstein's Antifoundationalism: a response to Cristiane Maria Cornelia Gottschalk

O Antifundacionalismo de Wittgenstein: uma resposta à Cristiane Maria Cornelia Gottschalk

Book review: Peters, Michael. (2020). *Wittgenstein, Education and the Problem of Rationality*. Singapore: Springer Nature.

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I am beholden to Cristiane Maria Cornelia Gottschalk for her critical reading of my published PhD thesis which has been carried out with the best of intentions to illuminate between us some disputed theses regarding the later Wittgenstein in relation to what I call the problem of rationality. One is always indebted to those who take one's work seriously and engaged in serious dispute over readings and arguments. Gottschalk advances three aspects for commentary and disagreement: (i) the appropriation of Wittgenstein's philosophy by analytic philosophers of education; (ii) the status of Wittgenstein's spelling dictionary; and (iii) Wittgenstein's antifoundationalism. I think I can clear up the confusion around the first two points to focus on the third. My aim in the thesis was to contest the interpretation of analytic philosophers of education, especially those of the London School, who derived their legitimacy by interpreting Wittgenstein as providing foundations for conceptual analysis as a method and thus, also seemingly advanced an interpretation of Wittgenstein at odds with others such as Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin's *Wittgenstein's Vienna*, and Richard Rorty (1980) *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. My argument here is only that the reading by analytic philosophers of education of education like R.S. Peters was wrong-headed by insisting on the necessary and sufficient conditions for the use of educational concepts, leading us away from the view developed in *Philosophical Investigations*. I think Cristiane and I are on the same page here. The second point on Wittgenstein spelling dictionary can also be cleared up quickly: when I mentioned that Wittgenstein published only two works during his life, I was talking about works in philosophy. Wittgenstein's dictionary is not a philosophical work even though as Gottschalk points out it has philosophical and biographical interest I agree with biographical interest for his language-game philosophy. I benefitted from reading this section and I have referred to it in works subsequent to my 1984 thesis, in for instance the view I put forth with Nick Burbules and Paul Smeyers in *Showing and Doing: Wittgenstein as a Pedagogical Philosopher* (2008) where we comment on Wittgenstein's 'pedagogical turn'.

Gottschalk's reference to PI §217 I take as evidence for an antifoundationalism and the idea that there is no philosophical 'bedrock' for the justification of my acting. Inferential justification comes to an end! In this sense it conforms to the view that language games are grounded in our actions and the significance of the view especially as it gets developed later in relation to mathematics is that there is no class of inviolate propositions ('rules') that anchors

our understandings. I think the real disagreement between us is based on the third point, a section that Gottschalk heads up as ‘Was Wittgenstein a relativist?’ and really, one that I refer to through my thesis in terms of anti-foundationalism and historicism. This is the real nub of our disagreement: Gottschalk wishes to defend a transcendental interpretation of Wittgenstein’s ideas, where I want to provide a reading that emphasizes Wittgenstein’s anti-foundationalism. I don’t think I use the word ‘relativism’ in this context: this is Gottschalk’s problem for which she requires a transcendental answer.

From various Wittgensteinian texts Gottschalk mentions how Wittgenstein sees himself as differing from science based on commanding a clearing view, on the goals of clarity and transparency: ‘In philosophy we are not laying foundations but tidying up a room’; ‘Any explanation has its foundation in training’; the famous remark about following a rule at PI §217 – ‘If this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my acting in this way in complying with the rule. Once I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: “This is simply what I do”.’ Gottschalk refers to the riverbed metaphor at OC § 96 and § 97.

In these and other remarks I believe that Gottschalk is agreeing with me about Wittgenstein’s anti-foundationalism. We need to keep in mind what kind of doctrine foundationalism is and also the role that it has played in philosophy. As Ali Hasana and Richard Fumerton (2018) put it:

Foundationalism is a view about the structure of justification or knowledge. The foundationalist’s thesis in short is that all knowledge or justified belief rest ultimately on a foundation of noninferential knowledge or justified belief.

Foundationalism, thus, is the view that some beliefs can justifiably be held by inference from other beliefs, only if there are a class of privileged beliefs that are justified directly. ‘Foundationalists are united in their conviction that there must be a kind of justification that does not depend on the having of other justified beliefs.’ What is the basis for the class of noninferential beliefs? The assumption is that if we not do have secure foundations the rest of knowledge is suspect. Since Descartes foundationalist have made demands are for foundational knowledge that is based on basic beliefs that must be infallible or indubitable. This class of foundational belief has been sought in reason or experience. Only if there is a secure (infallible and indubitable) foundation can we be sure that the rest of our beliefs constituting knowledge can be successfully inferred. For a belief to be justified it must be supported by other beliefs. In fact, as Donald Davidson points out ‘nothing can count as a reason for holding a belief except another belief’ (1986, 310). It is not surprising that foundationalism fell into disrepute during the 1950s after a series of attacks by the likes of Quine, Rorty and Derrida.

In relation to Wittgenstein we can clearly see that he does not subscribe to any form of foundationalism in the relevant sense of the word. We need to make the distinction between foundations in terms of a doctrine of justification from ordinary sense of the world. To say that the language game rests on what we do is not foundationalist in any philosophically interesting sense of the word – there is no form of justificatory structure from which we can build knowledge. The metaphor of the riverbed is not an attempt to ‘save’ foundationalism. It is quite the reverse, an attack on the very concept of foundations or, indeed, its requirement for knowledge to be possible. This is why there is an established interpretation that suggests Wittgenstein was not a foundationalist (eg., Williams, 2005). On this basis it is important not to employ the term ‘foundations’ to imply some form of foundationalism when discussing Wittgenstein as it just adds to the confusion.

In *On Certainty* Wittgenstein (1969) presents us with a set of ‘framework judgements’ that constitute the language game within which we justify beliefs, argue the case, give reasons and make knowledge claims, but these ‘framework judgements’ while certain are themselves non-epistemic and do not constitute a uniform class of propositions: they are the framework within which we learn to play the language game (Peters, 2021). As Williams expresses the point: ‘Framework judgments are not certain because self-evident. Rather, their certainty accrues to them as a matter of meaning. Someone who doubted them could not learn the language-games in which they are embedded and thus could not express any judgments at all’ thus, knowledge-claims can be intelligibly entered only where questions of justification, evidence, doubt, etc. can arise. Since such questions cannot arise in connection with framework judgments, framework judgments are not (cannot intelligibly be supposed to be) known to be true. More generally, judgments that make justification possible are themselves outside the scope of justification. Our relation to framework judgments is thus wholly non-epistemic.

As Williams suggests this view inclines some scholars to accept that Wittgenstein is a foundationalist albeit of a nontraditional kind, yet he thinks ‘it is a bad idea to think of Wittgenstein as any kind of foundationalist’ because it mistakes the radical nature of his epistemological views. For Wittgenstein the basic certainties are not a special class of indubitable propositions but rather presupposed judgements embodied as ‘rules’ that only exist implicitly in practice. They are not open to knowledge or truth claims and they do not conform to any sort of epistemological grounding that can be called into question. ‘Words are deeds’ as Wittgenstein was fond of saying quoting Goethe, but there is no relationship of dependency here: judgements are actions and they are shot through with a conceptual element. In terms of ‘the interdependence of basic and non-basic judgments’ Wittgenstein embraces ‘a limited semantic holism’. Williams suggests that Wittgenstein suggest that both foundationalism and its rival—coherence theory—‘go badly wrong’.

This account which squares with my anti-foundationalist view of Wittgenstein that I came to in the early 1980s is also backed by Wittgenstein’s constructive finitism in mathematics where he holds mathematics is a human invention and is essentially syntactical such that signs and proposition do not *refer* to anything. There is no extra-mathematical reality that grounds or legitimates mathematical propositions: as Rodych (2018) puts it: ‘the only meaning (i.e., sense) that a mathematical proposition has is *intra-systemic* meaning, which is wholly determined by its syntactical relations to other propositions of the calculus.’ One of the consequences for Wittgenstein’s middle view mathematics is an anti-foundationalist account of real numbers. According to Rodych (2018) Wittgenstein’s anti-Platonist view of *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics* (RFM) maintains that mathematics is non-referential and purely syntactical against the deceptive view of a natural history of numbers which hides certain problems by suggesting there is a kind of predetermined and preestablished order that mathematicians discover although his later views do reintroduced the concept of an extra-mathematical ‘application as a necessary condition of a *mathematical* language-game.’

I need to address the issue of interpretation here because there are issues of interpretation that separate us. First, Gottschalk refers to a number of articles she has written in relation to Wittgenstein that for language reasons I cannot access. It might help to lessen our differences if I could read these in English. Second, the work she expertly reviews is a work written in the main during the early 1980s. My views have changed somewhat as is indicated by a number of publications written in the intervening period in the work with Jim Marshall (Peters & Marshall, 1999), Nick Burbules and Paul Smeyers (2008), and Jeff Stickney (Peters & Stickney, 2017, 2018, 2019a,b) and in a number of different books and papers over the years

(eg. Peters, 2020, 2021).¹ In ‘Pedagogy as Philosophy: Wittgenstein’s style of thinking’ (Peters, 2001) I cover much of the ground that Gottschalk mentions in her review, particularly Wittgenstein as philosophy teacher and Wittgenstein’s relation to teaching, as well as the dialogical style of the *Investigations*.² Third, in interpretation we must distinguish between textual exegesis and interpretation; rarely if ever do words stand for themselves without the need for commentary, and when it comes to interpretation we may find it difficult, if not impossible, to distinguish the work from the interpretation. Rarely is an interpretation to be judged in term of truth or falsity (although clearly there are ‘facts’); rather an interpretation is to be judged instructive, fruitful, misleading, helpful, constructive etc. A good interpretation is like a good metaphor: they carry meaning across borders by trading on similarities and by assigning meaning to various concepts while maintaining consistency across texts, often by means of argumentative discourse but also through rhetoric. Thus, fourth my interpretation of Wittgenstein in relation to the problem of rationality is therapeutic in the sense that it tries to show that Wittgenstein does not recognise or engage with the problem of rationality after turning away from the prospect of an ideal formal language. In doing so the *Investigations* that indicated a change developed at Cambridge from 1929 to 1947 became the inspiration of a number of philosophers that Thomas Nickles (2020) calls the ‘new historicists’ who during the 1960s ‘challenged the then-dominant accounts of scientific method advanced by the Popperians and the positivists (the logical positivists and logical empiricists) for failing to fit historical scientific practice and failing particularly to account for deep scientific change’. I call Kuhn, Toulmin, Feyerabend, Hesse and Rorty ‘Wittgesteinians’ who became deeply impressed with both Wittgenstein’s style of philosophy, its therapeutic aim, its historicist orientation and the socialized view of language consisting in the everyday rationality of ‘language-games’ in ordinary language (Peters, 2021). I should also mention Stanley Cavell in this context who also exercised great influence over my direction even though I take issue with Cavell’s romantic ‘figure of the child’ (Peters, 2017). This historicism imported through Hegel was part of the broad overarching interpretation of Wittgenstein that informed my phenomenological and hermeneutical interpretation of the later Wittgenstein I developed as the basis for a research program in philosophy of education. It is pretty well the program and outline that I have followed since 1984. I am of course indebted to Cristiane Maria Cornelia Gottschalk for such an intelligent review and I look forward to learning more from her perspective.

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¹ See <https://www.mv.helsinki.fi/home/tuschano/lw/links/>

² https://radicalpedagogy.icaap.org/content/issue3_3/4-peters.html. On Wittgenstein’s therapeutic view of philosophy see my ‘Philosophy, Therapy, and Unlearning’ in Peters, Burbules & Smeyers

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