

SAYING AND SHOWING: the Choreography of Psychology and Religious Understanding

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Abstract

“Clarity, perspicuity (*Durchsichtigkeit*) are an end in themselves. I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as having a clear view (*durchsichtig*) before me of the foundations of possible buildings. My goal, then, is different from the scientist and so my think-way is to be distinguished.” (Written as a draft foreword to *Philosophische Bemerkungen* in 1930). This article will consider what a ‘Wittgensteinian psychology’ may look like concentrating on four aspects of his account: the change of aspect brought about by psychology, psychology as (pseudo-) science, psychology and interiority and the choreography of knowing and unknowing. The paper will relate Wittgenstein’s work to that of Thomas Merton, the American Trappist monk, whose centenary we celebrate this year.

Introduction

From Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) onwards Western culture has sought to ‘pin down’ the iridescent, sparkling and constantly changing human psyche into particular categories. In the hundred years or so since Freud published his first papers in Vienna the science and study of psychology has flourished and developed in many different directions. The direction taken by psychology and psychologists has often depended on their

attitude to what is called the *mind-body problem*, or, as the contemporary British philosopher Colin McGinn puts it 'how can the water of the physical brain be turned into the wine of consciousness?'¹ Simply put, when we consider the rich storehouses of our mental lives – dreams, fantasies, thoughts, memories, motivations etc. and then look at the physical processes of a chunk of grey material the size of an average cauliflower we seem to have two different materials – two different substances even – how can the two be related?

Although of great contemporary scientific and medical relevance this question is not new and has troubled philosophers for centuries, beginning with Plato (429–347 BCE). How we respond to this question will determine our view of psychology, psychotherapy and ultimately of mind/soul. Broadly speaking, since the development of the cognitive sciences and medical approaches from the middle of the twentieth century onwards there has been a branch of psychology that tries to *reduce*, or at least *limit* the functions of the mind to those of physical brain processes (much present-day cognitive psychology would fall into this category) and a branch of psychology which attempts to interpret mental function without necessarily relating it to physical function (many psycho-analytic and counselling approaches would tend to fall into this category).

The 'Father of Psychology', Sigmund Freud, fell into both categories. Trained originally to investigate cognitive processes through physiological means under the influence of the then fashionable ideas of Hermann von Helmholtz (1821-1894), he later became interested in the functioning of psychic processes *qua* psychic processes. His middle to later work shows the influence of both approaches and he seems to have lived in uneasy tension between the two.

In seeking a mode of expression and analysis of this process a helpful guide is the postmodern philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951). Commenting on the role of the philosophy in the contemporary world, he stated:

Philosophy may in no way interfere with the actual use of language; it can in the end only describe it. For it cannot give it any foundation either. It leaves everything as it is. (*Philosophical Investigations*: 124, hereafter PI)²

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- 1 See, for example 'Can we solve the mind-body problem?' *Mind* 98 (1989) reprinted in *Philosophy of Mind: A Guide and Anthology* ed J. Heil, Oxford: OUP 2004
 - 2 For more on the relationship between Wittgenstein's philosophy and Christian spirituality see Tyler 2011.

Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything. – Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. (PI: 126)

The Foundations of Possible Buildings

Philosophy, like therapy or counselling, is for Wittgenstein a process of seeing correctly what lies before us.³ So, in the case of our trapped butterfly of the psyche, we don't have to prod and push it but observe its movements, how it flutters, now this way, now that, until we can see at which point we can gently usher it towards its exit and freedom:

What is your aim in philosophy? – To show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle. (PI: 309)

How then is this liberation achieved? To achieve this, suggests Wittgenstein, the therapist and counsellor are not so interested in propounding theories and explanations as observing the 'foundations of possible buildings', which will require this certain 'clarity of vision':

Clarity, perspicuity (*Durchsichtigkeit*) are an end in themselves. I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as having a clear view (*durchsichtig*) before me of the foundations of possible buildings. My goal, then, is different from the scientist and so my think-way is to be distinguished. (VB: 459)⁴

The therapist therefore sensitively observes the choreography of the psyche and spirit as they skate on the surface of the mysterious, the unknown (*unheimlich*), Freud's 'unconscious world'.⁵ For Wittgenstein this involves a choreography of 'what is said' and 'what is shown'. Thus the therapist and counsellor must of course pay attention to what is said to them, but perhaps more importantly what is not said but shown. For in therapy more insight can often be found in the unspoken rather than the spoken.⁶

Following this line of argument and referring back to the models of *psyche* with which we began, the therapist, counsellor or spiritual director is

3 Wittgenstein uses the phrase *Übersichtlichkeit* – literally, 'right seeing' or 'clear overview'. For an excellent recent discussion on Wittgenstein's choreography of saying and showing in relation to his views of self see Chapter Two of Jose Nandhikkara's *Being Human after Wittgenstein* (Nandhikkara 2011).

4 Written as a draft foreword to *Philosophische Bemerkungen* in 1930. See also Zettel 464: 'The pedigree of psychological phenomena: I strive not for exactitude but *Übersichtlichkeit*.'

5 Freud's *Das Unbewusst*, literally 'the unknown thing'.

6 As Wittgenstein states in his preface to the *Tractatus*, there is what is presented on the written page and what is unwritten, and often 'this second part is the important one' (LPE: 143). Cf. *Tractatus* 4.1212: 'What *can* be shown, *cannot* be said.'

therefore not a second-rate scientist or empiricist but is working from a different 'world view'. One, as Wittgenstein states, where 'all possible world views' are held in balance. The therapist is allowed an insight into all world views and then presents them to the listener. In this respect Wittgenstein saw the value of Freud's contribution to our understanding of the mind being not the observations of a pseudo-scientist but of someone who 'changes the perspective' of their interlocutor:

When a dream is interpreted we might say that it is fitted into a context in which it ceases to be puzzling. In a sense the dreamer re-dreams his dream in surroundings such that *its aspect changes*...

In considering what a dream is, it is important to consider what happens to it, the way its aspect changes when it is brought into relation with other things remembered, for instance. (LC: 45-46)

A Wittgensteinian Psychology

Building on these opening thoughts I would like to develop what might be called a Wittgensteinian perspective on psychology. I shall concentrate in particular on four aspects of this 'choreography':

1. 'Seeing an aspect' in the discourse.
2. Not based on 'pseudo-science'
3. Not concerned with 'interiority'
4. The choreography of 'what is not said' (i.e. 'shown') and 'what is said'.

Of course every great choreography requires a partnership and I have chosen as Ludwig's dancing partner the American Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968) whose centenary we celebrate this year. As I develop these four aspects of Ludwig's thought I shall bring them to bear on the religious understanding of Merton.

1. A Change of Aspect

Wittgenstein's later thought on the process of what he would call 'aspect-seeing' was particularly stimulated by his prolonged reflection on Jastrow's famous 'Duck-Rabbit' diagram:



As he lived in virtual isolation at a farmhouse in Rosro near Connemara, Ireland (having resigned his professorship in Cambridge and more or less withdrawn from academic life) there are amusing stories of the great philosopher drawing the diagram in the sand of the sea-shore and then standing there for hours staring at it - much to the bemusement of his fellow villagers. In the final remarks on 'the philosophy of psychology' he returns continually to the figure and how an aspect is changed in our thought and life. What fascinated him was how 'nothing and yet everything' is changed with the change of aspect as he wrote in 1948 at Rosro:

What is incomprehensible is that *nothing*, and yet *everything*, has changed, after all. That is the only way to put it. Surely *this* way is wrong: It has not changed in *one* respect, but has in another. There would be nothing strange about that. But 'Nothing has changed' means: Although I have no right to change my report about what I saw, since I see the same things now as before - still, I am incomprehensibly compelled to report completely different things, one after the other. (RPP2: 474)

As we look at the duck-rabbit, or indeed other parts of our perception of the world, 'a new aspect' dawns - everything has changed while nothing has changed. In his prolonged reflection on this phenomenon Wittgenstein is at pains to discount two lines of explanation. The first is what he calls 'the psychological', my second aspect of a Wittgensteinian psychology that would like psychology to move away from thinking itself as 'pseudo-science':

2. Not a Pseudo Science

Such a view, he explains, would be to 'seek causes' for the change - I would interpret this as perhaps a neurological or reductionist search for the physical causes of the change - either in the firings of neurons or some other aspect of brain structure:

Indeed, I confess, nothing seems more possible to me than that people some day will come to the definite opinion that there is no picture/representation in either the physiological or nervous systems which corresponds to a *particular* thought, a *particular* idea or memory. (LWP1: 504, I have adjusted the translation slightly)

True to his later growing disillusion with the universalist claims of such 'scientism' he declares that such searching for causes is of no

interest to him (LWP 1:434)⁷. For as he says himself in the *Philosophical Investigations*, by ‘giving all these examples I am not aiming at some kind of completeness, some classification of psychological concepts’ (PI: 206e).

3. Not Interior

Having resisted the siren voices of neo-empirical psychology, Wittgenstein then proceeds to turn his guns on what he sees as the other chief distraction in formulating his response to the change of aspect – the lure of inwardness. As he warns: ‘Do not try to analyse the experience in your self’ (PI: 204e/LWP 1.548)⁸. ‘Inner pictures’/ *Inneren Bilden* are ‘misleading, for this concept uses the ‘outer picture’ as a model’ for ‘the use of the words for these concepts are no more like one another than the uses of ‘numeral’ and ‘number’. (And if one chose to call numbers ‘ideal numerals’, one might produce a similar confusion)’ (PI 196e/PU 523).⁹ As I have argued elsewhere (Tyler 2011), I see one of the characteristics of Wittgenstein’s style is the use of ‘shock tactics’ to force his reader to think for themselves. As I wrote in *The Return to the Mystical* (Tyler 2011), Wittgenstein ‘prods and pokes’ his reader to allow each of us trapped flies to escape our own personal ‘fly-bottles’. Typical of these tactics (common with, I have argued, the great writers of mystical theology such as Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross) are the use of irony (in Wittgenstein’s case inherited from his master Søren Kierkegaard), exaggeration, paradox and humour. Wittgenstein’s later writings are peppered with many examples of all of these and one of his most startling assertions makes its appearance in his critique of the inner:

I can know what someone else is thinking, not what I am thinking.
It is correct to say ‘I know what you are thinking’, and wrong to say ‘I know what I am thinking’ (A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar). (PI 222e/ PU565)

To say the change of aspect occurs by the change of an ‘inner picture’ is therefore for Wittgenstein nonsensical – tautologous even:

7 Interestingly this final part is deleted in the published version of the *Investigations*: ‘Its causes are of interest to psychologists, not to me’ in LWP becomes ‘Its causes are of interest to psychologists’ in the final version of PI. Was one of his editors worried about Wittgenstein’s perceived anti-psychologism here – or that his method somehow transcends psychology? As no editorial guidance was given for this decision in 1953 we cannot know.

8 The official translation here is ‘Do not try to analyse your own inner experience’.

9 See also LWP 2.13e: ‘The aspect seems to belong to the structure of the inner materialization’.

The 'inner' is a delusion. That is: the whole complex of ideas alluded to by this word is like a painted curtain drawn in front of the scene of the actual word use. (LWP 2:84e)

Now, if we begin to turn Wittgenstein's thoughts here onto the grand tradition of Christian mystical theology we immediately encounter a problem – for the tradition has sometimes been obsessed with the 'inner'¹⁰. No better example of this can be found than in the later writings of Thomas Merton. The lives of the two men – Wittgenstein and Merton – have striking parallels. Both born into relatively affluent and artistic families they were afforded as young men a certain freedom of education and style that probably contributed more than anything to their fiery independence of spirit and thought. Both in their twenties had a life crisis that propelled them into a complete re-evaluation of all that they had achieved and led to the contemplation of a monastic vocation. In the case of Wittgenstein this was rejected (more by his fellow monks than by Ludwig himself) and in the case of Merton embraced. Both wrote significant works as young men that shaped the philosophical and theological climates that followed them. In the case of Wittgenstein the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and Merton the *Seven Storey Mountain*. Works, incidentally, that both men began to repudiate as they moved into middle age.

The Inner Merton

The Inner Experience (IE), published in 2003 from the manuscript of Merton's 1950s revision of his earlier *What is Contemplation* (1948), neatly encapsulates Merton's lifelong attempt to describe the nature of the contemplative life.¹¹ Throughout the text Merton appears to assume the approach to the 'inner' as a distinct 'mental realm' that Wittgenstein had so forcibly critiqued in his own late writings. Take this passage from the beginning of the text for example:

Every deeply spiritual experience, whether religious, moral, or even artistic, tends to have in it something of the presence of the interior self. Only from the inner self does any spiritual experience gain depth, reality, and a certain incommunicability.

10 Although see my essay 'To Centre or Not to Centre' in Tyler 2013 where I deconstruct the notion of 'the inner' with respect to the writings of Ss Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross.

11 Both authors share the distinction of having just as much published after their deaths as in their lifetimes. As with Wittgenstein, editors have been sometimes less than transparent about giving their reasons for certain editorial choices. However this makes studying the posthumous work more challenging and exciting for the serious research student!

But the depth of ordinary spiritual experience only gives us a derivative sense of the inner self. It reminds us of the forgotten levels of interiority in our spiritual nature, and of our helplessness to explore them. (IE: 7)

Now much of the language here is the traditional language of the Christian contemplative (and often mystical) tradition – that is, ‘interiority’, ‘depth’, ‘the inner self’ and ‘levels of interiority’. As explained above, Wittgenstein was deeply sceptical of such metaphors, not least because he continually asked: ‘Yes, but what do they *mean*?’ How can we talk of psycho-physical spatial ‘depth’ in the construct of the mental which is essentially non-spatial? Merton is right to point to the ‘certain incommunicability’ that lies in this process for the very concepts of meaning (or in Wittgensteinian terms, ‘the language game’) begin to break down at this point.¹² Now if Merton was to simply essay ‘the inner’ as a realm to be ‘mysteriously approached’ through contemplation without *intuiting* (I use the word here in its Kantian sense) an unease with such language this article could finish at this point, we could cheer the wisdom and perception of Wittgenstein and leave the mystical theology of Merton to continue languishing in its dark ‘inner’ prison. But, fortunately for our investigation, what *is* fascinating in Merton’s late writing (and the editing of the *Inner Experience* by William Shannon allows us to read the middle-aged Merton critiquing the work of his younger self) is that Merton himself intuits that the mental language of ‘inner and outer’ simply won’t work as a means of expressing what he has encountered in the contemplative life. These ideas are brought out forcibly in one of his last published works, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (ZB,1968). In this late work Merton (like Wittgenstein) takes as his target the Cartesian self:

Modern man, in so far as he is still Cartesian... is a subject for whom his own self-awareness as a thinking, observing, measuring and estimating ‘self’ is absolutely primary. It is for him the one indubitable ‘reality’ and all truth starts here. The more he is able to develop his consciousness as a subject over against objects, the more he can understand things in their relations to him and one another, the more he can manipulate these objects for his own interests, but also, at the same time, the more he tends to isolate himself in his own subjective person, to become a detached observer cut off from everything else in a kind of impenetrable alienated and transparent bubble which contains all reality in the form of purely subjective experience. (ZB:22)

12 In similar vein see Tyler 2013.

Modern consciousness, for Merton, becomes 'an ego-self imprisoned in its own consciousness, isolated and out of touch with other such selves in so far as they are all 'things' rather than persons' (ZB: 22). So our two authors, then, share a common unease of the developing of the subject-object duality of the post-Cartesian Western empirico-scientific mindset. However the two authors do differ somewhat in their solutions to this problem. Wittgenstein prefers to lay the problem before us and give us his unendingly curious, frustrating and infuriating puzzles, cryptograms and aphorisms in order to coax each of our dualistic Cartesian mindsets out of our individualised fly-bottles.

Within Merton's writings, on the other hand, we can find at least three attempts to crack this problem by three related, but quite different solutions (which has led, perhaps unfairly but understandably, to charges laid at Merton's feet over the years of eclecticism and syncretism).

The first is the one that occurred to Merton as a young man – his encounter on the trams of New York with the writings of Étienne Gilson, especially his *Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*. From this work he became interested in what he later characterise as '**the search for Being**' as being at the root of his conversion from post-modern lost soul to reborn Trappist monk:

Underlying the subjective experience of the individual self there is an immediate experience of Being. This is totally different from an experience of self-consciousness. It is completely non-objective. It has in it none of the split and alienation that occurs when the subject becomes aware of itself as a quasi-object... In brief this form of consciousness assumes a totally different kind of self-awareness from that of the Cartesian thinking-self... Here the individual is aware of himself as a self-to-be-dissolved in self-giving, in love, in 'letting-go', in ecstasy, in God. (ZB: 24)

This is an attitude that Merton had explored all his life following his conversion to Catholicism in his twenties and developed through his long study of scholastic theology in Gethsemani monastery. However, as revealed in this late quote from *Zen*, Merton is still striving for the *healing* of a split (between self and Other) rather than the dispersal of the *illusion of a split* that Wittgenstein is pursuing in his late works.

Accordingly, it is no surprise then that Merton turned to two other sources to seek his way out of his fly-bottle – both from non-Christian traditions: in Zen Buddhism and Sufism. As well documented in Baker and Henry's *Merton and Sufism: The Untold Story* (Baker and Henry 1999),

from the late 1950s onwards Merton became fascinated with the work of Sufi scholars such as Abdul Aziz, Reza Arasteh, Louis Massignon and Martin Lings (for the full correspondence see *The Hidden Ground of Love*, ed. Shannon, 1985). This culminated in a series of lectures given to the Gethemani novices during the last two years of his life from 1966 – 1968. One constant theme in these lectures, which will take us back to Wittgenstein, is the sense that the ‘change of aspect’ required for Sufi (or indeed monastic) insight comes not from thinking or book-work but rather from the act of seeing itself. As he constantly tells the monks:

You can’t learn it from a book, you’ve got to learn it by experience. And if you’re learning it by experience, you need somebody else who’s been through the mill to tell you what’s happening to you... And that is what Sufism is for, is to provide the situation where there is somebody around who knows the score and who can tell you. (Baker and Henry 1999: 149)¹³

But perhaps even more than Sufism (Merton’s Sufi studies came somewhat later in his life and would have perhaps flowered had he lived longer), Merton’s deliverance from the illusory dualism of the *cogito* lies in his study of Zen. Unlike with his Sufi studies, Merton had over a decade to perfect his understanding of Zen - including many conversations and much correspondence with the noted Zen master D.T. Suzuki (again, see Shannon 1985). This time he was able to write out his mature thoughts on the matter in works such as *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* and the later revisions of *The Inner Experience*.

Zen-practice, the awareness of Zen-mind and the practice of *satori* clearly gave Merton the language he needed to escape from his Cartesian fly-bottle. In particular, from Zen, Merton learns the importance of stressing non-thought, seeing and experience with *satori* if realization is to happen:

Buddhist meditation, but above all that of Zen, seeks not to *explain* but to *pay attention*, to *become aware*, to *be mindful*, in other words to develop a certain *kind of consciousness that is above and beyond deception* by verbal formulas – or by emotional excitement. (ZB: 38)

Zen therefore encourages a certain type of ‘authentic metaphysical intuition which is also existential and empirical’ (ZB: 38), for the Zen practitioner sees ‘what is right there and does not add any comment, any interpretation, any judgement, any conclusion’ (ZB: 53). Thus Zen provided a means for Merton whereby he could articulate

13 Baker and Henry tend to tidy up Merton’s somewhat rambling style in their transcript of his lectures. I shall shortly give some of my own transcription which I have left more or less as Merton gives it.

‘a breakthrough, an explosive liberation from one-dimensional conformism, a recovery of unity which is not the suppression of opposites but a simplicity beyond opposites’ (ZB: 140). A breakthrough, or revolution, not just for the practitioner but to the whole of a culture dominated by the dead-ends of objectification and reification:

The inner self is as secret as God and, like Him, it evades every concept that tries to seize hold of it with full possession. It is a life that cannot be held and studied as object, because it is not a ‘thing’. (IE: 7)

Using the concepts of Zen, then, Merton is able to escape the fly-bottle of dualism to articulate a position not a million miles from that presented by Wittgenstein. This is no better illustrated by the very Wittgensteinian inverted commas Merton brings to his final (revised) remarks of *The Inner Experience*:

The ‘reality’ through which the contemplative ‘penetrates’ in order to reach a contact with what is ‘ultimate’ in it is actually his own being, his own life. The contemplative is not one who directs a magic spiritual intuition upon other objects, but one who, begin perfectly united in himself and recollected in the center of his own humility, enters into contact with reality by an immediacy that forgets the division between subject and object. (IE: 151)

In these last few crucial years, then, Merton was clearly struggling as much with the notions of ‘inner and outer’ as Wittgenstein was in his final years. In a letter to Suzuki written on 11th April 1959 he ponders when contemplating the differences between Christianity and Zen:

The Christ we seek is within us, in our inmost self, *is* our inmost self, and yet infinitely transcends ourselves. We have to be ‘found in Him’ and yet be perfectly ourselves and free from the domination of any image of Him other than Himself... Christ Himself is in us as unknown and unseen. (Shannon 1985:564)

In passages such as this it is almost as if Merton’s (theological) conceptual apparatus is collapsing and it is only notions such as Zen (or Sufism) that will give him the language to present what he is experiencing in these last extraordinary years. It is striking, and a little sad, then, that in *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, having referenced Wittgenstein’s famous aphorism from the *Investigations* - *Don’t Think, Look!* - in support of his notion that Zen ‘blasts out’ the preconceptions of the mind ‘by using language against itself’ so that ‘we can see directly’ (ZB: 49), he concludes *Zen* with a thin attack on what he terms ‘the canonization of “ordinary speech” by linguistic analysis’ (ZB: 49). Given the state of post-Wittgensteinian analytical philosopher by the time Merton

wrote these words in 1968 this is perhaps not surprising. As I have argued elsewhere (Tyler 2011) the post-Wittgensteinian splitting of Wittgensteinian interpretation into various rival 'camps', coupled with some strange editorial choices on behalf of his literary executors (again see Tyler 2011) has led to some of the ill-informed and frankly prejudicial views that still attach to Wittgenstein's name and philosophy to this day. With the unedited state of the *Investigations* at the time of its publication in 1953 (the version which Merton would have read) and the lack of supporting material such as the *Last Writings* I have used in this paper, it is perhaps unsurprising that Merton would not have found in the Austrian's writings what he was looking for. I hope to have demonstrated here that there are sufficient congruencies between their two approaches to justify my claim that both these twentieth century masters are working in the same direction to release the Cartesian fly from its post-modern flybottle. In support of this contention I would like to conclude by examining how both develop a notion of 'clarity' or 'perspicuous view' as necessary preconditions for the 'Change of Aspect' so essential for both their philosophies.

Conclusions

We have seen how for Wittgenstein the aim of philosophy was to 'show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle' (PI: 309). For him philosophy could never be an abstract rarefied discipline, it had to have a *practical, ethical* dimension. For him, the right seeing of true philosophy will bring about right action. In this respect I will conclude by saying that I believe that the Wittgensteinian *Blick*, despite Merton's reluctance to admit it, shares many characteristics with the 'Zen-Christian' mind of Merton that we have explored here. Both of them with their gestures and comments nudge us in certain directions so that in Wittgenstein's case we can begin to 'see the world aright' (T: 6.54) and in that of Merton we will establish the correct conditions to be brought into deeper contemplative relationship with God. Their comments interrupt the spontaneous, unselfconscious flow of the dualistic Cartesian mind forcing us to re-evaluate our place in the world and our attitude to it. By using language, similes and metaphors in unusual and provocative ways (as indeed Merton tells us is the role of Zen master in ZB: 34) both authors bring us back to what we knew already but were unable to express in words.

In psychological terms the Wittgensteinian 'Blick' leads us into a choreography of saying and showing in our relations with others so that meaning develops from within this web of interaction.

Reference

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