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Wittgenstein, Derrida, and the Possibility of Meaning:
Hierarchy or Non-Hierarchy, Simple or Non-simple Origin,
Deferral or Non-Deferral

Abstract: Meaning understood in terms of teachability and learnability is crucial to Ludwig Wittgenstein's later work. As regards the resolution of philosophical problems – and epistemological problems in particular - this approach seems to posit a hierarchy of meaning that excludes endless deferral. This is the basis of Wittgenstein's attack on philosophical scepticism. Jacques Derrida's approach to language seems to require both non-hierarchy and endless deferral characterized by a concept of non-simple origin. Consequently, his concept of origin is characterized by identity and difference simultaneously, irreducibly, non-simply. One question is whether it is possible for there to be a compromise between the two philosophers: a hierarchy of meaning that does not in principle exclude endless deferral. It is concluded that endless deferral is antithetical to Wittgenstein's concepts of teachability and learnability, and both philosophers would agree on this.

1 Introduction

It cannot be gainsaid that both Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jacques Derrida share a common preoccupation with language. Wittgenstein, especially the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, belongs to a specifically Austrian tradition of 'language-consciousness' traceable back - through one of his own contemporaries Karl Kraus - to the first half of the nineteenth century. This essentially literary tradition was combined in the *Tractatus* with the language of propositional and predicate logic, a language whose source could be traced back to another Austrian, Gottlieb Frege. (Frege's own intellectual context may be said to be the no less indigenous Austrian scientific tradition of the second half of the same century: the work of Brentano and his successor Ernst Mach at the University of Vienna. Brentano's guiding philosophical principle was *Vera philosophiae methodus nulla alia nisi scientia naturalis est*: the true method of philosophy is none other than that of natural science). If anything, the later Wittgenstein is even more focussed on language: instead of objective scientific language as the only meaningful language, it was now merely one of many. Wittgenstein now affirmed a plurality of 'language-games'.

What of Derrida in this respect? Language too is uppermost in his philosophy. His influences have been Nietzsche, Heidegger, and various forms of structuralist thought, especially that of the linguist Ferdinand Saussure. Derrida maintains that both phonetic and conceptual systems are systems of differences. What defines an 'a' as an a in a phonetic system is its difference from other phonemes within the system, rather than intrinsic characters of the sound. Derrida extends this insight to conceptual schemes. A concept is defined by its

differences, hence a conceptual system is a system of differences. The concept a is defined in terms of everything else in the system, that which is not a, (a is precisely not-not a). (Though Derrida shares a common legacy with 'objective' structuralists such as Roland Barthes who also stands in the tradition of Saussure, Derrida's attitude to language is - in virtue of the method of deconstruction - commonly defined as post-structuralist. As will become evident Wittgenstein's later work is a form of 'structuralism' in the broadest sense of the term.)

However, the shared concern Derrida has with Wittgenstein as regards language has seemed to go deeper than a mere common focus on language. It is not only that Wittgenstein affirmed a plurality of 'language-games', it is that he took this to mean that no one 'game' assumed priority over another. Here, it could be said, is a basic affinity with Derrida: Wittgenstein's conception of the relations between language games is decidedly non-hierarchical; Derrida's conception of deconstruction presupposes non-hierarchy in its very performance.

It seems to me that it is clear that Wittgenstein affirmed a plurality of language-games; what seems much more doubtful is the claim that he affirmed a non-hierarchical relationship between one language-game and another. Indeed, I would argue that Wittgenstein would have said that, to say that the relation between one language-game and another was either hierarchical or non-hierarchical, did not itself make sense. It was simply not the kind of thing one said of language-games: they could neither be said to justify or not justify each other. This becomes especially evident when we consider the examples of language-games that Wittgenstein actually gave. According to the list outlined in paragraph 23 of the *Philosophical Investigations* it seems clear that he meant by the term 'language-game', simple everyday activities such as: giving orders, and obeying them, reporting an event, forming and testing a hypothesis, etc. (Wittgenstein 1953: §23). He did not mean that science was one language-game, religion another, politics another, and so on, all existing in a non-hierarchical relationship.¹ Whether such a view of science, religion, politics, etc. is valid is not the issue (though I am personally doubtful), the point is that it is not what Wittgenstein meant by the term when he used it.

That the above most accurately reflects Wittgenstein's conception of language-games - language-games can neither be said to be hierarchical or non-hierarchical as regards each other - does not rule out, and indeed allows for, a very interesting possibility. The way is open to argue that in the arguments of the later Wittgenstein there is, precisely, the pervasive presence of hierarchy. This is one of the things I intend to do in what follows. I will suggest that there is a

¹ For a summary of the literature on this point, see Kerr 1999: 64-66.

fundamental dissimilarity between Wittgenstein and Derrida on the question of hierarchy, and indeed on endless deferral; and it is for these reasons that the later Wittgenstein's and Derrida's respective accounts of language - their respective philosophies of language if you will - cannot be rendered compatible. Derrida rejects hierarchy, Wittgenstein not. Derrida affirms endless deferral, Wittgenstein not. And this means that one cannot without inconsistency affirm both Wittgenstein's critique of philosophical scepticism and Derrida's deconstructive approach to language even though both are anti-metaphysical projects. Wittgenstein's dialectic employs a teachability-learnability criterion that, though anti-metaphysical at core in its approach both to scepticism and to meaning *per se*, presupposes both hierarchy and a conceptuality of stability or equilibrium antithetical to endless deferral. The paper essentially comprises of three sections. I first examine Wittgenstein's critique of philosophical scepticism and demonstrate how the teachability-learnability criterion at the centre of his theory of meaning applies in the context of epistemology. Then I juxtapose Derrida's concept of *différance* and deconstruction. Following this I discuss the implications of Wittgenstein's critique of Descartes for his relation to Derrida. In the course of these sections I hope to show that: Wittgenstein's critique of Cartesian scepticism presupposes hierarchy; Derrida's deconstructive critique of language affirms non-hierarchy. I conclude from this that Wittgenstein and Derrida cannot be reconciled on the question of hierarchy. Then, to the question whether the later Wittgenstein necessarily rejected the Derridean notion of endless deferral I conclude that insofar as it precludes teachability and learnability of meaning the answer must be, yes. The resources constituting our teachability and learnability criteria necessarily originate in what Wittgenstein calls 'forms of life.' Of course since teachability and learnability are not central to Derrida's approach to language understood in terms of the paradigm of writing that is not a problem for him.² In a concluding section I explore the implications

² As Wheeler saw, Derrida extends the concepts of interpretation to texts, to writing and writings. The implications of this are only understood against a background in which Derrida rejects the essentially Cartesian (and Husserlian) conceptuality that

speech is somehow more directly connected with full meaning than writing, that somehow speech directly puts meaning fully into sound. The idea gets strong intuitive support from the experience of thinking to oneself, the interior monologue that seems directly to put meaning into something which, if overt, would be speech (Wheeler 1985: 492).

It is because Derrida rejects this privileging of speech that, as Wheeler writes, he holds 'all language is really writing, ... all language is subject to interpretation in

of my framework for understanding the relation between Wittgenstein, Derrida and Descartes in the context of the history of ideas. In a concluding section I employ hierarchy, deferral and origin to place Wittgenstein, Derrida and Descartes in the context of the history of ideas.

2 Wittgenstein's Critique of Philosophical Scepticism

Let me start with Descartes and the eponymous 'Cartesian project.' Descartes' 'project of pure enquiry' was motivated by a desire to put the science of his day on a firm foundation (Descartes 1968: 95; Watling 1964: 171, Williams 1978). As if in anticipation of the later Enlightenment philosophers who drew extensively from the legacy of the Greek and Roman ideals of classical antiquity (Gay 1969: 9-10; 31-203), Descartes' *Meditations* was influenced by the arguments of the ancient Sceptics and Sextus Empiricus in particular (Curley 1978; Popkin 1964: 172-192). Descartes sought to establish - as against the Sceptics - truths about which there could not be the slightest doubt.³ To this end, he began by rejecting as absolutely false everything which he should have the slightest cause to doubt. He 'doubts everything' until he reaches a proposition about which he cannot have the slightest doubt: a truth that is indubitable or absolutely certain. This account of the Cartesian project, if not Descartes, seems to me to remain valid. For one fundamental presumption behind this epistemological pursuit of certainty is it envisages the sceptical possibility that at its conclusion one had not found any proposition at all about which one could be certain.

According to Wittgenstein the whole project is based on a misapprehension. This can he thinks be most illuminatingly exposed by attention to the teachability-learnability criteria attached to our epistemological concepts: in order to have learned to doubt, one has to have learned 'what certainty is' (and/or been taught 'what certainty is') before one can learn or been taught doubt. Putting it another way: in order to conceive of the possibility of the meaningfulness of doubt one has to have a criterion of non-doubt - certainty -

exactly the way writing is.' (Wheeler 1985: 492). The scepticism that Derrida holds applicable to writing is generalizable to speech and therefore characterizes all language. As we will see Wittgenstein's conceptuality of teachability and learnability cannot countenance these claims about language even though he too dispenses with the Cartesian ego, though for reasons that oppose, and are indeed opposite to, Derrida's.

³ The first of Descartes' *Meditations* is in fact a rehash of ancient scepticism. See Burnyeat: 45.

against which to measure what it is one conceives as doubt. "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get so far as doubting anything. Wittgenstein frames his response to philosophical scepticism in both these ways in the posthumously published *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1969). The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty." (OC § 115) "To be sure, there is justification; but justification comes to an end." (OC § 192) "Doesn't testing come to an end?" (OC § 164) Wittgenstein says "This statement appeared to me fundamental; if it is false, what are 'true' or 'false' any more?" (OC § 514) It is not a question of having the right not to doubt, as if one's claim to know had justified one suspending one's willing faculty; rather, doubt only works in context of what it is to be certain about something - just as being wrong can only make sense against a criterion of what it is to be right, and just as miscalculating can only make sense against the criterion of a correct calculation. Justification - and criticism - comes to an end not because we reach rock-bottom facts about the external world which we know for certain, as, for example, the philosophical realist G. E. Moore thought, but because we reach some point beyond which our concepts become detached from: the criterion against which we measure what it means to know something does not exist; the criterion against which we measure what it means to know what it is to make a mistake about the existence of something ("I thought it existed, as for example, this does, but I made a mistake"); the criterion against which we measure what it means to doubt whether something is the case:

The idealist's question would be something like this: "What right have I not to doubt the existence of my hands?" (And to that the answer can't be: I know that they exist.) But someone who asks such a question is overlooking the fact that a doubt about existence only works within a language-game. Hence, that we should first have to ask: what would such a doubt be like?, and don't understand this straight off. (OC § 24)

In what sense is it the case that "a doubt about existence only works within a language-game"? At OC § 52 Wittgenstein writes:

[The] situation is not the same for a proposition like "At this distance from the sun there is a planet" and "Here is a hand" (namely my own hand). The second can't be called a hypothesis. But there isn't a sharp dividing line between them.

But even though there is no sharp dividing line between them, it didn't follow, as Moore thought, that mistakes merely became increasingly improbable:

For it is not true that a mistake merely gets more and more improbable as we pass from the planet to my own hand. No: at some point it has ceased to be conceivable.

This is already suggested by the following: if it were not so, it would also be conceivable that we should be wrong in every statement about physical objects; that any we ever make are mistaken. (OC § 54)

Wittgenstein then considers this possibility:

So is the hypothesis possible, that all the things around us don't exist?

Would that not be like the hypothesis of our having miscalculated in all our calculations?

His answer to this question is given in the next paragraph:

When someone says: "Perhaps this planet doesn't exist and the light-phenomenon arises in some other way", then after all one needs an example of an object which does exist. This doesn't exist, - as for example does (OC § 56).

Wittgenstein's point is that to be able to conceive of the concept of non-existence in this example presupposes that one has a criterion of existence against which to measure it. One cannot affirm the non-existence of something without first having a means of measurement of what it is the non-existence of this something would be ("This doesn't exist, - as for example does"). Only when one has a criterion of what this something existing is can one judge whether this something does not exist. The Cartesian sceptic's belief that one could be mistaken about the existence of everything one ordinarily took granted comes to grief for precisely the same reason. The idea of the possibility of making a mistake every time is incoherent because knowing what it is to make a mistake presupposes knowing what it is not to make a mistake. Otherwise, we could not know what it is to make a mistake. Thus given the concept of making a mistake it is not possible that we are not certain about some things. Otherwise, we have no bench-mark against which to measure what it is to make a mistake.

Note what Wittgenstein is not saying. It is not that a person could not make a mistake, empirically speaking, every time! Wittgenstein accepts this as quite possible. His point is that knowing what it is not to make a mistake - knowing what it is to get it right - is presupposed even in this case just as it is in the case of someone who makes the occasional mistake. Otherwise we would have no criterion against which to measure his getting it wrong each time. Getting it wrong all the time presupposes a bench-mark of getting it right. In the *Meditations* Descartes uses the argument that one might be mistaken on every occasion about one's belief that there is a physical object (for example, a table) in front of one's eyes. In reality, being mistaken like this is no more powerful a proof for philosophical scepticism than being mistaken once.

The conceptuality of teachability and learnability employed in essentially the same strategy of argument occurs towards the end of *On Certainty*.

Wittgenstein writes:

Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc. -they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. etc.

Later, questions about the existence of things do of course arise. "Is there such a thing as a unicorn?" and so on. But such a question is possible only because as a rule no corresponding question presents itself. For how does one know how to set about satisfying oneself of the existence of unicorns? How did one learn the method for determining whether something exists or not? (OC § 476).

One can only determine whether something exists or not (and therefore know what it is for something not to exist) if one already has learned a criterion - the means of measurement - of what it is something existing is. This of course is true of children who are very likely to go on and develop the relatively more sophisticated skill of asking about the existence of vampires, ghosts, aliens from outer space, legendary places, etc. The exchange, "Do you know the way to Xanadu?" "No, Xanadu does not exist", is a meaningful exchange only on the assumption that one already knows - has learned (precisely in the activity of interacting with them) - that there are 'things' that do exist. It could not be a meaningful one if it made sense to answer "Do you know the way to London?" with: "I'm not sure London exists (because I'm not sure the external world exists)." For in that case one could have no criterion against which to measure what it is for Xanadu not to exist.

It is testimony to the importance Wittgenstein attached to the teachability-learnability criterion and argument that its presence in his thought is consolidated in a similar epistemological context in *Zettel* (Wittgenstein 1981). Doubt is not a matter of will precisely because the distinction between getting the concept of doubt right and getting it wrong logically presupposes a pre-existing means of measurement, a metaphorical act of calibration on standard objects. But this means one has to have 'learned certainty' before one can 'learn doubt' Wittgenstein writes:

How does it come about that doubt is not subject to arbitrary choice - And that being so - might not a child doubt everything because it was remarkably talented? (Z § 409).

A person can doubt only if he has learned certain things; as he can miscalculate only if he has learned to calculate. In that case it is indeed involuntary. (Z § 410).

Imagine a child was especially clever, so clever that he could at once be taught the doubtfulness of all things. So he learns from the beginning: "That is probably a chair."

And now how does he learn the question: "Is it also really a chair?" (Z § 411).

To begin by teaching someone "That looks red" makes no sense. For he must say that spontaneously once he has learnt what "red" means, i.e. has learned the technique of using the word. (Z § 418).

In other words, to teach someone "That looks red" presupposes the person knows what it is red is: "'It looks red to me.' - 'and what is red like?' 'Like this.' Here the right paradigm must be pointed to." (Z § 420) "Why doesn't one teach a child the language-game "It looks red to me" from the first? Because it is not yet able to understand the rather fine distinction between seeming and being?" (Z § 422) No, because it first has to know what it is red is in order to have something against which to measure what it is that looks red. The former is the condition of learning or successfully teaching the latter. Put otherwise: one can doubt whether something looks red only if one already knows what it is that is red; the latter is the criterion against which the former is measured. Therefore doubt is not and cannot be a function of the human will; doubt cannot be a matter of choice; in this sense one is not free to doubt. One cannot will to doubt because one cannot, as a matter of logic, doubt anything and everything.

This is why, to return the point of departure of the enquiry of this section, Wittgenstein rejects the sceptical possibility that one not find any proposition at all about which one could be certain. "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get so far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty." ?" (OC § 115) Certainty about what? Norman Malcolm attributes to Wittgenstein the view that: "Certain propositions belong to my 'frame of reference'. If I had to give them up, I shouldn't be able to judge anything." (Malcolm 1977: 74). As Wittgenstein puts it himself: "... the questions we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt." (OC § 341) Again, he writes: "To be sure, there is justification; but justification comes to an end." (OC § 192) And again: "Doesn't testing come to an end?" (OC § 164) On G. E. Moore's claim to know certain fundamental facts such as he has two hands Wittgenstein writes: "Moore does not know what he asserts he knows, but it stands fast for him." (OC § 151) Examples of propositions Wittgenstein cites as 'standing fast' are: 'I know that I am a human being', 'I know I have a brain' (OC § 4), 'The earth existed long before I was born' (OC § 233), 'I believe I have forebears, and that every human being has them'. (OC § 234) The importance of such propositions is that they constitute the metaphorical means of measurement against which, and only against which, one's use of the

concept of doubt can be measured for correct usage, can be measured in terms of getting it right as opposed to getting it wrong.

Wittgenstein's key argument against philosophical scepticism, whether it be about epistemology, or meaning itself, is that scepticism can only make sense against a pre-existing criterion of measurement or comparison. Philosophical scepticism is in error since it presupposes that one's judgements can make sense outside of such a criterion of measurement. Wittgenstein's critique is, at bottom, based on the observation that, in the act of doubt or criticism, the philosophical sceptic attempts to 'measure' - criticise - a very distinctive object of measurement, namely: the object of measurement that constitutes the means of measurement, and therefore a condition, of the meaningful employment the concept of doubt itself. In order to doubt, the sceptic must presuppose that which he or she doubts. The specific truths which the sceptical philosopher wishes to doubt are exactly what cannot be doubted, are exactly what must first be presupposed. This is essentially why Wittgenstein made a connection between meaning and teaching. When he asks, "Am I making the connection between meaning and teaching?" (Z § 411), the answer must be, absolutely! Teachability and by implication learnability – both closely linked to the concept of practice - is central to the later Wittgenstein's account of meaning.⁴ Just as scepticism was only warranted in a context in which one could say what it would mean to be certain about something, scepticism or doubt as a conceptual skill could only be taught and learned after one has learned more basic conceptual skills regarding criteria of truth and certainty.

3 Derrida's Enduring Motif Of 'Unending' Deferral Between Identity And Difference

It is fair to say that Derrida never countenances such a structure or such a determinate origin in his approach to meaning. In contrast to the later Wittgenstein he presents a picture of a subject who is enfolded in language which he can neither oversee (nor control) nor escape. As Charles Taylor memorably put it:

The Derridean insight into the illusions of the philosophies of "presence" opens the way to endless free play, unconstrained by a sense of allegiance beyond this freedom. Derridean deconstruction claims to undo certain hierarchical distinctions, such as that between abstraction and concrete

⁴ In this specific respect, volume two of Pears' *The False Prison* remains the most thorough account of Wittgenstein. See also Baker and Hacker 1985.

experience, misreadings as against true readings, confusion versus clarity, and the like. The general method is to show that the traditionally privileged terms depends on, is a special case of, the 'lower' one, e.g. that all readings are misreadings (Taylor 1989: 488).

Speaking specifically about the conceptuality of hierarchy Taylor continues: 'There is a Nietzschean background here, but here is also a liberationist attempt involved in it. The undermining of hierarchies seems to open up the possibilities for a world of equals' (Taylor 1989: 488). There is no hierarchy: the possibility of affirming such a world is undercut by the fact that deconstruction cannot come to an end is so that deferral of the end and endless play are everything.

For Derrida there is nothing but deconstruction, which swallows up the old hierarchical distinctions between philosophy and literature, and between men and women, but just as readily could swallow up equal/unequal, community/discord, uncoerced/constrained dialogue (Taylor 1989: 489).

And just as all readings are misreadings, all learnings are not learnings, all learnings are mislearnings. But ultimately one cannot even say this is true (and one cannot say that 'true' is true). If there is to be consolation here it must be found in the boundless celebration of the creative presence. Though deferral is intertextually 'spiral' and 'out of (our) control' this is inversely related to the degree of presence of creativity. Taylor concludes:

Nothing emerges from this flux worth affirming, and so what in fact comes to be celebrated is the deconstructing power itself, the prodigious power of subjectivity to undo all potential allegiances which might bind it and oppose pure untrammelled freedom (Taylor 1989: 489).

Put like this, it may be argued that Derrida's postmodernist philosophy implicitly attaches too much value to the subjectivist self-celebration of the creative imagination: such celebration of the endlessly deferring creative self must mean endlessly deferral and, hence, moral default on the question of opposition to the coercive power of, for example, Fascism. This is essentially a moral criticism. Terry Eagleton has made a similar criticism in his book *The Illusions of Postmodernity* (Eagleton 1992: 32). This view-point seems to me too simplistic. Derrida has a profound philosophical statement to make. The lesson to learn is that origin or the criterion or the measure or the paradigm-case of meaning turns out to be identity and difference simultaneously, irreducibly, non-simply then. It is because of this that deconstruction and différance for Derrida are unavoidable principles of philosophical enquiry.

To say that everything exists "différently" is to say that everything exists without hierarchy. Différance is the condition of being according to which "there is no experience of pure presence, but only chains of differential marks" (Derrida

1988: 10). Derrida expressed himself in terms of this neologism because it uniquely expressed the perspective that presence is always experienced as difference itself and defers to what is non-identical with itself and in relation to itself. Because of this Derrida held the deferral to be endless, and as a consequence classical equilibrium in ontology and epistemology beyond our grasp, therefore impossible. In answer to the question, whether *différance* is 'the God of negative theology', Derrida famously (or infamously) replied, "It is and it is not. It is above all not." (The Original Discussion of *Différance* 1985: 84; Derrida 1992: 74). In other words *différance* is the condition of possibility both of difference and identity but difference is not in a hierarchical relationship with identity where it occupies a subordinate position. Origin is characterized by identity and difference simultaneously:

'What we note as *différance* will thus be the movement of play that "produces" (and not by something that is simply an activity) these differences, these effects of difference. This does not mean that the *différance* which produces differences is before them in a simple and in itself unmodified and indifferent present. *Différance* is the non-full, non-simple "origin"; it is the structured and differing origin of differences. (Derrida 1973: 141).

"Origin" can only exist as original identity *and* original difference. Derrida's concept of the trace means that 'words and concepts only receive meaning in sequences of differences' (Derrida 1976: 70). Hence on the question of the origin of meaning Derrida says that 'a meditation on the trace should teach us there is no origin, that is to say, simple origin; that the questions of origin carry with them a metaphysics of presence (Derrida 1976: 74). In terms of simple origin he quotes Antonin Artaud approvingly: 'It is that there has never been an origin' (Derrida 1978: 292). *Différance* as non-simple origin does not confer hierarchical presence: it is only a point of stability in that it decrees there is no stability at all (a hierarchy that declares non-hierarchy so must itself not be a hierarchy). Hence, insofar as origin coincides with identity it cannot shut out original difference. In *Writing and Difference*, in his essay on Hegel and Bataille, he writes:

It is not a question of subordinating the slidings and differences of discourse, the play of syntax, to the entirety of an anticipated discourse. On the contrary. If the play of difference is indispensable for the correct reading of the general economy's concepts, and if each must be reinscribed within the law of its own sliding and must be related to the sovereign operation, one must not make of these requirements a subordinate moment of a structure. [...] ... one must not submit contextual attentiveness and differences of signification to a *system of*

meaning permitting or promising an absolute formal mastery (Derrida 1978: 345).

Finally and famously Derrida writes in the essay 'Différance':

Thus one could reconsider all the pairs of opposites on which philosophy is constructed and on which our discourse lives, not in order to see opposition erase itself but to see what indicates that each of the terms must appear as the *différance* of the other, as the other different and deferred in the economy of the same... (Derrida 1982: 17).

A metaphysics of presence is a hierarchical structure with subordinate categories of one kind or another. Derrida opposes this possibility unconditionally. But without hierarchical structure – without presence of this kind – the lesson of Wittgenstein is that doubt is impossible and by extension teaching and learning is impossible. The teaching and learnability conditions of meaning require structure and presence. They may also require some kind of 'base-camp' presence of stability and equilibrium at odds with endless deferral and hence Derrida's concept of non-simple origin characterized by *différance*.

4 Wittgenstein and Derrida Agree: No Compromise?

What is at stake is no less than the question whether we do in fact have a universal principle here. Let us suppose that regarding the relatively sophisticated skill of reading (writing) all readings are misreadings, does it follow that all learnings are not learnings, all learnings are mislearnings? And even if it doesn't follow is it not true that all learnings are learnings and hence not mislearnings, so that the concept does not necessarily contain its 'opposition', or at least not significantly: not in such a way as to undermine the central claim that the child learns – and this tacitly - the distinction? The conceptual spectrum must include both learnings *and* misreadings and only the assumption that the former is logically prior makes sense of this? According to Wittgenstein then one cannot collapse all hierarchies in the way Derridean deconstruction proposes. His argument against the Cartesian project is essentially, that in the realm of language, hierarchies and indeed the stability constituted by the teachability-learnability criterion, serve to repudiate it. At most, non-simple origin may operate *within* the parameters of the teachability-learnability criterion but that is far from the 'superordinate' place it occupies in Derrida's thought.⁵ There is a

⁵ It is for essentially the same kind of reason that Derrida and Donald Davidson part company. As Wheeler's comparison of Derrida with Davidson demonstrated, Davidson is transparently on the side of Wittgenstein: 'There is

possible world in which we know what it means for some being - some nature - to learn something, and it turns out as a consequence of this that this property is true of the actual world. But this is because the teachability-learnability criterion is integral to the very concept of a learnable publicly accessible language (a private language is no language at all). All this seems directly to contradict Derrida. Derrida says that there are no hierarchies, hence no hierarchies of the form is/seems to be or is/is probably. Wittgenstein says that unless there are hierarchies of the form is/seems to be and is/is probably, a child could not learn the meaning of 'probably' or 'seems to be': 'is' constitutes a stability condition that has to be mastered before one can proceed to 'seems'/'is probably.' And since a child does learn these differences – and learning these differences depend on hierarchies - Derrida must be mistaken in thinking that in this context there is non-simple origin characterizable by his concept of *différance*. There exists a kind of genetic epistemology in the later philosophy that has parallels with Piaget's theories of child development: certain principles have first to be in place before one can attempt to master the next stage. The inscription that Wittgenstein had intended to preface the *Investigations, King Lear's* 'I'll teach you differences' is not meant to challenge the ontological and epistemological priority of truth over false, certainty over doubt, 'is' versus 'appears to be.' It is intended precisely to highlight differences that in a learnability context necessarily originate in identity. Teachability and learnability then are antithetical to deferral.

But *is* Derrida mistaken? For he could counter: but *does* the child learn the distinction between 'is' and 'seems to be' or 'probably is'? He could do this in two ways: first, the distinction Wittgenstein envisages between the two is not as conceptually clear-cut as he implicitly envisages because even the slightest 'trace' of the 'other' in its 'opposite' muddies the waters; second – and perhaps because of the first – the child cannot be said to 'learn', in the sense Wittgenstein means, what he posits them to have learned. In other words, the distinction between 'is'

only ontological relativity if there is something stable for ontology to be relative to.' (Wheeler 1985: 486) Again: 'Davidsonian indeterminacy seem to occur only at margins, since interpretation itself depends on overall agreement. Thus there can be no global breakdown while interpretation is possible' (Wheeler 1985: 485). Indeterminacy for Davidson is not at the quantum (universal) level as Derrida thinks; there is no correlation between language and reality at any level lower than that existing between truth-bearing sentences and reality (hence not between word and reality). This is as it should be: 'God is in his heaven and all is right with the world' in the sense that truth – as more a more general category - supervenes over quantum mechanics, not vice-versa

and, 'seems', etc., or between 'learnings' and 'not learnings' that Wittgenstein needs does not exist as 'distinctly' as he appears to imply.

But if this were to be the Derridean response it may be a moot point whether there could be deferral at all far less endless deferral. For deferral presupposes a distinction between those items in the system playing the role of 'deferer' and 'deferee.' Hence such an argument directed against Wittgenstein would it seems invalidate Derrida. (Indeed, Wittgenstein would have held that some measure of deferral is not inconsistent with the presence of hierarchy and stability: there is a sense in which one can say in the Derridean idiom that one 'defers' from 'seems to be' to 'is'. Endless non-hierarchical deferral is another matter.)

Here I think we have to acknowledge that Derrida would not disagree with Wittgenstein's judgement: teachability and learnability *are* incompatible with deferral. But since the latter supervenes over the former there is only one conceptual scheme in town. Derrida would deride the stabilizing forces in Wittgenstein's approach to language guaranteed by the presence of teachability and learnability. Endless deferral simply refuses to co-exist with them. Not only is there no 'formal absolute mastery', there is no mastery at all. All such concepts of 'success' Derrida has to eschew with characteristic Derridean scepticism. They are in reality just 'idling', to use a Wittgensteinian idiom. The promise of compromise between the two seems doomed to failure.

5 Some Gentle Conclusions Regarding the Lessons of Hierarchy, Deferral, and Origin for the History of Ideas

Does this discussion about hierarchy and deferral and indeed origin say anything about the relation between Wittgenstein and Derrida and indeed Descartes as regards the history of ideas? Wittgenstein's later philosophy, as Brian McGuinness puts it, 'exposes the weaknesses of traditional philosophies by a method which is itself a subtle differentiation of traditional philosophy' (McGuinness 1982: iii). If Descartes is taken as a representative of early modern philosophy, this would seem to imply that Wittgenstein's philosophy is a merely (though this should not be taken in any pejorative sense) a phenomenon of late modernity. His philosophical technique is decidedly not post-modern. That is, Wittgenstein uses rational argument of a qualitatively different kind from Descartes' to refute him. He does not dispense with philosophical criticism *per se* but uses it to show that certain truths are exempt from philosophical criticism. But what makes Wittgenstein and Descartes modern is that both affirm hierarchy. The fundamental difference between the two thinkers is the direction of hierarchy. Essentially, Wittgenstein reverses Descartes' hierarchy. This is not

an original conclusion but it is worth rehearsing in the context of my argument. In his *Meditations* Descartes wrote:

... I am the same being who senses, that is to say who apprehends and knows things, as by the sense-organs, since in truth I see light, hear noise and feel heat. But it will be said that I am dreaming. Let it be so; all the same, at least it is very certain that it seems to me that I see light, hear a noise, feel heat; and this is properly what in me is called perceiving (Descartes 1968: 107).

As Descartes puts it in his 'Replies and Objections to the Third Meditation' an idea is 'whatever is immediately perceived by the mind' (Cottingham 2013: 165). Consequently, though one has incorrigible knowledge of one's own inner mental phenomena, one does not have such knowledge of the external world. Descartes aimed to show 'how it is easier to know the mind than the body': "I see a tree" can be doubted without contradiction but not "I seem to see a tree". The argument is that what is certain is what seems to be the case - and that what is less certain - what is the case - can only be made certain if it is derived from (or presupposed by) the former. The error of this, according to Wittgenstein, is that it posits an impossible hierarchy, a hierarchy that does not and cannot be realised in any language except an unlearnable one. In essence, Descartes puts things the wrong way round. It is not possible to take as one's point of departure what seems to be the case, and from that point to attempt to derive what is the case. Rather, *what it is x is* is the criterion against which to measure what it is seems to be x is. If you like, in a certain sense the objective is the criterion against which the subjective must be measured. Hierarchy seems to be a defining characteristic of modern thought, non-hierarchy a defining moment of post-modern thought. In the context of epistemology both Wittgenstein and Descartes affirm hierarchy or structure.

In contrast an enduring philosophical motif of Derrida is the rejection of hierarchy and structure, and by implication the repudiation of the presence of simple origin. As regards hierarchy then, it does not take much to work out that we have two moderns (one early and one late) and one post-modern. In the context of epistemology, Wittgenstein's rejection of endless deferral is more emphatic than that of Descartes' because the Cartesian project did not conceptually preclude the possibility that there would be no convergence to stability. This is its affinity with the Derridean project. It is on the matter of the 'linguistic turn' in twentieth-century philosophy that things are more complicated. Yet the conclusion I think has to be that in the course of espousing hierarchy in the field of language-learning Wittgenstein would also reject endless deferral and by implication non-simple origin. Teachability and learnability are at the very core of what a language is. To say one has actually *learned* how to say

this or that - and mean it - cannot sit easily with the conceptuality of deferral. Otherwise one has to say – even as it goes against experience - that learning this or that concept remains a matter of deferral. Put even more acutely: surely even the reality of an infinitesimal linguistic learning-event repudiates Derrida here? However, Derrida may insist that non-hierarchy and endless deferral summed up in terms of non-simple origin – *différance* - take priority; and that any falsification of this principle is at best only apparent.

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