Guiding or drilling?
Wittgenstein and Cavell on initiation into the (philosophical) community

By Chantal Bax

Teaching or training forms a recurring topic in Wittgenstein's later work - from his comments on Augustine's account of language learning in the first paragraph of the *Investigations* to the entries about the inheritance of world pictures in his swan song *On Certainty*. It could even be argued that Wittgenstein takes it to belong to the very essence of human language that it is taught, or that he more generally takes it to belong to the very essence of being human that we come into this world as children rather than fully formed adults.[1] According to Wittgenstein, selfhood or subjectivity is acquired rather than given, and is more precisely acquired in the course of one's upbringing within a particular socio-cultural context. On his view, in other words, we are what the senior members of our community have taught us.[2]

Such a social account of subjectivity is supported by many other philosophers, but perhaps as many thinkers have argued against it.[3] According to critics like Manfred Frank and Seyla Benhabib, for instance, claiming that the subject is the product of its socio-cultural context means presenting the individual as a mere cog or bolt in a larger social machinery; as a purely passive being that is unable to think for itself and has no choice but to carry on the customs and conventions it always already finds itself immersed in.[4] Several of Wittgenstein's remarks about the way we are prepared to participate in the (linguistic) practices of our community may suggest that this is indeed the implication of his social take on the self. Wittgenstein repeatedly refers to the training that children receive as *Abrichtung*[5], a term that is usually reserved for the disciplining of animals, and according to *On Certainty,* a child will virtually automatically "swallow" the belief system of its elders "down"[6] in the course of its upbringing. In line with such remarks, a commentator like Saul Kripke takes Wittgenstein to hold that learning to participate in social practices simply means

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[1] Cf. CR p. 123, AO p. 99 (an explanation of the abbreviated references I use can be found at the end of this essay).
[2] In what follows, it will become clear that this claim needs some modification; as I will explain, Wittgenstein does not take the subject to be socially produced all the way through.
[3] In Bax 2011, I more thoroughly discuss the larger context in which Wittgenstein's account can be placed, as well as the arguments that have been raised against accounts of this kind.
[4] See Frank 1989, p. 10; Frank 1995, p. 30-31; Benhabib 1992, p. 16, pp. 214-218; Benhabib 1995.
[5] See e.g. PI § 5, PI § 6, PI § 206, RFM § 1, Z § 646.
[6] OC § 143; see also OC § 310-315.

incorporating the blind inclinations of the other members of the community.[7]

It could be questioned whether this accurately represents Wittgenstein's ideas, just as it could be questioned whether such an account of what makes a subject into a subject is acceptable in the first place. There are several reasons for arguing against a view of this kind; Frank and Benhabib have for instance rejected it on ethical and political grounds, stating that a socially produced or pre-programmed self can no longer function as a locus for matters such as agency and autonomy. In this contribution, I will have a closer look at Wittgenstein's social account of subjectivity for a somewhat different but, in the context of this *Festschrift*, equally valid reason. For as Martin's students will without exception be able to affirm, the claim that teaching is mere drilling and that only blind obedience allows one to become a full-blown member of the (philosophical) community, stands in sharp contrast with the way Martin guides his PhD's through the dissertation process. In his book, teaching does not equal conditioning. Rather than making sure that his students uncritically conform to what others are doing, Martin's first priority is to help them find their own voice.

Now to be sure, there are important differences between supervising a Philosophy PhD and teaching a child how to speak its native tongue. In what follows I will however show that, explained along Wittgensteinian lines, the latter process need no more be described in terms of mere drill than the former. Taking my lead from both Martin's teaching style and the influence that Wittgenstein has had on his thinking, I will argue that the Wittgensteinian subject is not the purely passive creation of its elders, in spite of what Wittgenstein's use of terms like "*Abrichtung*" and "swallowing" may suggest. I will first of all explain that Wittgenstein does not take the self to be the pure and simple product of its upbringing because this process is, on his view, only set in motion by factors that are of a natural rather than of a socio-cultural kind. Making use of the arguments developed by Wittgenstein's interpreter Stanley Cavell, I will moreover argue that there is a way of understanding the initiation process that does justice to the fact that selfhood is not in all respects produced. In short, I will show that there is no contradiction between Wittgenstein's notion of a socialized subject and Martin's educational practice.

A natural basis for nurture

Wittgenstein's interest in scenes and processes of instruction is noticeably accompanied by an interest in natural, instinctive or primitive behaviour. This can for instance be seen in a well-known *Investigations* remark in which Wittgenstein explores an alternative for

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[7] See Kripke 1982, pp. 86-95. For both a more detailed description of "Kripkenstein" and a more thorough refutation of this interpretation, see the book by another student of Martin's: Stein 1997.

the "model of 'object and designation'"[8] when it comes to psychological terms like "pain". After raising the question "How do words *refer* to sensations? […] how is the connexion between the name and the thing named set up?" he submits: "Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour."[9] Remarks such as these put Wittgenstein's repeated emphasis on the sociality of subjectivity in a somewhat different light. They indicate that to the extent Wittgenstein takes many or even most psychological phenomena to be obtained in a socialization process rather than at a person's disposal from the start - or as he puts it with regard to pretence and sincerity: "[The child] has to learn a complicated pattern of behaviour before he can pretend or be sincere"[10] – Wittgenstein also holds that a child can only learn to participate in these supra-individual patterns because it already exhibits certain very basic sensations in very basic ways. Without these natural expressions as a stepping-stone, children would be unable to become participants in the psychological practices of their communities.

To Wittgenstein, this comes as no surprise. For "if human beings shewed no outward signs of pain (did not groan, grimace, etc.),"[11] he explains, the teaching and learning of how words like "pain" are used would become an even more impressive task, involving almost superhuman insight or a great deal of luck on the part of both infants and their caretakers. Wittgenstein even feels that when it comes to basic psychological expressions, it makes no sense to talk about teaching and learning at all: "Suppose someone knew, guessed, that a child had sensations but no expression of any kind for them. And now he wanted to teach the child to express the sensations. […] Can he teach the child: "Look, this is how one expresses something--this, for example, is an expression of this--and now you express your pain!" "[12] According to Wittgenstein, groans and grimaces are not learned but belong to the behaviour that human beings naturally display.[13] And it precisely this natural behaviour that enables the child to make the psychological customs and conventions of its elders its own.

Hence, at the same time as Wittgenstein emphasizes the sociality of subjectivity, he indicates that this is only made possible by factors that are not of a socio-cultural kind. There is a naturalism underlying Wittgenstein's writings that prevents him from maintaining that the subject is socially produced all the way through. This can be

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[8] PI § 293.
[9] PI § 244.
[10] LWi § 869. I offer a more comprehensive discussion of Wittgenstein's social theory of mind in the third chapter of Bax 2011.
[11] PI § 257.
[12] RPPi §§ 309-310; see also RPPi § 308.
[13] To the extent that such behaviour does not come naturally (think of a feigned smile or repressed tears) this is due to our learning how to manipulate or suppress natural expressions.

observed in *On Certainty* as well. It should be noted that when Wittgenstein writes that "As children we learn facts; e.g. that every human being has a brain, and we take them on trust. [...] The child learns by believing the adult,"[14] he not only repeats the insight that human beings acquire a world picture by inheritance rather than by investigation and experimentation - he also points out that this inheritance is only possible because it comes natural for the infant to believe or trust its parents and teachers.[15] In *On Certainty*, in other words, Wittgenstein identifies a kind of instinctive behaviour that enables the acquisition, not just of particular psychological verbs, but of language or of world pictures more generally. On his view, children exhibit an instinctive trust without which instructors would be unable to impart anything whatsoever.[16]

This means that in so far as Wittgenstein argues that a child will almost automatically swallow the belief system of its elders down, he cannot be said to hold that all of a person's basic beliefs - or certainties, in the terminology of Wittgenstein's very last writings - are imposed on her by the senior members of her community. For although *On Certainty* does not mention this explicitly, certain restrictions follow from the fact that infants always already put trust in their caretakers. Their trusting behaviour perhaps points to the possession of other basic beliefs as well,[17] but it minimally implies that children take for granted that there are others to go along with in the first place, and that the infant thus always already distinguishes self from other and other from self. Without such differentiation, no going along could get off the ground, for were the child to live in a state of undifferentiated confusion, it would be unable to engage in any following behaviour. However, it is also essential to the infant's basic attitude that the others it puts its faith in, lead a full-blown human life of the kind the infant is in the process of developing. The resemblance it bears to its caretakers explain why they are the object of the child's instinctive trust; without such identification, the infant's going along would not get off the ground either. At the same time as the child can be said to distinguish self from other, it can be said to presuppose basic similarities between them as well. Its instinctive trust requires both identification with and differentiation from its caretakers.[18]

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[14] OC §§ 159-160; see also OC § 34, OC § 161, OC § 170, OC § 263.

[15] Cf. Plant 2005, p. 47; I will point out below that Cavell also makes a similar point.

[16] Of course, children cannot be said to trust in the same sense that adults can, but Wittgenstein does not rule out the ascription of basic psychological phenomena to infants, as witnessed by his remarks on pain. Moreover, although this instinctive trust does not have the same natural expressivity as a sensation like pain, we do grant children trust, which perhaps comes out most clearly when we notice their reluctance or refusal to interact with people they are unfamiliar with. That this absence of trust strikes us goes to show that we take their trusting attitude to be default; cf. Moyal-Sharrock 2004, p. 197.

[17] Moyal-Sharrock (see 2004, p. 104) for instance mentions taking for granted that its caretakers continue to exist while being out of sight as one of the child's inborn certainties.

[18] Cf. Gallagher 2005, pp. 65-85. Gallagher argues that neonate imitation behaviour implies pre-reflective awareness of one's own body, a differentiation between self and other, and a recognition that the other is of the same sort as the self.

So even if *On Certainty* argues that most of a person's world picture is inherited in the course of a socialization process rather than at her disposal from the start, the mention it makes of infant trust suggests that children already possess a rudimentary sense of self as well as of other. Forming a precondition for initiation into the community in the first place, these basic beliefs are given rather acquired, and one's elders can accordingly not be said to completely determine how one will come to think. But Wittgenstein's naturalism can be said to play a restricting role in the socialization of subjectivity in another way as well. Natural facts about infant life, namely, also include the different (dis)inclinations and (in)abilities with which a person is born. And while each process of instruction is premised on the possibility of improving pre-given capabilities, certain differences in bodily, mental and social skills, for instance, may never be overcome. Such differences are likely to affect the manner and pace in which a world picture is conveyed to a particular child, but they might also have an effect on the extent to which it will be able to conform to the community's ways of thinking and acting. A naturally blind person, to give one very conspicuous example, may after all come to possess a different world picture from that of a person with normal eyesight. In this sense, too, Wittgenstein's naturalism appears to prevent him from maintaining that the subject is socially constituted all the way through.

This has important consequences for Wittgenstein's social account of subjectivity. The naturalism that is present throughout his later writings indicates that, on his view, the subject is not the mere effect of its upbringing in the sense that this upbringing cannot wholly determine how a person will develop. Moreover, given that it is only on the basis of certain natural facts that the socialization of subjectivity can take place, the subject cannot be considered to be the simple product of its rearing in the sense that this rearing does not proceed from scratch. On a Wittgensteinian view, then, the child's upbringing neither has the first nor the final word. Indeed, since the infant's innate trust already requires a rudimentary sense of self, subjectivity can, at least in this minimal sense of the word, not be said to be produced at all.[19]

These observations by no means lead to the conclusion that Wittgenstein does not support a social account of the self after all. *On Certainty* may for instance suggest that a basic sense of self is always already given, the infant's directedness to and dependence on others is thereby not ruled out[20] - that is, on the contrary, precisely explained and safeguarded by the child's basic subjectivity. The implication of Wittgenstein's naturalism accordingly rather is that the process by means of which the child is initiated into the community, is not entirely one of construction or production. For rather than owing its entire world picture to its elders, the infant always already has

[19] Cf. Zahavi 2007, pp. 185-194. He argues (though he does not put this in ontogenetic terms) that the narrative construction of individuals presupposes the notion of a minimal self.
[20] Wittgenstein can accordingly only be ascribed a version of naturalism that does not prevent him from considering humans to be social by their very nature; cf. Medina 2004, p. 86, explaining that Wittgenstein blurs the distinction between nature and culture.

some basic beliefs itself. Thanks to its otherwise unconditional trust, these basic beliefs can be refined and enhanced to correspond with the community's ways of thinking, but the child's inborn capacities may prevent complete conformity from ever being reached.[21] From this perspective, initiation into the community is more a matter of enhancement and attunement that occurs within certain bounds than a matter of unbridled construction or production.

Revisiting the process of initiation

Be that as it may, my arguments in the foregoing may not sound very convincing in light of Wittgenstein's use of terms like "*Abrichtung*" and "swallowing" when describing the training that children receive. Granted that Wittgenstein assumes something like a pre-given form of subjectivity, it could be questioned whether this makes any difference if subsequent processes of initiation are designed to make new members of the community confirm to existing conventions as much as they possibly can. How does pointing to Wittgenstein's naturalism undermine an interpretation like that of Kripke, who takes Wittgenstein to hold that children have to incorporate the blind inclinations of their elders, regardless of whether they come into this world with a (proto-)perspective of their own? At this point, it is instructive to turn to the writings of another thinker who has extensively engaged with Wittgenstein's later work, namely, Stanley Cavell. By means of the reading developed by Cavell – in part in critical conversation with Kripke[22] – it can be made clear that the child's upbringing can also be understood in a way that does justice to the fact that this process concerns selves to whom a certain amount of subjectivity or individuality can already be ascribed.

In the section of *The Claim of Reason* dedicated to linguistic training, Cavell first of all explains in more detail why both he and Wittgenstein are somewhat hesitant to use words like "teaching" and "learning" in this context.[23] Such words are not the most appropriate, Cavell points out, not because the child's training is a matter of sheer drill and discipline, but because it is not just a matter of teaching children concrete things like names for objects. In the course of their upbringing, children are made familiar with so much more than we realize: "In learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the "forms of life" which make those sounds the words they are, do what they do."[24] It is thus precisely because

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[21] And it should be noted that if there is no guarantee that all members of the community will come to incorporate the exact same picture of the world, there may not be an invariably shared set of certainties for children to conform to in the first place. I discuss such matters more elaborately in the fifth chapter of Bax 2011.
[22] AO is dedicated entirely to Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein.
[23] See CR pp. 169-179; see also OC § 279.
[24] CR pp. 177-178; see also CR p. 111.

the child's upbringing is a matter of initiation[25] rather than explicit training that words like "teaching" and "learning" have to be used with some caution here. A form of life is not something that can be conveyed by, say, making a list of rules available; it is something that a person can only make his or her own by slowly growing into it. Indeed, the senior members of a community do not always have explicit knowledge or awareness of their customs and conventions themselves, as Wittgenstein makes clear at several points.[26] This means that in so far as Wittgenstein uses words like "swallowing" rather than "learning", he does not mean to say the child's upbringing consists in purposively being indoctrinated with a particular picture of the world.[27]

In line with my arguments in the foregoing, moreover, Cavell explains that it is only because of certain primitive or instinctive reactions on the part of the child that it can enter into processes of initiation. For such instruction to be possible, as Cavell puts it, "the initiate must be able to follow us, in however rudimentary a way, *naturally* (look where our finger points, laugh at what we laugh at, comfort what we comfort, notice what we notice [...]); and he must *want* to follow us (care about our approval, like a smile better than a frown, a croon better than a croak, a pat better than a slap)."[28] Such behaviour is not learnt, Cavell adds, but is truly "nothing more than natural"[29] for us humans.

Yet Cavell also identifies certain reactions on the part of the child's caretakers that enable it to grow into their practices. Have a closer look at a specific case of linguistic training, Cavell recommends. What has for instance been accomplished when one's daughter for the first time responds to an ostensive definition of the word "kitty" by saying "kitty" herself? "All I know is [...] that she made the sound I made and pointed to what I pointed at. Or rather, I know less (or more) than that. For what is "her making the sound I made"? She produced a sound (imitated me?) which I *accepted*, *responded to* (with smiles, hugs, words of encouragement, etc.) *as what I had said*."[30] What she uttered, namely, may have sounded more like "kiddy" than "kitty", and a week later, one may find her stroking a piece of fur and saying "kitty" (or "kiddy"). Such should however be no reason for disappointment, Cavell insists, for "[i]f she had never made such leaps she would never have walked into speech," and if she moreover "keeps leaping and I keep looking and smiling,"[31] she will eventually become a competent user of the word "kitty", and in due time become competent in so much more.

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[25] Cf. CR p. 148, CR p. 177, CR p. 180, CR p. 184.
[26] See e.g. PI § 122, PI § 129, OC § 87, OC § 95, OC § 152.
[27] Of course, this is the form that a particular upbringing might take, but that does not mean that it is in general the most appropriate way to describe processes of initiation. I will come back to this shortly.
[28] CR p. 178.
[29] Ibidem.
[30] CR pp. 171-172.
[31] CR p. 172.

What is vital for the process of initiation, then, is not just that children instinctively follow their elders' every lead, but also that caretakers encouragingly accept "what they say and do as what we say and do."[32] In addition to the child's instinctive trust being a precondition for initiation, Cavell points out that teachers should in turn place confidence in their pupils.[33] Unlike the infant's instinctive trust, however, such behaviour may not always come naturally. That is to say, as Cavell explains at several points – especially in his discussion of Kripke in *The Argument of the Ordinary* – an instructor may respond to a pupil who has not got things entirely right by saying "Do it my way or leave my sight."[34] Such a gesture of exclusion rather than encouragement "*can* be the teacher's reaction as representing the community, and doubtless allegorizes certain dimensions of our, or any known, community,"[35] Cavell observes. Yet that an instructor *can* respond in this way does not mean that he or she *should*. When Wittgenstein states "Explanations come to an end somewhere"[36] and remarks "If 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","[37] he is not justifying impatience and intolerance towards the person on the receiving end of one's instructions. For as Cavell explains, "What I am *inclined* to say is precisely not something I necessarily go on to say;"[38] if my spade is turned I might also "shift my ground, or take a new approach, or blast my way through […]."[39]

According to Wittgenstein and (or read through the lens of) Cavell, in other words, an instructor may approach an initiate with coercion and intimidation but that is not the only possible or even the most appropriate way. This does not mean that the child's upbringing will never include moments of drilling and disciplining, but it does mean that in so far as some things can only be learned by drill, these instances should not be taken as a model for the entire process of initiation. For as Cavell points out, to recapitulate my other arguments in this section, children learn infinitely more than what we explicitly aim to teach them, and we can similarly not always be said to be aware of the things we are imparting to them ourselves. Moreover, just as the child would be unable to enter into processes of initiation if it were not for its instinctive trust, it is vital that instructors also put trust in their pupils, as Cavell makes clear. Teachers have to accept their pupil's actions and reactions as attempts to participate in the community's practices and encourage them to make additional steps on their way to full blown membership.

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[32] CR p. 178.
[33] See AO p. 75.
[34] AO p. 72.
[35] AO p. 73; see also AO p. 76, AO p. 99.
[36] PI 1; see also OC § 34, OC § 110.
[37] PI § 217.
[38] AO p. 71.
[39] AO p. 82; see also CR p. 124

This is in agreement with my observations at the end of the previous section that initiation into the community is more a matter of enhancement and attunement than of construction or production. Hence, "guiding" seems to be a more appropriate term than "drilling" to describe the training that children receive. For the goal of that process is not to produce clone-like beings whose thoughts and actions can be controlled for all time to come. The goal is rather to help initiates find their own way. Or in the words of Cavell: "The mind cannot be led at every point; teaching (reasons; my control) comes to an end; then the other takes over. And the object of my instruction (my assertions, questions, remarks, encouragements, rebukes) is exactly that the other shall take over, that he or she shall be able to go on (alone)."[40]

Martin's Wittgensteinian practice

Read along these lines, then, Wittgenstein's social (or largely social) account of subjectivity does not have the consequences that critics like Frank and Benhabib take a social view on the self to have.[41] As I have argued, the Wittgensteinian subject is not the purely passive recipient of pre-existing practices, and the process of initiation should on closer inspection be described in terms of guiding rather than in terms of drilling. This moreover means, to come back to my main aim in this essay, that there is no contradiction between Wittgenstein's notion of a socialized subject and Martin's educational practice. For if Wittgenstein does not automatically take teaching to equal conditioning either, Martin's patiently helping his students find their own voice can in no way be said to be unwittgensteinian.

Even so, Martin's teaching style should be said to be somewhat out of the ordinary. As I explained in the previous section, teachers do not always already adopt the attitude that most accurately reflects what the process of initiation is about, and similarly, PhD supervisors do not always reserve as much time as Martin to discuss their students' writings, or do not always nonjudgmentally help them make the arguments they themselves want to make, to mention some of the things that set Martin's teaching apart. That it is rather exceptional only makes me more grateful for having been supervised by someone with a truly Wittgensteinian approach. Two years after completing my dissertation, I still reap the benefits every single day and really appreciate being able to bring this to Martin's attention here. For in this respect the supervising of PhD students probably bears resemblance to basic linguistic training too: teachers may not always be aware of how much their pupils learn from them.

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[40] CR p. 112.
[41] Or to put this more precisely with respect to the latter critic: Wittgenstein defends a weak version of the claim that the subject is inherently social, not the strong version that is contested by Benhabib; see Benhabib 1995, p. 20.

Abbreviated references

AO   Cavell, C. 1979. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (Kindle Edition)

CR   Cavell, C. 1990. "The Argument of the Ordinary" in: *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome. The Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, pp. 64-100

LWi   Wittgenstein, L. 1990. *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume I*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

OC   Wittgenstein, L. 1974. *On Certainty*. Oxford: Blackwell

PI   Wittgenstein, L. 1995. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell

RFM   Wittgenstein, L. 1978. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Oxford: Blackwell

RPPi   Wittgenstein, L. 1998. *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume I*. Oxford: Blackwell

Z   Wittgenstein, L. 1981. *Zettel*. Oxford: Blackwell

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