On "the temptation to attack common sense"[1]

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Introduction

Education happens all the time, in all places and during all our lives. We all know that. However, the moment we hear the word "education" our minds wander back to school. Schools and other educational institutions offer formal education; and thus formalize the concept, turning it into a quasi-technical term that goes well with "policy", "criteria", "evaluation forms" and all the rest of the modern educational vocabulary. The growing formalization of concepts is inline with a verificationist ideology that thrives in formal education: methods and outcomes need to be tested; we need a *scientific* language that measures what students learn in a scientific way; science is a priority anyway, for it informs us of what lies beyond our ordinary conception of the world. Among the goals of education after all is to teach us a more accurate way to describe the world, leaving vulgar common sense behind.

Wittgenstein however, argues against the temptation to attack common sense. In the following sections the Wittgensteinian idea of common sense will be explored and then applied in education. Wittgenstein defends common sense as a guide for our thinking and as a relief from mental discomfort. It is the starting point and the final destination of our encounters; yet the process requires that people are able to walk their way through puzzlement. Such a defence of common sense might stand as a

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powerful educational ideal. Education should not teach us to hide confusion behind technicalities; it should rather enable us to embrace and dismantle it.

Wittgensteinian common sense

Philosophers often appeal to common sense as a criterion that can help address philosophical problems. It supposedly provides some kind of *consensus* about what it is sensible to say, ask or mean (Gasparatou, 2010). Thomas Reid is among the pioneers who use *common sense* to refer to sound judgment or to the views of plain men; for both can help undermine the absurd claims of the philosophers. In 20th century philosophy, Moore (1993) gives the most well known "Defence of common sense". His appeal targets the sceptic; he argues that there is a large set of propositions, such as "There exists at present a human body, which is my body" (p. 107), which, even though they are contingent, we all know with certainty; the sceptic also is certain of them. Common sense then, refers to a list of truisms, to beliefs held by all.

When Wittgenstein talks about common sense, he has Moore in mind. Wittgenstein opposes the view that common sense can provide an answer to scepticism, or any other philosophical problem (Gasparatou, 2009a). And yet, he agrees that common sense needs defending:

> There is no common sense answer to a philosophical problem. One can defend common sense against the attacks of philosophers only by solving their puzzles, i.e., by curing them from the temptation to attack common sense; not by restating the views of common sense (BB, p. 58-59).

Wittgenstein's point of view in fact opposes most traditional appeals to common sense. Philosophy threatens common sense; but this is not reciprocal: common sense cannot threaten philosophy, for it cannot answer its questions. Just like it cannot answer scientific questions.

> A philosopher is not a man out of his senses, a man who doesn't see what everybody sees; nor on the other hand is his disagreement with common sense that of the scientist disagreeing with the coarse views of the man in the street. That is, his disagreement is not founded on a more subtle knowledge of fact. We therefore have to look round for the source of his puzzlement. And we find that there is puzzlement and mental discomfort, not only when our curiosity about certain facts is not satisfied or when we can't find a law of nature fitting in with all our experience, but also when a notation dissatisfies us -perhaps because of various associations which it calls up... (BB, p.59)

According to Wittgenstein then, stepping out of common sense amounts to mental discomfort. And one is forced outside its realm for two reasons. First, they may need to explain some fact that common sense does not explain. Subtler knowledge is called for. This is the realm of science. The second source of misunderstanding has to do with some conceptual knots that are created within ordinary language. Certain terms are used carelessly and lose their ordinary meaning; certain phrases are metaphorical and if taken out of context they project false images. If, for example, one says "I don't know what is going on in your head", this expression may be taken to imply that the mind is some sort of private room where things happen. But if we clarify this phrase, it will become evident that all one means is "I don't know what you are thinking". In such cases *grammatical investigation* clears misunderstandings away and brings clarity of meaning in context. This is the realm of philosophy. Now, one should not take Wittgenstein's distinction between science and philosophy or between factual and conceptual confusions as sharp. There can be conceptual confusion within science; furthermore, concepts may evolve as new scientific information is brought to light (OC §94-99; Gasparatou, 2009b). In any case, philosophy is a conceptual or grammatical investigation (PI §89-133).

Wittgenstein's use of p*hilosophy* has both negative and positive connotations; none refers to just academic philosophy. In its negative use, it signifies our temptation to go *deeper* than ordinary language, with the result that we violate it somehow. In its positive use, philosophy is the activity of clarifying language, so that

misunderstandings will be resolved. Each of us can be a philosopher in both senses; everybody can potentially give into the temptation to overstep ordinary language usage; in which case, they can potentially work to dismantle the misunderstanding. The only way to cure such mental discomfort is to pay close attention to ordinary language and uncover the rules of our language-games.

The term *language-game* has no clear definition. Wittgenstein resists definitions and all attempts to amend language or create an ideal meta-language; these are attempts to arrive at some hidden essence. But there is no such essence; a term gains its meaning by its actual use in actual contexts*, i.e.* by the many language-games people play with it. The game analogy opposes the view that language has a prioritized function: to *describe* the world (PI §1-38). Description is only one language-game among many. Each game involves rules. Rules are contingent: they could be otherwise. Yet, they are also necessary: if they change, the game changes. It would be plain nonsense, then, to believe that the many language-games, like *promising, obeying, play-acting* etc., could be reduced to a single one, *i.e. describing*. You cannot reduce one game to another; if you change its rules, you alter the game. And indeed sometimes rules change: old language-games die and new ones are born all the time.

Speaking of *language-games* and *grammar,* Wittgenstein emphasizes the normativity of language. Language is a rule-governed activity; and grammatical investigation uncovers rules in order to clear misunderstandings away. At a minimum, rules are inner standards of correctness and meaningfulness. We grasp such rules by participating in the activities of our community. In fact, Wittgenstein expands the notion of language to cover all human practice; the totality of human practice is rule-governed. *Rule-following* then, is a central theme (PI §138-242). It presupposes some regularity in behavior, but it is not automatic; it is intentional. In fact, I follow a rule only if I intend to follow a rule, consciously or unconsciously. Intending does not require me to justify, explain, articulate or even think about the rule as I follow it. But I need to have grasped the correct application of the rule by being brought up within a community of fellow rule-followers. For example, people learn to shake hands in certain contexts. This is a human practice, involving language-games and gestures,

all of which are normative. The rules slightly change depending on the occasion. Grasping the normativity of this gesture within the context, we can apply it on different occasions without thought; we can also change the rules of this activity over the course of time. Yet, it is always an intentional gesture that carries some normative habitual implications.

It is the task of philosophy to unravel rules *whenever confusion is created* (PI §119, §125-133). The point is not to clarify all language or explain all rules. That would be impossible since rules change and new language-games are created. Moreover, it would be a case of philosophical -*i.e.* conceptual- confusion: an overall all-purpose clarity does not make sense. To clarify is to dismantle some specific misunderstanding *to some specific end* in some specific context. In cases of puzzlement then, we need to practice grammatical investigation and *return* to common sense.

> ... for as soon as we revert to the standpoint of common sense this general uncertainty disappears (BB, p.45).

Wittgenstein then, invites common sense as an ideal. It is our ideal home: our starting-point and our final destination. Starting from the language-games we play, confusions arise and we may need to clarify them so that we again revert to a common ground of contentment. This is the ground of sanity, the time when discomforts are put to rest. It is also a *common* home; it implies a worldview and a set of practices common to us all. After all, no language and no rules are private (PI §243-275). Common sense is necessarily sharable too. And if Wittgenstein is right, and philosophical problems arise from our every-day use of language, this is a non-stop guiding norm for philosophy. Not for the academic philosopher but for the philosopher inside us all.

Educating for common sense

Wittgenstein's philosophy is full of insight about how we learn language and how important the social activity of sharing a language is for all other types of learning (Standish, 1992; Smeyers and Marshall, 1995; Peters and Marshall, 1999; Smeyers et al., 2007). We share the grammar of our practices, and we *understand, mean, feel and act* using a variety of language-games. Growing up in a community we learn to share rules, or even come up with new ones (Burbules and Smith, 2005; Smeyers and Burbules, 2006). Wittgensteinian philosophy can explain how education, formal and informal, includes us in a *form of life* and even enables us to change it from the inside (Peters et al., 2008). The Wittgensteinian notion of *common sense* can add up to such discussions. In fact, it could serve as a game-changing educational ideal. Wittgenstein's plea for common sense demands that we learn to dismantle conceptual confusions. Since confusions arise in all human practices, education should teach us to deal with them. Yet in order to do that, educators need to address their own discomforts.

Philosophers of education have pointed out instances of such discomforts in educational contexts (Winch, 2006; Davis, 2009; Standish, 2012). Among the concepts in desperate need of clarification is the use of *criteria* in formal education today. Much of educational policy, research and practice, has blurred our discussions of *criteria* with a preoccupation with *data*. Here lies a Wittgensteinian-textbook conceptual confusion that relates to an ill-conceived verificationism. *Verificationism* is roughly the idea that to say something meaningful is to be able to back it up with verifiable data. This idea was once proposed by logical positivists. It somehow declined in philosophy of science decades ago. Yet, it is still prevailing in education: whatever we do needs to be describable, documentable, measurable and assessable by objective data (Standish, 2004). For example, if we want to see if a teacher teaches well, we don't just go and watch them teach; we fill assessment forms, give them self-evaluation forms to fill, and since these practices are not considered objective enough, we also document how well their students perform in tests. So, we no longer talk about the *qualities* of a good teacher, but rather about their *scores*. Any decision in education today about who to hire, which method is optimal or which curriculum we should prioritize turns on data, measurements and assessment-forms. Instead of

discussing the qualities we ought to embrace and promote, we are preoccupied with data.

Educators' obsession with data implies that some language-games are given more priority than others. Within the verificationist ideology, d*escribing* is the prioritized language-game; its superiority derives from science; science supposedly describes how the world operates on a deep level; hence, educational policies today prioritize science not only in curriculum design but also as a method for all disciplines, including educational practice itself. The implication is that any practice worth educating for would be reducible to the descriptive game. However, even if science *did* objectively describe the world, this would not be reason enough to stop all the other things we do with language. It makes no sense to eliminate *arguing, teaching, advising* and all the other things we do with words in the fantasy that this would leave us free to *describe*. Wittgenstein's arguments against the idea that there is some linguistic function that stands above all the other functions of language are indeed relevant here.

Moreover, science does not merely or *objectively* describe the world. Scientific research is as much a social, cultural, normative and imaginative practice as any. It is a mainstream concern in science education research today to attack naïve depictions of science as merely descriptive of nature. Effort is being made to inform teachers, students and policy-makers of the true nature of science and to dismantle conceptual, factual and historical confusion about the distinction between data and their interpretation, the role of the community, culture, creativity and imagination in the creation and evolution of scientific theories (Lederman, 2007). Then, it is not just that we cannot eliminate all other language-games in order to describe scientifically; we actually *need* a vast variety of language-games for science itself to evolve. Policy makers struggle to ground their decisions on a misunderstanding of scientific method.

In education, science, and every-day life practices, to judge which methods are optimal is to exercise a normative power. This involves values, emotions, interpretations, and rules. And indeed we do exercise this normative power: we judge what kind of data is relevant or how to interpret it. Evaluation-forms or metrics are blind unless we put them in the perspective of an overall discussion of the

dispositions or the qualities we want to promote. For example, teachers' favourable evaluation is taken to suggest that their students understand them: *that is why* they do well in tests. Academics' high metrics scores are taken to imply that their work is influential. However, this is an interpretation of the data in the light of ideas and norms, which are debatable. Not everybody thinks that good teaching means "teaching to the test" (Standish, 2014); nor does everybody think that *influential* research necessarily means *highly cited* research or *good* research. The idea that there might be some objective database that could spare us the process of judging is thus incoherent. Databases depict underlying norms and values. However, in education today instead of doing the hard work of clarifying and refining such norms, we undermine them by fixating on technicalities. Educators misidentify the normative for the descriptive; diminish rules into formulas; portray rule-following as blindly complying with procedures; reduce inner-yet-social standards of excellence to external metrics.

Contrariwise, we should be more confident of our natural rule-following practices. Wittgensteinian philosophy can remind us that, as natural rule-followers, we comply with criteria for every single practice or habit of ours from handshaking to scientific research; we explore new ones, we initiate others into our normative practices etc. Within this flux, it is hard to formalize criteria. We employ more that we realize; we create new ones every day; and we impose them differently depending on the context. We judge by using our criteria while debating over such criteria at the same time. Thus, our criteria are never *subjective*: they are sharable. Neither are they *objective*, not if by "objective" we mean automatic or causal. Imposing criteria is an intentional and inter-subjective practice that is open to revision, just like all human practices. There is nothing mysterious about it.

The current use of *criteria* in educational settings today shows that the use of a concept may hide a series of implications that need to be explicitly addressed through Wittgensteinian investigation. Furthermore, it is a key example of how the formalization of a concept makes a whole practice seem more obscure than it really is. Formal education claims its authority by working against common sense. The aim

is to present educational research and practices as *scientific,* when in fact scientific practice is misrepresented too. For even science has its home in common sense.

The Wittgensteinian notion of *common sense* should be an educational ideal altogether. Wittgenstein would not suggest we rest content with our common beliefs or silence the philosopher -or the scientist- within us. It is part of our human nature to try alternative viewpoints; or wish to go deeper into a better understanding of our worldview; to live better and to create new language-games for all to play; to have a more accurate knowledge of the facts and incorporate it into our practices. All the more reason why we should embrace philosophical discomfort, practice grammatical investigation and learn to make our way through confusion, puzzlement and distortion, back to an enlightened clarity of mind. Education should enable us to move this circle from common-sense-point-one through grammatical investigation and back to common-sense-point-two; and then all over again when another discomfort arises. This temporal equilibrium he would call *common sense*.

Educators can start incorporating this ideal by solving their own conceptual perplexities. This would require policy makers, administrators and teachers who *engage* with confusions rather than succumbing to them or obscuring them. The catch is that only such educators can truly promote this ideal. Grammatical investigation is -or should be- one more practice among the many normative human practices we grasp while growing up. Yet, one can only learn to play the game while actually playing it with others in formal and informal educational settings.

Wittgensteinian *common sense* has one more advantage: it is a vague and elusive ideal. There can be no formula, no clear-cut prescription; it is partly a matter of social initiation and negotiation and partly an individual endeavour; it includes a lot of disappointment (Standish, 2004; Smeyers et al*.,* 2007); and in the end, just like any other practice, one can only learn how to do it while doing it. We do not need formulas from education; we need to learn to notice *differences*, to uncover *pieces of nonsense* (PI §119) and to assemble *reminders for particular purposes* (PI §127).

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