Argument

Wittgenstein opens his *Philosophical Investigations (PI)* in a quite enigmatic way, with the following quote from Augustine:

« When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered when they meant to point it out. Their intention was shewn by their bodily movements, as it were the natural language of all peoples: the expression of the face, the play of the eyes, the movement of other parts of the body, and the tone of voice which expresses our state of mind in seeking, having, rejecting, or avoiding something. Thus, as I heard words repeatedly used in their proper places in various sentences, I gradually learnt to understand what objects they signified; and after I had trained my mouth to form these signs, I used them to express my own desires. » (Wittgenstein 1986 [1953]: §1)

Wittgenstein comments this passage by saying: « These words, it seems to me, give us a particular picture of the essence of human language. » (1986 [1953]: §1). Cavell, for his part, offers a comment of this commentary in « Notes on the Opening of Wittgenstein’s Investigations » (1990) and gives a commentary of his commentary in « Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening of Wittgenstein’s Investigations » (1995: 125-186). Presenting itself as an experience of learning through the (re)reading of texts – that is, as an exercise of writing and rewriting – philosophy becomes the « education of grownups » (Cavell 2012), an education where the figure of the grownup is intermingled and resonates with the figure of the child. This interlacing forms a recurrent pattern in Wittgenstein’s and Cavell’s works.

When he refers to the opening quote of the *PI*, Cavell is not willing to concede that Augustine’s words are giving a picture of the essence of language. Cavell rather senses that the passage gives a certain image of language learning. Now, in the *PI*, the child is a figure that shows up regularly in a chain of numerous language games « by means of which children learn their native language » (Wittgenstein 1986 [1953]: §7), offering an occasion to clarify our concept of meaning. But as the figure of the child is the term of a comparison, its presence can also cast new light on our concept of learning. In § 208 to 225, Wittgenstein takes interest in a scene of learning, where a teacher tries to train his/her pupil to follow a rule. Cavell comments on this « scene of instruction » – as he calls it – in chapter II of *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (1990), giving « his » Wittgenstein a particular political shape in the field of education, as opposed to Kripke’s communautarian interpretation of Wittgenstein’s passages on following a rule (1982).
One might ask then, who is Cavell’s Wittgenstein? And what does he have (Wittgenstein? Cavell?) to teach us about learning and about an education which makes space to the figure of the child?

Cavell’s Wittgenstein is very uncomfortable with the conception of learning as a training process (a « dressage » in French). He prefers « education »: the adult accompanies the child more than he/she trains him/her, or, to put it otherwise, it is inexact not say that the adult teaches the child how to walk. One should rather say that they simply walk together. But what happens if, at some point along the pathway, the child stops? If the child doesn’t react (anymore)? What if the adult has exhausted all the justifications he/she has to act the way he/she does, to use language as he/she does? At this point, can the adult rely on his/her way of doing and simply say « This is simply what I do » (Wittgenstein 1986 [1953]: §217)? Cavell, unlike Kripke, is very suspicious of this « confident inclination » solution (1990) which makes the adult a representative member of his/her community and allows him/her to expect that the child will do what he/she would have himself/herself done. This way of trying to escape from uncertainty as to what should be taught, and learned – which is a kind of skepticism – holds out the threat of exclusion from the community for the child who would react differently than expected, or who would not react to the teachings of his/her teachers: « if a child does not respond to the suggestive gesture, it is separated from the others and treated as a lunatic » (Wittgenstein 1958: §30).

Thanks to the reading of Cavell, this danger has not remained unnoticed in Augustine’s remembering of himself as a child learning language, cited in the opening of the Pl. In this scene, indeed, the child – « invisible to or unnoticed by its elders (as if not spoken to) » (Cavell 2012: 26) – seems isolated, left apart from the community of grownups, who speak in the distance. In a word, the child is in exile and this very possibility is a permanent problem for a society based on consent:

« The scene thus represents the permanent crisis of a society that conceives of itself as based on consent. In suggesting that there is an alternative to taking “this is simply what I do” as expressing confidence in myself rather than confidence in the other, I am, I guess, suggesting – my Wittgenstein is suggesting? – a certain opening of the idea, or direction, of consent. What is causing these fantasies of politics is doubtless my confusion over the air of power or violence in the solution by “confident inclination”. If the child is separated out, treated as lunatic, this shows at once society’s power ans its impotence – power to exclude, impotence to include » (1990: 76)

As a response to a child who doesn’t react or who reacts otherly, Cavell proposes to wait. By this, he seems to suggest that education has someting to do with (looking for confidence in) patience, and also that the newcomer has something to teach to his/her elders, so familiar they might have become with their forms of life. What, then, if this newcomer – a figure of the stranger, of the foreigner, of the other – required not only to be taught, but also to teach us something about ourselves? What if he/she was able to re-draw our attention, to make us care anew? Adressed this way, the encounter of the child and the adult, of the native and the foreigner, represents the occasion of an adventure.

The figure of the child – once noticed its pervasive presence and importance in our lifes – raises political (politics of consent) as well as ethical (ethics of care) issues that oblige us to imagine what it could be to find one’s way about through the indeterminacy of learning and teaching. Over the last decades, these issues and this (moral) effort of imagination, the importance of the figure of the child and education (including the education of grownups) in Wittgenstein and Cavell, have been noticed, used and enlarged in many ways in a series of (often collective) writings (see the bibliography below) that appear to enter in strong resonance. The two-days Workshop that will take place on the 11th and 12th March 2016 at the University of Lausanne offers a place of encounter and the occasion to converse further on these concerns.
« Am I doing child psychology ? – I am making a connexion between the concept of teaching ans the concept of meaning » (Wittgenstein 1994 : §412). As the issues of (re)thinking education and childhood (and adulthood) with Wittgenstein and Cavell appear very different from doing child psychology and as they invite us to take a grammatical and anthropological perspective on education, we propose to adress these concerns by considering the triangle formed by the child, the grownup and the form of life :

A. The child and the form of life
   • Children language learning as a paradigmatic example of all kinds of learning ?
   • Childhood as an experience of exile and isolation ?
   • Children’s lifes as adventurous ?
   • Children’s projections of words as poetic/aesthetic expression ?
   • …

B. The grownup and the form of life
   • (Re)education : a natural/vital/necessary need ?
   • The role of conversion/conversation in the education of grownups ?
   • The importance and the uncanniness of remembering childhood ?
   • The child as a paradigmatic example of our relation to others ?
   • The role of childhood in our refusal/acceptance of human finished condition ?
   • …

C. The child and the grownup
   • An air of « illicitness » in learning : the child as a thief ?
   • (Not) understanding the newcomer ?
   • Training and education (in the PI) : from the politics of conformism to the politics of consent ?
   • From provisional agreements to mutual education ?
   • The recognition of the indeterminacy of teaching and learning : which practical consequences ?
   • …

Bibliography


