Chapter 1  Introduction: Wittgenstein and Developmental Psychology

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Why Wittgenstein and developmental psychology? What does the renowned philosopher of language have to do with psychological development? At first glance, this juxtaposition might appear to be far-fetched, but a closer look reveals at least three types of connections. First, there are certain aspects of Wittgenstein's life and thought that are directly related to the subject matter of developmental psychology. Second, Wittgenstein's philosophy has specific implications for the conceptual and metatheoretical foundations of psychology in general and of developmental psychology in particular. Third, certain aspects of his philosophy may also have specific implications for both theoretical and empirical research in developmental psychology. Although the chapters contained in this book do not all fall neatly into one and only one of these categories, they can generally be classified as emphasizing one of these connections more than the others. Thus, Chapters 2 through 4 (by Karl Brose, James Russell, and Roger Dixon) deal mainly with thematic relations between Wittgenstein's philosophy and aspects of developmental psychology, Chapters 5 through 8 (by Jochen Brandstätter, Jeff Coulter, Michael Chapman, and Joseph Margolis) address conceptual and metatheoretical issues, and Chapters 9 through 12 (by Eleanor Rosch, Charlotte Patterson, Daniel Bullock, and Rom Harré) describe some implications of a Wittgensteinian perspective for developmental theory and research.

The Developmental Dimension in Wittgenstein's Life and Thought

After completing the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* (published in 1922), Wittgenstein gave up philosophy for a time and became an elementary schoolteacher in Lower Austria. His second book, and the only other book published during his lifetime, was a vocabulary workbook for elementary school children (Wittgenstein, 1926). Recent scholarship has recognized the importance of this period of Wittgenstein's life for the subsequent development of his thought (Bartley, 1973; Wünsche, 1985), and some commentators have claimed to discern specific connections between his experience as a teacher and certain aspects of his later work (Bartley, 1973, 1974; for a contrasting view, see Hargrove, 1980).

Whether such connections are direct or indirect, distinct *pedagogical* themes
run through much of his later work. For example, in the *Philosophical investigations* Wittgenstein’s method consists in focusing attention on the concrete ways in which words are used rather than on abstract conceptions of meaning. For any given word or expression, there exist certain conventional *criteria* that serve to determine whether that word or expression is used correctly. One way of identifying these criteria is to answer the question, “How would one go about teaching a child this word”? The criteria for justifying the use of a particular word are those things one might point to in trying to teach a child what we mean when we use that word (Z,412ff.). To use another of Wittgenstein’s comparisons, teaching children the use of language is something like teaching them how to play a game. In learning language, they learn the rules of various language-games, including the use of certain words and their criteria. The initial language-games which are first learned by children in learning language are “primitive” in the sense of basic or fundamental (*PI*, p.200e). Later, children will learn more complex conceptual connections among linguistic expressions, but these connections can only be acquired once the “primitive” language-games have been mastered. In this respect, the process of language acquisition resembles that of learning to play increasingly complex games; learning a game with codified rules (e.g., a competitive ball game) presupposes the mastery of more rudimentary games (e.g., throwing a ball back and forth). The idea that certain language-games must be learned before others become possible is another example of an implicit developmental dimension in Wittgenstein’s work (see Brose, this volume; Dixon, this volume).

There may be a point in the development of language-games, however, where words and concepts may become disconnected from their original context of use. This is typically the point at which language begins to “idle” (*PI*, 132, 291). In Wittgenstein’s colorful phrase, “Language goes on holiday” (*PI*, 38). In everyday life, the words and phrases of ordinary language are usefully employed. In this functional context, their meanings are relatively unproblematic. In relieving them of their practical functions, we are in danger of losing sight of the context which gave them meaning in the first place. At this point, philosophical problems arise (*PI*, 38). But these problems are not confined to philosophy as a discipline. As we shall have occasion to see in this volume, Wittgenstein believed that psychology was especially prone to “philosophical” problems of this kind (*PI*, p.232e). Wittgenstein’s remedy for such problems was to return words to their “original homes” in ordinary language (*PI*, 116). In practice, Wittgenstein often accomplished this “return” to ordinary language by considering how a given word or concept would be taught to someone encountering it for the first time. Thus, a more or less explicit dialogue between teacher and pupil can be found throughout his later works.

This dialogue, as it occurs in Wittgenstein’s last book *On certainty*, is explored in depth by Karl Brose in Chapter 2 of the present volume. Brose begins by considering the role of the child or pupil in this colloquy. As portrayed by Wittgenstein, the child learns language by “believing” the teacher. This is not to say that the child suspends its doubts, but rather that the child at this initial stage