

Wittgenstein and Aspergers

Professor Michael Fitzgerald (book review newsletter June 2011) is full of certainty, but not the sort that Wittgenstein illuminated for us (Wittgenstein, 1969). Fitzgerald demonstrates both the psychiatric failure to truly engage with Wittgenstein's thought, and the failure of the DSM IV with its over-inclusive categories. He also indulges the (tempting) fallacy of post-mortem psychiatric diagnoses. Indeed he illustrates the fundamental problem of criterial diagnoses in psychiatry which fail to engage with the reasons why a person might act in a certain way. So over activity and failure to concentrate might indicate a failure of development in parts of the brain, or a history of abuse.

Reading

Wittgenstein is possibly the 20th century greatest genius. Stroll (2002) considers Wittgenstein three times a genius, for three great original ideas (Beethoven was blessed with two ideas, most geni only have one). Arguably though Wittgenstein was really working out the ramifications of his first idea, that logical propositions are – resolutely – nonsense and say nothing. Neither Stroll nor Fitzgerald take on more recent interpretations of Wittgenstein that take seriously his statements about his propositions being nonsense (eg McManus 2006, Mulhall 2004)

Wittgenstein was at odds with people. Most people didn't understand him, and still don't. He was said to have consoled Russell and Moore after they 'examined' him on the Tractatus for his PhD, by saying, "don't worry, I knew you wouldn't understand me." Although Wittgenstein is part of a long tradition of sceptical thought, his form of expression is radically different from most philosophers. He predicted it would take 100 years for people to really begin to understand him.

Three of his brothers committed suicide – has anyone, even his best biographer --- really considered why? Or considered the traumatic effect on Wittgenstein, who considered suicide himself in his younger life? Wittgenstein wrestled with homosexuality, once praying all night while his fiancée waited in vain for him to leap into bed with her. Homosexuality was often a reason for people to kill themselves – or to go to gaol – in those times. Intense, traumatised, extremely bright, shy, sensitive, and simultaneously arrogant young men can indeed seem a bit autistic, considering our increasingly meaningless use of the word.

Wittgenstein did not have to wait to discover that other people existed. He pointed out the fallacy (and the truth - "The world is my world" TLP 5.62) of solipsism in the Tractatus. He took himself as close to death as possible, by acting as a forward observer for the Austrian artillery, the most dangerous place to be, in the First War. He hoped it would intensify his ability to philosophise – which is perhaps the slightly 'mad' courage of a very intense young man. When he, an officer, found that his troops were suffering and dying with typhoid fever while waiting to be demobbed, and prisoners of the Allies, he insisted on being moved to their camp so he could care for them.

The refutation of the possibility of "private language", surely an insight of genius, is nothing to do with Asperger's syndrome; indeed, if there were such a thing as proof in this field, it would prove that Wittgenstein did not have an autistic disorder. Wittgenstein, who had been beside dying men, did not have to infer another's pain when it was open to view. His argument, still generally undiscovered and so not understood by psychiatry, puts paid to the horrible theoretical formulations psychiatry and psychology insist on: the "inner world" of Kleinian psychoanalysis, the "inner working model" of attachment theory, the "theory of mind" of theories about autism, the newer concept of "mentalisation", "mentalese" as an evolved 'inner' language that precedes the various local languages that humans use, the "semantic mental states" of cognitive 'science' and ideas that meaning is encoded in the brain, and ultimately the notion that psychiatric 'symptoms' and 'signs' are the outer markers of an inner 'mental state' that can be objectively assessed. All of these terms are nonsense in the resolute sense as discussed by Mulhall and others, that is they have no referent –

there is no thing there. No ghost in the machine.

When he taught Wittgenstein preferred small intimate groups. He hated delivering monologues, the 'autistic' phenomenon of university teaching that delivers 'facts', often without engaging with the audience. Fitzgerald is talking to himself, delivering a monologue. Fitzgerald's hypothesis that genes determine one's thought in the end seems to be a way of standing above Wittgenstein, and anyone else, rather than seriously engaging with what is being said, and what we might understand that would challenge and change us.

References:

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