



Andrew Rosenstock

The Philosophical Touch

How Wittgenstein can Enhance Somatic Therapies

By Andrew Rosenstock, Certified Rolfer™

ABSTRACT *To launch The Philosophical Touch column, Rolfer™ Andrew Rosenstock shares his passion – the philosophy of somatic therapies – inspired by Advanced Rolting® Instructor Jeffrey Maitland, PhD (1943-2023). Rosenstock spotlights Austrian Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951), offering some context of Wittgenstein’s life story and his links between the cognition of language with the physical interactions we have with the world.*

In honor of the passing of Advanced Rolting® Instructor Jeffrey Maitland, PhD (1943-2023), I wanted to create a series of short articles on how philosophy is fundamental to embodied and somatic practices. Maitland’s tireless work in this pursuit was not lost on me. He significantly influenced me and how I approach not just the work we do, but the life I live. He opened a door for me to new ways of thinking, experiencing the

world we live in, and also how to meet my clients in more efficient and larger ways.

My first Rolting Ten Series™ client was a professor of philosophy and a specialist in phenomenology¹. At one point during our sessions, he said, “You are doing my work embodied.” I didn’t understand what he meant at the time, I do more so now. I hope to share that same type of insight with you, the reader, in these short introductions to embodied ontology².



Portrait of Ludwig Wittgenstein, taken in 1929, taken by Moritz Nähr (1859-1945) for the conferment of the Trinity College Scholarship. The image is in the public domain since the photographer died more than seventy years ago; see https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ludwig_Wittgenstein_1929.jpg

These writings are meant as an amuse bouche, a taster to what your whistle for what the main meal could be. They are snippets into much larger topics, topics people such as Maitland have been bringing to our community for years. And these are topics I hope we continue to share in conversation. For me, the 'diving deeper' into the ontological⁹ realm is when my bodywork practice really began to change and I began to understand (and not understand) – *what are we actually doing here?*

Austrian Philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951)

In the complex interplay between mind and body that characterizes somatic therapy, the unexpected yet profound insights of Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein offer a fresh perspective. As a seminal thinker of the twentieth century, his explorations into language, thought, and how we engage with our work have much to teach those of us on the therapeutic front lines. In our treatment rooms, the nuances of communication

and understanding the nature of human bodily being are pivotal.

Let me give you an overly concise and simplified biography of Wittgenstein. He was born in Austria in 1889 to a wealthy and cultured family. He initially studied engineering before turning to philosophy. His early work focused on the relationship between language and reality, proposing that the structure of language mirrors the structure of the world. Later, he shifted to examining how language functions in practice, emphasizing the importance of ordinary language and the various ways it is used.

Wittgenstein's ideas continue to shape contemporary philosophical thought, and his philosophical journey can be divided into two distinct phases. His early work is encapsulated in his book *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), where he aimed to define the limits of language and thought. He argued that language's structure reflects the world's structure, proposing that only propositions that can be logically articulated correspond to meaningful statements about reality. In philosophy, propositions are statements that express facts about the world. They are used to convey information that can be viewed as true or false. Wittgenstein viewed propositions as logical pictures of reality, meaning they represent the way things are or could be in the world. This work placed him at the heart of the logical positivist movement⁴, which sought to ground knowledge in logical and empirical verification.

In his early work, Wittgenstein believed that language works like a mirror,

accurately reflecting the world through logical statements. He thought that anything meaningful must be something we can clearly and logically state; if we can't put it into words in a logical way, it falls outside the realm of what we can meaningfully discuss.

Shortly after completing *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), he gave up philosophy because he believed he had solved the essential problems of philosophy and sought a more meaningful life through other pursuits.

Phase Two of Wittgenstein's Life

After a period of working as a schoolteacher and laborer, Wittgenstein returned to philosophy, dramatically revising his views. His later work, most notably presented in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), this book, published posthumously, shifted focus from the abstract relationship between language and the world to how language is used in everyday life. He wrote about the concept of 'language games' to illustrate the diverse and context-dependent ways in which language operates. This pragmatic turn influenced ordinary language philosophy, emphasizing the variability and complexity of linguistic practices.

"The limits of my language means the limits of my world." (Wittgenstein 1922, Proposition 5.6.)

Wittgenstein's influence extends beyond philosophy into fields such as cognitive

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science, linguistics, and literary theory. In cognitive science, his emphasis on the role of language in shaping our perception of the world has influenced theories about the nature of human cognition and the limits of artificial intelligence. In linguistics, his views on the fluidity of meaning and the context-dependent nature of language have informed studies on how language functions in real-world use, moving away from rigid, formal structures. In literary theory, his focus on the interpretive nature of language has been pivotal in understanding how texts create meaning, influencing approaches to narrative, symbolism, and the reader's role in interpretation. His ideas challenge us to rethink the nature of meaning, understanding, and human communication, making him one of the twentieth century's most fundamental, paramount, and original thinkers. He died in 1951, leaving behind a legacy that continues to inspire and provoke philosophical inquiry.

Application of Wittgenstein

Now that we know a bit more about this fellow, let's look at how his work can relate to what we do with bodywork.

Wittgenstein's philosophy, centered on the ways in which language shapes our understanding of the world, holds particular relevance for the somatic bodyworker and client navigating the deeply personal terrain of physical sensation and emotional experience. He argued that the meaning of words hinges on their usage within specific life contexts

– a concept that encourages us to listen more deeply to how clients describe their inner experiences. This nuanced attention to language can help bodyworkers grasp how clients perceive their bodies, aiding the formation of a therapeutic dialogue that is as empathetic as it is insightful.

Moreover, Wittgenstein posited that the structure of language influences not only our thoughts but also our actions and interactions, suggesting that the way the world is linguistically shaped for us alters how we navigate through it. This intertwining of language and lived experience suggests that changes in how we speak and think about our bodies can directly impact how we experience our physicality and move through the world. In our practices, altering the language surrounding pain, movement, or emotional states can transform the client's physical experiences, providing both mental and bodily benefits.

Wittgenstein also challenged the notion of a private language, suggesting that the words we use must be anchored in shared experiences to be meaningful. In the therapeutic setting, this insight is crucial. Therapists and clients must often co-create a language to communicate effectively about the client's subjective experiences of pain or discomfort. This collaborative linguistic process not only clarifies the client's experiences but also strengthens the therapeutic alliance, making the treatment more targeted and effective.

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that our mental processes are often intertwined with our physical interactions with the world. This idea resonates deeply with the principles of somatic therapy, which posits that the body is not merely a vessel for treatment but an active participant in healing and understanding. Recognizing this, somatic bodyworkers can utilize physical movements not only to mend the body but also to enhance cognitive and emotional states, integrating therapy more holistically into the client's life.

Integrating the Philosopher's Touch

The philosopher's call to focus on the ordinary – and the ordinary uses of language – can translate into a therapeutic approach that sees every movement and daily activity as an opportunity for healing. This perspective can lead therapists to encourage clients to incorporate therapeutic practices into their everyday lives, thereby promoting continuous well-being rather than isolated episodes of care.

Lastly, though Wittgenstein was not explicitly a phenomenologist, his emphasis on describing direct experiences offers valuable techniques for enhancing how we engage with clients' bodily sensations and movements. By prioritizing the lived experience of the client, therapists can develop strategies that are acutely attuned to the subjective quality of bodily feelings, making the therapeutic process more personally relevant and effective.

Incorporating Wittgenstein's insights into the practice of somatic and embodied bodywork does not just add an intellectual layer; it revolutionizes the therapeutic process. It enables a form of care that is deeply communicative, empathetically nuanced, and effectively integrative, recognizing the intricate dance between language, perception, and bodily experience. Such philosophical integration champions a holistic approach to therapy, where the mind and body are not treated as separate but as intimately connected arenas of health and healing, each enriching the other.

Endnotes

1. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach that explores how we experience and perceive the world. It focuses on the structures of consciousness and lived experiences from the first-person perspective. It seeks to describe phenomena as they appear to us, without assumptions, aiming to understand the essence of our direct experiences.
2. Embodied ontology is the philosophy of being a human being.
3. Ontology is a branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature of being (Merriam-Webster.com 2024a). Metaphysics is a division of philosophy concerned with the fundamental nature of reality and being (Merriam-Webster.com 2024b). Metaphysics includes ontology, cosmology, and often epistemology.
4. The logical positivist movement was a philosophical approach that emerged in the early twentieth century. It advocated that meaningful knowledge is grounded in logical reasoning and empirical verification. It held that statements are only meaningful if they can be proven true or false through direct observation or logical proof, dismissing metaphysical or ethical claims as nonsensical if they cannot be empirically tested.

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Keywords

philosophy; phenomenology; Jeffrey Maitland; ontology; mind and body; Wittgenstein; language; thought; somatic; language games; understanding the world; sensation; emotions; shared experience; therapeutic setting; somatic therapy; movement; embodied ontology; cognitive interaction. ■