

Wittgenstein on consciousness in “Philosophical Investigations”

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There are many important sides of Cartesian dualism and among them is the epistemological perspective, which says that there is a faculty of introspection by which a human being as a conscious being can know the contents of his/her own consciousness.¹ Here, we will discuss only Wittgenstein's criticism of this perspective. He changed his position at least twice (TLP, PI), but we are going to discuss only a few paragraphs from PI (398-427), and some related passages from Z. Wittgenstein in his philosophy, and in this part of it as well, did not formulate a thesis in the strict sense, nor did he formulate strict objections and arguments. Rather, he “displayed philosophical puzzlement about the mind by the identification of misleading images and superficial similarities” (Budd 1995:617). He saw that there is an important problem closely connected with the Cartesian picture of consciousness.

(1) Wittgenstein says: “Though the ether is filled with vibrations the world is in dark. But one day man opens his seeing eye, and there is light.” (PI II 184, Glock 1997, Mladić 2003:207-216)

Consciousness is conceived as the ray of light which illuminates our private mental episodes. (Glock 1997:85) In his later work, Wittgenstein raised numerous objections to this picture, or “world of consciousness”, especially in PI. The point is that if these objections stand, then the Cartesian picture of consciousness is unacceptable. But let us see some of his strongest objections to the picture (1).

(1.1) According to the thesis, the content of consciousness is a special kind of entity to which only I have access. The objection is formulated by the well-known “private language argument” which says that there are no such private entities and private access to them (PI 243-315, McGinn 1997:143-177). But that might be going too far. He certainly holds that we can't talk about an inner private realm, but in PI 304 he famously says it is “not a something, but not a nothing either...”.

(1.2) The consequence of the first objection is that there is no infallible introspection. If after an accident I say to my doctor “I am conscious” I don't report the result of introspection of my mind but simply signal him that I have regained consciousness and I could have done that equally by saying “Hello!” (PI 416-417).

(1.3) For this reason (1.2) it is completely misguided to look for the essence of consciousness by turning one's attention toward one's own consciousness. Quite the contrary, what is needed is an investigation of the use of the word “conscious” and similar words like “aware” etc. But regarding this and (1.2) if I could signal to my doctor that I am conscious equally by saying “I am conscious now” and by saying “Hello doctor!” why are we then so puzzled by the analysis of the word consciousness and not by the analysis of the word hello?

(1.4) Such an investigation reveals that “consciousness” doesn't refer to a phenomenon inside us, and the alleged ontological gap between the physical

world and the world of consciousness is merely a categorical difference between sentient and non-sentient beings that we commonly apply. “Healthy human beings are conscious” or “Healthy human beings hear, see, smell...” are grammatical propositions. This is established in Wittgenstein's concept of grammar (PI 281-284).

(1.5) If what is previously said (1.1 – 1.4) is correct, then there is no “unbridgeable gulf between consciousness and brain process” and there is not a such thing as a “metaphysical mystery of consciousness” (PI 412). This is Wittgenstein's treatment of the Cartesian picture of consciousness and it is a part of his more general criticism of the inner/outer distinction (Glock 1997:174-179). The core of the inner/outer distinction is the idea of privacy which has two different but nonetheless interconnected connotations (the private ownership thesis, and the epistemic privacy thesis); privacy (regarding 1.1) could mean:

(2) “X is privately owned” which means that no one else can have somebody's X (“my pain” for example), and “X is epistemically private” which means for example that “only I can know that I am in pain”. (PI 398-411, Mladić 2003:207-217).

(3) This is also closely connected to the problem of other minds. The mental states of others are hidden to me as well as my mental states are hidden from others. Wittgenstein's criticism can be summarized as “Nothing is hidden!”

This was Wittgenstein's criticism of the Cartesian “world of consciousness”. The treatment of empiricist view of consciousness was also criticized from the same position, i.e., by the same arguments.

(4) The Cartesian solution is “res cogitans” as immaterial substances which are the bearer of psychological properties. Cartesian and empiricist conceptions imply that the mental is an inner realm of subjective experience contingently connected to the body. For Wittgenstein, “the mental is essentially manifested in the forms of behavior which give expression to the inner” (Hacker 1999:4).

(5) Regarding behavior, “while Cartesians and behaviourists represented behaviour as bare bodily movement, Wittgenstein emphasized that human behaviour is, and is experienced, as being, suffused meaning, thought, passion and will” (Hacker 1999:5).

Wittgenstein's final criticism of Cartesian and the empiricist “world of consciousness” is a simple statement that human beings have consciousness, and trees and stones do not have it (PI 418, similar in PI 281 with difference in “*living* human beings ... have or haven't consciousness”), and this is a grammatical statement. So, investigation of our use of words like “consciousness” or “awareness” is of utmost importance, and the result of such investigation is:

(a) That we conceive consciousness as something that is realized not by some “mental entity” like “res cogitans” (Cartesian solution),

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- (b) And not that it can be deduced from premises that include facts about our behavior as bare bodily movements (empiricism),
- (c) But rather that we conceive the whole human being as being in "the stream of life" that give signs to others like a sign "Hello!" or a sign "I am conscious now".

This unity of human beings implies many ideas that are quite contrary to those of the Cartesian and empiricist traditions. This kind of unity, as is presented in Wittgenstein's treatment of "human being/life", seems to be extraordinarily strong in terms of the third position between dualism and behaviorism.

(6) Wittgenstein's solution is that human being is a psychophysical unity, not an embodied anima, but a living creature in 'a stream of life', because it is human beings, not minds, who perceive and think, have desires and act, feel joy and sorrow. But the question is how he connected these two elements of his solution, namely:

(6.1) That our investigation of consciousness is conceptual or grammatical, and the other one,

(6.2) That only a living human being as a kind of unity or whole in its stream of life expresses consciousness or is conscious?

The crucial aspect of grammatical investigation (6.1) is that "'I have consciousness' – is not a proposition" (Z 401), and the crucial aspect of the "descriptive" investigation (6.2) says that "a man can pretend to be unconscious; but "conscious"?" (Z 395) However, it seems to us that the connection is almost natural concerning his later philosophy.

(7) Since language is given in language-game model and practice, since language game is "a part" of an activity or form of life (PI 23), and "is there – like our life" (OC 559), and finally since expressions in language have their meaning only in "stream of life", it seems that investigating consciousness means "investigating grammar of consciousness".

(8) On the other hand and following the same line of argument, there is no private language since language games are actual practices of speaking of language and since language is public. These elements imply that there is no inner realm of anything including consciousness among many other things in the manner of Cartesian "res cogitans" and its contents, but this is a bad sign for a language, if it cannot "express" the inner realm. Of course from this it does not follow that behaviorism is correct, but this will be discussed later.

Now we must ask how this was done in Wittgenstein's work, especially in PI. (9) Regarding (7) and (8), if we apply these results (some of them coming directly from the criticism of TLP, PI 1-133) regarding the problem of the gap between brain processes and consciousness, Wittgenstein must criticize the Cartesian view of consciousness as a result of "res cogitans". Imagine that a stone has a soul, or that a human body has a soul, (PI 284), and you will see that it is wrong, because "only for a being that behaves like a human we can say that it has pain" (PI 283).

That is how the human being is introduced in the argument.

(10) But, there is another problem. If we criticize dualism, or the Cartesian "world of consciousness" then

implicitly the statement that human action (linguistic as well as non-linguistic) and the form of life is what counts, then we can be accused of behaviorism, because fiction is everything besides human behavior (PI 307).

The first thing is that Wittgenstein explicitly says that if it is a matter of fiction, then it must be grammatical fiction (PI 307). But, quite the contrary, it is a grammatical reality, since when a child is in pain, and it is gesticulating in a certain typical way, and it is screaming "It hurts!" for example (acculturated pain-behavior), that means that it was educated in pain behavior (Schmerzbehemen, PI 244), and this acculturation by virtue of uttering "It hurts!" is the result of this education. And that means that a child acquired not only a language in which it could say "I am in pain", but also a form of life. A description of behavior is not something that serves us as an explanation of a certain behavior, but a description of a certain behavior makes sense precisely because one is behaving in such a way. (PI 357) Psychology is interested in behavior, not in the soul. So, what does a psychologist observe if not the behavior of people, especially their utterances and statements? "But *they* [utterances/statements] don't speak of behavior." (PI II, 179). So, for Wittgenstein behavior is not just "bodily movement" like in behaviorism, but rather the whole life of a living human being, and actions as its parts. In this respect, Wittgenstein rejected behaviorism and empiricism with the same argument with which he refused Cartesian consciousness. Concerning consciousness, Wittgenstein followed the same line of description as he did regarding language, rules, and reality in PI. Since there is no private language, and there are no isolated "res cogitans", then there must be something objective. But he criticized behaviorism on the same grounds. Moreover, he contrasted them as similarly unacceptable positions. Following A. J. Rudd (2000) and P. M. S. Hacker (2001) we can see the place of his position in the context of these two opposite viewpoints. FIRST PERSON: Starting from the introspection of the isolated subject: Cartesian "res cogitans". THIRD PERSON: Starting from the objectivity of scientific observation: behavioral bare "bodily movements". SECOND PERSON: Starting from ordinary human interaction: language-games, forms of life, which is Wittgenstein's position, namely the investigation of how we learn the language in which we talk about inner states. The result of such investigation is the following:

(11) "The inner states find a natural or "primitive" expression in and through physical behavior." /.../ "To be in pain is not just to display pain behavior, or even to have a disposition to do so; but it is a part of the experience of pain that it finds natural expression in certain types of behavior." (Rudd 2000)

Living human beings are entities which express their feelings, thoughts, intentions, which are occupied in different activities in their stream/form of life. But, from the point of view of the form of life (and especially in light of its connection with practice, handling, routines, etc. from PI and OC, see Krkač 2003) there is no relevant difference between expressing pain, sorrow, or joy, and lifting a book, or sitting on a chair. This seems the way in which Wittgenstein connected or saw the connection between "grammatical investigation", and the "investigation of form of life" of consciousness among other things. It seems that explications (7) to (10) show the difference and connection between (6.1) and (6.2), and in the end this explains his general solution stated in (6) which says: Wittgenstein's solution is that the human being is a psychophysical unity, not an embodied "anima", a living creature in "a stream of

life", because it is human beings, not minds, who perceive and think, have desires and act, feel joy and sorrow... But the question is what the human being is. Regarding human nature, Wittgenstein surely rejected Cartesian (dualist) and Humean (empiricist/behaviorist) explanations, and adopted a quite simple reason in the famous, already mentioned paragraph of PI.

(12) "Only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears, is deaf; is conscious or unconscious." (PI 281, related to 282-287).

Regarding the interpretation of paragraph 281 we can quote A. Kenny: "I conclude that there is good reason to heed the warning of Wittgenstein with which this paper began [PI 281]. The moral is not that the human-being predicates cannot have their use extended at all, but that they must be extended cautiously and self-cautiously, and that if they are extended one may not argue from the application of such a predicate to a whole human being to the application of the transferred predicate to anything other than the whole human being." (Kenny 1987:133-134) Following H. – J. Glock (1997:156) we can cite two arguments for this claim (12).

(13) There is a conceptual (grammatical) connection between psychological terms and forms of behavior. We can ascribe thoughts only to those creatures which are capable of 'manifesting them' (PI 284).

(14) Such expressions ("I am in pain") make sense only as a part of a complex of the form of life. "The concept of pain is characterized by a particular function in our life... we only call 'pain' what has 'this' position, 'these' connections." (Z 532-533).

There are at least three possible explanations for these arguments.

- (a) In the first interpretation there is a tension between behavioral criteria and contextualism of the form of life.
- (b) In the second interpretation there is a relation and in it the form of life implies behavioral criteria (for a different community it is possible to respond the same, but that "pain" would have a different meaning).
- (c) In the third, they are compatible because without forms of life, forms of behavior would be unintelligible (Glock 1997:156). The point is simple.

(15) If it is correct that we can ascribe experiential predicates (like "... in pain") only to sentient beings, then there (a) is no sense to ascribe them to non-material substances like in dualism, (b) nor to ascribe them to physical bodies or their parts like in materialism.

The first consequence (a) is nevertheless accepted by the majority of contemporary philosophers of the mind, and the second (b) is suspicious because some philosophy of science informs us that "the mind is the brain" (science of course does not tell this). As far as we can see it, this claim that the mind is the brain is not crucial for the argument, but rather, the answer to the question – what cultural anthropology tells us about sentient beings. But, what really seems problematic in Wittgenstein's overview of human nature is not so much the concept of a "sentient being" or "human being", but more fundamentally, the concept of a "living being".

(16) "I am inclined to speak of a lifeless thing as lacking something. I see life definitely as a plus, as something added to a lifeless thing. (Psychological atmosphere)" (Z 128, see also PI 430 (comparison between a log and living creature) /.../ "Seeing life as a weave, this pattern is not always complete and is varied in a multiplicity of ways." (Z 568)

However, Wittgenstein often speaks of life metaphorically and also literally. So, we can draw the analogy: like "the use of a sign is its life", (metaphorically), so "the action of a living (sentient as well) being is its life" (literally). And being conscious is not a part of a mental realm nor is it a part of mere brain activity/or expressed by bodily movement, but rather implicit in the action of a living human being (Hacker 2001:87).

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