Wittgenstein's Phenomenology: Reconsidering the Relationship of Experience and Language

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Although Wittgenstein's work is not usually associated with the term phenomenology, he nevertheless makes explicit use of it at two very different points in the course of his philosophic thought, i.e. during his middle period and again towards the end of his life. Virtually unknown outside the circle of Wittgenstein studies, even those within the ranks have rarely discussed this aspect of his work. The reason for this situation is comprised of many factors, not the least of which was a lack of access to Wittgenstein's *Nachlaß*. With the publication of the *Wiener Ausgabe* and the *Bergen Electronic Edition*, this gap in the research has started to close. Indeed, several interpreters have made efforts to examine and unravel this unusual, if not puzzling, phase in his development. Yet, many aspects of Wittgenstein's phenomenology and phenomenological language remain unclear, including their significance for his later work. Following Herbert Spiegelberg's lead, I intend to examine Wittgenstein's first brush with phenomenology in order to draw connections between these two lesser known phases of his work, primarily focusing on what I see as an important shift in his methodological approach to philosophical difficulties, eventually leading to a reconsideration of the relationship between experience and language. The first section briefly discusses the concept of Wittgenstein's phenomenology – understood as the attempt to construct a phenomenological language – and his subsequent rejection thereof, in order to set the stage for a significant shift in his thought. The second section jumps ahead a bit to discuss his more mature treatment of the inner/outer dualism as it relates to Wittgenstein's concepts of grammar and language-game.

1. Moving in a New Direction: The Shift to Immediate Experience

As Wittgenstein began to gravitate away from his ideas in the *Tractatus*, his philosophical interests came to focus primarily on immediate experience. He increasingly addressed issues involving our immediate perceptions of the world and our linguistic attempts to convey them.

When he returned to Cambridge at the beginning of 1929, he immediately set about explicating his new philosophic direction. In *Some Remarks on Logical Form*, Wittgenstein admits to the inadequacy of his approach in the *Tractatus*, and signals a move towards the investigation of both spatial and temporal perception. As he held previously, language hides the true structure of the world, however, the focus of his new investigation calls for the "logical analysis of actual phenomena" and ordinary language. Where Wittgenstein had previously held that atomic propositions were completely independent of one another, this early-middle view speaks of systems of propositions being compared with reality, and not just against a single point. While certainly not a complete departure from his earlier position, he does hint at the need for a phenomenological grammar and corresponding language to completely describe our experience, in order to get at the actual structure of the world. We need only find, he says, the "appropriate symbolism" to describe the phenomena as directly perceived, leaving out all hypothetical additions [*hypothetische Zutat*]. This description of immediate experience is what Wittgenstein initially means when he speaks of phenomenology.

At that time, he was fond of using what he called the "magic lantern" simile to illustrate his point regarding the problem of the relationship between language and experience. He would speak of the film running through the projector, one frame after another. The 'present' consists of the frame lying before the projection lamp, the future awaits its turn on the feeder reel, while the past has already moved onto the catch reel. As spectators, however, we are only presented with that which is projected onto the screen. It has neither a future, nor a past; there is only that which is present before us. Wittgenstein characterizes the problem of describing immediate experience as such: while the picture before the lamp is said to have "neighbors" (for it is only one of a sequence of pictures), the picture on the screen does not. In attempting to develop a phenomenological language capable of unbiasedly representing immediate experience, he realized that in describing such experiences as mentioned above we cannot make use of language involving terms like sequence, past, present or future. We must include only that which is on the screen and nothing else. He sees the two reside on different levels; language as unfolding in the physical world and the phenomena as an atemporal immediacy. In his own words, "we find ourselves, with our language so to speak, not in the domain of the projected picture but in the domain of the film" (Wittgenstein, 1975). Thus, the question becomes: How can language, which unfolds in time, describe a realm not in time?

Finding that there are no moves left to be made, Wittgenstein concludes before the year is out that a description completely devoid of hypothetical components is neither necessary, nor even possible. Language, he thinks, could never bridge the gap between what is referred to here as primary – immediate experience – and that which is secondary – language or any means of representation. He feels that the problem has been improperly formulated in terms of an irresolvable separation of the sensing subject and the perceived outer world. To this end, he writes, "Experience is not something that one can demarcate by determinations of something else which is not experience; rather a logical form" (Wittgenstein, 2000).

He concludes that what is now necessary is to determine the essential from the non-essential in our everyday language, and the role of grammar takes on a new importance. Thus, a second fundamental shift in his thought has occurred as he rejects the idea of an artificial language of immediacy – an undistorted representation capable of tapping directly into the world of appearances. "How strange if logic were concerned with an 'ideal' language and not with *ours*" (Wittgenstein, 1975). The distinction between a primary and secondary language is declared flawed – the product of a philosophic error.

2. Moving Beyond the Dichotomy

As I have said, Wittgenstein's first attempt at phenomenology very quickly came to a self-proclaimed end. At this point, he sees the future of his investigations to be the grammatical analysis of our everyday language; for it is here where the errors of philosophy, especially his own, will ultimately find their resolution. However, it is worth noting that not everyone believes Wittgenstein to have abandoned his phenomenological undertaking.

Herbert Spiegelberg contends that what Wittgenstein has given up is not a phenomenological analysis, but rather this narrow sense of it. He continues hypothesizing that a broader sense remains intact within his notion of grammar (Spiegelberg, 1981). A letter Spiegelberg later received from G. H. von Wright lends support to this view, where he says that what should be of most interest to phenomenology is Wittgenstein's notion of grammar. The obvious question here is why? The short answer lies in that Wittgenstein is still very much interested in investigating the relationship between experience and language. But, unlike his earlier conception of immediate experience, his later one points to its inseparability from language. This growing awareness of the interwoven nature of experience, language, and grammar is perhaps best illustrated by Wittgenstein's treatment of philosophic dualism.

Since the modern era dualistic thought has exercised a remarkable presence in almost every aspect of our lives, having left its indelible mark on many of our most important discourses. If, for example, the problems of substance and causality are construed in terms of the concepts mental and physical, we have already set up a certain framework or course for the discussion of the world and subject; in other words, the inner/outer distinction is already firmly in place. Viewed in this way, the dichotomy does not result from our analysis; rather one conceptual framework has been uncritically applied to the discourse. This is what Wittgenstein means when he refers to the "method of projecting". This split has come to inhabit not only our scientific conceptions, e.g. the term socialization – the internalization of the external relationships of our surroundings into the individual, but our everyday understanding of the world as well, e.g. as an independent order of reality in contrast to an inner realm of life (or existence). Because his own thought – his early phenomenology – was dominated and structured by an inner/outer (mediated/unmediated) dichotomy, it should not strike us as strange that this theme should receive so much attention in his later work. Wittgenstein's brief, but insightful remark in the *Investigations* (§580), "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria," is bluntly calling into question our understanding of the relationship between inner and outer, by asking, "Is this an absolute distinction?…[and] Why do we feel the need to make use of it in *this* situation?"

However, Wittgenstein's grammatical investigations represent more than an attempt to overcome this dichotomy. The concepts themselves are nothing to be overcome, but rather it is our tendency to see things in a particular way that requires attention. Thus, one cannot really talk of having conquered a philosophic problem, but merely having come to terms with it (this difference can be seen in the German terms *Überwindung* and *Verwindung*). Certainly the uses of the concepts inner and outer are not always unwarranted, and Wittgenstein's point (if one can speak of him making points), is rather that an uncritical relationship to the uses of these concepts can hinder other avenues of understanding and approaching the world. This

is our bewitchment by languages – our preoccupation with a particular model. Wittgenstein illustrates this tendency by examining the common association of "thinking" and "process":

> Thinking is not an incorporeal process which lends life and sense to speaking, and which it would be possible to detach from speaking, rather as the Devil took the shadow of Schlemiehl from the ground.— But how "not an incorporeal process"? Am I acquainted with incorporeal processes, then, only thinking is not one of them? No; I called the expression "an incorporeal process" to aid in my embarrassment when I was trying to explain the meaning of the word "thinking" in a primitive way (Wittgenstein, 1971).

The misleading aspect mentioned in the quote lies in our understanding of processes. To speak of an 'incorporeal' process exceeds our actual experiences of processes, i.e. we are *only* acquainted with or know about mechanical and physical processes. What we have tried to do is broaden our notion of physical processes to include a realm that the dichotomy itself makes inaccessible to such conceptualizations. Although indicative of, this passage can only take us so far with respect to, Wittgenstein's critique of the inner/outer. His most explicit treatments of these themes, and among his last, are to be found in the second volume of *The Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*.

When referring to the thoughts and feelings of others we usually associate an inaccessibility or internality to them. It is common to hear someone say something like, "I don't know what he or she is feeling," or perhaps "I don't know what you are thinking," while gesturing to one's head. This kind of talk leads us to believe that the thoughts, feelings, sensations, etc. of others are unknowable to us. But is this the case? Are such things as feelings impossible for us to understand and know? Are we really clear about our determination in this matter? Clearly, Wittgenstein would say, "No".

What we have done, according to Wittgenstein, is mix-up different language-games. We have let a particular model of understanding dominate its application.

> Why do we say: "I didn't know what went on behind this brow", although it can be of no importance to us whatsoever what goes on behind someone's brow. Our uncertainty doesn't at all refer to what goes on in the inner; and even if it does refer to the mental, the mental finds its expression in the bodily (Wittgenstein, 1993).

I take the main point to be that by reading the 'surface' grammar of our language into the experience itself, we mistakenly grant this characterization a certain significance not necessarily warranted; that somehow this way of looking at things belongs to the *essence* of thinking.

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein proclaims that language-games should be viewed as *Urphänomene*; they occupy a unique and originary place within our *Weltanschauung*. He writes: "[We should] look upon the language-game as the *primary* thing" [das *Primäre*] (Wittgenstein, 1971). Thus, language has a privileged position in his investigations, not because language has some form of ontological priority over experience, but rather because language is our investigative mode of access. Here, language serves the curious role of both subject *and* means of inquiry. Since we cannot get outside of language by means of it, we must subject our mode of inquiry itself to critique. We must always be on our guard from reading the structures of language as those of

immediate experience. And yet, to speak in this manner is already misleading; for one of Wittgenstein's later insights was that one cannot separate language (broadly conceived) from experience. To talk of them as two completely autonomous entities confuses the issue. We would have made, in Wittgenstein's own words, a quite innocent yet "decisive movement in the conjuring trick" (Wittgenstein, 1971); we have already unknowingly given a fairly definite structure to the concept or problem.

However, just because we *can* come to recognize that we project certain structures does not mean that we can "get by" without them. We are, after all, always already engaged in activity – even if one of those activities is armchair philosophizing. Here again, talk of projection can be misleading, for it invites one to understand an absolute division between language on one side and experience on the other; a division between what is experienced and the one doing the experiencing. Precisely this separation is what Cartesian dualism necessitates. While once the acknowledged goal of his earlier phenomenological grammar, he later deems this view misguided.

3. Concluding Remarks

Language comprises not only that which is spoken, written, or signed, but encompasses the entirety of human activities, which are concretely situated *in* the world. As such, the inseparability of language (expression) and experience indicates a perspectival shift from a Cartesian model, where language is portrayed as medium between two irreconcilable spheres, towards an understanding of language that recognizes its various "functions," including that of dualism. This is a subtle, but often overlooked, aspect in Wittgenstein's later thought. To speak of mediation projects precisely the subject-object dichotomy that he says requires a certain level of restraint; for to divide reality into: that which is experienced / language / that which experiences, would ignore the constitutive aspect of language in experience. To be sure, experience does *not* collapse into language; rather the absolute division between the two falls away to reveal their inseparability and mutual constitution. And once we have reached this level of constitutive primacy, questions of justification, inquiry, and reason quickly lose the force of their significance. In other words, we cannot get beyond or outside of language by means of language, and this simply means that talk of this nature continuously collapses in on itself.

Literature

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