

Self-Identification and Some Versions of the Dream-Argument

Tadeusz Czarnecki

Wittgenstein's general anti-sceptical argument included in *On Certainty* can be called an argument from semantic certainty: A sceptic must acknowledge that he understands sentences, which he undermines. But when the sceptic claims that he has a reason to doubt all sentences and, at the same time, that he understands the sentences he doubts, he contradicts himself, because one cannot doubt all sentences and understand any of them. Since some sentences are meaning-bearers of words, a total doubt implies complete lack of understanding of their meaning. This argument is expressed in a pragmatic stylization: since some assertions are meaning-bearers, a total doubt would amount to complete lack of understanding.

For example, when a person *A* obeys the order given by *B*: 'Bring me a book', he perhaps has an epistemic doubt as to whether an object, seen from a distance, is a book. But to dispel the epistemic doubt whether the object is a book, he must first have a semantic certainty, i.e., be certain what people mean by the word "book". And, if he did not know what the word meant, he would have to be instructed by help of ostensive definition including the identification sentence 'This is a book'. Identification sentences of the type 'This is *X*', asserted as components of ostensive definitions, are for Wittgenstein indispensable semantic tools (Wittgenstein 1969, § 519).

Assertions identifying external objects are traditionally undermined in virtue of the dream-argument: When a person *A* asserts 'This is *X*', he can be fully convinced that he identifies an external object *X* but, as it is possible that he dreams, it is possible that he actually identifies an internal object. Wittgenstein thinks that the dream-argument can be neutralized thanks to revealing its logical connections with an exceptional case of identification: self-identification.

Characteristically, the classical dream-argument, directed against the possibility of identification of external objects, does not question the possibility of self-identification. The famous dictum 'Cogito, ergo sum' implies that everything can be dubious, but, if one thinks, one cannot doubt both one's existence and one's identity. It remains certain that he who thinks always knows who he is. The possibility of successful self-identification is for Cartesian sceptic so far beyond doubt that even the dream-argument is meant to be too weak to question it.

This exceptional kind of certainty has a very singular aspect. The sceptic's conviction that self-identification is undisturbed follows from his interpreting the act of self-identification in a metaphysical way: as an act of uttering the word "I" in relation to the inner self. From his point of view, the word "I" can always be applied safely just because its application is thoroughly non-relational, i.e., the word "I" is logically unconnected with assertions of other identification sentences, which themselves could be undermined. Metaphysics neglects the question 'Who am I?'. The certainty of the metaphysical "I" is unconditional because the sentence 'This is I' does not follow from any premises and does not imply any consequences.

Wittgenstein stresses that ordinary self-identification means something different. Primarily, it is not understood as an act of naming oneself by applying the word "I" but as a prosaic linguistic custom of repeated application of the name "A" by a person A. An ordinary person does not speak of himself 'My name is I' but 'My name is A' and uses his name in a relational way, i.e., he is ready to make secondary self-identification assertions specifying his identity.

Since ordinary usage of a person's name does not hang in vacuum but is connected with one's ability to make secondary identification assertions, e.g., 'My eyes are green' or 'I have three sons', the power of the dream-argument seems to spread also over self-identification. The ability to make ordinary self-identification ceases to be evident because there is a contradiction between the possibility of dream and certainty of secondary identification sentences concerning external objects. As a result, the ability to utter one's name faultlessly becomes dubious and Wittgenstein faces a paradox: self-identification, interpreted metaphysically, is beyond doubt but interpreted ordinarily becomes again dubious. Claiming that metaphysical self-identification is not a proper kind of self-identification Wittgenstein seems to get into trouble.

Wittgenstein believes that this contradiction can be turned against the sceptic. His pragmatic critique of the dream-argument is carried in the following way: If a person A is uncertain of his self-identity, he does not fulfill the subject-condition of linguistic competence - no person B will be certain that A understands the words he utters in assertions identifying external objects when B doubts that A identifies himself properly. Similarly, if A is uncertain as to some assertions identifying external objects, B cannot be certain that A identifies himself properly.

Wittgenstein considers the following sceptical questions: Is it not possible that a person A, being convinced that he has just waken up, would assert: 'I imagined that my name is B'? Can, therefore, A be certain that he will not wake up again, will be prone to interpret the situation of his first assertion as a dream fantasy and say: 'I imagined that my name is A'? (Wittgenstein 1969, § 642). The hypothesis of many-dimensional dream

evidently undermines certainty of ordinary self-identification: a person *A* can endlessly dream that his name is "*B*", "*C*", and so on; every time he can be convinced that he has different look, qualities of character, personal history, etc.

Wittgenstein seems to be of opinion that the dream-hypothesis is senseless just because it suggests a systematic mistake in self-identification. A hypothesis that undermines the certainty of all self-identification assertions, discredits all assertions of the type 'I cannot make a mistake that *p*' and, therefore, implies that thinking in language is impossible, must be judged as absurdly false.

He admits that one can imagine a non-regressive case of a dream when, after weakening up, a person *A* has no difficulty in distinguishing what was unreal from what is real. But such a case, or its possibility, does not discredit the assertion 'I cannot make a mistake that *p*' insofar as there are sentences of a special semantic status, i.e., sentences belonging to the class of meaning-bearers or semantic assumptions of language (Wittgenstein 1969, § 643). The application of the operator 'I cannot make a mistake...' is still justified when it ranges over semantic sentences. The operator would be totally discredited only if all semantic sentences appearing within its range were discredited. Sentences of the type 'My name is *A*', for individual language users, are semantic assumptions of their ability to speak consistent language. They informally record a necessary condition of linguistic rationality. So, any reasoning undermining them must be absurdly false.

Wittgenstein's basic argument in favor of certainty of self-identification assertion is that if a person *A* does not know what his name is, it is uncertain whether he controls his speech. One cannot seriously take into account the possibility that a person is always mistaken when he makes a self-identification assertion 'My name is *A*'. If the primary assertion were discredited, all secondary self-identification assertions, e.g. the sentence 'This is *my* hand' would also be discredited. The possibility of a systematic mistake in self-identification is for Wittgenstein unacceptable because systematic successful self-identification is a necessary condition of playing all language games - the subject-condition of ability to use language competently (Wittgenstein 1969, § 644). If a person *A* realized that he made a self-identification mistake, it would be equivalent with her realization of the fact that he had lost ability to make competent judgments: 'If I was making a mistake that my name is *A*, I was unable to make judgments'. If mistakes in self-identification were made permanently or frequently, the fact would change all language games (Wittgenstein 1969, § 646).

There is an essential difference between an exceptional mistake appearing within a language game, which does not destroy the identity of the game, and a regular mistake, which would destroy the identity of the game (Wittgenstein 1969, § 647). If all people

made self-identification mistakes regularly, no language game could be played. Regular mistake in self-identification belongs to the boundary semantic mistakes because it precludes the possibility of entering any language game without deforming it. This mistake is unimaginable in the sense that people either believe that they speak a non-disfigured language and does not make it or make it repeatedly and disfigure the language.

In ordinary situations *A* tries to convince *B* that he does not make an epistemic mistake by removing a limited number of *B*'s doubts. For example, when *A* asserts: '*C* talked to me this morning and said that *p*', *B*'s reasonable doubts are these that are implied by the content of *A*'s assertion, i.e., *B* can reasonably doubt whether *A* talked to *C* or whether *C* actually said that *p*. Such doubts are predictable and it is easy to imagine what *A* should add to dispel them. Wittgenstein admits that such additional pieces of information are unable to exclude the possibility that *A* was dreaming about his talk to *C* and his assertion refers to no real talk (Wittgenstein 1969, § 648). Ordinary epistemic justifications, sufficient to neutralize doubts implied by a sentence's content, are insufficient to remove the possibility of dream. It does not mean, however, that the dream-argument undermines all assertions, self-identification assertion including, because the last one has the special status of a basic semantic assumption: one cannot reasonably claim that *A*, who stubbornly maintains that he is *B*, will be a fully rational speaker.

Wittgenstein mentions two qualities that decide about a special status of the sentence 'My name is *A*'. Firstly, it is for him a non-epistemic sentence, i.e., it does not have a distinctive empirical proof. People consider the sentence as irreversible because they have overwhelming semantic proofs of its certainty; everyone can support an assertion of the type 'My name is *A*' by a system of secondary self-identifying sentences. The strong conviction of its irreversibility is not a result of people's empty-mindedness but of the fact that, having a system of semantic proofs, they are justified in retaining certainty in face of any epistemic counter-proof. As far as the strength of its justification is concerned, the sentence does not differ from elementary mathematical sentences, which, in virtue of their place in a system, have so strong proofs that they are taken to be thoroughly irreversible (Wittgenstein 1969, § 657). The question: Couldn't you be deceived as to the fact that your name is *A* and then become aware of your mistake? is analogous to the question: Couldn't you be deceived that $2 \text{ plus } 2 \text{ is } 4$?

Secondly, the sentence 'My name is *A*' is not susceptible to doubt because of its essential non-temporality. When *A* says to *B*: 'I cannot be mistaken that I have just eaten dinner', then *B*, in order to undermine this assertion, can only consider the possibility that *A* lost his senses. In this particular case, *A* cannot be suspected of making an empirical

mistake - if *A*'s senses function, it is unimaginable that they could deceive *A* as to the fact that he has just eaten dinner. Wittgenstein suggests that in order to seed a doubt *B* can appeal to a sleep-argument: the person *A* can have, immediately after dinner, a dreamless sleep lasting for a time, not knowing about it, and then, after weakening, claim that he has just eaten dinner. This story suggests an asymmetry between *B*'s ordinary sleep-hypothesis, which is sufficient to undermine the sentence 'I've just eaten dinner', and epistemic reasons which *A* has in favor of his assertion. Wittgenstein underlines that *B*'s sleep-argument is unquestionably rational but, on the other hand, it produces only a doubt of a limited range. Namely, one can still separate such a grammatical form of the sentence, which is immune to the argument. The sentences 'I have just eaten dinner' and 'I ate dinner' are different because the factor of time is inessential for the second one. Wittgenstein claims that the sleep-argument can question *A*'s estimation of the time of eating but is unable to question the bare fact that *A* ate dinner. The sentence 'I have just eaten dinner' is a temporal sentence and that is why it is susceptible to the sleep-argument.

The immunity of the self-identification sentence from the ordinary dream-argument becomes explicable when one pays attention to the fact that the assertion 'My name is *A*' is radically non-temporal. To the question: 'How could I make a mistake that my name is *A*?' an ordinary person should answer: 'If I am normal, I cannot imagine how it would be possible' (Wittgenstein 1969, § 660). This answer is justified by the grammatical fact that the adverb "just", functioning as time determination, cannot be an integral part of the self-identification sentence: the sentence 'I have just eaten dinner' makes perfect sense, whereas the sentence 'My name has just been *A*' is senseless. When a person *A* uses the word "*A*" as his personal name, he has already been called "*A*" for a long time and his name has been certain for him for a long time. If *A* could not manage to make self-identification assertion repeatedly and with utmost certainty, his ability to make assertions identifying other things would be under suspicion. Only if *A* is able to make self-identification assertion with perfect certainty, can one ascribe to *A* the ability of making identification assertions concerning other things. Self-identification is a necessary condition of other things' identification.

Wittgenstein treats self-identification as a personal assumption of one's ability to use language: I can name other external objects, if I can name myself. To the sceptic he is therefore apt to say: If you acknowledge that you know your name, then you imply that you have some semantic knowledge about names of external objects and the dream-argument is an empty fiction. But if you doubt your identity, then you also doubt whether you are able to think in a non-disfigured language. If you need some additional reasons why you should be certain of your identity, pay attention to the fact that 'My name is *A*' is neither an empirical nor a temporal sentence.

References

Wittgenstein, L. (1969), *On Certainty*, Oxford: Blackwell.