

Where to seek for the ‘Uniquely Individual’ in Human Experience: In the Twilight Zone of Consciousness or Somewhere More Accessible?

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When we are faced with a profoundly unique experience such that ‘our mouths remain wide open’ – overwhelmed by having had such an experience – as the Turks say, our immediate reaction to that event is to attempt to store it in the private realm of our consciousness, i.e., our mind. Above all else, the mind is the coolest cellar to store such precious gifts as the sense impressions and the ineffable qualia of that very experience which are to be sifted through our memory—that is, a cognitive faculty of our intellect- and soon to be called for, i.e., introspectively ostended in light of our first- person authority. Perhaps it is not for nothing that ‘our mouths remain wide open’¹, for we think we do not have the words, the sentences to utter with that mouth with which we are able to explain what we went through during that particular experience, since language will contaminate it with what is cultural and what is public. According to this view, when our privately owned experience is brought to light with an avowal cloaked in words, those very words will always fall short of explaining what happened in our mind by crudely publicizing the private aspect of the phenomenon.

Before getting involved in an investigation as to why it is thought that language falls short of explaining the private aspect of our experiences, let us have an insight as to what we have in mind when we talk about these ‘profoundly unique, authentic, individual, etc. experiences’.

Ironically, the more technology advances, the more eclectic the practices of daily modern life become. While we observe a mass depersonalization on one side as we are being transformed more and more into numbers on our credit cards, genetic codes on our chromosomes or income recipients in tax statistics, an ever-increasing number of people, take refuge in fortunetellers’, tarot and horoscope readers’ and all sorts of meditation centers, be it Zen Meditation or Vipassana, etc. Whether they are looking for their lost self in these inward looking practices or whether they are looking for it in the wrong place, namely in the ‘inner’, in the disembodied ‘soul’, in the ‘etheric’ and the ‘spiritual’ is hardly our concern here. The problem at hand is that this recent phenomenon of masses being interested in matters ‘beyond explication’ concerning the quality of one’s experience when he is said to be experiencing for example a trance or when he (for example an Indian Sadhu) is lowering the rhythm of his heartbeat or when he(for example a deaf mute) is said to be recalling the memoirs of his thoughts before learning language raises the question as to whether there is an essentially private, an essentially ‘inner’ aspect of one’s experiences which only the first person can be said to ‘know’ or have access to and that which nothing can be said about. Thus, with the advent of such neo-spiritualism and, moreover, in the light of the quest to regain an authentic personhood in the realm of depersonalization, so-called genuine and individual experiences, the nature of which we tried to study are those which are said to have a non-linguistic leftover for and exclusively owned by their bearer. For don’t we hear ever more frequently from people around

that they had an utterly unique experience which they can not express in words?

One wants to ask: ‘Are you sure you have no medium to express what you have experienced? For there might be other ways than words upon which to load your thoughts. Say, for example, can you draw a picture of it or compose a song of what you went through in that profoundly unique, inexplicable experience?’ The answer may be ‘yes’ but the individual experiencing it will not be committed to accepting the picture s/he draws or the song s/he composes as the public expression of her private, inner experience in a somewhat symbolic language, for s/he will not see the practices of drawing and composing as yet other examples of language games. S/he will argue that the picture drawn on the basis of her memory or the song composed on the basis of what it feels to her to live such and such will remain to be private since they do not carry out the task of outwardly expressing her inner experience. Rather, they function to be the private note s/he takes down in her diary which only s/he herself can make sense of. Had there not been a language game of seeing something as something, another of identifying an experience as something, and yet another of identifying oneself as the owner of that experience, would s/he be able to draw that private picture or compose that private song for herself? Plus, wouldn’t s/he fail to make use of what her memory provides were s/he not able to *remember* her experience which involves her judging that event to be the foundation of what s/he is creating now?

The reason why I take the relationship between creative acts and ‘private’ aspect of an experience is that I believe creative acts have an authenticity, a privacy exclusively owned by its possessor. But here I am using the terms ‘authenticity’, ‘privacy’, ‘exclusively owned’ as parts of a different language game such that a composition, a drawing are unique to their creator but no more or no less than a sentence is unique to the individual uttering it. The privacy does not owe its existence to the individual’s founding afresh a language of which constituents originate from their possessor, but rather it owes its existence to the individual’s unique combination of what is given publicly such as the words and sentences of a spoken language, the notes of a musical system, the lines of a drawing be they Van Gogh’s drawing or tribal designs by Mitkila women. To better illustrate my point, we can take the example of ‘Take Five’ where notes never come together in that form with that rhythm until Dave Brubeck combined them in a way unique to him. In that sense it would be absurd to say that one can have a private composition of notes originating from him since recognizing something as a note already requires mastery of a technique called hearing and performing music in the absence of which the individual will fail to perceive anything as a *note*.

What about the case in which the individual who is said to have experienced something profoundly unique fails to provide even a private exhibition of her experience stating that s/he lacks the conceptual tools with which to explain what s/he went through? What use is such an

¹ (‘Şaşkınlıktan’) Ağzım bir karışık açık kaldı.’ in Turkish.

experience or such a claim of privacy to its possessor? What will be the criterion for her to judge that s/he had an experience at all? For isn't a certain grammar presupposed here within which s/he is to locate her experience as one that which s/he can not make sense of but still be sure to *have*? Why not regard it as a dream in which the individual sees something but fails to recognize it, i.e., a dream which the individual simply does not understand? Will a congenitally blind person understand, that is, be able to apply the concept of blue? He does not have a stage set to fit in colors whereas he has the stage set to fit in shapes and solids, etc. What happens then when the aspect of color sensation is by nature inaccessible to him? He simply cannot make use of the concept of color such that he won't be able to pick out blues from non-blues, which the language game of differentiating colors suggest. Were his eyes to open one day, he would not be in a position to pick out blues from non-blues on his first encounter with blue objects since he lacks the requisite practice of 'seeing something as' which the language game of differentiating colors presupposes.

So what are we to conclude when we are faced with reports such as an individual having a trance and having no conceptual tools to express what is it that he went through? Are we to grant him the privacy which in turn will entail that there can be thought without language? The question is 'did thinking take place or was he like the congenitally blind person facing blue but failing to recognize it and thus was what was uniquely individual in that experience conceptually inaccessible to him? Are we to conclude that he does not know more than what we know of his very individual experience? And plus where does this quest to know what nobody can know concerning our personal experiences come from?

Were we to find anything other than what is public, namely other than what we can conceive of within the conceptual framework that our forms of life provide us which also draw the boundaries of our consciousness, then we would be justified in thinking that there is a twilight zone in our consciousness which we are to conquer by inwardly ostending and through a circumspection of locating the self of our mental life in the brain somewhere. But Wittgenstein shows us that rising above our concepts is not an empirical but a grammatical impossibility. Because of our concepts which we sieve through the forms of life of the society we are a part of are the very boundaries of our *inner* life. Our language and thus our concepts are the conditions of the possibility of our understanding the world. Had we been of a different height, had we had no faces, had we been able to fly, the grammar of our world would have been completely different. That is why it does not make sense to think of our consciousness as disembodied.

When we think about the quest for conquering the twilight zone of our consciousness, namely the quest for what we cannot know with the concepts at hand which are the outcome of our public life that we have gained through public practices such as learning, rule following, practicing, calculating, etc., we find ourselves in the realm of what is inaccessible to us within our conceptual framework. The affinity of this quest with a commitment to disembodied brain events winks at us from the distance so that the attempt to make an effort to understand what we can not understand within the limits of our conceptual framework, i.e., with this body and this language, is in a way an attempt to go beyond our limits, to opt for the unlimited self of which conceptual borders are nothing but the infinity.

Wittgenstein's abrogation of the privacy of the mental realm has important bearings on our life. In the Cartesian picture the only type of existence that we could be certain about was existence of the self as a thinking being. So the self was flown away from the chimneys of the mind never to necessitate again its disposable extension, the body. Wittgenstein can be said to have put the mind back in its finite position. His *Philosophical Investigations* can be read as an ode to everything that is finite and human. For it is from that very finitude and that very bodily existence which we derive our concepts and which draw the borders of our consciousness.

When the individual is brought back on its feet again from the realm of the unlimited possibilities, which include existing without a body or doubting afresh all that is, one descends from the floor of the divinities to the ground. That means, to look for the uniquely profound experiences is now the everyday practice of worldliness, human discourse, namely language.

It would not be wrong to say that as long as there is life, there will be infinitely many combinations of words to come together, infinitely many contexts to make sense of and every time one utters a sentence it will be profoundly unique to that individual such that it is his or her own tone of voice, speaking out of the context of his/her own personal history, bounded by the conceptual framework of his/her own society, time and geographical conditions.

Therefore where to look for authenticity, uniqueness and individuality is by no means inside the brain lurking in the grey stuff, nor is it in the mental realm the mysteries of which wait yet to be explored but rather in public life, on the streets, neighbourhoods where the substance to fill in the *mental* is formed and practiced, i.e., in the realm of communication.

It is through communication that we experience our individuality. We are individual and authentic with respect to *others* who are out there in the world, not to entities trapped within our mind. The sphere of communication is the very sphere of creativity in which we constantly improvise with the other performers, namely, the rest of the world using the given tools of the language.

Language, being the vehicle(bearer) of thoughts in Wittgensteinian terms, and thus the vehicle of all there is to human discourse provides the basis for undermining the foundations of skepticism such that outright skepticism is nonsense since we speak a language, since we are able to communicate. We are indebted to Wittgenstein for such an aspect of language which presupposes the existence of people, world and communication based on these:

"that if what would satisfy our quest for 'unique individuality' is by nature inaccessible to us, then it would not be in a position to satisfy us".