

Ethics and Private Language

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When Wittgenstein says that “naming is a preparation of a description” (*PI*, 49) the sharp boundary between fact and value disappears. Hence, without considering whether the word ‘good’ corresponds to a fact, whether one’s utterance pictures the reality or not, one could use the word ‘good’ in a language-game and give it a meaning within the particular language-game. Wittgenstein says that in searching for the meaning of the word ‘good’ we must look at the language-games in which this word appears (*PI*, 77). But, we must first ask: “How do we learn value words like ‘good’ in ethical and non-ethical senses?”

In addressing this issue Wittgenstein almost always used two cases as examples. The first concerns how a child learns words like good, the second, how an adult learns them in a foreign language. Let us consider the case of a child and ask “How does a child learn the use of words like ‘chair’, ‘pain’ and ‘good’?”

The most common answer to how a child learns a language is given in terms of ‘ostensive teaching of words’. In principle, ostensive teaching is establishing “an association between the word and the thing” (*PI*, 6). Hence, when a child directs its attention to an object, say to a chair, one points at the chair and utter the name of the object and say ‘chair’. This seems to be a simple protocol in such teaching and learning and seems to be alike in the application of words like chair, table, etc. Yet, things get more complicated when it comes to names of colours and numbers. If one considers value names, the problem appears in its full complexity.

Ostensive teaching of words must have its limits in value judgements. One cannot point to ‘good’ and say that ‘this is good’, or that ‘what I mean by good is this.’ It might be argued that instead of ostensive definitions one could employ descriptions, but again, it appears that one has to depend on the child’s comprehension of the language; for, apparently, the child must know the meaning of the other words one would have use in such descriptions.

Can one describe a word by using other words? This could work in some situations but not in all. Let us look at the particular circumstances in which the word ‘good’ is used. The main difference in how we learn the words of judgement of value and other words seem to be in the gestures, the voice, behaviour of encouragement or discouragement followed by the action to be corrected or approved of.

Indeed, in a child’s learning process, one’s behaviour could be more effective than words. Wittgenstein says that it is possible to interpret an ostensive definition differently in every case (*PI*, 28). Consider the following example: “No, no more sugar.” This sentence might have been uttered while taking the sugar away or while giving it. In *Philosophical Grammar* (*PG*) Wittgenstein says “In this way he has learnt to use the word, but also associate a particular feeling with it, to experience it in a particular way” (*PG*, p.64).

When a child demonstrates a behaviour that one does not approve of, one says “No!” “Don’t!” “That is bad”. This may even be followed by a punishment. It seems that the child understands by the gesture and the tone of one’s

voice that the one it confronts is upset, unhappy, disapproving its behaviour. The word ‘bad’ then could be associated by the child with something painful.

This seems to be a process of learning by experience of pleasure and pain.¹ Does not “yes” mean that something, a certain act, a certain claim, some reasoning or some judgement is permissible, useful, of consequence, of utility? One’s memory should suggest that in all such cases one has received an answer, a “yes” or “no” that has directly or mediately been associated with some pleasure or pain. If my expectation fails or my claim is rejected, I am frustrated: I feel pain. It appears that learning through constructing similar rule systems and associating these rules with pain and pleasure or with punishment and reward could provide a model for learning value judgements.

What Wittgenstein suggests in *PI* is that we learn the use and the meaning of the word ‘good’ in particular circumstances in particular language-games. In order to play a game we must know its rules. It is, therefore within the rules of the game one will determine what ‘good’ is. Here, let us ask whether a conception of learning by experience of pleasure and pain’ could, in a way, bind the expression of ‘good’ to the expression of pleasure or that of ‘bad’ to pain. In other words, do we use the word ‘good’ in a language-game in the way we use the word ‘pleasure’ in a language-game? Are there resemblances between expressions of feeling (e.g. pain) and expressions of judgements of value (e.g. good)? Are they instances of the same kind of language-games?

Criteria for playing language games are interpreted in various ways. The most common one is that for someone to play a language game there must be public criteria. Arguing that there are public criteria for playing language games implies that judgements of value are the work of the society. Such dependence on a particular society, for Wittgenstein, could only justify judgement of value in relative sense.

As public criteria are necessary to make language-games possible, ethical value judgements and in general norms seem also to be determined by people who play related language games. Wittgenstein says that “...obeying a rule’ is a practice” (*PI*, 202). Cannot one obey a rule privately? For Wittgenstein “it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’: otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it” (*PI*, 202).

This leads us to the Wittgensteinian ‘private language argument’ which is mostly based on discussions concerning sensations. What does Wittgenstein mean by saying that we cannot obey a rule privately? It appears that inner expressions are conceivable for praising or blaming oneself, or for inducing one to a particular action or plan; one commonly asks oneself questions about oneself and answers them.

¹ See for the discussion in the wider context in Turan, Halil 2005 “The Existence of Other Egos and the Philosophy of Moral Sentiments” *Analecta Husserliana* LXXXIV, 177-191.

For Wittgenstein, one needs another person in order to be able to report legitimately one's sensations. When one says "I am in pain" or "I believe in God" the others are supposed to understand him, as well as one understands them when they make similar utterances. However, Wittgenstein questions this sort of understanding. In *Culture and Value (CV)* he asks: "How do I know that two people mean the same thing when each says he believes in God?" (CV, p.97)

Do we need a presupposition of a community view in order to understand others' value judgements? Wittgenstein says that "a person goes by a sign-post only in so far as there exists a regular use of sign-posts, a custom" (PI, 198). It appears that, for Wittgenstein, one needs a pre-determined standard for one's judgements and choices. But, does the objective measure of our behaviour come from the members of our community? Wittgenstein says that "[i]f language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgements" (PI, 242). Then, to decide whether we mean the same thing when we utter a judgement of value we must be depending on the judgements of others. Thus, following a rule has a social nature (Baker, Hacker 1988, p.170).

For Wittgenstein, "*Practice* gives the words their sense" (CV, p.97). Following Wittgenstein in this assertion, we will further say that words acquire their meanings through bodily signs. In fact, a smile, a gesture, a certain tone of voice or a certain pattern of behaviour are sometimes more useful in one's effort to understand (even verify) the sincerity of the expressions concerning the experiences of others. Hence, one may argue that what value words ultimately refer to are memories of "inner" experiences accompanied and marked by primitive signs, elements of inarticulate language, of certain bodily movements. An intricate feeling like remorse, for example, can be recognized from bodily signs, and indeed one continues to make use of these signs in one's actual experience in order to verify the sincerity of linguistic expressions people use to describe their emotions.

How can one conceive a child's learning the word 'pain'? In *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology (RPP)* Wittgenstein seems to offer a generally accepted view:

When a child behaves in such-and-such a way on particular occasions, I think it feels what I feel in such cases; and if I am not mistaken in this, then the child associates the word with the feeling and uses the word when the feeling reappears (RPP, 146).

If we see the child holding its stomach and doubled up and see tears in its eyes then we associate it with our experience of stomach ache and we say "you have pain". This does not mean that the word pain means crying, instead "the verbal expression of pain replaces crying but does not describe it" (PI, 244).

Hence, it may be that one recognizes others' feelings by looking for similarities between the signs by means of which one judges that they have those feelings and those signs in exemplary cases of experience in which oneself must have come to recognize these feelings, and have learned to call them as such.

There may always be cases where one might misinterpret behaviour of others and associate it with different feelings. Someone may hold her stomach and double up with tears in his eyes out of laughter, not pain. Also, there is always a possibility that someone could 'simulate pain'. Such simulation and really having pain "might have the

same expressions in behaviour" (RPP, 144). Could we distinguish them? If I think I can, what kind of evidence do I have to verify my judgement? "How do I know that the child I teach the use of the word 'pain' does not misunderstand me and so always call "pain" what I call "sham pain"?" (RPP, 145) It seems that the only one certain thing in the expression of feelings is that one does not doubt that one has that feeling. I know that "I have pain". But, most of the time I am in pain other people also know that I am in pain. Wittgenstein states that the other person can only guess that I am in pain and cannot know that I am in pain with the certainty I know. It makes sense for one to doubt other people's pain but not one's own. Can we say that we really understand others expressions of sensations and value judgements?

For Wittgenstein, we can express our private sensations, but "another person cannot understand the language" (PI, 243). One needs an objective standard to confirm that his judgement that such-and-such behaviour is the sign of 'pain' to be able to say that someone is really in pain. For Wittgenstein, the only objective standard is the agreement in the language we use. This is not to say that "human agreement decides what is true and what is false" as Wittgenstein's interlocutor suggests. Rather, "it is what human beings say that is true or false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life" (PI, 241). And our private language does not conform to this criterion. We can follow this criterion only if we agree with others that from now on when we see such-and-such a behaviour we will use the word 'pain'. And this set of agreements is valid only for a specific language-game and a specific form of life. When we step out that language game, the agreement loses its sense; we cannot apply it to another language game.

The rules of a language-game, the agreement on the use of language and the agreement of forms of life determine the correctness of the use of value judgements. That is to say, forms of life determine the way we look at things. But, if we are to agree with Wittgenstein and say that forms of life play a major role in shaping our attitude towards the world, then we must presuppose the existence of others. Hence, "Can there be any ethics if there is no living being but myself?" appears to be a crucial question. Here Wittgenstein seems to be questioning the common attitude of taking the existence of others for granted to justify the possibility of discourse on value. A similar question arises related to the notion of 'private language'. If I cannot obey a rule privately, even if I may speak of an ethics without the existence of others, this must only be captured by my private language. Since I cannot express my private sensations, ethical discourse appears to be impossible. The issue is not whether we can express our feelings, but whether others could understand us as we express them.

It is safe to assume that our attitudes, ethical conduct and ethical utterances find their meanings within a community and that what is seen as universal are the rules that are approved and accepted by a group of people. But this assumption concerns "ethics in the relative sense". However, it does not seem to be necessary to regard the discourse on higher values to be referring to the absolute sense of ethics. What makes 'good' seem to be 'higher' is that everyone in the language-game shares a form of life and uses the word 'good' as agreed. Wittgenstein allows the possibility of discourse on ethics in a language-game.