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The “private language
argument” - conclusions

W’s philosophy of mathematics

1

Summing up:

- The interlocutor wishes to claim that he can invent a completely private language; however, he wants to avoid all the consequences that follow from the claim that these signs are meaningful (to him)
- He has not claimed anything *false* by saying: “I have sensations, but nothing about them can be communicated in our language”
- The problem is that he has actually not claimed anything at all, but wants to continue using the words of our language

2

Wittgenstein's last word?

§ 304. "But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour with pain and pain-behaviour without pain."

— Admit it? What greater difference could there be?

—"And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a Nothing."

—Not at all. **It is not a Something, but not a Nothing either!** The conclusion was only that a Nothing would serve just as well as a Something about which nothing could be said. **We have only rejected the grammar which tends to force itself on us here.**

3

§ 304 continues

The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts—which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or whatever.

4

Morale

- The craving to say that a sensation must be a "something" (a private mental object or process) is forced upon us by our forms of language
- But the paradoxes surrounding "private language" disappear once we realize that language functions in many different ways
- We must call to mind how our language involving names of sensations actually gets meaning in particular circumstances (i.e. take note of its "grammar")

Consequences: the example of "pain"

- We are misled by the Cartesian idea of the priority of the first person to understand "I am in pain" as a description of an inner object or process, instead of a manifestation of pain
- Such manifestations of pain are *internally* connected to our "instinctive behaviour" and our pain-language grows out from this behaviour
- Our natural expressions of sensations are "part of the language-game" where our pain-language is used and makes sense
- "Only of what behaves like a human being can one say that it *has* pains." (PI § 283)

284. Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations.—One says to oneself: How could one so much as get the idea of ascribing a *sensation* to a *thing*? One might as well ascribe it to a number!—And now look at a wriggling fly and at once these difficulties vanish and pain seems able to get a foothold here, where before everything was, so to speak, too smooth for it.

7

The skeptical temptation

288. [...] expression of doubt has no place in the language-game; but if expressions of sensation—human behaviour—are excluded, it looks as if I might then *legitimately* begin to doubt. My temptation to say that one might take a sensation for something other than what it is arises from this: **if I assume the abrogation of the normal language-game** with the expression of a sensation, **I need a criterion of identity** for the sensation; and then the possibility of error also exists.

8

The upshot of the discussion

272. The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person possesses his own exemplar, but that nobody knows whether other people also have this or something else. The assumption would thus be possible—though unverifiable—that one section of mankind had one sensation of red and another section another.

Illustration: the "beetle in the box"

293. If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word "pain" means—must I not say *that* of other people too? And how can I generalize the *one* case so irresponsibly?

Well, everyone tells me that he knows what pain is only from his own case!—Suppose everyone had a box with something in it which we call a "beetle". No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle.—Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing.

293 continues

—But what if these people's word "beetle" had a use nonetheless?—**If so, it would not be as the name of a thing.** The thing in the box doesn't belong to the language-game at all; not even as a *Something*: for the box might even be empty.—No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.

That is to say, **if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and name', the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.**

294. If you say he sees a private picture before him, which he is describing, you have at any rate made an assumption about what he has before him. And this means that you can describe it or do describe it more closely. If you admit that you have no idea what kind of thing it might be that he has before him—then what **seduces you into saying**, in spite of that, that he has **something** before him? Isn't it as if I were to say of someone: "He *has* something. But I don't know whether it is money, or debts, or an empty till."

Temptation: to think of a pain as a thing the bearer of the pain has, or "owns"

Does this make Wittgenstein a behaviourist?

The interlocutor's accusation:

307. "Are you not really a behaviourist in disguise? Aren't you at bottom really saying that everything except human behaviour is fiction?"

The narrator's reply:

—If I do speak of a fiction, then it is of a grammatical fiction.

Why is Wittgenstein not a behaviourist?

Remember the asymmetry between first and third person regarding pain-language

- First person expressions cannot be translated into statements reporting behavioural occurrences
- First person utterances, being *Äusserungen*, are not reports; they do not describe behaviour, but neither do they describe inner objects (cf. the beetle)

- However, the words we use as Äusserungen get their sense from our public language-games involving sensation-words, *not* from the first-person case
- Third person statements are descriptions, and ascription of for instance pain to another person is internally dependent on observable behaviour
- But Wittgenstein's appeal to behaviour is non-reductive; behaviour is always behaviour in context

17

- Therefore knowledge claims about the third person's sensations and emotions are often vague and uncertain (indeterminacy of the mental)
- However, you usually perceive *directly* whether someone is sad, angry, in pain, etc.
- This does not mean that our judgment is infallible:
"Fine shades of behaviour" and "imponderable evidence" ("subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone") (see PI II, pp. 204; 227-228; PPF 210; 358-360) are crucial for our use of psychological concepts.

18

Is there such a thing as 'expert judgment' about the genuineness of expressions of feeling?—Even here, there are those with 'better' and those with 'worse' judgement.

In general, predictions arising from judgements of those with better knowledge of people will be more correct.

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can learn it. Not, however, by taking a course of study in it, but through '*experience*'.—Can someone else be a man's teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right *tip*.—This is what 'learning' and 'teaching' are like here.—What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. **There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculating rules.**

What is most difficult here is to express this indefiniteness correctly, and without distortion.

PPF xi, 355-356

The expressive power of the human body

The human body is the best picture of the human soul.

(PI II, p. 178; PPF § 25)

Neither Cartesianism nor behaviourism gets this right

Consequences regarding grammar of pain-language

1. The concept of pain does not depend on introspection or an «inner» ostensive definition
2. The verbal expression of pain has the same epistemic immediacy as the pre-linguistic manifestations of pain: it is not the result of self-observation

Sensation-language is public

There is an interplay between the first person and the third person uses. A child would never acquire pain-language unless it was taught to «replace» pre-linguistic, instinctive manifestations of pain

But a child's reactions to other persons' pain are also «instinctive»; not built upon inference from observed behaviour

Sensation-language is public

But these «instinctive, primitive, natural» reactions are not self-intimating; they only get a sense once they are seen «under the aspect of pain», ie brought into the language-games where the naming of sensations «has its home» (i.e. the public realm)

24

Morale of discussion of psychological concepts

- Neither the explanations nor the uses of such concepts have the formal simplicity and uniformity we naturally expect (on account of their "surface grammar")
- We are lead astray by our expectations that language always functions in the same way, for example that all words are names that refer to objects
- Especially when we consider our ways of talking about the "inner" and the "outer", we must take note of how words such as 'pain', 'thinking', 'anger' function in our language, instead of letting us be tempted by pictures that come to us "naturally"

25

How general is this account of pain?

A similar account can be given of other "mental phenomena" (aspect perception, intention, belief, etc.)

Principles (Child 172):

- Meanings of these words should not be represented as resting on internal ostensive definitions

- Identity conditions of the experience or sensation are not purely introspective but linked to external circumstances
- The difference but interrelation between first- and third-person cases must be respected
- Our grasp of others' sensations or experiences must not be represented as extrapolations from a purely introspective grasp of the concept
- But neither is it an inference from their observable behavior to their mental states