

WITTGENSTEIN ON DENIAL OF PRIVACY

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Wittgenstein's later philosophy as a part of his programme of attack upon the philosophical search for foundations is directed as an onslaught against self-knowledge. The sense of a sentence, according to Wittgenstein was given by its criteria. If so, then how is it possible to think of sentences without criteria? The possibility of self-ascription of psychological predicates is the question. The question raises several issues in philosophy, for example: the relation between the sense and the possibility of cognition, the nature of indexical expressions, the distinction between 'I', 'he' and 'this', logical form of ego-centric sentences in general, self-ascription of psychological predicates, the other-ascription of psychological predicates etc. These issues are related to Wittgenstein's non-cognitive theses of self ascription of psychological predicates and to the problem of self-knowledge.

Wittgenstein says that 'I am in pain' is merely an expression of pain. It does not make an assertion that 'I have a pain' is equivalent in meaning to the actual natural expression or manifestation of pain. Wittgenstein says : "The difference between the propositions 'I have pain' and 'He has pain' is not that of 'L. W. has pain' and 'Smith has pain'. Rather it corresponds to the difference between meaning and saying that some one moans".¹ Just as emotive theory in ethics denies any truth-value to the statement like 'A is good' since such statements merely express emotions or concealed imperatives, in the same sense Wittgenstein means to say that 'I am in pain' does not have any truth-value. It is merely a cry of pain. Again Wittgenstein says:

"Roughly speaking; the expression 'I have a toothache' stands for a moan but does not mean 'I moan'. You could not call moaning a description. But this shows you how far the proposition 'I have a toothache' is from a description, and how far teaching the word "toothache' is from teaching the word 'tooth,'".²

In *Investigations* also similar arguments are seen:

Words are connected with the primitive, the natural expressions of the sensations and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and cries, and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.³

Wittgenstein denies any knowledge-claim for such sentences as 'I am in pain' because in such cases the concept of doubt and error has no application so also the

concept of knowledge has no application here. The absurdity of doubting such things makes the knowledge of such things absurd. Wittgenstein says

It cannot be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I know that I am in pain, what is it supposed to mean-except perhaps that I am in pain.⁴
The truth is : it makes sense to say about other people that they doubt whether I am in pain; but not to say it about myself.

Again Wittgenstein points out that

It has sense to say 'it rained and I know it, but not I had a toothache and knew that I had'. 'I know that I have a toothache' means nothing or the same as 'I have a toothache'.⁵

To say that 'I know that I have a toothache', I must also know the concept 'I'. In this version of the argument it is necessary for understanding first-person psychological sentences that it be possible for me to understand the function of 'I' in language. In such sentences the use of 'I' appears puzzling to Wittgenstein. It is used as if there is a form of empirical knowledge which is non-evidential or immediate. The use of 'I' as subject involves no identification of one particular object to function as the subject of the psychological predicates. As there is no identification, nor recognition, so the question of misidentification or miss-recognition does not arise. For this reason, Wittgenstein claims that when 'I' is used as a subject it does not denote a possessor nor does it refer to a particular person. He says: "'I' for me is not a signal calling attention to a place or person. It is no more a name than 'here' is a name of a place or 'now' a name of a time".⁶

On a total review, the arguments boil down to the point that pain-behaviour is peculiarly one's own. It is not an assertion, it does not describe the pain one suffers, and rather it is a constitutive part of pain. As knowledge and ignorance, doubt and certainty are applicable to assertions, it is not possible to say 'I know that I am in pain'. The grammar of the language does not permit such a use.

There have been many criticisms advanced against the theory that such sentences express self-knowledge and indicate self-awareness. Simply stated 'it flies on the face of common sense' to borrow a fanciful expression of Moore. In the criticisms advanced against Wittgenstein's denial of knowledge-claim that is based on criterial considerations, we find a common element that absence of doubt implies certainty, which therefore must be taken as a mark of knowledge. The justificatory

criterion employed to test self-knowledge is misplaced. It may be considered for a genuine criterion to test scientific knowledge but self-knowledge and the belief in the 'I' as the subject is a necessary part constituting the very core of human knowledge.

But these considerations, I suspect, may be off the mark for the reasons which compelled Wittgenstein to consider the illegitimacy of self-knowledge. Strawson has argued against Wittgenstein's view of self-knowledge as 'internally incoherent'. Strawson's thesis of course supports, in a way, Wittgenstein's attack against Cartesian dualism. Mind and body once posed as separate and distinct entities, the gap would be unbridgeable and many complicated issues will follow from this. A better view would be, to consider person as one integrated entity. P. M. S. Hacker⁷ has superbly systematized the arguments advanced by Wittgenstein. He has advanced as many as nine points in criticism against Wittgenstein's non-cognitive thesis.

Hacker says, "these nine points suggest that 'I am in pain' said by A can be used to make assertions, bear truth-values and indeed has truth-conditions, identical with 'He is in pain' said of A"⁸. This suggestion seems to me to imply that the speaker must be sincere in his utterance. In case of any insincerity or in case of any obscurity in understanding the concept of pain, the assertion may misguide and the purpose of the suggestion would be proved false. Hence, much depends on understanding i.e. knowing the use of the word 'pain'. This was the point which Wittgenstein wanted to make in his non-cognitive thesis. If the competence of the speaker in using language is taken for granted, then only the suggestion Hacker makes may hold good.

Wittgenstein's fundamental contention in his attack on private language and the solipsistic approach to self-knowledge was to bring into focus the conditions of use of the word 'pain' used in uttering such sentences. He questions the very assumption which Hacker makes. To an unreflective thinker, self-ascriptive psychological predicates in present tense do not pose any problems. They manage sometimes well with insincere or play acting utterances. All the same, if the use of the words such as 'pain' or 'toothache' is questioned, then they rectify their mistakes and for all practical purposes do not face any problem. But the mistake pointing to a

malady is inherent in the language. Wittgenstein hoped very much to understand the sources of the malady and perhaps judged correctly that any wrong understanding of the concepts used in such ascriptions must be liable to blame.

There is no private language which is purely personal to the knower. Knowledge which is a characteristic of interpersonal communication presupposes; that experience of a phenomenon is communicable. Wherever we can use such concepts as 'doubt', 'certainty', 'belief' etc. that is a language game and there only we can correctly ascribe to a speaker that he knows such and such object. But in case of a private language, when I say, 'I know that I am in pain', the supposed most plausible candidate for private language, there such concepts as 'doubt' 'certainty', 'probability', 'belief' etc. do not arise. There is no privacy in that sense.

Wittgenstein's dissolution of the problem of solipsistic consciousness that threatened the possibility of knowledge was intended to meet the challenge of Berkeley. However, when he says that 'I' is no owner of consciousness, that in some cases 'I' can be used in different language-games. The logic of these language-games determine the sense to be given to 'I'. It does not presuppose what we are to understand by this 'I' in all cases of its use. The meaning of 'I' depends on its specific use in the specific context or language-game. We have to see the language game which gives a sense to the concept 'I'. That does not mean 'I' will stand as a summation of the sense given to it in all language-games taken jointly or separately. That would again go wrong. The proper spirit of understanding Wittgenstein's view of no-ownership would be to take a relative notion of 'I' depending on the context of the language-game. If a language game is some how different from the form of life that we have, then the notion of 'I' would be purely different. Such a notion is given in a private language. In a private language we assume private predications not communicable in an inter-personal relationship. Hence that is not a language-game which takes the common form of life that we have.

Self-knowledge in the sense of 'I' forming a subject in ascription of psychological predicates may be admissible as Hacker has very ably pointed out. But the awareness of a pure consciousness or ego as Descartes postulated to all of our

experiences may be felt still to be illusory. In this sense Wittgenstein's thesis may be viewed as still having relevance.

Notes:

1. Wittgenstein, L., *The Blue and Brown Books*.
2. Wittgenstein, L., *Notes for Lectures*, pp. 301-2 as quoted in PMS Hacker's *Insight and Illusion* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972), p. 257.
3. Wittgenstein, *P.I.*, Section 244.
4. *Ibid.*, Section 246.
5. Wittgenstein, *Notes for Lectures*, p. 309 as quoted in Hacker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 256.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 307 as quoted in Hacker, *Op. Cit.*, p. 257.
7. Hacker, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 267-8.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 268.