

WITTGENSTEIN'S SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF OTHER MINDS

There seem to be two sorts of closely related arguments which Wittgenstein deploys to destroy the scepticism about our knowledge of other minds. First, there are those which relate to the conclusion that there is a kind of absurdity in the sceptic's own position which becomes evident when we try to formulate his case for him. The sceptic, it appears, would have to feign ignorance of the language of mind which he uses in common with other people, and in the same sense as they do. He would have to invent a 'private language' for himself in which the words for mental concepts acquired meaning solely by reference to his own private experiences. That is, he would have to learn *from his own case*¹ what e. g., thinking, feeling and sensation were. He would then use his private language to make his scepticism intelligible to himself. But Wittgenstein appears to argue that the assumption that one could possess such a private language is mistaken; consequently the idea of a private—language—using—sceptic itself is absurd.

Once the illusion of a private language has been destroyed, the philosopher sceptic has simply to see that anyone who possesses a language necessarily possesses a repertoire of public concepts which are exercised with inter-personal criteria for identifying mental phenomena. There are then the other sort of arguments to show that in our language the words for mental concepts are intelligible only because there are public interpersonal criteria for their correct application. Thus, e. g., the word 'pain' has its criteria rooted, not in the sensation which one is inwardly aware of when one is said to be in pain, but in behaviour, which one outwardly manifests in a characteristic manner, when in normal circumstances one is said to be in pain. Given this, the sceptic could not both use the mental concepts of our language and, through them, express his doubt in other peoples states of mind in general. I shall argue that Wittgenstein's arguments in both the areas mentioned above, in so far as they are directed against the sceptic, seem to miss their target. At 256, in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein attacks the idea of a "language which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand". He

then considers a case where one attempts to invent words for one's inner experiences:

"I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign 'S' and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition That is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connection between the sign and the sensation. —But 'I impress it on myself' can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection *right* in future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'." (258) Wittgenstein is clearly arguing here, not only that the inventor can never be *sure* whether he wrote 'S' in his calendar rightly or wrongly, but since he has no criterion of rightness or wrongness, the expressions 'right' and 'wrong' could have no meaning *for him*. That is, the inventor's inability to ascertain the correct memory of 'S' implies his inability to understand what it *means* for him to have the correct memory of S. I think it is generally agreed now that Wittgenstein is mistaken in this. All that the argument shows is that the inventor in question can never be sure of the meaning which he has given to a particular word. But now, can this conclusion be used as a weapon against the sceptic? We must distinguish here between the meaning of a word, and the intentional act of meaning something by using a word with a certain meaning. The sceptic can be mistaken in the former but can he be mistaken about the latter? It seems clear that in order to make his scepticism intelligible to himself, the sceptic need not worry about making *correct* reidentifications of his sensations. As long as he uses S to make reference to some kind of sensation or any introspective quality of consciousness, his scepticism remains meaningful. And there is no reason to suppose that he may lack the ability to make a rough distinction between the class of inner, private things i. e. experiences and the class of other things i. e. material qualities (ultimately known by means involving sense-experiences). On the contrary, as it will be seen, such an ability seems to be presupposed to learning the public language itself.

We now turn to the other set of arguments. Our natural inclination to think that the word 'pain' does not have its criteria in behaviour rests in the fact that one does not have to observe one's own behaviour, or listen to what one says, in order to know that one is in pain. Further, when someone tells another that he is in pain, and there is no characteristic form of behaviour, which may be called pain-behaviour, present, he is clearly informing the other of how he feels. The success of this communication depends upon the fact that both of them attach the same meaning to the word 'pain', and attribute the same sort of thing to anyone of whom it is asserted that he is in pain. Yet it is difficult to see how it could have come about, since each person's state of mind is private to him, at least in the sense that no one else could have it. If I am in pain I am aware of my state of mind in a way that others are not. Others do not *feel* it. Now, it is true that this fact of privacy, by itself, does not entail that others cannot know it. That would have been the case if the only way of knowing that someone was in pain were to perceive him *feeling* his pain, or else to feel his pain. But both these feats are impossible to perform. We obviously often know when others are in pain, e. g., when people who are physically injured are writhing and crying etc. Thus the sceptical problem here is of justifying the assumption that everyone actually has the same thing whenever we assert of them, on the basis of behaviour, that they are in pain. Wittgenstein thinks that we can have this justification if we examine the way we come to give sense to the word 'pain'. His position is that while the word 'pain' has private reference, it has no private meaning; on the contrary, the private knowledge (if there is such a thing) of the referent plays no part in the 'language-game' which determines the sense of the word 'pain'. The empiricist view which Wittgenstein is attacking here seems to maintain that the understanding of 'pain' may arise out of merely being aware of the sensation of pain; that is, having a pain itself may be the source of knowing what sort of thing pain is.

Now, at a first glance Wittgenstein's position seems to deny too much. For do we not, in having the sensation called pain, know something of what it is, at least in so far as we know what it *feels* like? Indeed it is thought that only by having it could one at all know what it felt like. Nor is it inappropriate to call it a species of knowledge, as the 'feel' can be remembered and the

relevant knowledge can be utilized in recollection and mental imagery etc. But this knowledge of the 'feel' remains essentially incommunicable to others. The only way in which it could possibly be communicated would be by associating it with the circumstances and the manner in which the sensation naturally expresses itself. And then, the only communicable explanation of 'what it feels like', and consequently of what sort of thing pain is, will be given by reference to the characteristic form of behaviour which *naturally* ensues when a man is said to be spontaneously feeling pain. Thus the public meaning of 'pain' will be cast in the form: "*that sort of thing* which naturally expresses itself in X Y Z characteristic manner". That is, the meaning of a mental concept cannot be given entirely either in terms of the circumstances of its normal application or in terms of one's own private experiences. A sensation is to be defined by reference to its external circumstances as its private and non-dispositional accompaniment; it is clearly not reducible to those circumstances. In this way the 'object', i. e. the feeling or the sensation drops out of the picture; it plays no part in the explanation of the meaning of 'pain'. This doctrine is explained by the well known example of 'the beetle in the box'. If everyone had a box in which they had something which they called "beetle", but no one could look in another's box, then "beetle" could not be the name of an *object*. Since for all they know, they may have different things in their boxes. And the meaning of "beetle" would remain unaffected if the thing in the box changed, or for that matter even if someone did not have anything in his box. "The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all: not even as a *something*." (*Investigations*, 293). This of course is going too far. It is difficult to see how the word 'pain' could acquire the meaning which it has without the background assumption that when a man is writhing, crying etc., there is at least something going on inside him. For if there is nothing going on inside him and he reports himself as in pain, he surely means something different by 'pain' than what we normally mean—perhaps he means the pain-behaviour. But giving a sympathetic interpretation of the passage, the main point of Wittgenstein, I take it, is that it is the alleged incommunicable knowledge of the *something* (and not the supposition that there is something) — of what it looks like where it can not be described, or of what it feels like where

nobody else can feel it—that has no place in the language game; since, e. g. we can truthfully say “X is in pain”, as long as X has something (whatever it may be) accompanying his natural pain-behaviour. If this is a fair interpretation of Wittgenstein's theory, then, while it may have clarified our concept of pain, I do not think that it succeeds in removing scepticism altogether. The sceptic need not deny that others have pain, in the sense that they have *that* which naturally expresses itself in the characteristic pain-behaviour. But this, it seems clear, does not damage his case. For what the sceptic can still be asking is whether that pain, the *thing*, is existentially the same as the sensation which he calls ‘pain’. He is concerned about a real occurrence—a sensation—which has a certain introspectively revealed quality of consciousness. He has direct access to the ‘that’ in question. Perhaps what is present in others when they manifest pain-behaviour is simply a brain process, without any inwardly revealed quality of consciousness. His scepticism is about that consciousness, that *feel* of pain and not simply about the fact that *something* manifests in pain-behaviour. This point can be made in another way. According to Wittgenstein the sceptic can not use *our* concept of pain to express his doubt about other people's pain; since the correct application of our concept of pain is governed by public criteria.

But, the public concept of pain, in part, still is the concept of something private, in so far as pain has as inner aspect directly recognisable by the person who has it, albeit the expression of that something is public. Given this, it is clear that this concept could not have evolved except on the assumption that something inner and horrifying always accompanies the natural outer expression of pain. Indeed it is granted by Wittgenstein that the word ‘pain’ has an inner private reference. As such, at some stage of the learning of the concept one must have seen the unity of the inner sensation and its natural expression in behaviour, to be able to connect the whole phenomenon with the word ‘pain’. The awareness of this unity can come only from one's own case. That is, the connection between the word ‘pain’ and the inner sensation, although learned, is not something that one could be taught—could be shown. One end of this connection is always an inner, private state of mind. But Wittgenstein contends that the private something about which nothing could be said is not a *something*; not even for the individual who is supposed to be aware

of it: yet it is not a *nothing* either. His point, as we have seen, is that a mere awareness of the sensation plays no part in determining the meaning of a word for it. Thus in so far as pain is something private it is not a determinate something of which one could be said to have knowledge of any sort. Wittgenstein is implying here that if one *knows* what pain is solely by reference to his private experiences, one should be able to say what sort of thing it is. But in the present context it amounts to begging the question. For, as noted earlier, there is no *a priori* absurdity in the notion of incommunicable knowledge of a personal sort—a knowledge which is exercised in private nonverbal recollections.

What I am trying to say is that our concept of something which has two aspects, as it were. It is true that the publicly revealed aspect of pain has social significance and as such it will always demand human concern. For this reason one can say that as long as what is given is a natural pain-behaviour, it does not matter what is going on inside the person—we can justifiably say that the person is in pain. But of course it does matter in the philosophical context of scepticism about other minds; since it remains an open question whether what we call pain does in each case possess *both* the inner and the revealed aspects referred to in the concept of pain. One may agree with Wittgenstein that to know what pain is involves knowing that it is a feeling which is normally found unpleasant and normally expressed behaviourally in a certain characteristic manner. But what does one understand by 'feeling' here? As this concept can not be reduced to behavioural concepts, at some stage of explaining the meaning of 'pain' one will have to use, what Smart calls² a 'topicneutral' language, i. e. to explain pain as something that goes on when *Such and such* behaviour is manifest under *such and such* conditions. And this is where scepticism can get a foot-hold again. As we noted earlier, it remains a contingent matter, whether what is going on in a person when he is said to be in pain, is not just a brain process with no introspective quality of consciousness. Or, for that matter, whether anything is going on at all; although it is not a contingent matter that when we see his behaviour as pain-behaviour, in natural circumstances we also attribute to him the sensation of pain. For that is the way our concept of pain has evolved. But since, on Wittgens-

tein's theory, the sensation, as distinct from behaviour, is merely a "not nothing", attributing a sensation to him leaves it open whether or not it is a conscious process, i.e. whether or not the subject *feels* anything. The sceptical doubt is about the connection between the sense of the word 'pain' and its presumed private reference. There can be no independent public access to the sceptic's private referent except through the concept of pain. Yet for the concept 'pain' to apply to his private referent, the knowledge of the referent in question must already be incorporated in the concept. It might now be objected that I have not disengaged or taken seriously Wittgenstein's view of language. Wittgenstein is trying to draw limits to what can be said, and therefore known, about minds, including one's own, and a positive answer to Wittgenstein involves attacking him on this point. My contention (p. 478) that 'there is no a-priori' absurdity in the notion of incommunicable knowledge of a personal sort, is not sufficient as an answer. Very briefly, I will try to deal with this objection.

In Wittgenstein's account of how we come to learn mental concepts there is throughout a supposition about the uniformity of human nature. This supposition implies that we already have that knowledge of minds which, precisely is what the sceptic of 'other mind' denies. At this juncture one recalls the following dictum of Wittgenstein's: 'My attitude towards him is as towards a soul; I am not of the opinion that he has a soul.'³ That is, it is not a matter of having opinions or beliefs that the human bodies around us have souls. Well, if it is so it can not be a matter of having *knowledge* either, for what can be known can also be opined on. If knowledge consists only in the application of concepts learnt publicly, then what is presupposed to such *learning* cannot be classified as knowledge. The supposition about the uniformity of human nature, therefore, cannot be utilised as a basis for a theory of how we learn mental concepts. Later in the *Investigations* Wittgenstein says that our eyes are shut on the matter that the bodies around us are human. The sceptic who tries to open his eyes, then, tries to engage in an impossible exercise. I am not sure if this is so. If, however, it is allowed, then Wittgenstein's arguments discussed in this paper, in so far as they are supposed to constitute a solution to the problem of other minds, become redundant.

SUMMARY

In the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues that the words for mental concepts, such as 'pain' are intelligible only because there are public interpersonal criteria for their correct application. This view is supposed to constitute a solution to the problem of Other Minds. For, it shows that possession of concepts, through which the sceptic of other minds knows his own state of mind, is possible only because there already exist other minds.

This paper argues that Wittgenstein's position does not rule out the possibility of a personal sort of knowledge of one's private states of mind, ungoverned by public criteria. Consequently, it is possible to reintroduce the scepticism of other minds.

Department of Philosophy,
University of Nigeria
NSUKKA
NIGERIA

M. M. AGRAWAL

NOTES

1. Cf N. Malcolm, "Knowledge of Other Minds" *Wittgenstein*, ed., Pitcher.
2. "Sensations & Brain Processes", *The Philosophy of Mind*, ed. V. Chappel.
3. *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 178.