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On the Misuse of Language in the Traditional Introspective Model of Self-Knowledge: Revisiting Wittgenstein's Critique

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Abstract

This paper attempts to present Wittgenstein's critique of the traditional psychological introspective model of self-knowledge, which, according to Wittgenstein, rests on a mistaken understanding and (ab)use of language. Building upon the example of "beetle in a box" and other related arguments in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, this paper attempts to show the redundancy of introspective self-knowledge statements, posited as "knowledge statements". To support this argument, Wittgenstein's critique of the idea of private language, clarification of the nature and genesis of meaning in language & a critique of phenomenalism are also provided. Following this, in review of the conventional understanding of Wittgenstein's critique already presented, Edward Sankowski's reception of Wittgenstein's critique is discussed.

Keywords: self-knowledge, avowal, language game, doubt

INTRODUCTION

The problem of self-knowledge is undoubtedly one of the central problems in Philosophy of Mind, with significant interrelations with Philosophy of Language. This problem has multiple dimensions. One of the crucial dimensions is the direct, first-person, introspective, epistemic privacy of the self. This has been one of the most significant legacies of Cartesian philosophy, which has single-handedly influenced and shaped the entire discipline of Philosophy of Mind since Descartes. Significantly, since Gilbert Ryle's critique of (Cartesian) official doctrine of the mind, this traditional introspective model of self and self-knowledge has received many challenges from many philosophers. One of the most powerful critiques of this traditional model was presented by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who took the vantage point of his unique philosophy of language.

In this paper, we will first try to present Wittgenstein's critique of the traditional introspective model of self-knowledge based on the notion of misuse of language, which will be carried out in the first section of the paper, followed by Edward Sankowski's reception of that critique, presented in the second section of the paper.

1.

"BEETLE IN THE BOX" & THE MISUSE OF LANGUAGE

Wittgenstein's "Beetle in the box"[1] is a widely cited argument against the idea of a private language. It forms a crucial starting point for Wittgenstein's argument against private, introspective, individual

[1] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, section 293.

sensations, posited as self-knowledge. Here, the parable of "beetle" stands for an individual, private, token sensation. The substance of the argument can be summed up in the following words: consider a group of people discussing about "something", contained inside each of their boxes, that they refer to as "beetle"; Wittgenstein's point is that in the public language game played in between this group of people, the word "beetle" that is successfully used, simply cancels out the notion of the privately available "thing" inside individual boxes.

In other words, the claims to knowledge in various language games are solely dependent on the uses of words rather than the privately available introspective sensations, as the traditional model conceives. This is the first conventional Wittgensteinian critique of the idea of self-knowledge.

NATURE & GENESIS OF MEANING IN LANGUAGE

As an extension of the above argument, Wittgenstein's critique can be presented from another perspective. The idea of describing private sensations as a form of knowledge stems from the mistaken view that "objects" derive their meaning from individual "names" assigned to them separately. For Wittgenstein[2], this is not how language functions. Language is a public participatory game. A child does not superimpose meaning, individually, on words, deriving authority from private sensations. On the contrary, "meaning" draws "in" from the "outside" (as one participates in the already available language game) rather than the other way round. In other words, privately constructed language (or description) is logically impossible. As we can see, the argument against private language and the argument against introspective epistemic privacy mutually reinforce one another.

Moreover, sensations are not atomistic and independent. They are interconnected & therefore the individual "naming" of sensation cannot capture meaning.

ABUSE OF THE WORD "I KNOW" IN THE CASE OF INTROSPECTIONS

Wittgenstein's primary point against introspective avowals posited as self-knowledge is that a clear abuse of language is involved in such a claim. "I know I am in pain"; for Wittgenstein, the phrase "I know" in this avowal is an unnecessary addendum. Since there is no possibility of doubt in such a claim, the possibility of a knowledge claim also doesn't exist. "I" reference is nonsensical because there is no possibility of misreference. In other words, for an epistemic claim to be an epistemic claim, there has to be a division between a subject and an object that creates the possibility of both doubt and knowledge. Privately available, first-person avowals do not satisfy this condition. Therefore, introspective claims cannot be posited as knowledge claims.

It is for this reason that Wittgenstein says, "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"[3]. Since for others there is a legitimate epistemic distance, there is a scope of doubt and thus the possibility of knowledge. In "I know I am in pain", there is no possibility of doubt; the phrase "I know" or the word "know" are unnecessary, useless additions and thus nonsensical[4]. Wittgenstein refers to this point again at another place, "It is correct to say 'I know what you are thinking', and wrong to say 'I know what I am thinking'"[5].

[2] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, section 244.
[3] Ibid., section 246.
[4] This is the conventional understanding of Wittgenstein's critique. We will see in the coming sections that Wittgenstein's position is much more nuanced than this.
[5] Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, part two, page 222. Please note that the page references to Philosophical Investigations are made to the second part of the book. The first part of the book is referred to by section numbers.

CRITIQUE OF THE "MYTH OF THE GIVEN".

Before we move on to reviewing the above-mentioned conventional understanding of Wittgenstein's critique, taking the vantage point of the receptions of this critique in Sanskowski, let us briefly discuss the critique of the "myth of the given" which forms an important dimension in the question of the legitimacy of self-knowledge claims.

The traditional introspective model of self-knowledge builds upon a phenomenalist account of sense data, i.e., the idea that we perceive sensory data directly in its pure, pristine, proposition-less form. But as Kant and Sellars show that the pure proposition-less, direct, naïve[6], empirical, "given", private sensation is not possible. Every perception and understanding is propositional – qualified and determined by language. But since language is public, the claim of private introspective self-knowledge, therefore, becomes problematic. Sensation of pain and description of pain cannot be radically dissociated. If we subtract "language" from pain, it becomes a meaningless *noumenon*. Again, we are seeing the reverberations of Wittgenstein's private language argument and its implications on the claims of self-knowledge.

2.

EDWARD SANKOWSKI'S RECEPTION OF THE CONVENTIONAL INTERPRETATION OF WITTGENSTEIN'S CRITIQUE

Sankowski argues that self-knowledge in Wittgenstein is possible in a way not allowed by the conventional interpretation[7] of Wittgenstein's critique. The main section of *Philosophical Investigations* that is employed by conventional interpretation to argue for the impossibility of self-knowledge in Wittgenstein is section 246, which is reproduced below:

In what sense are my sensations private?—Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it.—In one way this is wrong, and in another nonsense. If we are using the word "to know" as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am in pain.— Yes, but all the same not with the certainty with which I know it myself I—It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I know I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean—except perhaps that I am in pain? Other people cannot be said to learn of my sensations only from my behaviour,—for I cannot be said to learn of them. I have them. 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[8].

Sankowski's point is that this section, like most of the other sections of *Philosophical Investigations,* is "conversational" in nature. Sometimes Wittgenstein mentions a position only to register it as an opponent's view. One must look at the larger corpus of Wittgenstein's later writings to make sense of such sections. Sankowski says[9] that anyone acquainted with Wittgenstein's later writings knows that he doesn't hold the position given above in the cited section – that "Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it". Similarly, the statement, "It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I know I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean—except perhaps that I am in pain?", is inconclusive to prove the rejection of first-person avowals in Wittgenstein.

[6] This refers to the direct realism as opposed to Kant's *critical* realism which shows that every understanding has conceptual/linguistic/propositional *a priori* content.

[7] Sankowski mainly considers Anthony Kenny & P. M. S. Hacker's interpretation as the conventional understanding of Wittgenstein's critique.

[8] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, section 246.

[9] Sankowski, "Wittgenstein on Self-Knowledge", pp. 256-57.

Sankowski says[10] that the conventional reading of Wittgenstein's critique affirms the senselessness of self-knowledge statements because one cannot really doubt the fact of whether one is in pain; therefore, "I know I am in pain" is senseless. But, Sankowski says, Wittgenstein, in actual fact, only denies a particular expression of doubt and not the possibility of doubt per se. In order to establish his point, he cites a section from *Philosophical Investigations,* which is given as under:

It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I know I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean—except perhaps that I am in pain? English word "pain" means; and we should explain it to him.—How? Perhaps by means of gestures, or by pricking him with a pin and saying: "See, that's what pain is!" This explanation, like any other, he might understand right, wrong, or not at all. And he will shew which he does by his use of the word, in this as in other cases. If he now said, for example: "Oh, I know what 'pain' means; what I don't know is whether this, that I have now, is pain"—we should merely shake our heads and be forced to regard his words as a queer reaction which we have no idea what to do with. (It would be rather as if we heard someone say seriously: "I distinctly remember that some time before I was born I believed ....."). That expression of doubt has no place in the language-game; but if we cut out human behaviour, which is the expression of sensation, it looks as if I might legitimately begin to doubt afresh. 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[11].

Sankowski says[12] that Wittgenstein is not doing away with doubt per se, but an expression of doubt which has no place in the language game. Wittgenstein writes (in the above-cited section), "Oh, I know what 'pain' means; what I don't know is whether *this, that I have now, is pain...That* expression of doubt has no place in the language-game" (emphasis mine). It is this particular expression of doubt that is being questioned.

Moving on, Sankowski says[13] that the conventional reading of Wittgenstein's critique (particularly in Kenny) amounts to a non-cognitivist account of Wittgenstein, i.e., all the statements like "I am in pain" are not any descriptions but expressions like a "cry". Since there are no descriptions, they do not constitute any knowledge. But Sankowski contests this reading. He says that Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* does not fully accept this reading. He writes, "But Investigations, p. 189 does not bear out this interpretation. Wittgenstein seems to imply there that sometimes an avowal (e.g. 'I am afraid') can be a description of a state of mind, though it need not *always* be such"[14]. Similarly, he goes on to say:

And indeed there is evidence that Wittgenstein would give a positive answer [to the question whether 'I am in pain' could under any circumstance be a description]. Wittgenstein himself alludes to the locution 'I describe my state of mind' as if it is a permissible way of talking (*Investigations*, 291). Besides, Wittgenstein hints that 'I am afraid' is sometimes a description of a state of mind and sometimes is not (Investigations, pp. 187-189)[15]

[10] Ibid., p. 257.
[11] Ibid., section 288.
[12] Sankowski, "Wittgenstein on Self-Knowledge", p. 258.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid., p. 260.

Sankowski says that Kenny is right when he says that avowals, if taken as necessarily true, amount to nonsense; to be precise, they amount to a piece of *a priori* philosopher's nonsense for Wittgenstein[16]. "But", Sankowski writes, "we must distinguish this rejection, which is to be found in Wittgenstein, from a different view, not in Wittgenstein, that 'I know I am in pain' is necessarily philosopher's nonsense except perhaps in certain very restricted kinds of cases"[17]. Jack Temkin, another commentator on the conventional reception of Wittgenstein's critique of epistemic privacy, gives an example to which Sankowski is alluding. What Cartesians call necessary truths, Wittgenstein, according to Temkin, calls rules of grammar. Avowals, as grammatical propositions, are not nonsense, but rather grammatical propositions taken as empirical propositions are nonsense[18].

Moreover, Kenny, Sankowski says[19], conflates the attack on the observational model of introspection with an attack on the cognizability of one's own conscious states[20]. Self-knowledge does not rest on "observation" as opposed to the description of the external world (i.e., the asymmetry between first-person and third-person accounts), but it does not annihilate its cognizability. Wittgenstein, according to Sankowski, only denies the idea that the picture of inner process gives us the correct idea of the use of mental words rather than denying the cognitive basis of mental content. It is important to quote the full section of Wittgenstein here, which deals with this issue:

"But you surely cannot deny that, for example, in remembering, an inner process takes place."—What gives the impression that we want to deny anything? When one says "Still, an inner process does take place here"—one wants to go on: "After all, you see it." And it is this inner process that one means by the word "remembering".— The impression that we wanted to deny something arises from our setting our faces against the picture of the 'inner process'. What we deny is that the picture of the inner process gives us the correct idea of the use of the word "to remember". We say that this picture with its ramifications stands in the way of our seeing the use of the word as it is[21].

One can witness the conversational style of writing at play here again, as already mentioned above; an interlocutor is asking Wittgenstein as to why he is denying "an inner process", to which Wittgenstein replies that he is not rejecting the occurrence of the inner process i.e. its cognizability but rather he only denies the idea that "the picture of the inner process gives us the correct idea of the use" of any word describing mental event. According to Sankowski, Wittgenstein is only distinguishing between two different types of descriptions, in accordance with his theory of multiple uses and language games. Sankowski writes, "Wittgenstein wanted us to grasp the variety of sorts of descriptions there are, especially so that we would see that a description of my room and a description of my conscious state differ in important ways – in particular that the latter does not begin with observation, as does the former"[22].

HOW CAN FIRST-PERSON AVOWALS COME TO HAVE SENSE ACCORDING TO SANKOWSKI?

Sankowski's main answer to this question is that providing a context to statements like "I know I am in

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Temkin, "Wittgenstein on Epistemic Privacy", pp. 107-109.
[19] Sankowski, "Wittgenstein on Self- Knowledge", p. 259.
[20] Ibid.
[21] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, section 305.
[22] Sankowski, "Wittgenstein on Self-Knowledge", pp. 258-59.

pain" can lend sense to them[23]. These expressions make adequate sense in appropriate contexts. Wittgenstein is basically challenging all sorts of foundationalisms, the context-independent knowledge claims. Wittgenstein occasionally holds that statements like "I am afraid" are sometimes a description of a state of mind, and sometimes they are not[24]. For Wittgenstein, self-knowledge is neither cheap, i.e., available in easily accessible immediate avowals, nor too difficult so as to dissolve it into an impossibility, as held by the conventional reading of Wittgenstein's critique.

Jack Temkin, already referred to above, provides a few relevant examples that further explain Sankowski's point of "context providing sense to avowals". Temkin says that for Wittgenstein, a sentence is senseless only if it doesn't have any use in a language game. But avowals, says Temkin, do have uses. They can express one's exasperation, as in, "I know very well that I am in pain; don't keep trying to cheer me up." Or they can be of "concessive" use like, "I know I am in pain, coach, but it is important to me to play this game"; here "I know" means "I accept", "I grant"[25]. This is exactly Sankowski's point. Contexts provide meaning to avowals.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we examine Wittgenstein's critique of the traditional introspective model of self-knowledge, as understood in the conventional interpretation of Wittgenstein's later work. All the major dimensions of Wittgenstein's critique are properly laid out. Following this, a review of this critique is presented with special reference to Edward Sankowski. This review presents a more nuanced understanding of Wittgenstein's treatment of the question of self-knowledge, making possible a certain legitimate scope for it that would otherwise be totally denied by conventional interpretation.

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[23] Ibid., p. 261.
[24] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, part two, pp. 187-89.
[25] Temkin, "Wittgenstein on Epistemic Privacy", p. 103.