

WITTGENSTEIN: THE CONCEPT OF THE THINKING SELF IN THE LATER TRANSITIONAL PHASE

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ABSTRACT

Post 1932, a fresh Wittgenstein emerges who insists that philosophy consists in the dissolution of philosophical problems. Wittgenstein now turns to ordinary language where the meaning of a sentence is determined from the rules of its use. Wittgenstein says the word 'I' has a peculiar grammar which gives the impression that the real 'I' lives in my body. He says that there are two distinct cases in the use of the word 'I' or 'my' which he prefers to call 'the use as object' and 'the use as subject'. There is a difference between the two categories in the sense that the cases of the first category involve the recognition of a particular person and there is in these cases the possibility of an error. The latter cases may be said to be immune from error unlike the former. Wittgenstein points out that the two words 'I' and 'LW' in 'I am LW' do not mean the same, nor do they mean 'The person who is now speaking'. Nor do they mean that 'I' and 'LW' mean different things. It only means that these words are different instruments in our language. This paper discusses the concept of the thinking self in this context. When we use the word 'I' as a subject, it creates the illusion that we use this word to refer to something bodiless, which however has its seat in our body. This seems to be the real ego, the self as distinct from the body. This is the point made by Wittgenstein.

Keywords – Grammar, Self, Thinking, Use, Words

INTRODUCTION

The most conspicuous feature of the early transitional period was Wittgenstein's adherence to verification. Post 1932, Wittgenstein brings in his new ideas. It includes all the lecture notes recorded by his students, the *Blue Book* dictated by Wittgenstein himself to his students during 1933-34 and the *Brown Book* dictated during 1933-35, the *Philosophical Grammar* composed during 1932-34. Wittgenstein, now moving away from verification, considers philosophy not as a vacuous search of metaphysical problems but rather in the dissolution of philosophical

problems. Philosophical problems are due to grammatically alike expressions which have different uses and the error lies in considering them to be similar. Wittgenstein pointed out that the mistake made by philosophers, including the author of the *Tractatus*, is looking at language as a form of words rather than the use of the form of words. In this paper, I will consider Wittgenstein's views on the thinking self as it appears in the later transitional period.

SECTION 1 THE GRAMMAR OF 'I'

In the *Blue Book* Wittgenstein says that the subject of personal experience is the source of a great deal of philosophical difficulties.¹ His enquiry about the thinking experiencing self or the "I" intends to show whether there is any substantive corresponding to the "I". His answer is negative in keeping with his view of meaning of terms as the uses that we give them. So what is the use of the term "I"? For Wittgenstein it serves no useful purpose of picking out someone amongst others nor does it refer to an inner state of consciousness. It is only used as a convention in our language. Therefore, he says, the mouth which says "I", or the hand which is raised to indicate that it is I who wish to speak, or I who have toothache does not thereby point to anything.²

Wittgenstein during this stage is continuing to make the distinction between first person present tense utterances and third person present tense ones in order to show that the term "I" does not denote any person. Moreover, experiencing a sense-data is also different from having or owning a material object. The difference lies in their grammars. In the lectures during 1932-33, Wittgenstein says that the grammar of "having a toothache" is very different from that of "having a piece of chalk". Similarly, the grammar of "I have toothache" and "Moore has toothache" are also different; the word "toothache" in these two cases is part of two different games. The verification for "I have a toothache" is different from that of "He has toothache". We fall into the risk of error if we say that he has what I have, when I have a toothache, except that I know it directly in my case and indirectly in his. The root of this blunder lies in our tendency to confuse grammatical statements with statements of facts. It is sensible to say "His ache is worse than mine". But it is nonsensical to say "I feel my toothache" or "Two people cannot have the same pain" as it is meaningless to ask whether someone else can have what I have, when I have a toothache. These are questions and statements about facts which we muddle with grammar.³ Wittgenstein says: 'Nonsense is produced by trying to express in a proposition something which belongs to the grammar of our language. By "I can't feel his toothache" is meant that I can't *try*. It is the character of the logical *cannot* that one can't try.⁴ Wittgenstein points out that it is nonsense to ask. "How do you know you have a toothache?" in case of oneself, because the verification of my having a toothache is simply having it. It would be absurd to say "I know it because I feel it". But it is not nonsensical to ask "How do you know?" in case of "He has toothache".⁵ Wittgenstein points out that we tend to confuse "I have a piece of chalk" and "He has a piece of chalk" with "I have toothache" and "He has toothache". In the former pair the

verifications are analogous unlike the latter pair. He further points out the function "x has a toothache" can have different values like Tom, Dick and Harry but never I. Wittgenstein points out that the personal pronoun "I" does not indicate a possessor nor is it necessary in sentences that describe having an experience unlike in sentences like "I have a cigar". Therefore, instead of saying "I think" or "I have an ache" we can say "It thinks" just as in "It rains" or "There is an ache here". Although it appears that the word "I" refers to a person and any omission of it would imply describing phenomena incompletely, it is not so. The word "I" can be done away with and we can describe phenomena without using it.⁶ Thus Wittgenstein says: 'I is in a class by itself. The word "I" does not refer to a possessor in sentences about having an experience, unlike its use in "I have a cigar".⁷

Moore records Wittgenstein during 1932-33 as saying that the verification for "I have toothache" is quite different from that of "He has toothache" and therefore the meanings of the two expressions must be different, i.e., the meaning of verification is different in "I have" from "He has". There is in fact no verification for "I have" because the question "How do you know that you have toothache?" is nonsensical. The answer "Because I feel it" is not acceptable because "I feel it" means the same as "I have it". Or the answer "I know it by inspection" is also unacceptable, because it implies I can "look to see" if I have it or not, but "looking to see whether I have it or not" has no meaning. The fact that it is nonsense to talk of verification in case of "I have it" places "I have it" on a different grammatical level from "he has it". This is further testified by the fact that both are not values of the single propositional function "x has toothache". Wittgenstein further pointed out that "I don't know whether I have toothache" is always absurd or nonsense but "I don't know whether he has toothache" is not nonsense. Still further "It seems to me that I have toothache" is nonsense, whereas "It seems to me that he has" is not nonsense.⁸ Moore points out Wittgenstein's lectures suggest that it not that the word "toothache" is used differently in "I have toothache" from "He has toothache". But the latter expression necessarily refers to a physical body, whereas the former does not.⁹

SECTION 2 DESCRIPTION OF SENSATION FROM THE FIRST PERSON PERSPECTIVE

According to Wittgenstein in describing a sensation, we need not refer to a person or to a sense organ. In a description of the visual field we need not necessarily refer to a person; the visual field being *mine* is not essential to the description. Or in other words, it is not an essential property of a visual sensation or a pain to belong to someone. The locality of the pain is not related to the person who has it. Just by naming a possessor, the pain cannot be given. Wittgenstein considers the statement "The noise is approaching my right ear"; in such a case the existence of a physical ear is not necessary. It only describes an auditory experience and this experience is logically independent of the existence of my ears. The audible phenomena are in an

auditory space and are independent of the human body. Thus we can talk of toothache without the existence of teeth or we can talk of thinking without a head being involved.¹⁰

The solipsistic position that "only my experiences are real" is obviously absurd if taken as a statement of fact. The solipsist who says "only I have real toothache" does not need either the word "I" or the word "real". "I" is not opposed to anything. It would rather be better to say "There is toothache". And this is exactly what the solipsist is trying to say—"Getting into the solipsistic mood means not using the word, "I" in describing a personal experience."¹¹ During 1932-33, Wittgenstein said the solipsistic statements "The only reality is the present experience" or "The only reality is *my* present experience" both are equally absurd but the idea expressed in them is of great importance. Moore points out that elsewhere Wittgenstein said the solipsists' statement "Only my experience is real" is absurd as a statement of fact and the solipsist falls into error when he says he has something which another does not have; that is equally absurd. But he will not fall into error if he says "I have toothache" and "He has toothache" are on different levels. Wittgenstein says the solipsist is right in treating "I have toothache" as being on a different level from "He has toothache". But the solipsists' claim that he has something that no one else has is absurd. Here both the terms "I" and "real" in "only I have real toothache" are redundant. Moreover, the person who denies the solipsist's claim is equally absurd. "Only my experiences are real" and "Everyone's experiences are real" are equally nonsensical.¹²

SECTION 3 THE USE OF THE WORD 'I'

According to Wittgenstein, the word "I" in answer to the question "who has toothache?" has two very different kinds of use. More often the word "I" is used as a sign coming from a certain body. But my answer to the question whether I have toothache is not made by reference to anybody. There is no need for a criterion; my body and the toothache are independent. During the lectures of 1933-34, Wittgenstein shows that the word "I" cannot be used to refer to "my body". Two persons may have the same body. The terms "I" and "my body" are used differently. It would be a wrong expression if I said my body has toothache instead of "I have toothache". It would further imply the non-existence of the "I" and would amount to replacing "I" with "my body". It would be nonsense to suppose that I have a self without a body and therefore "I" cannot be replaced with "my body". "I" has meaning only with reference to a body. Yet "I" and "this body" cannot be interchanged and therefore it is incorrect to suppose that pointing to this body is an indirect way of pointing to me.¹³ In his lectures on private experience and sense data Wittgenstein says it is misleading to suppose that I know directly what I see and only indirectly what others see. I cannot be said to know indirectly what another person sees if I cannot be said to know it directly. So: 'We can't say: "I say he has toothache because I observe his behaviour, but I say that I have because I *feel* it" (This might lead one to say that "toothache" has two meanings, one for me and one for the other person)'.¹⁴

Wittgenstein divulges his intention of giving the example of having a toothache in someone else's tooth. Its purpose was to show that one may be tempted to do away with the simple use of the "I" in certain situations. His intention was to show that the use of the word "I" is suggested by certain invariable experiences and if we suppose these experiences are changed (like having a toothache in someone else's tooth) the ordinary use of the word "I" breaks down and other words can be used. We tend to have a feeling that our language would be incomplete if we omit the "I". We suppose that leaving out the personal pronoun would describe phenomena in an incomplete manner. But says Wittgenstein, this is not the case.

Thus Wittgenstein says:

One symbolism is just as good as the next. The word "I" is one symbol among others having a *practical* use, and could be discarded when not necessary for practical speech. It does not stand out among all other words we use in practical life unless we begin using it as Descartes did. I have tried to convince you of just the opposite of Descartes' emphasis on "I".¹⁵

So any kind of privileged status is denied to the term "I". Being one among other ordinary words it has no uniqueness. Its use is given by us in our language and we can get rid of the term where it is not essential. So the indubitableness of the "I" that so characterized modern philosophy with the start of Descartes' *Cogito* is completely shredded by Wittgenstein.

According to Wittgenstein, the word "I" has a peculiar grammar which makes us think that the body is the "seat" of "I". The statement "The body is the seat of that which really lives" is senseless nor is it an experiential proposition which can be known only by me, for only I can have that experience. Wittgenstein distinguishes between two different cases in the use of the word "I" or "my" which he calls "The use as object" and "the use as subject". The former kind is exemplified in cases like "My arm is broken", "I have grown six inches", "I have a bump on my forehead", "The wind blows my hair about". Examples of the latter kind of use are "I see so-and-so", "I hear so-and-so", "I try to lift my arm", "I think it will rain", "I have toothache". The difference in the two categories lies in the fact that the former use involves the recognition of a particular person and there is the possibility of error while in the latter case there is no recognition of a person involved nor is there any room for error. Wittgenstein says it is possible in an accident to mistake someone else's broken arm for mine or mistake someone else's bump on the forehead to be mine when we are looking at the same mirror at the same time. But when I say "I have a toothache" there is no possibility of error; the question "How are you sure that you have a toothache?" is nonsensical. Thus Wittgenstein says:

The word "I" does not mean the same as "L.W." even if I am L.W., nor does it mean the same as the expression "the person who is now speaking". But that doesn't mean: that "L.W." and "I" mean different things. All it means is that these words are different instruments in our language".¹⁶

In his task of eliminating the "I" as the owner of experiences, Wittgenstein distinguishes between two cases: "How do you know that *he* has pains?" and "How do you know that you have pains?" The answer to the former could be "Because I hear him moan", i.e., I see him in pain while the answer to the latter is somewhat different—"Because *I feel* them" i.e., I do not see or observe that I am in pain unlike the former but I rather have the pains. And in the latter case, points out Wittgenstein, we are inclined to lay emphasis on the word "feel" and not on the word "I". This attests the fact that the term "I" does not serve to distinguish one person among others. Therefore, Wittgenstein says: 'When we feel that we wish to abolish the "I" in "I have pain", one may say that we tend to make the verbal expression of pain similar to the expression by moaning. — We are inclined to forget that it is the particular use of a word only which gives the word its meaning... We feel then that in the cases in which "I" is used as subject, we don't use it because we recognize a particular person by his bodily characteristics; and this creates the illusion that we use this word to refer to something bodiless, which, however, has its seat in our body. In fact, *this* seems to be the real ego, the one of which it was said, "Cogito, ergo sum". — "Is there then no mind, but only a body?" Answer: The word "mind" has meaning, i.e., it has a use in our language; but saying this doesn't yet say what kind of use we make of it'.¹⁷

Wittgenstein considers the two cases: "A has a gold tooth" and "A has toothache". He points out that at first sight the two propositions might appear to be similar but they are not used analogously. They have different grammars. The terms "to have" have different usages here. According to Wittgenstein it is conceivable that I can feel pain in someone else's tooth, or I can feel pain in someone else's body. "I can't feel his pain" is a metaphysical proposition while "We can't have pains in another person's tooth" is an experiential one and we are prone to confuse these two kinds.¹⁸

Moore says, Wittgenstein called "having toothache" a primary experience. The characteristic feature of primary experience is that in its case "I" does not denote a possessor. Wittgenstein points out that just as the idea of a person does not enter into the description of a visual field, or a physical eye does not enter into the description of what is seen, so also "the idea of a person" does not enter the description of "having toothache". Moore points out that in one passage Wittgenstein seemed to imply that he used "person" to mean the same as "physical body". Wittgenstein had said: "A description of a sensation does not contain a description of a sense-organ, nor, *therefore*, of a person". But Moore points out, Wittgenstein was not always using the term "person" to mean the same as physical body. Moore writes:

For he said that 'just as no (physical) eye is involved in seeing, so no Ego is involved in thinking or in having toothache'; and he quoted with apparent approval, Lichtenberg's saying 'Instead of "I think" we ought to say "It thinks", ('it' being used, as he said, as 'Es' is used in 'Es blitzet'); and by saying this he meant, I think, something similar to what he said of 'the eye of the visual field' when he said that it is not anything which is *in* the visual field. Like so many other philosophers, in talking of 'visual sensations' he seemed not to distinguish between 'what I see' and 'my seeing of it'; and he did not expressly discuss what appears to be a possibility, namely, that though no person enters into what I see, yet some 'person' other than a physical body or a voice, may 'enter into' my seeing of it.¹⁹

SECTION 4 'I' IS NOT AN OWNER OF EXPERIENCES

The root cause of statements like "If what I feel is always *my* pain only, what can the supposition mean that someone else has pain?", is our oscillation between logical impossibility and physical impossibility, says Wittgenstein. The problem which so perplexes us can be avoided by investigating "how the words in question *are actually used in our language*". We are alternately inclined to use a word in different and varied ways and as a result the grammar of our words sometimes appears to be queer. It is difficult to see that an assertion of metaphysics can also be used to state an experiential fact. When a man says "only my pain is real" he is not using the expression in the way it is normally used.

Wittgenstein says: "The man who says "only my pain is real", doesn't mean to say that he has found out by the common criteria—the criteria, i.e., which give our words their common meanings—that the others who said they had pains were cheating. But what he rebels against is the use of *this* expression in connection with *these* criteria. That is, he objects to using this word in the particular way in which it is commonly used. On the other hand, he is not aware that he is objecting to a convention'.²⁰ The solipsist who says only his own experiences are real is using a certain form of expression only (restricting the use of the epithet "real" to what we should call his experiences). We must remember that the meaning of a phrase is the use we give it. Wittgenstein concludes the *Blue Book* by saying: "The meaning of the expression depends entirely on how we go on using it. Let's not imagine the meaning as an occult connection the mind makes between a word and a thing, and that this connection *contains* the whole usage of a word as the seed might be said to contain the tree."²¹ So the word "I" in "I have pains" does not denote a particular body because we can never substitute a description of a body in place of "I". The word "I" is hence a part of our language and has a use that is accorded to it by us. We use the word "I" to refer to an owner in the sense of belongingness like in "I have a pen". This use is different from the one where we use the term "I" to denote immediate experiences like in "I have a pain". In the latter

case the "I" is not significant of an owner and the same can be expressed without the term like in "There is a pain".

Wittgenstein says the answer "I" to the question "who has toothache?" has two very different kinds of use. Mostly the word "I" is used as a sign coming from a certain body. But my answer to the question whether I have toothache is not made by reference to any particular body. There is no need for a criterion. My body and the toothache are independent. Therefore, one answer to the question "who" refers to a body and another appears not to refer to a body and is of a different kind.²² In the *Big Typescript*, Wittgenstein writes the phenomenon of pain in 'I am in pain' has nothing to do with my body and hence I can have toothache without teeth. Moreover, when we say that a machine cannot think or cannot have pain, the understanding of the expression "having pain" is the main point. In the *Big Typescript* he writes:

*could a machine think? - could it have pain? ... Here it depends on how the expression "have pain" is used. But in the sentence "I'm in pain", "I" doesn't signify a body, and therefore neither does it signify a machine.*²³

Wittgenstein pointed out the terms "I" and "he" are on the same grammatical level where "I" can be replaced by "this body". Moore says Wittgenstein was very much convinced that the word "I" or any other word denoting a subject is used in two very different ways. In one sense it is used on a level with other people and in another sense it is not. This difference, according to Wittgenstein, is due to the difference in the grammar of our ordinary language.²⁴ Moore writes:

As an instance of one of these two uses, he gave 'I've got a match box' and 'I've got a bad tooth', which he said were 'on a level' with 'Skinner has a match-box', and 'Skinner has a bad tooth'. He said that in these two cases 'I have ...' and 'Skinner has ...' really were values of the same propositional function, and that 'I' and 'Skinner' were both 'possessors'. But in the case of 'I have toothache' or 'I see a red patch' he held that the use of 'I' is utterly different.²⁵

CONCLUSION

It is seen in the post verification phase, regarding the thinking self, Wittgenstein's insistence that the term "I" is redundant in describing immediate sense data is shown more exhaustively and the continuity is unmistakable with the earlier stages. During this phase, Wittgenstein is more inclined towards the concept of use in language. The concept of 'use' is gaining ground as related to the thinking self. In the early transitional phase, Wittgenstein had stressed on verification and phenomenological language which describes the immediately given and had replaced the logical atomism with language as a calculus. The *Blue Book* introduces the concepts of language games, family resemblance and repudiates that language is a calculus of clearly defined rules. After

1932, Wittgenstein moved over to ordinary language and considered the meaning of a sentence to be determined by the rules of its use. A paradigm shift is exclusive at this stage. Wittgenstein is speaking of the multifarious uses of language and is considering the self also from this point of view. He shows how in our ordinary language the word 'I' is used and because we are unable to distinguish between the different grammatical uses we consider all uses to be of the same kind. This ultimately results in erroneously considering the 'I' to denote some kind of an entity separately, a metaphysical one. Therefore, we notice a continuity in Wittgenstein's denial of the thinking self from the Tractarian days.

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