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Intelligibility and Objectivity of Psychological Language

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I. Surface Grammar and Pseudo-Problems

By all accounts, it does seem incredible that in these days of the internet and e-mail, the news haven't yet spread that a problem that tormented philosophers for centuries, namely, the famous "mind/body" problem, was solved and utterly overcome by Ludwig Wittgenstein during the first half of the 20th century. It is indeed fantastic that even now so few people are aware that the great difficulties faced in the philosophy of mind, as for instance the relationship between the bodily and the psychological or the knowledge of "other minds", were completely liquidated as subjects more than a half a century ago. And it is no less extraordinary that there are still professional philosophers stubbornly trying to find "solutions", the more entangled and fanciful the better, about how psychological states become real through brain activities. How should we explain such scandalous facts? Ignorance is never an argument, but if Wittgenstein's devastating results have not been properly appraised it's perhaps due to the fact (partially at least) that there is a whole culture conspiring against it. This culture manifests a clear lack of interest about valid thinking and conceptual clarity in favor of the getting of astounding amounts of data concerning neurons, synapsis, brain cortex and so on, under which we all are practically buried. Thus, despite a forceful and up to this day unrefuted line of argument and of a huge amount of ideas and isolated arguments scattered throughout philosophical literature, we still find serious people aiming at setting up tortuous explanations which mostly become even more incomprehensible than the original problems they were attempting to solve.

Frankly speaking, we should say that in general discussions about the nature of (allowing myself for a moment to use words philosophically, that is, without real justification) "the mental" and the relations between "the mental" and the physical are discussions that take place within a clear and neat framework. Such framework is the crucial factor, the one that allows for the birth of such pseudo-difficulties. The framework I have in mind is just surface grammar. In it, as we all know, classifications for words are drawn (substantives, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, etc.) but under each category the most assorted variety of "elements" fall, despite which they all get the same treatment. For instance, within the category of substantive fall words like 'dog', 'love', 'thermodynamics', 'irrational number', 'person, and so forth. They are all the subjects of sentences which, as expected, have all the same structure. Within the category "verbs" we find such dissimilar elements as 'to kill', 'to run', 'to dream', 'to rest', 'to exist', 'to sleep', 'to act', 'to mean' and so forth. The same thing happens with adjectives which can be of a moral, physical, aesthetic, psychological, military, religious, etc., character. Now, language must some way or another be regulated, and that regulation must be set up previously to the application of words. If it weren't like that it just would be impossible to learn any language. The problem is that the order imposed by surface grammar, which certainly is most useful for both the utilization of language and communication, fosters, not to say "promotes", conceptual confusions of the most variegated kind. The trouble is that precisely because all discussions take place within that framework, if one stays inside it there is simply no way of freeing oneself from them. That's why speculating about the "mind/body" problem without challenging surface grammar is really a waste of time.

With Wittgenstein the landscape is drastically modified. Why? Because Wittgenstein worked out a notion of language in which surface grammar is simply irrelevant. His is the conception of language in terms of language games and forms of life. Let us quickly reconstruct his stance.

Perhaps we should begin by pointing out that Wittgenstein was not, and did not see himself, as a surgeon of language, someone who carries out a sort of real operation on language. From his point of view, language is not made out of language-games. The concept of language-game is a heuristic one, a linguistic instrument useful for the construction of explanations or clarifications. In that sense, language-games are not real. Language is not composed of language-games in the same sense in which a chair is composed of a back to lean on, legs to stand and a board where to sit. Rather, what is at stake here is something like the *Tractarian* idea of scientific theories as nets that allow us to catch or grasp the world's facts. On the other hand, however, the Wittgensteinian concept of language in terms of language-games and forms of life has a very precise, concrete goal: this conception was elaborated

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in order to show that philosophical discourse is empty, that philosophical statements are absurd and that philosophical research and discussions arise out of a certain kind of misunderstandings. Thus, there is a sense in which the Wittgensteinian view of language is an *ad hoc* one, conceived to attain certain previously established results. Now: what traits or characteristics does this new conception have? In my view, the most appropriate way to present it is by saying that it is a praxiological conception of language. It is only from a praxiological perspective that philosophical language may be exhibited as unintelligible. Language *in toto* is seen by Wittgenstein as a toolbox. What are its tools? The sentences and words we use all the day around. They all serve *some* purpose. The fact that words have multiple possibilities of being applied indicates that language may be seen as composed, in the relevant sense, of multiple language-games. However, unlike what happens with the standard grammatical conception, Wittgenstein is not concerned with words themselves, but with words *used in connection with activities*. The activities in question are not any action or behaviour accidentally or arbitrarily displayed by someone. The activities that help lay the foundations of language-games are socially recognized activities. Wittgenstein named those activities 'forms of life'. Thus, we can assert that every language-game is paired with its corresponding form of life. In fact this is something that Wittgenstein himself says, although he states it in a way that may easily be misinterpreted, which is what as a matter of fact has happened. He says: "it is easy to imagine a language entirely composed of orders and battle reports. – Or a language that is solely composed of questions and expressions to answer Yes and No. And innumerable others. And to imagine a language is to imagine a form of life."[1] Unfortunately, rather seldom has it been understood that what Wittgenstein is saying is that to imagine a language-*game* is to imagine a form of life. Actually, the underlying thought is simple: it is as absurd to think that there are activities for which there is no vocabulary that would allow us to identify and recognize them as to think that the application of words that, so to speak, hovers in midair without any human activity as a foundation, might be meaningful.

Before reconstructing the explanation Wittgenstein offers of the functioning of language about "the inner", I think it would be useful to bear in mind the notions required for such task. The main one is obviously the complex concept "language game/forms of life", that he refers to simply as "language-game" for, as he says, he will call "language game the whole composed by language and the activities intertwined with it".[2] But language for Wittgenstein also includes everything without which it could not be learnt. Those elements without which language would be impossible to assimilate, without which it would not be possible to learn it, are called by Wittgenstein the 'instruments of language'. They include things such as samples, tones of voice, grimaces, gestures and the like. And it is also very important to have a global vision on the subject. Here there is a contrast to draw. In traditional conceptions, language is seen as something external to human beings, something with which they (so to speak) get in touch; in the praxiological conception of language the latter is conceived as something organically integral to human life. It is not something external but rather something like the metabolic system that allows to transit from the biological to the human sphere of life. With all this in mind, which I hope will become clearer the further we go along, we can now move to deal concretely with psychological language.

II. The Linguistization of Psychological ("inner") States

It would be useful to recall that in the traditional approaches there is just no possible solution to the "mind/body" problem. Taking as the most representative of all possible positions Cartesianism and radical behaviorism, the situation that one is lead to is that either everyone has a direct, exclusive access to their psychological states but then we have no clue whatsoever about what happens to others or even if anything does happen to them at all, or else everyone knows what happens to others but no one has any idea of what happens to him or herself. In both cases the conclusion is the same: what we take as "communication" is something fictional, unreal. There is simply no such thing. This result is of course unacceptable, but if it is then its presuppositions are invalid too. Let us try to figure this out.

When someone states that something hurts him, that he imagined something, etc., other speakers normally assume that the person in question is talking, in one way or another, about something that happens to and is located inside him or her. But if it were so, then the speaker would be talking about what only he or she knows, since it would be impossible for everybody else to know what goes "inside" him. But if so, how could others understand him and, since the phenomenon is reciprocal, how could he understand others when they say they are in pain? Obviously, something must be wrong in the traditional, usual, common way of interpreting the use of psychological language. If the usual interpretation were right, then we would not be in a position to explain how communication is possible; or we should simply infer that there is no communication but only a simulacrum of communication: we all pretend, we act as if we do communicate with each

[1] L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), sec. 19.
[2] L. Wittgenstein, *ibid*., sec. 7.

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other, but if we coincide it would only be by chance. Obviously, this is not an explanation and that's why that way of approaching the issue is simply unacceptable. At this stage, the following fact is worth noticing: language does work; what philosophers have not managed to do is to give an acceptable account of its functioning. But then it would be very useful to understand what the nature of the error is, because if we understand that we will be in a much better position to explain how it is that we can convey the contents of our psychic life knowing that everyone speaks of what only happens to them. I highlight the fact that no one denies that when people use psychological language something happens to them. The real difficulty is to accept it and at the same time to account for it.

The right answer must come in very different terms from the usual ones. There must be a way of explaining the use of language that should allow us to express what happens to us as well as to understand what another's is, and the only way to do so is to emerge from the idea that for communication to take place, there must be a common platform, something shared. Here the comparison with the market and money is highly enticing. In a market there is a multitude of goods, which are bought and exchanged. How? This is possible because we are provided with a special good, namely, money, through which we unify in a single net the system of prices of goods and thus we can acquire, sell, auction them, etc., in a way that becomes intelligible for everyone and sharable by everyone (even if it is intrinsically unfair). Now, I suggest that the same must happen with communication and everyone's experiences. These must, so to speak, become goods (linguistic ones, in this case) for them to be exchanged. But how is that done? The only way to do so in linguistizing them. That is, when someone says to me that something hurts what I care about of course is his pain, but for his pain to become comprehensible it had to become, to keep up with the metaphor, "linguistic money". On the contrary, the situation would be as if we wanted to buy things but pay with bottlecaps. There is no business in that case, what means that communication in these conditions is simply unfeasible. But how can we communicate, that is, how do we make me understand what someone is saying when they say something hurts and conversely? This is achieved when one becomes a user of language, that is, through a certain training which, by the way, takes no little time. What happens during that process? In the case of sensations, spontaneous, natural reactions of sensation are little by little being replaced by words, expressions, sentences. Instead of letting out moans or groanings someone exclaims "my tooth hurts so bad!" while pressing his jaw, for instance. Thus, when I say that something hurts me, through those words I give expression to my pain, but when I do that I automatically cease to play the "name-object" language-game. When I say that something hurts me, I do not name that something, I express it.

Now we can explain why we understand what others tell us when they talk about their experiences. Of course that is feasible, but it has a price: when we use psychological language we connect with each other even if that connection takes place within language, given that language is precisely that public platform that we all share and inside which we all move. And I would go even further and say: of which no one can escape.

One of the advantages of the Wittgensteinian approach is that it makes us understand immediately why practically all conceptions of language are simultaneously, if it is possible, naïf, false, and absurd. Naïf, because they offer a very primitive, very dull explanation for something that should have called for philosopher's attention as something not so simple and of not so easy apprehension; false, because they obviously fail, and absurd because they purport something logically impossible to happen, namely, that everyone talks about their experiences, so to speak, in a raw state, but nevertheless others understand us. That is ridiculous.

All of this is highly important for a thorough understanding of language and to dissolve the riddles that plague the philosophy of mind or (what would be a better way of putting it) the philosophy of psychology. Let us now examine that sector of language that is psychological language.

III. Psychological Language

By psychological language we will understand that sector of natural language constituted by words and expressions such as 'think', 'belief', 'feeling like', 'forgetting', 'bringing back to memory' and so on. It contains verbs ('to imagine') as well as nouns ('feeling) and adjectives ('intelligent'). Now, our starting point is obviously the rejection of the primitive proposal, that, is, the grammatical one, which makes of nouns names for objects, of adjectives qualities of things, and of verbs actions. We shall not say that 'to imagine' indicates an action, that 'feeling' is the name of a particular state and that 'intelligent' is the name of a special quality. On the contrary: as a matter of fact our starting point consists in holding that psychological words *never* name anything, that they just do not function as names, that they do not fit in the 'Fido'- Fido model. But if psychological language does not operate according to the "name-object" model, how does it?

From Wittgenstein's perspective and in accordance with what we already stated, psychological language has a certain feature which distinguishes it from other sectors of language: it is marked by an essential asymmetry. A relation is asymmetric if when it holds between two objects *a* and *b* it never holds

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between *b* and *a*. Now, the asymmetric relation that Wittgenstein detects in psychological language is its fundamental feature and *applies to* the first and the third persons. In other words, when one uses psychological language in the first person one does something with it that simply cannot be done when it is used in the third person, and conversely. Indeed, when we use psychological verbs or expressions, we either self-ascribe some psychological state or we ascribe it to others. Now, this distinction is not arbitrary but is explained by the fact that psychological language serves different purposes depending on how it is applied. What we have to do then is to ask ourselves: what do we need psychological language for? In the first person we need it to express what happens to us; in the third person, to make intelligible someone's contextualized and meaningful behaviour. Let us give an example of this.

Let's suppose we are speaking about beliefs. From the perspective of the praxiological conception of language, it naturally makes no sense to make a question such as 'what is a belief?' To make such a question is to adopt the "name-object" model in a context in which it is simply useless. To speak of beliefs cannot be but to self-ascribe a belief or to ascribe it to someone. Therefore, if we want to give an account of what it is to have a belief we need to give *not one but two answers.* But trying to be more accurate: what is the usefulness of saying 'I believe that…' or 'he believes that…'? Let us consider the first case. When I say in believe in something: am I describing myself by means of these words? Is that the way a real understands? Obviously not. Were the speaker describing himself the only thing he would be achieving would just be begging the question, since the only thing he would be saying is that he believes something. Of course someone can describe himself if he stands in front of a mirror and speaks about the person he sees reflected in it, but then he would be describing his own body and that is not what we are talking about. Rather what happens is the following: I use the 'I believe that…' to give my interlocutor an indication to the effect that I am not sure about something, that I just believe it, that is, that I cannot warrant what I am stating. If I wanted to warrant my saying, then I would say 'I know that…'. That is precisely what I am discarding when I say "I believe that…". To my "belief" there corresponds a state of hesitation, of doubt, of lack of certainty. But does the same happen when I say about someone that he believes that it will rain? Of course not. The question is: what do we aim at achieving when we state of someone that he believes such and such thing? A belief is ascribed to someone because what is intended is to make his behavior intelligible. If for instance someone suddenly runs away, I make his behavior intelligible if I ascribe him a belief, *e.g.*, that there is a lion in the room. That is, I make sense of his agitation by ascribing him a belief. That is what the concept of belief in the third person is for, at least the fundamental one because, obviously, we have different concepts of belief. At any rate, the philosophical lesson is really important: it is crucial to understand that when we use psychological language we simply don't do the same thing if we use it in the first than if we use it in the third person.

A very important fact highlighted by these examples it that the key to understand what is meant is to describe where the usefulness of employing the words in question lies. Now, this can only be achieved if we reconstruct the context of discourse, that is, the situation in which the speakers were placed, the subject of the talk, the speakers' goals, etc. Sentences, as we saw, are tools and therefore they can, just like a scalpel or a hammer, have different applications. And it is particularly important to understand that it is through the appropriate contextualization of the linguistic act that the intentionality of the actions is retrieved. We need to look for no "intentional act", an event consisting in "being directed" to this or that object. That is pure mythology and the philosophical manoeuvre it entails was exhibited the *Philosophical Investigations* when Wittgenstein states "When our language suggests a body and there is no body, there, we can say, there is a *spirit*".[3] This is exactly what happens when we consider words and their use in a non-contextualized way. The phenomenon is understandable: it is because the linguistic exchange is decontextualized in order to consider the words exclusively that it is normal for anybody whoever attempts to explain their meaning to postulate something (an entity, a mechanism) to make sense of the apparently referential nature of discourse (*i.e.*, we talk about something, we refer to something, etc.). But the normal speaker "knows" that that is precisely what is achieved when the linguistic exchange is duly "contextualized". That is what is achieved by what I call "contextualization". The same holds, *mutatis mutandis*, for actions.

What we have pointed to are aspects, features of psychological language. To round up our exposition, however, we have to take into account some other elements particularly the notion of a criterion, which is what I will focus on now.

IV. Criteria

Just as what happened with the notion of language-game, the concept of a criterion is a heuristic one, one of Wittgenstein's technical terms that allows him to create an unending amount of quite useful clarifications. As was to be expected, it is a technical concept that, along with its refinement, underwent a certain evolution. Still, its utility is clearly felt in the philosophy of mind, but it is also highly useful in others,

[3] L. Wittgenstein, *ibid.*, sec. 36.

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such as the theory of knowledge or the philosophy of mathematics. Let us ask ourselves then: what is the concept of a criterion useful for? What kind of clarifications thanks to it can be made?

One way to answer these questions, an attractive though probably a bit strange one and certainly a misleading one especially if the corresponding clarifications are not made, is to say that thanks to the notion of a criterion we can meaningfully speak when, referring to others, we speak of that which we are logically supposed not to have access to. What about the other person is that which, in the traditional conception, we have no "direct access" to? The answer is obvious: his psychic life: his feelings, thoughts, images, memories and so on. We are supposed to have to those states and processes only a "privileged access": only everyone in his own case can give an account of them. Naturally, the problem is that were it so, then we would never know what happens to other people, and the other way around: no one could ever know what happens to us when we say we are in pain or we have a mental image. It is evident that something is deeply wrong with this pseudo-explanation and we know what it is: in conventional conceptions, words are interpreted in accordance to the "name-object" model, the asymmetry between the first and the third person is ignored and sentences are taken in consideration apart from their real usage, of their context of application. These flaws enable us to understand why the "mind/body" problem could last for the 2,600 years of its history and make people believe it was, as everything in philosophy, a real problem.

The case of the traditional conception, whether in its Cartesian version or its behavioral variant, is much worse than what could be thought at first sight. Wittgenstein shows that the situation traditionally depicted of the subject as locked inside his own world is not only fallacious but also inconsistent because if it were so, he would not even be able to identify his own psychological states himself. A reason why he would not has to do precisely with the notion this section is devoted to. Let us look at this more closely.

From the Wittgensteinian perspective, the first thing we must pay attention to is the actual utility provided by using the psychological expression we are dealing with. What we must ask ourselves is: what should we use this expression for (in this concrete case, in this concrete situation)? We already mentioned that the first condition to be able to talk of, *e.g.*, someone's pains or memories is for the former to have been previously linguisticized. To linguisticize them means, among other things, that somehow we homogenize them, that is, from their linguistization onwards psychological states stand at the same level that other elements of the linguistic context. We can then ascribe pain to someone because, for instance, we see him shriek, moan, ask for help, etc., in a determinate way. It is based on contextual elements, such as those that expressions of pain were associated with, that we can say of someone that something hurts him, that he remembers something, etc. Now, criteria are precisely those elements that confer meaning to our adscriptions of psychological states. It should be noted that what is associated to them is the meaning of what we say, not its truth or its falsehood.

Naturally, a criterion is an element that is part of a situation. There are no criteria pulled out of thin air. Generally speaking, the criterion we call upon first in our use of psychological language is *what the subject says.* We begin by believing other people, by accepting what they tell us. Why? Because in the field of self-ascriptions, language recognizes firsthand the authority of the first person. But the fact of recognizing that the speaker has such a prerogative does not mean it cannot be suppressed or revoked. Let's suppose a student doesn't do his homework and when he is asked why he didn't do it, he tells us he was sick. We can believe him, but if we choose not it would be only because we have a reason. For instance, let's suppose someone tells us he was seen the night before at a movie theater. We have an element to discard his affirmation. That factor is what another person told me and that for me can become, in that situation, a criterion (because she is a trustworthy person, because everybody knows she doesn't lie, etc.). Therefore, invoking that criterion, it is possible to disprove the student and act accordingly. But we can do that because we have a criterion that shatters what the subject said. Language provides for that possibility and it is clear why: if criteria were not available to us, if we lacked criteria we just wouldn't be able to refute anything people would say about themselves and to talk about their psychic life at all. We would not be able to say of anyone that he or she is making errors from memory, that he or she is confused, that she believes that this or that is the case when in fact it isn't and so forth. Thus, the concept of a criterion is indispensable and non-negotiable.

The notion of criterion fits perfectly well with our previous clarifications about the linguistization of psychic life. It shows the mechanism through which language about the "mental" is revealed as perfectly objective, shared and thus, a-mysterious. It allows us to understand how we can know even better than the subject his own psychological states, something that from any other perspective seems absolutely incomprehensible. This doesn't mean that the peculiarities of psychological language are lost. On the contrary: the mechanism established by the criteria is part of such language.

With the explanation about linguistization of inner states, the identification of the asymmetry between the first and third person and the notion of criterion we can say Wittgenstein restores to the language of the "mental" its objectivity as well as its intelligibility. And the

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result, it is worth noticing, is not the result of improvisation, "brilliant intuitions" or anything of the sort. It stems in an almost natural way when Wittgenstein's conceptual apparatus, and its argumentative strategies, are applied.

V. Conclusions

Clearly what we have presented here is not more than a synthesis, a reconstruction of some aspects of the formidable work developed by Wittgenstein in the field of the philosophy of psychology. It seems to me, nevertheless, that our work effort allows us to identify major differences between Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology and the standard philosophy of mind. Now, we know it is totally counterproductive to talk, as is done in conventional philosophy, of "mental states" in general because under that category are included the most diverse things such as having an image, remembering an event waiting for someone's coming, having the illusion something will happen, having a fantasy, lamenting something happened, believing in God and so on, indefinitely. Wittgenstein taught that, to be understood, every psychological state requires its corresponding grammatical analysis.

Coming back to our metaphor of language as a sort of market in which we exchange linguistic merchandise, what we want is a market in which prices are known by all and money has the same value for everyone. We don't want theories of linguistic barter, independently of their disguise, that is, theories that leave us speakers with uncertainty about whether others have more than we do or if they rather have nothing at all. If it was so we would be inscribed in an unregulated context in which everyone says what they feel like saying without having ever to justify their claims. Obviously, that is not the case. What we want are clarifications that give us back the intelligibility and objectivity of psychological language and that is possible only thanks to the Wittgensteinian way of thinking. Such way of thinking transmuted the character of philosophical research, turning it from sterile (and often puerile) speculations to grammatical analysis exercises, which belong to the noblest products of reason in action.

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