

The Thinking Self in Wittgenstein's Early Transitional Phase

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ABSTRACT

After taking a sabbatical from active philosophy, Wittgenstein returned to Cambridge in 1929 to receive the doctorate degree and was appointed a Fellow of Trinity College from 1930. The early transitional phase covers the years from 1929-32. The Philosophical Remarks may be considered as the first work in this period. It was also the work which helped Wittgenstein renew the grant for his research. This phase registers certain fresh and novel conceptions. Wittgenstein considers the concept of the thinking self in terms of representing phenomena. He shows the non-existence of the thinking self in this context. This paper attempts to analyse Wittgenstein's views on the thinking self in this period and show how he proves the non-existence of the thinking self by conceiving mono-centric languages.

Introduction

The available documents of the early transitional period establish Wittgenstein's enduring conviction about the non-existence of the thinking self. The writings of this phase show that Wittgenstein's return to philosophy is swathed in a chain of subtle changes in his thinking, although remnants of the early period still cling on. The predominant alteration is noticed in the fact that the earlier atomic theory of meaning is abandoned and now replaced by the principle of verification which states that the meaning of a proposition is its method of verification. The a-priori method of the *Tractatus* has now taken a back seat and in its place is introduced the a-posteriori method of investigating actual phenomena. There has been a shift from the firm belief of the early days in a primary language as describing phenomena to a physicalist language. In this paper I will consider Wittgenstein's views on the thinking self in the early transitional phase and try to compare with the early period in this regard.

Section 1 The 'I' in the Transition

Unlike the abstruse *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein is more explicit in his endeavour to demonstrate the use of the term 'I' as misleading and ultimately redundant. In the conversations Wittgenstein says that the word 'I' can be eliminated from language.¹ In the *Philosophical Remarks* he states

that the use of the word 'I' is more often than not misleading, particularly when it is used to express immediate experience like in 'I can see a red patch'. He continues that if it would be possible to speak of immediate experience without using the personal pronoun, then it would show that 'I' is not essential to representation. Philosophical errors arise when we try to represent immediate sense-data by using ordinary physical language. The forms of speech that we use are taken from ordinary physical language and cannot be used without error in epistemology or phenomenology.²

This denial of the thinking self has already been asserted in the early period but the point to be noted is that the *Tractatus* does not mention the 'I' in the context of first person experiences of immediate sense data. It may be recalled that in this intermediate phase, Wittgenstein classified propositions of the form 'I have ...', 'I feel ...' as genuine propositions which are about immediate sense-data and can be conclusively verified or falsified. The *Tractatus* only says that there is no such thing as a subject or soul in the world (*TLP* 5.5421). The transitional Wittgenstein seems to explain why he considers so. Our linguistic expressions of first person experiences tend to take the 'I' as an owner or possessor and the way we represent our immediate sense data is misleading. It is this erroneous representation that is the root of making us believe that there is an owner of our experiences although this owner can never be encountered in our experiences of sense data, as already stated by Hume a couple of centuries ago. In the *Philosophical Remarks* he writes:

...The experience of feeling pain is not that a person 'I' has something. I distinguish an intensity, a location, etc in the pain, but not an owner.³

The point that Wittgenstein is perhaps trying to accentuate is that the subject in experiences is not exigent because it cannot be separated from the experiences themselves. Thus the owner is not necessary at all and it is simply an erroneous use in our language. This fact can also be established by showing that there is no necessary connection between experiences and the subject of experiences. It is purely a contingent relation. The experiences that I suppose to belong to me could equally be anybody else's and I may not have a particular experience at all.

Consider what Wittgenstein is saying in the *Philosophical Remarks*:

... What sort of a thing would a pain be that no one *has*? Pain belonging to no one at all?

Pain is represented as something we can perceive in the sense in which we perceive a matchbox. What is unpleasant is then naturally not the pain, only perceiving it.⁴

It seems from this remark that in our language we represent pain (a sense datum) as any other objective reality, like a matchbox. In pain we perceive only the unpleasantness; this perception is

all that we have. Just as a matchbox can have an owner, or lack one, but can we talk of pain that nobody owns? Hacker points out that it makes no sense to speak of ownership because it makes no sense to speak of an unowned pain; a matchbox can have an owner because it can lack one also. Ownership makes sense only where it makes sense to speak of no ownership; so ownership is transferable.⁵ Dr. Sarkar on similar lines points out that one does not distinguish an owner when one is in pain because subjective experiences are always owned by someone or other. Therefore, it makes no sense to speak of pain owned by nobody and it follows that there is no sense in saying that the pain is owned by somebody.⁶

Section 2 'I' and the Phenomena of Sense - data

The most recurring example of sense-data in the transitional period is of 'toothache'. Wittgenstein cites the instance of 'toothache' and conceives of mono-centric languages where one or the other person is the centre and where representation could be done in different ways. These mono-centric languages show that the 'I' is not an essential constituent of representing experiences and sense data. In the *Philosophical Remarks* Wittgenstein says, that for example, if L.W. has a toothache then that can be represented by 'There is a toothache'. Again, 'A has a toothache' can be represented as 'A is behaving as L.W. does when there is a toothache'. Similarly, we can also, say 'It is thinking' like in 'It is snowing' and 'A is behaving as L.W. does when it is thinking'.⁷

In the conversations, Wittgenstein asks Waismann to imagine himself as a despot in the Orient and everybody is forced to speak the language whose centre is Waismann himself. In such a language, we would say 'Waismann has toothache; Wittgenstein is behaving, like Waismann when he has toothache'. Or if Wittgenstein spoke the language he would be saying 'Wittgenstein has toothache; Waismann is behaving as Wittgenstein does when he has toothache'. All these languages can be translated into one another.⁸ But what stands out is that the language which has 'me' as its centre, for example, where I can say 'I feel real pain' has a privileged status. The distinct status lies in its application. But a description of this application will not express the privileged status because it lies in that language itself.⁹ In any language, primary experience is unique so different languages differ only in their application and their uniqueness cannot be expressed.¹⁰ Moore records Wittgenstein as saying that the idea of a person does not enter into the description of the visual field and visual sensations just as the physical eye does not enter the description of what is seen. And similarly the idea of a person does not enter into the description of 'having toothache'. Actually, Moore goes on to point out that the idea of a physical body does not necessarily enter the description, and 'person' was used to refer to a 'physical body'.¹¹ Moore writes:

... 'A description of a sensation does not contain a description of a sense-organ, nor, *therefore*, of a person'. He was, therefore, still maintaining apparently that one distinction between 'I have toothache' and 'He has toothache' was due to the fact that the latter necessarily refers to a physical body (or, perhaps, to a voice instead) whereas the former does not. But I think this was not the only distinction which he had in mind, and that he was not always using 'person' to mean the same as physical body (or, perhaps, a voice instead). 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.¹²

This remark is reminiscent of *Tractatus* (TLP 5.633) where Wittgenstein had said that just as the eye is not a constituent part of the visual field so also the metaphysical subject is not a part of the world. Wittgenstein is now elaborating that the 'I' never refers to a physical body, quite contrary to common belief. He now no longer talks of the metaphysical subject but only of 'I' as a subjective owner. Although when we talk of experiences of other people we are referring to other physical bodies. And Wittgenstein refers to Lichtenberg's¹³ reduction of 'I think' to 'It thinks' as in 'It thunders'. In the conversations Wittgenstein says that we know only from experience what the parts of our body are, like I know that I do not have two bodies only through experience.¹⁴ This remark may seem to imply that our physical body is also known empirically like our experiences, it is a part of the experiential world like any other thing and does not imply an owner of thoughts and beliefs and feelings. In the conversations Wittgenstein says:

If I am 'A' [If A has toothache], he, can say, 'Now this tooth is hurting', and this is where verification comes to an end. But B would have to say, 'A has toothache', and this proposition is not the end of a verification.¹⁵

This implies that in the case of first person experiences, verification does not arise; and the subject as the owner of the experiences also cannot be verified. Moore thinks that the difference between 'I have toothache' and 'He has toothache', according to Wittgenstein is not because the word 'toothache' is used in a different sense in the two sentences. But rather it is because the latter expression necessarily refers to a physical body unlike the former. In the former expression, Moore points out, Wittgenstein insisted that 'having toothache' is a 'primary experience' and the characteristic feature of 'primary experience' is that in its case 'I' does not denote a possessor.

Wittgenstein distinguishes between two propositions: 'I cannot feel pain in your tooth' and 'I cannot feel your toothache'. The former proposition has sense stating an empirical knowledge whereas the latter is utter nonsense because such a proposition is not allowed by syntax.

Moore records Wittgenstein as saying that the verification or criterion for 'I have toothache' is very different from that of 'He has toothache' and therefore the meanings of the two expressions must also be different. Later on Wittgenstein had said that the meaning of 'verification' is different in the case 'I have' from that of 'He has'. Still later Wittgenstein said that there is no verification for 'I have' because the question 'How do you know that you have toothache?' is nonsensical. Wittgenstein also pointed out that 'I have it' is grammatically on a different level from 'He has it' and this follows from the fact that it is nonsense to talk of verification of the fact that 'I have it'. That these two expressions, i.e., 'I have it' and 'He has it' are on a different grammatical level is also evident from the fact that they both cannot be substituted for values of the single propositional function '*x* has toothache'. To support this view, Moore points out that Wittgenstein gave two reasons for saying that they are not both values: firstly, "that 'I don't know whether I have toothache' is always absurd or nonsense, whereas 'I don't know whether he has toothache' is not nonsense" and secondly, "that 'it seems to me that I have toothache' is nonsense, whereas 'It seems to me that he has' is not".¹⁶

Therefore, Moore points out that according to Wittgenstein, the 'I' in 'I have toothache' does not 'denote a possessor'. Moreover, this is supported when we talk of 'my body', the body cannot be verified as belonging to me (i.e., the body in question as belonging to me cannot be verified by reference to that body itself). Moore goes on to point out that yet Wittgenstein said at one place 'If there is an ownership such that I possess a body, this isn't verified by reference to a body', i.e., that 'This is *my* body' cannot possibly mean, 'This body belongs to this body'. According to Wittgenstein, where 'I' is replaceable by 'this body', 'I' and 'he' are 'on the same (grammatical) level'.¹⁷ Thus Moore writes:

He was quite definite that the word 'I' or 'any other word which denotes a subject' is used in 'two utterly different ways', one in which it is 'on a level with other people', and one in which it is not. This difference, he said, was a difference in 'the grammar of our ordinary language'.¹⁸

Wittgenstein went on to give examples. He considered the propositions, 'I've got a match-box' and 'I've got a bad tooth' to be on the same level with 'Skinner has a match-box' and 'Skinner has a bad tooth'. This is because 'I have ...' and 'Skinner has ...' are values of the same propositional function, where 'I' and 'Skinner' are 'possessors'. But in 'I have toothache' or 'I see a red patch', 'I' is used in a completely different manner.¹⁹ Therefore from the above records

by Moore it appears that Wittgenstein was implying that in the case of first person experiences i.e., about immediate sense data, the 'I' does not denote a possessor or an owner but it does so in other cases. What he is stressing here is the use of the word 'I', Therefore, we see a reassertion of the early denial of the thinking self. But now he is trying to elaborate the reasons for it unlike the *Tractatus*. And according to him it is only a grammatical convention, a use in our language which shows the 'I' as an owner or possessor in our description of immediate sense-data. The 'I' is an unnecessary part of the description. So in 'I think', 'I' does not refer to a subjective thinker. This is in perfect conformity with his earlier views.

The pervading influence of the early period regarding the view that there is no thinking, representing subject also envelops the transitional phase. Wittgenstein shows that in describing immediate sense-data the personal pronoun can be done away with; it is not necessary. Wittgenstein says instead of "I think" we can say "It thinks". The way the term "I" is used makes us think that the self as a thinking cogitating subject has a separate existence. So we find Wittgenstein adhering to his Tractarian viewpoint of the no-agent view of thinking. The subject as the owner of thoughts cannot be encountered and Wittgenstein is keen to deny its existence. It may be pointed out that the psychical element of the *TLP* is spotted in the transitional phase at least in an indirect manner. Wittgenstein says the I in 'I am in pain' or 'I have a toothache' has a special privileged status. This I does not admit of referential failure, it is immune from doubt nor can it mischaracterize that which the speaker is speaking. The verification for "I have a toothache" and "He has a toothache" is different. In the latter case it makes sense to ask "How do you know that you have a toothache?" But such a question would be absurd to ask in the former case. The former is verified by my simply having the toothache. Moreover, it is logically impossible for anybody else to have what I have when I have a pain, since no one else could have a pain which 'I' would encounter. Wittgenstein however goes on to say that 'I' becomes redundant and instead of 'I think', we can say 'It thinks' as in 'It rains'. This privileged status of the 'I' indicates something special that cannot be expressed in language, a kind of feeling. The 'I' may be said to have the privileged status because only in the case of 'I have a toothache', the 'I' can be replaced by 'There is a toothache' which cannot be done in the case of 'A has a toothache'.

Regarding solipsism, Wittgenstein said the two statements 'The only reality is the present experience' and 'The only reality is *my* present experience' are both 'equally absurd' but the idea they express is of 'enormous importance'. He later pointed out that solipsism is right if it says 'I have toothache' and 'He has toothache' are 'on quite a different level' but 'if the Solipsist says that he has something which another hasn't, he is absurd and is making the very mistake of putting the two statements on the same level'. Therefore, what Wittgenstein is laying stress on is a fact of grammar, which the solipsist tends to confuse with a metaphysical necessity; the

proposition 'I cannot feel your toothache' is a grammatical proposition and does not describe a feature of the world but rather explains a linguistic convention.

Section 3 Self and Solipsism

In the *Philosophical Remarks* Wittgenstein writes that the use of the word 'I' is more often than not misleading particularly when it is used to express immediate experience like in 'I can see a red patch'. If it would be possible to depict immediate experience without the use of the personal pronoun, then we could show that the 'I' is not necessary for the representation. Philosophical errors arise when we try to represent immediate sense-data by using ordinary physical language. The forms of speech that we use are taken from ordinary physical language and cannot be used without error in epistemology or phenomenology. Wittgenstein also points out that I cannot draw the limits of my world although I can draw limits within my world. The 'limits of my world' correspond to the 'limits of my language' and possibly the boundary cannot be made because to do so would involve 'to think what it is not to think at all'. This is a re-statement of the Tractarian point. In the conversations Wittgenstein says that the word 'I' can be done without, it can be eliminated from language.²⁰ Wittgenstein points out that it is possible to omit the 'I' and say 'It is thinking'. Moore points out that Wittgenstein does not make any distinction between the subject and the object of perception and Moore says that though no person may enter in the picture yet the act of apprehension cannot be denied. These remarks show that in describing immediate sense data, the personal pronoun can be done away with. It is not necessary. The way the term 'I' is used makes us think that the self as a thinking subject has a separate existence. So we find Wittgenstein adhering to his Tractarian viewpoint of the no-agent view of thinking. The 'I' of philosophy is a non-psychological self. Therefore, the subject as the owner of thoughts cannot be encountered and Wittgenstein is keen to deny its existence. Therefore, the pervading influence of the early period regarding the view that there is no thinking, representing subject also envelops the early years of Wittgenstein's return to philosophy. As has been observed, in the *Tractatus* and *Notebooks*, Wittgenstein had adopted a Humean stand, trying to show that the self cannot be encountered like an object of experience in the perceptible world. He went on to show that propositions of the form ' "p" says p' involves the correlation of facts by means of the correlation of their objects rather than correlating a fact with an object, (*TLP* 5.542). This is followed by the conclusion that there is no soul. This is the thinking, representing subject. But this subject is not the concern of philosophy, but rather of psychology. The concern of philosophy is rather the metaphysical subject which does not belong to the world but is its limit (*TLP* 5.632) just like the eye is related to the visual field (*TLP* 5.633). So though Wittgenstein rejects the thinking subject on the grounds of not encountering it, he does not do so for the metaphysical subject. The latter is not a part or a constituent of the world but exists as its limit. Apart from this Wittgenstein affirms the willing subject (*NB* p80). Some commentators interpret

the willing subject as being identical with the metaphysical subject. It is the metaphysical self which brings about solipsism. All that is correct in solipsism is that 'the world is my world'. Yet the self of solipsism shrinks to an extension-less point and solipsism coincides with pure realism (*TLP* 5.64). Actually solipsism attempts to say the unsayable. It cannot be said but can only be shown. And what the solipsist means is "that *the* world is *my* world. This inexpressible truth shows itself in the fact that 'the limits of *language* (of that language which alone I understand) means the limits of *my* world'."²¹ This was the early view.

The early transitional Wittgenstein attempts to put forward the same view of the non-existence of the thinking self but he treads a different path to reach it. The early period emphasized non-encountering of the thinking self. But now Wittgenstein prefers to give it a linguistic touch. He now says that the 'I' as a term can be shoved aside; it is not absolutely necessary in our description of personal experiences because the 'I' does not denote an owner. What is involved in the solipsists claim, for Wittgenstein now is a grammatical error. The point to note is that in spite of the major changes, the thread linking the early and intermediate years can hardly be overlooked.

So we see that Wittgenstein was working on his earlier ideas and at the same time developing new ideas.

Conclusion

Wittgenstein was perpetually enraptured with the intricacies of language and the transitional phase is no different in this respect. During this time, Wittgenstein acknowledges that a flood of new ideas is coming to him. The initial years are marked by an oscillating mood, and after 1932, the maturing of the philosopher to his ideas as espoused in the later period is noticeable. Wittgenstein in the early transition emphasizes the non-existence of the thinking self. He gives it a linguistic touch by saying that 'I' as a term can be shoved aside. It is not absolutely necessary in our description of personal experiences because 'I' does not denote an owner. He shows the erroneous representation of immediate sense-data, which makes us believe that there is an owner of our experiences. Wittgenstein conceives of mono-centric languages where one or the other person is the centre and where representation can be done in different ways. He also distinguishes between first and third person psychological sentences and also stresses a non-parallelism between them. The mono-centric languages show that the 'I' is not an essential constituent of representing experience and sense-data. Yet the language that has 'me' as its centre, has a distinct privileged status which lies in the application and which cannot be expressed in language.

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