

First-Person Knowledge: Wittgenstein, Cavell, and 'Therapy'

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The recent publication of *The New Wittgenstein* signals the arrival of a distinctive 'therapeutic' reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein's philosophical enterprise. As announced in its Preface, this collection presents the 'nonsense' of philosophy as the subject of Wittgenstein's therapeutic work. The simple, plain nonsense of many philosophical remarks is revealed under the scrutiny of Wittgenstein's investigations, according to this interpretation, leading us to see that such remarks „fail to make any claim at all“ (Crary 6). This view of Wittgenstein's use of 'nonsense' as a term of criticism begins with the work of Stanley Cavell, on this account, and has extended more recently to work on a wide area of Wittgenstein's concerns, elevating 'nonsense' to a central position in his philosophy. This paper argues that, in at least one case of Wittgenstein's talk of nonsense, this „therapeutic reading“ (Crary 7) oversimplifies the subtlety of Wittgenstein's writing. Indeed, one of the most prominent cases of 'nonsense' in the later Wittgenstein concerns the remark 'I know I am in pain'. Though Wittgenstein repeatedly treats this remark as nonsense, this treatment is not final in his philosophy of psychology. Rather, though his rich discussion in the later manuscripts of the indeterminacy of psychological judgments, the relation of these judgments to knowledge, and the role of first-person psychological descriptions, Wittgenstein is able to find what sense a remark such as 'I know I am in pain' might perhaps have. 'I know I am in pain' may be called nonsense, but this is not the last word on the matter in Wittgenstein's text: as Cavell says, „it makes no sense to say these things' (in the way we think it does)“ (Cavell 70). Wittgenstein is able to find what sense our remarks of first person psychological knowledge might have, contrary to what the therapeutic reading in *The New Wittgenstein* would have us suppose. Therefore, at least in one case, the therapeutic reading of Wittgenstein goes wrong.

Most directly to pursue this reading of first person knowledge in Wittgenstein, a preliminary summary of the indeterminacy he finds in psychological judgments may help open discussion. As Wittgenstein turns to examine many of the judgments that might typically be considered 'psychological', he finds indeterminacy saturating the weave of the mental they help to comprise. This indeterminacy is reflected in the lack of rules to which we take ourselves to be able to appeal in resolving disputes over some of these judgments. Even though we may have "evidence" (LWPP II ff.) to enlist in support of our 'indeterminate' judgments according to Wittgenstein, this evidence may fail to settle the question in a decisive fashion (e.g., LWPP II 89-90). So, in my own description of my feelings of, say, depression, we do not seem to have available evidence that settles whether I am suffering from depression. I "can observe the state of my depression. In that case I am observing what I for instance describe" (LWPP II 6): yet despite being able to describe my feelings and even discuss these descriptions, perhaps having friends recall what I have recently confessed to feeling, pointing out a trace of hesitancy in my current report, decisive evidence still is lacking. As a result, suppose someone disagrees with my description of my feelings in this case:

We are playing with elastic, indeed even flexible concepts. But this does not mean that they can be

deformed at will and without offering resistance, and are therefore unusable. For if trust and distrust [of a description of feeling] had no basis in objective reality, they would only be of pathological interest. But why do we not use more definite (bestimmtere) concepts in place of these vague ones? (LWPP II 24).

Though we may lack decisive evidence in assessing my depression, this indeterminacy does not make our descriptions entirely arbitrary. There is still correctness and incorrectness of our judgments in these contexts of indeterminacy:

Is there such a thing as 'expert judgment' about the genuineness of expressions of feeling?--Even here, there are those whose judgment is 'better' and those whose judgment is 'worse'. Correcter prognoses will generally issue from the judgments of those with better knowledge of mankind....What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculating rules. What is most difficult here is to put this indefiniteness (Unbestimmtheit), correctly and unfalsified, into words (PI II 227).

If, as Wittgenstein suggests, we make indeterminate, though nevertheless correct, judgments in such 'psychological' matters, and we do so without always having evidence we take to be decisive, we might wonder how commonly the psychological manifests this indeterminacy on his view.

The lack of rules of evidence that we encounter with respect to many of our 'psychological' judgments does not signal an essentialism about psychology or a mark of the „essentially undecidable character“ (Hacker 138) of psychological judgment. This lack of rules of evidence is rather, according to Wittgenstein, the product of an openness of our disputes to irresolution, a lack we can see in our inability to settle decisively certain disputes based on the evidence available to us. Thus, at least in some circumstances of 'psychological' judgment (of "knowing what goes on in someone else") and its disputation, there is a "lack of exact rules of evidence" (LWPP II 94). The lack of rules of evidence is supposed to be borne out in the many imagined situations Wittgenstein has us consider.

I am for instance convinced that my friend was glad to see me. But now, in philosophizing, I say to myself that it could after all be otherwise; maybe he was just pretending. But then I immediately say to myself that, even if he himself were to admit this, I wouldn't be at all certain that he isn't mistaken in thinking that he knows (kennt) himself. Thus there is an indeterminacy in the entire game.

One could say: in a game in which the rules are indeterminate one cannot know who has won and who has lost (LWPP II 86).

If we consider a situation in which we initially are convinced of someone's warmth, only to have him admit his lack of gladness, we would not necessarily be positioned to settle whether he himself is mistaken in his 'admission'. If we cannot rely on his manner to settle

whether he is glad, and if we cannot even rely on the admissions or confessions he may have made as to his own feelings at the time, then we might wonder what else we have to which to appeal in this case, at least, that we could use to decide the issue. This inability to decide the issue is redescribed by Wittgenstein as an "indeterminacy" in the game of judging his gladness. In this remark from the Last Writings Wittgenstein touches upon a theme that reappears throughout the second volume of collected manuscripts: we encounter again and again contexts in which our judgments lack determinacy through lacking rules of evidence, rules to which we may appeal that settle the correctness of a judgment about someone's feelings or thoughts. If there is indeterminacy in an entire game, this indeterminacy is only as well established as the considerations Wittgenstein adduces while searching for "any and all rules of evidence that refer to experiences" (LW II 89): on the path to essentialism, Wittgenstein stops short.

Wittgenstein sets out his conception of knowledge about (at least a portion of) the 'psychological' in a revealing passage that links strong knowing with the availability of rules. While elevating some families of knowledge above others, Wittgenstein still preserves talk of our less rule-informed judgments as knowing. The differences between these families of knowing appear to shape Wittgenstein's philosophy of psychology.

Then one can ask: What is the characteristic of what we can really know? And the answer will be: One can only know where no error is possible, or: where there are clear rules of evidence.

"I know that he enjoyed seeing me." -- What follows from that? What of importance follows? Forget that you have the right idea of his state of mind! Can I really say that the importance of this truth is that it has certain consequences? -- It is pleasant to be with someone who is glad to see us, who behaves in such and such a way (if one knows a thing or two about this behavior from previous occasions).

So if I know that he is happy, then I feel certain, not uncertain, in my pleasure. And that, one could say, isn't knowing (LWPP II 49).

My knowing that someone is glad is legitimately knowing, though not knowing of the particular variety Wittgenstein mentions at the beginning of this passage. No harm is done in claiming I know someone is glad provided that I am not taking myself to have rules which settle the case when there is a "lack of exact rules of evidence" (LWPP II 94). As Wittgenstein repeats, "If someone 'pretends friendship and then finally shows his true feelings, or confesses', we normally don't think of doubting his confessions in turn, and of also saying that we cannot know what's really (wirklich) going on in him" (LWPP II 86). There is a sense to knowledge claims in psychology on Wittgenstein's view, only without the suggestion of proof we might otherwise expect to be able to provide: this is the working of third person psychological knowledge according to the later manuscripts.

Having focused much of his discussion on interpersonal psychological judgment, Wittgenstein extends his discussion from third- to first-person descriptions. As a beginning for interpretation, Wittgenstein reveals quite openly that he is prepared to treat first-person talk about feelings as descriptions properly understood. As Hacker suggests, "Describing one's state of mind is indeed something one can do" (Hacker 95). More properly to familiarize us with the terms of this discussion, Wittgenstein attempts some clarification of his talk of 'observation' which may help with the interpretation of more complex passages. Observing our

own feelings, according to Wittgenstein, involves positioning ourselves to be receptive to our mood.

I can observe the state of my depression. In that case I am observing what I for instance describe.

A thought which one month ago was still unbearable to me is no longer so today. (A touch which was painful yesterday is not so today.) That is the result of an observation. ...

What do we call 'observing'? Roughly this: putting oneself into the most favorable situation to receive certain impressions with the purpose, for instance, of describing them (LWPP II 6-7).

As these comments may help make evident, Wittgenstein is prepared to speak of observing and describing in the first-person case quite openly. Indeed, first-person description is available for a range of psychological qualities, including pain, as Wittgenstein remarks while considering another example of self-observation. "And now I can simplify the case. He doesn't even have to produce the pain on purpose; rather, let it be a constant pain (a headache or a stomach-ache) and let him be thinking about how to describe his feeling correctly (richtige)" (LWPP I 614-18).

Wittgenstein therefore finds in his exploration of psychology that first-person psychological descriptions may correctly characterize our depression or our pain, and not in a manner which clearly admits of definite rules which help to settle their correctness. He has spoken of first-person knowledge of features of our psychology, albeit in a limited and deflated sense of 'knowledge' familiar from cases of third-person psychological judgment. As a result of his investigations, Wittgenstein has found a way to lend sense to first-person knowledge, perhaps even to instances in which we might claim 'I know I am in pain'. 'I know I am in pain' was nonsense, yet through his treatment of the philosophy of psychology Wittgenstein has found what sense such a remark may have.

In closing, the therapeutic reading advocated in The New Wittgenstein regards nonsense as an unwelcome presence in philosophical discourse, one that Wittgenstein exposes for its failure to "make any claim at all" (Crary 6). In what may be the most renowned case of nonsense from Wittgenstein's later work, however, this reading does not account for the subtle treatment of first-person knowledge present in the later manuscripts. Rather than failing to make any claim at all, our remarks of first-person knowledge are able to have sense, if Wittgenstein's texts are to be believed. At least in one case, therefore, nonsense remarks may yield some sense, and there is an irony here. The therapeutic reading, attributed to Cavell, is belied by Cavell's own early treatment of self-knowledge – upon which it is supposed to be based (Crary 7). In Cavell's own words, first-person knowledge of our psychology is not an illusion on Wittgenstein's developed view: "philosophers, I believe, are under the impression that Wittgenstein denies that we can know what we think and feel, and even that we can know ourselves. This extraordinary idea comes, no doubt, from such remarks of Wittgenstein's as: ... 'It cannot be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I know I am in pain' (246). But the 'can' and 'cannot' in these remarks are grammatical; they mean 'it makes no sense to say these things' (in the way we think it does). ... The implication is not that I cannot know myself, but that knowing oneself ... is not a matter of cognizing (classically, 'intuiting') mental acts and particular sensations" (Cavell 69-70). If the argument of this paper lends support to Cavell's early view of knowledge in the first-person, then the therapeutic reading in The New Wittgenstein may be in need of a firmer rooting in both the texts of Wittgenstein and the tradition of their exegesis.

References

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