Wittgenstein on Personal Time

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The most grandiose of the many philosophical problems of time is whether it is real or not. An example of a metaphysical argument to the effect that time is unreal is that of the idealist F.H. Bradley. In setting forth his case he made a distinction between 1) time as space-like and 2) time "as presented," the "now."

Both conceptions, he argues, involve contradiction. Time as space-like must somehow contain, as parts of it, past and future. "Time in fact is 'before' and 'after' in one; and without this diversity it is not time." (Bradley, 1893, 34) But if time – the whole thing – has duration, then all its units must have duration, too. But then these "units" are not really units. So time as space-like is contradictory.

On the other hand, Bradley argues, we also conceive of time as the "now," "as presented," which Bradley pictures beautifully:

"Let us fancy ourselves in total darkness hung over a stream and looking down on it. The stream has no banks, and its current is covered and filled continuously with floating things. Right under our eyes is a bright illuminated spot on the water, which ceaselessly widens and narrows its area, and shows us what passes away on the current. And this spot that is light is our now, our present." (Bradley, 1994, 44)

Bradley finds that this image of time as the moving "now" also harbors a

contradiction:

"But presented time must be time present, and we must agree, at least provisionally, not to go beyond the 'now'… is the 'now' simple and indivisible? We can at once reply in the negative. For time implies before and after, and by consequence diversity; and hence the simple is not time." (Bradley, 1893, 34-35)

So the "now" is also contradictory.

My intent here is not to wrestle with Bradley's metaphysical arguments but to introduce Wittgenstein's arguments and statements on time by way of a serious example of a metaphysical pseudo-problem, in its natural habitat, so to speak. I also want to point out the distinction Bradley makes between "space-like" time and time "as presented" (the "now") which Wittgenstein and certain other philosophers also make.

Wittgenstein in his various discussions of time made points relevant to Bradley's treatment of time (as well as to those of St. Augustine, Schopenhauer, McTaggart. and many others):

"The puzzles about time are due to the analogy between time and motion. There is an analogy, but we press it too far; we are tempted by it to talk nonsense. We say time 'flows', and then ask where to and where from, and so on." (Wittgenstein, 2001, 60-61)

"Why does one feel tempted to say " The only reality is the present"? … The person who says only the present is real because past and future are not here has before his mind the image of something moving [past him].

past   present   future

←-----------------

"This image is misleading … That the statement "Only the present experience is real" [as Schopenhauer believed] seems to mean something is due to familiar images we associate with it, images of things passing us in space." (Wittgenstein, 2001, p. 25)

Wittgenstein is definite in his rejection of such arguments, but at this point he modestly attributes their failure to the standard fallacy of false analogy, rather than to a mistake in "philosophical grammar":

"When words in our ordinary language have prima facie analogous grammars we are inclined to try to interpret them analogously; i.e. we try to make the analogy hold throughout. ___ " (Wittgenstein, 1958, 7)

This is a big generalization, but not yet a theory of "philosophical grammar." But then he speaks more directly about the "apparent contradictions" in the grammar of time:

"Consider as an example the question "What is time?" as Saint Augustine and others have asked it. … Now the puzzlement about the grammar of the word "time" arises from what one might call apparent contradictions in that grammar.

"It was such a "contradiction" which puzzled Saint Augustine when he argued: How is it possible that one should measure time? For the past can't be measured, as it is gone by; and the future can't be measured because it has not yet come. And the present can't be measured for it has no extension." (Wittgenstein, 1958, 26)

But then he quits talking about false analogies and introduces the concept of "philosophical grammar," which he uses to dissolve the cluster of pseudo-problems involving "mental processes," "minds," "pain," and so on: It is difficult to find a brief quote in PI that sums up this long argument, but the following passages will perhaps serve to call it to mind:

"I have a pain in my hand" has the same surface grammar as "I have a quarter in my hand, " so we wrongly infer that pains are things, physical objects. But I can throw the quarter away, or up in the air, but not the pain. So pains are not objects. But this argument seems to suggest that pains don't exist, but Wittgenstein is not saying that, of course. Pain is real but it is not a thing, like a coin, as Wittgenstein says:

"But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behavior accompanied by pain and pain-behavior without any pain?"-- Admit it? What greater difference could there be? – "And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*." – Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either … We have only rejected the grammar which tries to force itself on us here.""(Wittgenstein, 1953, 102)

This is perhaps Wittgenstein's most famous passage. Therefore we expect him to say something quite similar about time. The appropriate argument would be (now, after Wittgenstein) easy to supply:

"I went back to 1940" has the same surface grammar as "I went back to Dallas," so 1940 must be "space-like." We have clearly been misled by grammar, as Wittgenstein says.

Or, "He slept from Tuesday until Friday" has the same grammar as "He slept from Paris to Vienna," so Tuesday and Friday must be "space-like," like places or like stops on a railroad line, moving, flowing, etc.

What Wittgenstein has said about pain we expect him to say about time. Instead he brings up certain very odd considerations:

"How does the temporal character of facts manifest itself? How does it express itself, if not by certain expressions having to occur in our sentences?"…

"We are inclined to say that negation and disjunction are connected with the nature of the proposition, but that time is connected with its content rather than with its nature." (Wittgenstein, 1974, 215)

"Might one also put the question thus: "How does it happen that every fact of experience can be brought into a relationship with what is shown by a clock?" (Wittgenstein, 1974, 216)

Since time and the truth functions taste so different, and since they manifest their nature only and wholly in grammar, it is grammar that must explain the different taste."

"One tastes like content, the other like form of representation." (Wittgenstein, 1974, 216)

The "taste" of time, the "taste" of negation and disjunction? What can he mean? I think he means that the time of a thing or event is part of *it,* the fact or event, rather than a part of the statement. In "My poker is hot at time t" the time, or temporal aspect, is

part of the proposition, while the negation of it must be stuck on.

Then he makes a distinction between "personal time" and "measurable time":

"It is noteworthy that the time of which I am here speaking is not time in a physical sense. We are not concerned with measuring time. It is fishy that something which is unconnected with measurement is supposed to have a role in propositions like that of physical time in the hypotheses of physics." (Wittgenstein, 1974, 217)

Then in the margin of PG at this point he begins (but at a later date) to approach time and time-language in the same way he approached the language of pain:

" A sentence can contain time in very different senses," he says, and gives a list of sentences about time:

You are hurting me.

Water freezes at 0 degrees.

etc., etc. (Wittgenstein, 1974, 217)

Wittgenstein goes no further in this direction. But we do know that time is not a thing or a place, not a something, not a nothing either. We know that pain language is not referential but is a replacement for a cry. So perhaps time language is also a replacement for something. It's also true about time that it is in all

assertions, but has the taste of the content of assertions, not their form. So time is deep in assertions, deeper than pain. And the kind of time we are talking about is personal time, not measurable time – subjective time, not objective time.

Heidegger made very much the same distinction between "real," (subjective) time and

"measurable" (objective) time:

"Time familiar to us as the succession in the sequence of nows is what we mean when measuring and calculating time. It seems that we have calculated time immediately and palpably before us when we pick up a watch … look at the hands and say "Now it is eight-fifty (o'clock). "We say "now" and mean time. But time cannot be found anywhere in the watch that indicates time … nor can it be found in modern technological chronometers. The assertion forces itself upon us: the more technological – the more exact and informative – the chronometer, the less occasion to give thought first of all to time's peculiar character."(Heidegger, 1972, 11)

"Measurable time" for Heidegger is scientific, technological time, which draws us off the path of serious thinking. "Real" time is subjective time, of course, for Heidegger:

"Time is not a thing, thus nothing which is." (Heidegger, 1972, 3)

"There is no time without man." (Heidegger, 1972, 16)

These passages represent Heidegger's way of holding the personal and human as real in the case of time, as against the inhumanity, impersonality and abstractness of scientific, measured time. How can a more technologically advanced watch get us closer to the truth of real, personal time? It is the lived experience of time that is of philosophic interest. (This insight derives from Husserl.) Obviously Wittgenstein was interested in personal time, too, rather than scientific, objective, "measurable" time.

Interestingly, Heidegger, concerned with "true time" which, he says, appears as the "It" of "It gives being" ("*es gibt Sein*", or in the English idiom, "What time is *it*?") asks parenthetically:

"Or are we puzzled now only because we have allowed ourselves to be led astray by language or, more precisely, by the grammatical interpretation of language?" (This passage might be brought into harmony with Wittgenstein's view of language.)

On the other hand, the logician W.V. Quine holds an absolutely opposite, even antagonistic view. He accepts the space-time view for reasons of simplifying grammar, avoiding theoretical awkwardness, etc. in the task of the "artificial regimentation" of ordinary language. He does not seem to even recognize any such distinction as Bradley, Wittgenstein and Heidegger made. Quine is interested only in "theoretical simplicity," which can be achieved through the "artifice of canonical notation," the "regimentation of ordinary language":

"Where the artifice comes is in taking the present tense as timeless always, and dropping other tenses. This artifice frees us to omit temporal information or when we please, handle it like spatial information." (Quine, 1960, 170)

Quine is committed to space-time: "This four-dimensional view of things is an aid to relativity physics; also it is a simplification of grammar, by resolution of tense … (Quine, 1970, 30-31)

"There is what we say there is," means in his case that even "objective" time, or "measurable" time, has no ontological status, because we can paraphrase it away. Subjective time gets no chance at all with Quine. Except in logic theory, of course, simplification is not always justified. Pretending there is no such thing as death, for example, simplifies one's view of life, but at the cost of any authentic understanding of human reality. Denying the existence of poverty might simplify economic theory, but simplification that blinds itself to poverty is hardly adequate to an understanding of our actual world. At least that could be argued. In any case my main point is that the "scientistic" view acknowledges no phenomenological, subjective time, at all.

To return to the questions of time and of the language of time, it would seem that we need only ask, "What is deeper in language than even pain or deeper than negation or disjunction? What is the essence of personal time? When we talk about time what is the real depth of it?

Arthur Schopenhauer believed that the most basic thing there is, is will – not necessarily reasoned, human will, or personal will, but blind will:

"The plant raises its manifestation from the seed through the stem and the leaf to the blossom and the fruit, which again is the beginning of a new seed, a new individual, that runs through the old course, and so on through endless time. … Eternal, endless flux, characterizes the revelation of the inner nature of will." (Shopenhauer, 1939, 73)

Language is an expression of will. Indeed we call a statement an "assertion". Pain language replaces crying. Language is more than that. Time-language, so ubiquitous, must replace some primitive expression of will, something more primitive than pain, something universal, something as deep as the content of a statement. It is what is there in every assertion, a part of that which is as fundamental as the will to speak. That is what Wittgenstein might have said about personal (real) time.

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