Is the Private Language Argument a Transcendental Argument?

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1 Comparisons between Kant’s critique of pure reason and Wittgenstein’s critique of language, which became current in analytic philosophy (Cf. e.g Hacker 1972, 30.) seem not far-fetched in view of the impetus for the destruction of dogmatic metaphysics both philosophers share. Their relevance would gain though by an elaboration of their dissimilarities rather than by just stressing similarities.

An example of the former approach, Weinert (1983, 412) contrasts the tools both critics of metaphysics employ: the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments, and the description of the logic of language-use and in particular the ‘Argument from Epistemic Operators’ (Wittgenstein 1961, sects. 6.5, 6.51; 1958, §§ 246, 247, 251, 303; references in the form of paragraph-numbers are to the latter text) respectively. The analysis of the employment of those tools in anti-metaphysical arguments -and Weinert treats the Private Language Argument (PLA) as such (427-429)- enables to uncover underlying assumptions, e.g. the implicit assumption in Kant of a prior conceptual relation between concepts to which his notion of analysis is to be applied (430-431) and Wittgenstein’s explicit doctrine that “ordinary language is alright” (434).

An example of the latter approach, Hacker suggests an outright similarity in scope of the PLA and those arguments:

One can, without undue caricature, conceive of Wittgenstein’s purpose in the private language argument as being an endeavour to extend and elaborate the Kantian dictum that intuitions without concepts are blind. (Hacker 1972, 216.)

Due to its disregard of contextual differences, the illuminative value of that assessment is dubious. As Kitcher contends, those differences are so pervasive:

that it is an interpretive and philosophical mistake to try to force an alliance between what are, in fact, deeply opposed camps. (...) (2000, 35.)

And indeed, in what sense one could understand such a treatment of Kant’s dictum (see: 1990, B75) is unclear.

Kitcher criticises the conflation of Kant’s transcendental ‘I’ with Wittgenstein’s linguistic ‘I’ that prevails in the “British tradition of Kant interpretation” from Strawson on, and mentions, among others, Hacker as a target (2000, 35.) In this paper I extend Kitcher’s criticism to a ‘Kantian’ reception of the PLA as a transcendental argument (TA), taking Hacker’s qualification as a starting point (section 2). Adopting Weinert’s approach, I will single out some characteristics of the PLA that suggest an ‘unkantian’ reception. An assessment of its relevance can then be made. (Section 3).

2 As a follow-up of Strawson’s (1959) and (1966), the debate on TA’s facilitated the reception of the PLA as such an argument (Wilkerson 1975, 108; recently Stern 1999, 3), thereby attributing to its Kantian flavour. For the Transcendental deduction (TD) of the categories and the Refutation of Idealism (RI) are generally regarded as models for TA’s (Brueckner 1983, 552; Stern 1999, 2).

Under a general denomination, TA’s claim “that one thing (X) is a necessary condition for the possibility of something else (Y), so that (...) the latter cannot obtain without the former” (Stern 2000, 3; Wilkerson, 1975, 102). This does not mark off anything special about the argument itself, but only says something about the propositions it contains. (Gram, 1971, 15; Grayling 1985, 95.) Ample discussion has produced various distinctions between Kantian and revisionist accounts of TA’s (Stern 1999, 9), concerning the nature of the subject matter of (Y) (1999, 3). In ‘weaker’ TA’s (Y) stands for the necessary features of a conceptual scheme which makes possible a given structure of experience (Schaper 1972, 102). ‘Weightier’ TA’s (Grayling, 1985, 83) establish necessary conditions for the possibility of experience (Stern 1999, 3). This distinction coincides with Kant’s between regressive and progressive arguments (1993, 26, n). The former can function in refutational arguments to demonstrate the incoherence of a sceptical claim with the necessary assumptions underlying that claim. (Kant 1990, A388-389.) Thus, in the RI, for example, it is argued from the assumption of empirical self-consciousness, the empirical ‘I’ of Descartes’ Cogito. (Kant 1990, B275), to the conditions of its possibility, outer objects. The latter argue from a principle to its principiump. Thus, in the TD, it is argued from an a priori principle (the transcendental unity of the apperception, or transcendental ‘I’), concerning the subject of possible experience, the conditions of which it has to establish, to its principiump, those conditions, i.e. the categories. Aschenberg (1982, 262, 284), regards only weightier TA’s as transcendental. They, like Kant’s TD, establish basic principles for a conceptual scheme “without which we could not think coherently about experience at all” (Schaper 1972, 102). Accordingly, Kantian would, for Brueckner, be the argument which shows that “the existence of physical objects is a condition for the possibility of self-conscious experience”, as he beliefs both the TD and RI do (1983, 552). Hintikka requires the conclusion of the Kantian variant to be an assertion concerning the epistemic process involved (1972, 275). This marks it of from any inference from a successful use of concepts a priori to its presuppositions and a fortiori from arguments which establish the logical presuppositions of something being the case, that Schaper reckons among the general variant (1972, 277, 101).

This survey shows that the premises of a TA generally may contain synthetic and analytic, a priori and a posteriori, grammatical (Grayling 1985, 109) and empirical propositions. Consequently progressive as well as regressive arguments fall into its scope. Moreover, it shows that the genuine transcendentality of revisionist TA’s is controversial. Finally, that the dialectical distinction between the TD and the RI is often unaccounted for. In view of all this, a reception of the PLA as a TA seems unobvious. Besides, the use of the Argument from Epistemic Operators in the PLA to vitiate a private linguist’s claim concerning the epistemic privacy of sensations -e.g. S248 asserts the non-epistemic character of that claim- indicates already at the outset pace Hacker (1972, 271) the immoderation of a transcendental reading of the PLA, taking into account the primarily
epistemological connotation of ‘transcendental’ (Kant 1990, B25). Moreover, it turns out to be equivocal.

This is illustrated by Hacker’s suggestion of a similarity between the PLA and the TD when he cites Kant’s emphasis on the necessary co-operation of the Understanding and Sensibility for the objective validity of judgments (1972, 216) on the one hand, and his suggestion of a similarity with the RI when he presents the PLA as an argument demonstrating the incoherence of scepticism about the existence of the external world, on the other (215).

If one would want to project the PLA on the Kantian models, the RI seems the most obvious candidate, judged by its dialectical similarity with the PLA, both being refutations of a sceptical claim. Even if the success of the PLA at refuting the private linguist can be contested (see: Strawson 1986, 78) it could be, in a qualification Bennett coined for the Kantian prototype (1966, 203), taken as a gesture towards such a refutation. Precisely due to this similarity however, the PLA as an undogmatic procedure, merely clarifies that the private linguist’s claim stems from an inconsistency in his use of words (cf. Glock, 1991, 85). As a refutation it would not entail the possibility of interpersonal communicability, let alone, by contraposition of its result, the claim that language is ‘inevitably public’. Hintikka et al. notice that this claim is one of Wittgenstein’s basic assumptions but that he does not use it as a premise in the argument (1986, 261-262, 265). To his observation that his argument would “not be nearly as radical and as sweeping as it in reality” (264) if he nevertheless had done so has to be added that the refutational character of the PLA prevents such use.

Due to its exclusive orientation on the logic of rules, the Kripkean PLA (Kripke 1982, passim) suggests that it were merely dealing with questions of interpersonal communicability of S-words. As §257 shows however, its greater import is that it deals with the logic of language-games, that are constitutive for name-object relations and greater import is that it deals with the logic of language-games, that are constitutive for name-object relations and its preoccupation with subjectivity and reciprocally, with its objective counterpart forms an implicit plea for postneokantianism. To use a Kuhnian, obviously un- Wittgensteinian concept, that move would be a regression. For, unlike Kant, the PLA does neither deal with Cartesian metaphysics (Hintikka et al. 1986, 250) nor with Cartesian epistemology. It rather shows e.g. in §269, 278 the redundancy of the ‘transcendental’ subject, as well as of the metaphysical private object, sensation, most notoriously in §§272, 293 and 299.

By contrast, Weineft’s observation in Wittgenstein of a trend towards explicitness (1983, 423, 434-435) indicates a progressive problemshift. As such the emergence of a sharper awareness of the linguistic counterpart of the Paradox of Transcendental Knowledge, the intrinsic link between the unknowability of things considered independently of our epistemic procedures and the conceptual framework they utilize, and their unknowability, is also noteworthy. Wittgenstein’s awareness of this latter paradox, the mutual dependence of linguistic relativity and the ineffability of semantics (Hintikka et al. 1986, 5, is expressed in his calling the sensation itself “not a something, but not a nothing either!” (§304). Wittgenstein does not merely offer a Kripkean sceptical solution (1982, 95) for this paradox. Instead, he proposes a ‘radical break’ with the idea that language always functions as a means to convey thoughts. More than welcoming Kant’s ‘cognitive theoretical analyses’ to give direction to cognitive sciences, as Kitcher proposes (2000, 61), contemporary philosophers should study the consequencies of this break.
References


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