

WITTGENSTEIN, RORTY AND THE MIND

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One aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy most frequently misunderstood is his views on the mind. Some philosophers claim that he is simply a behaviorist; a victim of the behaviorist movement which was at its height during his time. Other philosophers argue that when it comes to issues of the mind Wittgenstein is out of his league and his views are naive. This paper discusses some of Wittgenstein's writings on the mind and tries to show how his views are both interesting and insightful. Once his views are correctly seen it cannot be maintained that he is a behaviorist or does not tackle the philosophical issues of the mind.

Richard Rorty is a prime example of a philosopher who misinterprets Wittgenstein's views on the mind. In his book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*,¹ Rorty writes that Wittgenstein is one of three philosophers who most influenced him. This is paradoxical since Rorty does not understand Wittgenstein's views.

The aim of his book, Rorty states, is to undermine one's confidence that the mind is something of which one should have a philosophical view. He argues that philosophers are captivated with the notion of knowledge as accurate representation and philosophy as the study of "mental processes' or the 'activity of representation' which make knowledge possible."² According to Rorty, the notion of mental processes originated from Locke. The concept of the mind as a distinct entity from the body was instituted by Descartes. In Kant philosophy became the study of pure reason. The area of philosophy of mind emerged after the publication of Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*. All these concepts and

¹ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 7. Cited as Rorty.

² *Ibid.*, p. 3.

suppositions, Rorty claims, underpin the current status of philosophy, where the aim of philosophy is to construct an accurate theory of representation.

For Rorty 'mental object' is synonymous to 'incorrigibly knowable object', hence the question whether an entity has a mind becomes whether an entity has some incorrigible knowledge.³ Behaviorism is the view that talk of inner states is simply a confusing way of talking about dispositions to behave in certain ways. Logical behaviorism, embraced by Ryle, is the view that the mental is reducible to behavior.⁴ However, one thorny issue never resolved by Ryle is qualia. According to Rorty, Ryle convincingly argues that beliefs and desires are reducible to dispositions but was unconvincing with the troublesome area of qualia. As a result the debate of the mental became the debate of qualia, making philosophers think that the mind-body problem boils down to the question whether qualia are reducible to dispositions of behavior.

In his discussion of Ryle and behaviorism Rorty attaches Wittgenstein stating that they hold similar views which induce three possible solutions to the question of the mind. One is to concur with Ryle and Wittgenstein, that there are no mental objects and that qualia are reducible to dispositions of behavior. Another is to support Cartesian dualism, hence disagreeing with them, and accept that there is an unavoidable gap between the mental and the physical. The last option is to defend a form of mind-brain identity theory and argue that qualia are reducible to the physical.

The question of the mind now becomes the question of the existence of private and privileged introspective qualia known only by the person experiencing them. The behaviorist argues that pain is a social function and denies the existence of qualia. The dualist argues that what is essential of pain is one's qualia. Only one can know that one is in pain; others can only guess.

Rorty erroneously claims that Wittgenstein resolves the debate with his hostility to privacy and by denying that pain sensations are mental events.⁵ It is correct that Wittgenstein proposes a resolution of the debate but not by denying that sensations are mental events or by maintaining a

³ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

hostility to the privacy of sensations. Rather, Wittgenstein shifts our perspective of qualia.

The behaviorist denies qualia and the Cartesian fosters them. Wittgenstein claims that the mistake that the Cartesian is guilty of is overemphasizing one character of pain and making it its essence. Qualia are seen as the essence of pain and from this it follows that one learns what pain is from one's qualia. But it is not in this manner, argues Wittgenstein, that one learns the word 'pain'. One does not learn 'pain' by introspecting one's qualia. Our understanding of pain is not derived from direct acquaintance with qualia.

The Cartesian definition of pain is of incommunicable qualia, when speaking of pain one is really referring to one's qualia. To grasp the essence of pain is to grasp one's qualia. So that when one learns language one is merely adopting the word 'pain' to refer to one's qualia which presumably prior to the language one already identified and understood. When using the word 'pain' in connection to another person one is referring to that person's incommunicable qualia. One knows what pain is from a private sample and must wonder if one's definition of pain is similar to another person's definition, leading to skepticism of other minds.

To shift the debate Wittgenstein examines the relationship between words to qualia and how this relationship is forged. For example, how is the word 'toothache' connected with a particular qualia? The connection, he claims, is of primitive and natural expressions: "a child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behavior."⁶ These natural characteristics ground the word 'pain'. Sensation words are tied with natural expressions of those sensations.

Despite this natural connection the Cartesian forgets, Wittgenstein argues, that a lot must be established or in place before a name (label) can be attached to a sensation or anything else. Naming a sensation requires much more than merely one's direct acquaintance with it. As if naming a qualia is simply a procedure of one concentrating and identifying it. This image should raise doubts; after all, Wittgenstein argues, words are not defined, understood or used in this manner. However, this image would be a consequence if qualia are seen as the essence of pains.

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd. ed., tr. G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Macmillan, 1971), p. 244. Cited as PI.

Wittgenstein compares this image to a beetle box. Suppose everyone has a box whose contents are only seen by the owner and the name 'beetle' is attached to its contents. What 'beetle' is for any given person would be whatever the person's box contained so that what one person means by 'beetle' may be completely different from what another means by 'beetle'. If what 'beetle' means is determined by what is in the box then it cannot be a word whose meaning is shared by others. But if the word is shared then this shows that what is in the box is irrelevant. This leads Wittgenstein to claim that the proper understanding of qualia is not that of object and designation.

Wittgenstein argues against the Cartesian temptation to see the essence of pain as its qualia and any other characteristics as incidental. Yet Wittgenstein does not follow the behaviorist path and denies qualia. Wittgenstein portrays a Cartesian when he writes, "but there is *something* there all the same accompanying my cry of pain. And it is on account of that that I utter it. And this something is what is important." Wittgenstein grants this to the Cartesian but protests the attempt to make this the essence of pain. The incorrigibility of pain should not be taken as some special discovery about pain. It is simply part of pain language that one cannot doubt when in pain. The Cartesian tactics to make this characteristic of pain into its essence is to confuse a condition of the game with the game itself.

Possessing something which is inexpressible is in a sense to possess nothing. If something cannot be expressed, that is, if in principle it is incapable of description, then how can one know what one possesses? It would be like having a wish but not knowing what one wishes for. If one cannot articulate what one possesses, then one cannot be sure what one possesses. Is it possible to correctly identify something which *in principle* cannot be described? Wittgenstein puts the point as follows: "the very fact that we should so much like to say: 'This is the important thing' —while we point privately to the sensation— is enough to show how much we are inclined to say something which gives no information."⁷

Far from having a hostility to privacy,⁸ as Rorty claims, Wittgenstein goes down the middle of the road by granting to the Cartesian the reality of qualia and that qualia are constituents of pain. But rejects the Carte-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 298.

⁸ Rorty, p. 218.

sian attempt to make qualia the essence of pain. Yet he agrees with the behaviorist that natural expressions of pain are important but scolds the behaviorist's denial of qualia.

Wittgenstein depicts the Cartesian as objecting: "But you surely cannot deny that, for example, in remembering, an inner process takes place."⁹ Wittgenstein rebuts, "What gives the impression that we want to deny anything?"¹⁰ The point of contention with the Cartesians, for Wittgenstein, is not that they advocate the existence of mental processes as Rorty claims. Rather the problem for Wittgenstein arises when the Cartesian says, for example, that it is an inner process which one means or refers to with the word 'remembering'. As if the word 'remembering' was a short cut to what one actually wants to say, e.g. 'the mental process occurring in my head'. Wittgenstein denies that the notion (picture) of mental process provides the correct understanding of 'remembering', instead it prevents us from seeing how the word is actually used.

Fascinated with the notion of mental process the Cartesian ignores, Wittgenstein emphasizes, language. Wittgenstein argues that the sentence 'There has just taken place in me the mental process of remembering ...' is fine but entices one to believe that this is what one really means when one says that one remembers. However, Wittgenstein states that the former sentence really boils down to 'I have just remembered ...' When speaking about remembering one is not speaking about the mental process of remembering (though one may want to on some particular occasion). Although one uses the former sentence this is not to deny that a mental process is involved because, "to deny the mental process would mean to deny the remembering; to deny that any one ever remembers anything."¹¹

One may object and accuse Wittgenstein of being a behaviorist. That what is he saying in a roundabout way is that everything except human behavior is a fiction. Wittgenstein retorts that what he can be accused of is fiction of grammar. By this he means that we are blinded by the sentence (notion) that remembering is a mental process, that we begin to think that it is a mental process we really mean or refer to with the word 'remembering'. By stating that remembering is a mental process we believe that somehow we have gotten to its essence. We insist that in the

⁹ PI, 305.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

future we will know more about mental processes; seeing this as a promissory note, an I.O.U. that science will make good someday.

Wittgenstein argues against this temptation, stating that it is not the case that we do not understand or only have partial understanding of 'remembering'. He argues against our inclination to think that science will provide a better understanding of what we mean by 'remembering'. We already understand the word 'remembering'. Science is not going to tell us how to use the word or when to say when one remembers. One does not need to know what specific c-fibers are activated when remembering in order to know how to use the word. Science may provide more information about the mental processes involved in remembering, but it cannot provide, e.g., linguists a better understanding of the word.

It is the notion of mental processes which causes philosophical problems between the behaviorist and the Cartesian. Wittgenstein says that what is not seen by either side is how 'mental process' is used, that we talk about "processes and state and leave their nature undecided. Sometime perhaps we shall know more about them—we think. But that is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter."¹² It is perfectly acceptable, it may also prove to be interesting and beneficial, to investigate the nature of remembering, but with the understanding that the word 'remembering' is fine as it is.

Take, for example, the word 'red'. Before we knew very little about red, especially when compared to our present knowledge; all we knew was what red looks. Despite the lack of physical facts of red we understood our use of 'red'. Today we have a wealth of information about red; yet, can a case be made that this increased knowledge has changed the word 'red' for us?

Perhaps it can be argued that the increased knowledge has changed the word 'red' on a certain level, for example, for scientists. But before one can teach the scientific definition of 'red' one must be taught the ordinary (lay person) definition of red. A baby must first learn to crawl before learning to walk. If one wanted to teach a child the scientific definition of 'red' first it would seem difficult. It may be that the only reason for this is our nature. If we had some form of x-ray vision with which to directly perceive brains, flashing c-fibers, or some similar ability, then perhaps one would be able to teach a child the scientific definition of 'red'. But we do not possess this capability. Before one can talk

¹² PI, p. 308.

about c-fibers, brain processes and other related matters, one must first learn more basic matters. Can one teach a child that water is H_2O without first teaching the child what molecules, atoms and other chemical terms are? If we do not teach a child that water is H_2O , do we feel that the child is not being taught the real definition of water?

Behaviorists are so busying themselves denying mental processes that they become blind to all other matters. On the other hand, the Cartesians are so fiercely fighting for their existence that they too become blind. They crisscross each other and problems arise. Wittgenstein states that "finism and behaviorism are quite similar trends. Both say: but surely, all we have is ... Both deny the existence of something, both with a view to escaping from a confusion."¹³ Contrary to Rorty, it is evident that Wittgenstein does not deny mental processes, or agrees with Ryle that there are no mental objects or processes. Likewise it is not true that he has a hostility towards the mental¹⁴

What is true is that Wittgenstein bets that there is no mirroring between language and the brain. Wittgenstein writes, "no supposition seems to be more natural than that there is no process in the brain correlated with associating or with thinking; so that it would be impossible to read off thought-processes from brain-processes."¹⁵ He believes that there is no one-to-one correspondence between a word and, e.g., certain c-fibers flashing, so that we can say that one is thinking red when these c-fibers are activated.

He also writes that "if I talk or write there is, I assume, a system of impulses going out from my brain and correlated with my spoken or written thoughts ... Why should this order not proceed ... out of chaos?" Wittgenstein believes that it will not be possible to read off thoughts from the brain no matter how much we know about the brain. Of course, Wittgenstein is saying this without the benefit of the study (empirical investigation) of the brain. But he is not alone with this conviction, in fact he is in good company, e.g., Quine. Quine writes,

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Foundation of Mathematics*, rev. ed., eds., G.E.M. Anscombe, Rush Rhees and G.H. von Wright, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1983), p. 142.

¹⁴ Rorty, p. 218.

¹⁵ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, tr., G.E.M. Anscombe, eds., G.E.M. Anscombe & G.H. von Wright, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1967), p. 608.

Each perception that it is raining is a fleeting neural event. Two perceptions by Tom that it is raining are apt to differ, moreover, not only in time of occurrence but neurally, because there are varied indicators of rain. Tom's perceptions of its raining constitute a class of events that is perhaps too complex and heterogeneous neurally to be practically describable in neurological terms even given full knowledge of the facts.¹⁶

Quine argues that to get a complete neural reduction of such a sentence for one person would be practically impossible. Let alone a reduction for a class of different people. I think that Quine's writings here are similar in spirit to Wittgenstein's writings about the improbability of a one-to-one correspondence between language and the brain.

This move may be better understood if seen as a continuation of Wittgenstein's repudiation of his earlier conception of language. In the Tractarian period he viewed language as an a priori mirroring of reality. Language was a one-to-one correspondence to reality. Later Wittgenstein argues that language is a tool and rejects the notion of a prior crystallized framework of language or reality. There are no necessary and sufficient conditions for any language. Considering his new perspective, would it make sense if he replaced the mirroring of reality by language with the mirroring of language by the brain? Wittgenstein does not want to replace one mirror with another but to overthrow all mirrors.

It is clear that Rorty is mistaken in identifying Ryle, who denies mental objects and processes, with Wittgenstein. Their respective views of the mind are quite dissimilar. It should also be equally clear how erroneous is Rorty's claim that Wittgenstein has a hostility towards the mental.

¹⁶ W.V. Quine, *Pursuit of Truth*, rev. ed., (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 62.