

Interpretation of psychological concepts in Wittgenstein

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Abstract

This paper focuses on Wittgenstein's notion of psychological concepts. According to the Austrian philosopher, it is only the Grammar to provide the means in order to properly interpret the psychological concepts, and the description of internal mental states is reduced to the description of the use of words. Psychological facts and phenomena are thus replaced with the notion of psychological concepts, which would exist only through linguistic expressions. The language is not conceived as a static image of logical rules far from the real contexts of interaction, but rather as a living entity which constantly transforms itself through its usage. Consequently, the meaning of a psychological concept, like any other linguistic expression, is strictly bounded to its ordinary usage.

Keywords: psychological concepts, ordinary language, context, internal mental states.

Starting from his return to Cambridge in 1929, after a period spent teaching in elementary schools in Austrian villages, Wittgenstein brought irrevocably into the philosophical debate the analysis of the relationship between the internal mental states and their external representation (Bouveresse 1971; Lazerowitz & Ambrose 1985). According to Gargani (1982), the first works indicating a new direction of analysis respect to what stated in the *Tractatus* are *The Blue and Brown Books*, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* and *Philosophical Investigations*.

A shared interpretation underscores the fact that the Austrian philosopher was firmly opposed to the idea that the mental phenomena are only accessible only to the direct experiencers (in first person) (cf. Budd 1989; Engel 1996; Malcolm 1986; Stern 1995). In fact, in the *Philosophical Investigations* he contends that only the Grammar can provide the means in order to properly interpret the psychological concepts (1953: 63). The external character of linguistic rules and their applied nature constitute the basis for a transposition of the internal mental states onto the level of anthropological practices.

The dichotomy Interior/Exterior, or, in other words, between the internal mental states and their external representations, according to Wittgenstein, does not have relevance anymore (cf. Budd, 1989; Kenny, 1973), and the research aiming at reaching stable meanings of the words in a perfect isomorphism between internal mental states and the outside world is, thus, meaningless (Block, 1981; Charles & Child, 2001). Far away from the claims of the *Tractatus*, now Wittgenstein chases away the ghost in the machine (cf. Ryle, 1949) by reducing the description of the internal mental states to the description of the use of words. In *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (1980: I § 830) he contends that philosophers try to find an ideal use of the words that, in the end, proves to be quite useless.

The outstanding innovation of Wittgenstein's thought is represented by the fact that the language is in a direct relationship with the aims it is used for. In this perspective, in order to understand the meaning of a word, we do not have to look at what happens into our mind in the moment we pronounce it, but, instead, look at the type of usage and the characteristics of the context it is adopted in. The myths of the unity of language and of philosophy as a normative science able to impose a higher order to the language, different and more "perfect" from the ordinary one, prove to be only an illusion. According to Wittgenstein, it is mistaken to say that in the philosophical sciences there is an ideal language opposed to a less correct ordinary language. This contraposition, in fact, has created the idea that is possible make the ordinary language more correct, but the ordinary language is already

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correct (1958: 40). The inner world with its concepts, in fact, spreads across the language and its rules represented by the Grammar (cf. Baker & Hacker, 1985; Cavell, 1969; Hacker, 1990).

Furthermore, the claim that the meaning of the words can be tracked by looking at the type of use and the characteristics of the context they are adopted in, implies a consideration about their usage and our attitude towards them. For instance, it would not be possible to us experiencing mental internal states such as hoping and feeling pain without the usage of the language. According to Wittgenstein, in fact, the internal mental states are natural activities, exactly as walking and drinking (1980: I §25). As a consequence, we do not need to pose the issue of their theoretical legitimization and logical foundation regarding the internal mental states, as, instead, was stated in the *Tractatus* (Anscombe, 1959; Black, 1964; Fogelin, 1976; Hintikka & Hintikka 1986; Popper, 1957).

Wittgenstein, by refusing the idea that the meaning of a word can be explained by psychological causes, states the grammatical and conventional nature of the sentences that we opt to use in our daily lives (cf. Kripke, 1982), and the philosophical analysis of language, as it does not have any relation with psychological mechanisms, is restricted to the description of its grammatical nature. Very clearly, in *The Blue and Brown Books* he contends that is duty of philosophers understand the function of the Grammar (1958: 13). The Grammar, according to Wittgenstein, must describe the use of the words in the language and not, instead, seek for a reason explaining their use in their meaning.

In the attempt to investigate the relationship running between internal mental states and their external representations, the Austrian philosopher analyzes a series of words frequently adopted to describe internal mental states in the ordinary language. According to Wittgenstein, even a psychological concept, like any other linguistics expression, has infinities way it is used for. The task of philosophy is thus that of describing the use of the words entailing a psychological meaning by focusing on their aim in the moment and in the context in which they are used.

The claim that in order to understand a state of mind we need to find the element which is always present when it is used has paralyzed philosophical research. Wittgenstein is interested in psychological concepts because the philosophical issues regarding the nature of the mind stem from the confusion over the use of our psychological vocabulary. This confusion, in fact, has paralyzed the philosophical research over time insofar as has induced philosophers to ignore, as irrelevant, the concrete cases of the ordinary life. As noted by Trinchero (1986), completely moving the issue of the understanding of the meaning of the internal mental states on a linguistic dimension, Wittgenstein attempts a real neutralization of all the psychological disciplines.

In the last part of this brief essay, I want to present the illuminating analysis of the expression “to be afraid” made by the Austrian philosopher in both the second part of *Philosophical Investigations* and *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*.

The psychological concept of being afraid, according to Wittgenstein, does not consist in the experience of an occult and mysterious internal state, but in an intransitive and immanent linguistic act.

Wittgenstein focuses on the importance of the context and on the use of the same expression in different linguistic games.

I am afraid. I am sorry to have to confess it.

I am still a bit afraid, but no longer as much as before.

At bottom I am still afraid, though I won't confess it to myself.

I torment myself with all sorts of fears.

Now, just when I should be fearless, I am afraid!

To each of these sentences a special tone of voice is appropriate, and a different context.

It would be possible to imagine people who as it were thought much more definitely than we, and used different words where we use only one.

We ask “What does ‘I am frightened’ really mean, what am I referring to when I say it?” And of course we find no answer, or one that is inadequate.

The question is: “In what sort of context does it occur?”.

Philosophical Investigation (1953: II § 9)

The language is not conceived as a static image of logical rules far from the real contexts of interaction, but rather as a living entity which constantly transforms itself through its usage, and the meaning of a psychological concept, like any other linguistic expression, is only detectable from the use that is made of it (1953: II § 9):

Describing my state of mind (of fear, say) is something I do in a particular context. (Just a sit takes a particular context to make a certain action into an experiment.)

Is it, then, so surprising that I use the same expression in different games?

The relevance of the context is tightly connected to the possibility of using the same expression in different linguistic games. For example, the fear can be of several types and can take different meanings and shades, according to the context in which it is experienced. If such principle has a deep impact on the linguistic expressions used in the everyday language, it is even deeper for the psychological concepts, which meaning is, certainly, of difficult interpretation even for him who experiment personally such internal mental states.

But, according to Wittgenstein, there is any problem of interpretation as the analysis of the internal mental states is only possible on a linguistic dimension.

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