

## COMMUNICATION AND MENTAL EVENTS

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NO one can be directly aware of the sensations and feelings of others. Feelings are "private" in this sense. How then can a person know if what other people call "pain" is at all like what he calls "pain"? The young do not know the meanings of "fear" and "dream" from birth. They learn these words from other people. But a child is never directly aware of the inner occurrences of others, and others are never directly aware of his. How then can he learn *which* private events the words "dream" and "fear" name? These are among the more interesting questions raised by Wittgenstein's private language discussion.

There are two kinds of answers philosophers have given to these questions. Many philosophers answer by saying that names for private events are taught and learned by reference to behavior naturally associated with particular private events. I call this the "external correlates" view since according to this view one learns names for private events by reference to external, observable correlates of the events. The second position is more radical. Proponents of this view, whom I call "radical Wittgensteinians," say that communication about sensations and other private events is impossible. If there were names for sensations, they say, these words could not be taught and learned. If a person used such a word for his own inner states no one else could understand him. No one could know what inner event he is referring to, it is said. Everyone could mean something different with these words, and no one could know. Reasoning in this vein, radical Wittgensteinians argue that "pain," "dream," and other psychological words are not, and could not be, names for special inner events.

I believe both positions are incorrect. The radical Wittgensteinian view that there cannot be communicable names for kinds of private events is to my mind absurd. I consider it obvious that we *do* have names for particular feelings (e.g., "itch")

and that these feelings are "private" in the sense that only the owner can be aware of them directly, i.e., without *inferring* their existence. Knowing the feelings of others requires an inference that is not required for knowing one's own feelings. The external correlates position also is unsatisfactory since it cannot, as I will show, adequately explain how communication about non-public events is possible. In this paper I do three things: (1) I show that the widely accepted external correlates view is unsatisfactory, (2) I reply to the main argument that radical Wittgensteinians use to support their incommunicability thesis, and (3) I explain and defend my own view of how meanings of words with private referents are publicly communicated.

### THE EXTERNAL CORRELATES POSITION

Kurt Baier presents a variant of the external correlates position when he writes:

Even before we learn to talk, we come to recognize certain sensations by their feel. Later, on occasions when, in fact and possibly unnoticed by us, they cause us to manifest pain behavior such as screaming, we are taught to call them "pains."<sup>1</sup>

According to the view expressed here, what enables us to learn the word "pain" is the fact that pain causes people to behave in certain ways. Others who notice the behavior thereby know we are in pain and then inform us that what we are feeling is called "pain." But this view raises problems. Suppose all people learn the word "pain" in the way Baier suggests and that this is the way the meaning of the word "pain" is publicly fixed and communicated. We need to ask: Is the sensation that causes a person to scream, grimace, rub his knee, or behave in any other way the *same* in all people? Is the sensation that causes me to scream or grimace at all like that which causes others to do so? If the sensation were not the same for all

people then the word "pain" would not in fact function in our language as the name of a single, fixed kind of sensation.

Some philosophers say that there is a regular, contingent correlation between particular kinds of private events and certain overt behavior and that this contingent correlation makes communication about private events possible. This assumption is embedded in Neil Cooper's thinking when he writes:

Communication is possible between us about our internal states partly, at any rate, because our overt behavior is broadly similar.<sup>2</sup>

Cooper applies this thesis to love:

Some of us can remember what it was like when we knew the meaning of "being in love" only from the bizarre behavior of others. Until we had the experience of our own, we had an incomplete mastery of the concept.<sup>3</sup>

Cooper seems to think that understanding the meaning of "being in love" involves both associating the phrase with certain behavior and knowing the experience that accompanies or causes the behavior.

Cooper apparently believes that people's internal states have a character of their own and that they are not defined exclusively in terms of their contingent effects. But how does Cooper *know* that when different people are in the same internal state, their behavior is "broadly similar?" How could he know that when different people behave in the same way they are experiencing the same feeling? How, if this view were right, could Cooper know that the inner event he refers to as "anguish" is like that which others call "anguish?" If people learned the meaning of "being in love" by way of "bizarre behavior" or any other kind of behavior, how could a person know that the feeling he has when in love is at all like that which others have? To know this he would need to find out about other people's mental states *independently of their behavior* and then correlate them with their behavior. Is it possible to find out about what another person is experiencing without appealing to his behavior as evidence? Nor would it help to say that all people agree that what they refer to as "anguish" is "un-

pleasant," for we are also at present trying to explain how we can know that different people all refer to the same inner characteristic when calling a feeling "unpleasant." If it *were* possible to find out about people's inner states in a way that is independent of any appeal to their behavior then it should also be possible to teach and learn words for mental states without even relying on behavior. If so, then the belief of Cooper and many other philosophers that communication about internal states is *contingent* upon there being a correlation between kinds of behavior and kinds of mental states would be false.

Some philosophers would say that though we do not know there is a one-to-one correlation between kinds of mental states and kinds of behavior, we do know *under some circumstances* what a person is feeling. Some kinds of behavior or combinations of behavior could only be caused by a certain kind of feeling. Charles Marks expresses this view when he writes:

The normal relations between sensations and public phenomena (such as behaviour, physiological changes, and surrounding circumstances) enable us to know, on occasion, that another has a sensation of a certain sort and to share a language containing names for kinds of sensations.<sup>4</sup>

This version of the external correlates position raises what is basically the same problem. How can we ever know—even if only "on occasion"—what the specific character of another person's experience is like?

Richard Hare adopts a variant of the external correlates position which might seem to avoid some of the problems the above formulations face. Hare suggests that teaching names for private events does not require *knowing* what others are feeling but only *guessing*:

The teaching procedure would work perfectly well if the connection between pain and (its) manifestations...were...contingent, provided that cases of pain without the manifestations, or *vice versa*, were rare. For me to succeed in teaching children the use of the word "pain," it is sufficient for me correctly to *guess*, on one or two occasions, that they are in pain.

Thus, "pain" might be the name of a completely pri-

vate experience (a word which could be legitimately used whatever was happening overtly) even though the word could not have come into use unless, normally, these private experiences were correlated with the overt occurrences.<sup>5</sup>

Are words for mental states taught by *guessing* the inner states of others? Perhaps from a guess I might get a particular child to use a word for the same private event as I do. However, if neither I nor the child can *know* the guess is correct, than neither he nor I can *know* whether the child has learned the word correctly. Furthermore, suppose when teaching the word "pain" I also guess incorrectly on many occasions? How would the child know which sensation to call "pain?" (For the child to tell me when I guess correctly he must already know the meaning of the word "pain." If he already knows, when and how did he learn?) More importantly, for a word to have a meaning that is fixed, reliable, and communicable—as does the word "pain"—there must be a method of teaching and learning the word that is more reliable than guessing. If *all* people learned the words for inner events from guesses there probably would be many mistaken guesses, perhaps many more mistakes than correct guesses. With many "mistaken guesses" the word would never acquire a single, fixed meaning.

Hare thinks that this guessing method would be sufficient for teaching names for private events *if* a particular sensation usually were felt when certain overt occurrences are present. But *is* there a particular sensation in fact correlated with grimacing, groaning, and certain other kinds of behavior? How could Hare know whether there is? Knowing this would require, as I mentioned, finding out about another person's inner states in some way other than by appealing to his behavior.

Edward Craig handles the problems I am raising by suggesting that communicating with psychological words does not require *knowing* the mental states of others or even *knowing* the meaning others assign to psychological words. Communication only requires *having correct beliefs* about their inner states and about the meanings they assign these words. "Why should we insist that nothing is communicable unless it be known...to have been communicated?," he asks.<sup>6</sup> Craig apparently is

suggesting—rightly—that we *could* all mean the same thing by a word even if we did not know that we do. However, for words to be useful for communication we must know, or at least have good reason to believe, that different people assign the words the same meanings. There would be little reason to talk to others if we did not have a fairly good chance of being understood.

Though the problem I am raising is related to the problem of other minds, I am not asking how we know others have minds but rather what reason we have for supposing that in all people *the same* private event is regularly associated with certain overt behavior. How can anyone know whether others who are disposed to behave in a particular way have qualitatively the same feeling he has when so disposed?

The general problem here is that causes and effects are distinct events. There are no *a priori* limits on the sensations that could cause wincing or any other behavior. It is logically possible that the feelings that cause me to yell "ouch" or to make the expressions we call "grimacing" are ones that cause you to smile and look as I look when I say I am "pleased" or "overjoyed."

Borrowing an argument used in discussions of other minds one might reply: Is it not a reasonable empirical hypothesis that the sensations that cause one person to groan are similar to those which cause others to groan? Are there not good reasons for supposing the sensation is the same in all people? Might one reason by analogy? People are similar in many observable respects, so it is probable that they also are similar in unobservable ways.

Firstly, this reply concedes that there is no contradiction in the idea of an inverted spectrum, where sensations which are intense pains for one person are tickles or intrinsically pleasant sensations for others. Secondly, as those familiar with the problem of other minds will recognize, this argument by analogy is unsound. In an opinion poll one needs to interview more than one person to be able to draw a well-supported conclusion about the majority of people in the city or country. How reasonable could it be to base conclusions about the inner life of everyone in the human race by appealing to just one person (myself)? As Hilary Putnam once wrote: "Suppose I find a mole under

my left arm. Must I conclude that all other people have moles?"

That there are similarities between others and myself does not entitle me to base opinion polls of nations on just one person. Nor does it entitle me to infer that sneezes always have the same cause. Why should these similarities justify universal generalizations about experiences? A crucial weakness in this argument from analogy is that there are in addition to similarities between myself and others innumerable differences. People are by no means similar in *every* observable respect. Consider allergic reactions or side-effects from medicines. The same substance (pollen, dust, mold) has different effects (sneezing, running eyes, etc.) on different people and no effect on others. The same reaction (e.g., sneezing) may be caused by different substances in different people. Caffeine causes insomnia in some people but not in others. Danger provokes flight in some people, aggression in others.

Thus the external correlates position, the view that words for private events are taught by reference to external, behavior correlates of the events, is inadequate. The position rests on the assumption that there is a correlation between particular kinds of private events and certain overt behavior—that certain kinds of behavior could only be caused by a particular kind of inner event. To prove the existence of such a correlation one would need to find out about other people's inner states independently of their behavior. This does not seem possible. And even if it were, the very fact that it is possible would itself refute the external correlates position. For if one could know about the inner states of others without appealing to their behavior, then one could also teach words for inner states without appealing to behavioral correlates.

#### THE RADICAL WITTGENSTEINIAN THESIS

If there were names for inner, private events they would be incommunicable. The fact that references to "outward criteria" are insufficient for establishing communication about inner events is one of the main reasons radical Wittgensteinians accept the incommunicability thesis. These philosophers maintain that "pain," "dream," "anger" and

other psychological words are not, and could not be, names for particular experiences or inward events. Norman Malcolm, for instance, argues that if the word "dreaming" named an inward event it would be impossible to understand others who use the word. The assumption that the word "dreaming" names an "inward state or process of the soul," he writes, gives rise to the following "insoluble problem":

How could it be determined that the inner states of different people were the *same*, and, therefore, that they mean the same thing by the word "dreaming?"

His belief that this question poses an insoluble problem is one reason he concludes that the word "dreaming" does not name some inward state. Anthony Kenny uses a related argument when concluding that emotions cannot be private events or particular experiences.<sup>8</sup> When elucidating Wittgenstein George Pitcher argues that if the word "pain" named a particular sensation it could not be taught or learned. This is one reason he concludes that the word "pain" does not in any important sense *name* a particular sensation.<sup>9</sup>

Alan Donagan accepts a variant of the incommunicability thesis:

A sensation is defined by reference to its external circumstances...as (a) private and non-dispositional accompaniment.... Whether the internal character of what is expressed in these ways is the same for you as for me is irrelevant to the meaning of the word "toothache."<sup>10</sup>

Donagan's view is less bizarre than Pitcher's, since Pitcher denies that "pain" names a sensation whereas Donagan does not. But Donagan accepts an absurd feature of the radical position when he says that the intrinsic character of the sensation we are referring to is irrelevant to the meaning of "toothache." This view, applied to emotions, implies that when we call a person "miserable" or "jubilant," "enraged" or "blissful," we convey no information whatsoever about the intrinsic character of what he feels. All that is necessary is that he feel something—anything. An inverted spectrum is possible, where what is a feeling of joy for one person is a feeling of misery for another. From what Donagan and Pitcher say, it seems that

neither even believes that "having a toothache" entails "experiencing something *felt to be in the tooth!*" Clearly there is room for progress here.

Central to Donagan's reasoning is a sound idea: if the meanings of names for mental states are publicly fixed by reference to contingent correlates of inner events, if, in effect, names for mental states are *defined* by reference to behavior contingently associated with experiences, it follows that "pleasure," "pain" and other psychological words cannot convey information about the intrinsic nature of an experience.

Radical Wittgensteinians and proponents of the external correlates thesis share an important assumption. Both accept, and begin reasoning from, some form of the Wittgensteinian dictum "an 'inward process' stands in need of outward criteria" (*Philosophical Investigations*, #580). They consider the inward process "in need of" outward criteria in that they assume that if there were no observable correlates there could not be communicable names for inner events. Philosophers of both schools assume that establishing communication with a word requires fixing the word's meaning by referring to something *observable*. Thus both approach the problem of communicating about private events by trying to fix the meanings of words by reference to observable correlates of the events. (Baier, Hare and Cooper think that communication *can* be established this way, Pitcher and Malcolm conclude that it *cannot*.) I will now show that this whole approach is wrong.

#### LEARNING NAMES FOR INWARD STATES WITHOUT USING "OUTWARD CRITERIA"

Why does communication over private events raise problems that do not arise for public phenomena? Why is communicating about feelings problematic in a way that communicating over furniture is not? What is so special about private events?

One crucial difference is that when a person teaches words for public phenomena he can *show* the learner examples of the things which the words name whereas with sensations and other private events he cannot. Pitcher explicitly draws attention to this difference when he writes:

The connection between the name of a public object, e.g., "tree," and its object is established by...pointing to trees, counting trees, drawing pictures of trees.... (But) I cannot point to a pain...nor show you a pain, nor draw a picture of a pain....<sup>11</sup>

Philosophers who think that names for inner events need to be taught by reference to "outward signs"—both radical Wittgensteinians and external correlates theorists—assume that to teach a child a name for a thing you must show him something. This key assumption is evident, for instance, in the following, confidently expressed, argument. Echoing a passage from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, George Pitcher writes:

One thing, to begin with, seems perfectly certain: if there were no overt manifestations of pain—i.e., if people just inwardly *had* pains, but did not cry out or groan or grimace or plead for help—then there is no conceivable way that anyone could learn the use of the word "pain."<sup>12</sup>

Why is Pitcher so certain about this? Why could we not have names for private events even if there were no outward, observable signs of those events? Pitcher is assuming that it is impossible to learn a name for a thing unless one can perceive that thing or some sign of it. He is assuming that words are learned by means of perceiving their referents. This assumption is explicit when Pitcher writes:

When a word is the name of something, I learn what it means by having other people point out examples of it to me or by observing what they apply it to.<sup>13</sup>

The problem seen in teaching words for private events; the problem suggested both by the questions raised in the opening paragraph of this paper and by the arguments of the philosophers I have discussed, is an outgrowth of this assumption: words which name things are learned by someone pointing out to the learner the things which the word names. A public process can be directly pointed out to a learner whereas an inner private event cannot.

There is a second important difference between public phenomena and private events. With public objects a person can *check* the things others apply a word to and confirm that they are the same sorts of things he applies the word to. With inner private events checks are impossible. This presumably is

why Malcolm thinks that if "dreaming" named an inward state no one could know what other people mean by the word. No one could *check* the event others refer to with the word. This is the reason Pitcher thinks that if "pain" were the name of a particular sensation, it would be impossible to know if a child had learned the word correctly. If I were learning the word "pain," Pitcher writes, "I might continually apply the word to the wrong sensation and no one would ever be able to tell me that I was doing so."<sup>12</sup> Pitcher is assuming that the only way of knowing whether someone understands a word is to check the objects he refers to with the word to see if they are the right ones. This is why inner private events seem to present problems that outward, public events do not. A person's experiences cannot be directly observed or checked on by others.

But suppose we could learn names for things without being shown examples of the things? Suppose we could know what another person means with his words and that he correctly understands them without checking the objects to which he refers?

To understand how the young learn names for private events we must recognize, and reject, the assumption of both radical Wittgensteinians and external correlates theorists that the only way to learn a word is to be shown the referent or some observable sign of it. Not all words are learned in this way. Most words can be learned without being shown examples of the object, state of affairs, or property which the words name. The average adult know thousands of words, but only a fraction of these were learned by what philosophers call "ostensive definition." The names for feeling and other private events form merely one species of a very large class of words that are not learned ostensively.

There are many words which *cannot* be taught by pointing out examples of the thing named by the word. Names for inner private events are merely one species of this class. Many names which could be learned ostensively are not in fact done so. Consider the word "God." Like the names for inner private events the word "God" cannot be taught by displaying the object the word names (if indeed such a thing exists). Ostension has its largest role when a young child learns his first words. Its role

is much smaller when a person learns words later. Though ostension may play a large role when a child learns the words "apple," "dog," "ball" and "tree" it can have little or no direct role in learning the words "vacuum," "electricity," and "nothing." Nor are the words "logic," "utopia," "infinite," "hell," "debt," "law," "unknown," "abortion," "perfection," "indirect," "future," or "prehistoric" learned primarily by having that which the word names displayed. When George Pitcher found insurmountable problems in communicating with names for sensations he defended his position in part by noting that we cannot point to sensations as we can to *trees*. But there are a great many words in addition to names for sensations that differ from the word "tree" in the same way. Many words cannot be taught by pointing out their referents.

Knowing that another person understands a word, and that he assigns it the same meaning that I do, does not require checking the objects he refers to with the word. As is so with the word "dreaming," our knowing what others mean by the word "God" and that they mean the same as we do is not contingent on our *checking* the object they refer to with the word. The same is true of "atom" and "electron." The things which these words name are too small to be seen or displayed. Suppose a person says "Tables are made of atoms." To know if he understands the word "atom" and that he thereby means the same as I (and others) mean by it I do not need to examine the objects to which he applies the word "atom." Thus the impossibility of being aware of another person's experiences no more prevents me from knowing what he means by the word "dreaming" than the impossibility of seeing infinitesimally small things prevents me from knowing what another person means by "electron."

We rarely check on what others say by examining the objects about which they speak, but in spite of this we normally know what they mean by the words they use. (If we did not we could not know what they are talking about.) This is further proof that it is possible to know what others mean by their words without checking the objects they refer to and possible to have communicable words for phenomena that are not publicly observable. I often hear others talking about persons and places which I have never seen or about events in the distant

dence that he understands, or does not understand, a particular word. The evidence does not, however, constitute conclusive proof. We rarely have conclusive proof on any empirical matter.

I can know what others mean by the words "dreaming" and "pain" by the way in which they talk about "dreaming" and "pain." There are many possible remarks that would provide evidence that a person does *not* understand a word for some mental state. Suppose a child talks of what he calls "headaches" as "bouncing across the floor" or being "up in the tree." Suppose that he says his "dream" is "throbbing" or that he "feels it in his toe." Imagine that a person tells us that he "bought a package of frozen afterimages at the store" or "found a pile of afterimages buried in the dump." If we heard these or innumerable other absurd remarks we would have evidence, and the evidence is of a purely verbal sort, that the speaker does not

understand the words "headache," "dream," and "afterimage." There are many remarks which would provide evidence that a person *does* understand a word. Suppose a person says, "I had a terrifying dream last night. I was standing in the middle of the freeway, my body unresponsive to my impulse to flee, cars and trucks barrelling down on me. I woke up in a cold sweat." This remark would provide verbal evidence that the speaker thinks that the word "dreaming" is used for feelings, thoughts and other experiences had while asleep. The remark "I avoid him, I find his company unpleasant" provides some evidence that the speaker understands "unpleasant," since the remark suggests that the speaker assumes that its being unpleasant is a reason to avoid a thing. Thus, even though I cannot directly check on another person's experience I can, nevertheless, know what he means when he speaks about his experience.

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#### NOTES

1. Kurt Baier, "Pains," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 40 (1962), p. 21.
2. Neil Cooper, *The Diversity of Moral Thinking* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 45.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
4. Charles Marks, "Kinds of Private Objects," in *New Essays in the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. by John King-Farlow and Roger Shiner (Guelph: Canadian Association for Publishing in Philosophy, 1975), p. 218.
5. Richard Hare, "Pain and Evil," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplement* (1964), reprinted in *Moral Concepts*, ed. by Joel Feinberg (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 40-41.
6. Edward Craig, "Meaning, Use and Privacy," *Mind*, vol. 91 (1982), p. 554.
7. Norman Malcolm, *Dreaming* (New York: The Humanities Press, 1959), p. 54.
8. Anthony Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 13-14.
9. George Pitcher, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1964), p. 291 ff.
10. Alan Donagan, "Wittgenstein on Sensation," reprinted in *Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations*, ed. by George Pitcher (London: MacMillan, 1966), p. 348.
11. *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, p. 291. In this passage Pitcher might be using the word "name" in a technical sense to mean "word that can only be learned ostensively." Interpreted this way, Pitcher's claim that "names" are learned by pointing out their referents becomes trivially true. But then he is wrong to call "tree" a name, since "tree" need not be learned ostensively. (It could be learned from a definition.) More importantly, the problems he sees in communicable words for private events would not arise for someone who does not think that words like "pain" and "anger" are "names" in his special sense. Hence his argument would not show that these and other psychological words are not words for particular kinds of experiences.
12. *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, p. 293.
13. *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, p. 291.