

MALCOLM ON CRITERIA

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ABSTRACT: Consider the general proposition that normally when people pain-behave they are in pain. Where a traditional philosopher like Mill tries to give an empirical proof of this proposition (the argument from analogy), Malcolm tries to give a transcendental proof. Malcolm's argument is transcendental in that he tries to show that the very conditions under which we can have a concept provide for the application of the concept and the knowledge that the concept is truly as well as properly applied. The natural basis for applying the concept of pain to someone else is pain-behavior like groaning and crying out. To know that a person pain-behaving is in pain is to rule out countervailing circumstances (smiles, exaggerated cries, winks, absence of plausible cause, and so on). The basic move by Malcolm is to make these special conditions a function merely of the concept of pain.

Key words: Malcolm, criteria, pain, pain-behavior

Malcolm has appealed to the concept of a criterion in many of his writings and has often tried to explain it. I am going to focus on what he says in his review of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (Malcolm, 1954). I am not concerned with whether or not Malcolm got Wittgenstein right; I am solely concerned with the explanation that is set forth in Malcolm's review.

Malcolm is trying to relate behavior and pain that will render them distinct yet more than contingently related. The private language argument has shown him the impossibility of the latter alternative.

Some Malcolm Quotes

Here are some things that Malcolm (1954) says:

. . .those features of someone's circumstances and behavior that *settle* the question of whether the words, (e.g., "he is calculating in his head") rightly apply to him. . .constitute the "criterion" of calculating in one's head. (pp. 543-544)

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Once you admit the untenability of “private ostensive definition” you will see that there must be a behavioral manifestation of the feeling of confidence. There must be behavior. . .if it is to be possible to judge that he does or does understand. . .[his words, “I feel confident”]. (p. 544)

. . .that so and so is the criterion of *y* is a matter, not of experience, but of “definition.” (p. 544)

The satisfaction of the criterion of *y* established the existence of *y* beyond question. . . .The occurrence of a symptom of *y* may also establish the existence of *y* “beyond question”—but in a different sense. (p. 544)

. . .if the criterion of being in pain is satisfied then he *must* be in pain. (p. 544)

Do the propositions that describe the criterion of being in pain *logically imply* the proposition “He is in pain”? Wittgenstein’s answer [and thus Malcolm’s] is clearly in the negative. (pp. 544-545)

Pain-behavior is a criterion of pain only in *certain circumstances*. (p. 545)

The expressions of pain are a criterion of pain only in *certain* surroundings, not in others. (p. 545)

. . .it does not *follow* from his behavior and circumstances that he is in pain. (p. 546)

We find Malcolm asserting that we can and cannot know with certainty that another person is in pain. He says a criterion both is and is not a logically necessary and sufficient condition for which it is a criterion. He uses key terms in unexplained ways: “normal,” “expressions of pain,” “satisfaction of a criterion.” His writing is contradictory and obscure.

It is also important. Why do I think it is important? Malcolm is trying to explain how we can know that someone is in pain by observing that person’s behavior. If one reads the paper in the spirit of a prosecuting attorney, one will get little out of it. If one reads it as an exploratory inquiry into a difficult area, one can learn something from what Malcolm says.

Here’s my gloss on his words: When I (I am pretending this is Malcolm talking) say that another person is in pain I say this, in the basic cases, on the basis of observations of his behavior. Behavior, then, must be our criterion for another person being in pain. That is, behavior is our criterion in the sense that if someone behaves in the appropriate ways then she must be in pain—behavior of the right sort entails being in pain. But on reflection I can easily imagine cases in which a person’s behavior made it look for the entire world as if the person were in pain, and yet a further circumstance might show she is not in pain at all. So, instead of saying behavior is our criterion, I should say that behavior and circumstances together form our criterion. But, on still further reflection, there is no combination of behavior and circumstances that rules out every circumstance that could show that a person is not in pain. So nothing in the way of behavior and circumstances

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can entail that a person is in pain. Still, there is nothing I can appeal to beyond behavior and circumstances, so they must form our criterion. Yet how can they when they necessarily leave open the possibility that the person who seems to be in pain is not in pain?

This marks the end of Malcolm's initial attempt to formulate the notion of a criterion, that is, to say how it is we can know that another person is in pain. Thus far the similarity between Malcolm and the skeptic about pain is striking. Both find they cannot rule out the possibility that a person is not in pain. Both are perplexed about how we can know another person is in pain.

Here are some more Malcolm (1954) quotations:

. . . there can be situations of real life in which a question as to whether someone who groans is pretending, or rehearsing, or hypnotized, or . . . simply does not exist. (p. 546)

A doubt, a question, would be rejected as absurd by anyone who knew the actual surroundings. (pp. 546-547)

Perhaps we can *imagine* a doubt; but we do not take it seriously. (p. 547)

. . . we sometimes. . . draw a boundary around *this* behavior in *these* circumstances and say, "Any additional circumstances that might come to light will be irrelevant to whether this man is in pain." (p. 547)

The man who doubts the other's pain may be neurotic, may "lack a sense of reality," but his reasoning is perfectly sound. *If* his doubts are true, then the injured man is *not* in pain. His reaction is abnormal but not illogical. (p. 547)

The certainty that the injured man is in pain (the normal reaction) ignores the endless doubts that *could* be proposed and investigated. (p. 547)

Here's my gloss: Now, in daily life cases, we often are certain that another person is in pain. There are cases in which we simply do not find any reason to doubt that the other person is in pain. But suppose someone were to try to raise a doubt in one of these cases. Well, I (we again imagine Malcolm is speaking) simply would not find his doubt reasonable. I would not let myself have any doubts. But couldn't I at least imagine being wrong? Yes, but I would not take this seriously. The fact is that I would not be led to doubt. Further doubts are possible. But suppose that a person behaved in circumstances that in fact did not include any of those elements that can show a person is not in pain. In these circumstances there can be no reason for doubt. Now I cannot prove that any set of circumstances does not include these elements. If I could then my certainty would be indubitable. What I actually do is to treat cases as if this were proven. I go so far with doubt and then say that with respect to these circumstances and this behavior it is limited. And now I see that this setting of limits must be what I do, for I can account for my certainty only in this way. If I did not fix these limits then I would have to admit the possibility of error; and once I do this I am not certain.

Here is Malcolm's problem: What has happened to his talk of criteria? He has said that behavior and circumstances are our criteria, but since behavior and circumstances do not provide certainty or knowledge, our criteria do not provide certainty or knowledge. We come to certainty or knowledge by ignoring further possibilities. If Malcolm were to leave the matter at this point he would have to admit he is not really certain and does not really know. Or, at least, if we decide not to raise further possibilities then our certainty is arbitrary and subjective. So far, then, Malcolm has not answered the skeptic. He has not shown we know the things the skeptic says we do not know.

Malcolm is aware of this problem. He writes:

And it is important to see that the abnormal reaction of doubting must be the exception and not the rule. For if someone always had endless doubts about the genuineness of expressions of pain, it would mean that he was not using any criterion of another's being in pain. It would mean that he did not accept anything as expression of pain. So what could it mean to say that he even had the concept of another's being in pain? It is senseless to suppose that he has this concept and yet always doubts. (p. 547)

Here is my gloss, again imagining it is Malcolm who is talking: If my certainty is not a sham and if my criterion is something more than a sign that my doubt comes to an end, then it must be the case that we are somehow required to set a limit to our doubts. Somehow the skeptic's abnormal reaction of doubting must be limited. Now what would it be like if the skeptic's endless doubts were in order? Then we could not be certain and we would have no criterion. But isn't this what the skeptic asserts? Yes, but a result is that we could not even understand a person's behavior as behavior expressing pain. It would just be bodily movement. Now if we were to be unable to understand another person's behavior as expressive of pain then we would lack the concept of another person being in pain. Now we already know from the private language argument that we cannot have a concept of pain merely in our own case. Thus, the requirement that we set limits to our doubts is entailed by the very concept we have of a person's being in pain.

Criteria and Knowledge of Other People

For Malcolm the concept of a criterion is connected with the question of our knowledge of other people and with the question of the concept of pain. He wants to explain our knowledge in terms of that concept. This explanation will proceed by showing that we *must* know that other people are in pain.

The idea that we necessarily have this knowledge is the epistemological correlate of the thesis that there is a necessary connection between pain and behavior.

Malcolm's general claim is that if a person has the general concept of pain, then, if he or she has made certain behavioral observations, that person cannot fail to know that other people feel pain. He does not claim that there is any one situation in which we cannot be wrong. He claims only that we cannot, in general,

be wrong. This is a transcendental aspect of his position. Malcolm's argument is transcendental in that he tries to show that the very conditions under which we can have a concept provide for the application of the concept and the knowledge that the concept is truly as well as properly applied.

Malcolm does not deny that it is conceivable that no humans feel pain. He denies that human beings who behave as we do could fail to feel pain. For Malcolm a sentence of the following sort is necessary: "Creatures which . . . [here would be given a lengthy description of how we behave]. . . are creatures that usually feel pain when they so behave."¹

Criteria and Symptoms

Malcolm tacitly uses "symptom" as short for "correlation." Here's an analogy: the repeated use of a rosin bag is a symptom of a pitcher's wildness if we have observed that pitcher's wildness often occurs when he repeatedly uses the rosin bag. There may be an explanation of this: when the pitcher begins to lose control, he feels he is not gripping the ball well enough. So when we see him go to the rosin bag again and again, that is a sign that he is wild. Criteria for his being wild are such things as walks, hit batters, batters diving to get out of the way of his pitches, more balls than strikes, and so on. Now we can think of that pitcher throwing wildly and never using the rosin bag. We can also think of all pitchers who throw wildly never using a rosin bag. So also we can think of people being in pain apart from any symptoms. That is, we can think of people being in pain without thinking of any of the things that might be correlated with being in this state.

Thus, if we can think of anything as a symptom of pain we must also be able to think of establishing that someone is in pain without appeal to any symptoms.

When Malcolm refers to criteria, he is referring to ways of establishing that a person is in pain and that does not rest on empirical correlations.

¹ Hilary Putnam has argued that such a proposition is not a conceptual truth. His procedure is to describe a community of "super-spartans" who have pains just as we do but never manifest them in any way. They suppress all natural reaction to pain. How do super-spartan children learn the meaning of "pain"? Putnam supposes they are born "fully acculturated" to the super-spartan ideology. People innately equipped with the concept of pain do not need to learn anything. Putnam imagines that the super-spartans suppress all pain-behavior, including verbal reports of pain. Thus their overt behavior is not such to distinguish them from people who do not know what pain is. Yet the super-spartans have pains and do know what pain is (Putnam, 1965, pp. 4-12). Howard Rachlin says of Putnam's fantasy ". . . there would be no conceivable way to distinguish the [super-spartans] who inhibit all pain behavior from others who are completely insensitive to pain. . . ." (Rachlin, 1985, p. 50) Putnam has a response: it is possible to test the hypothesis that super-spartans have pains by seeing what happens in their brains. (Putnam, 1965, pp. 14-19) Benjamin Gibbs skillfully argues that, in defending this latter claim, Putnam undermines his own thesis of the dispensability of behavioral criteria (Gibbs, 1969, pp. 54-55).

Here is the picture Malcolm gives us. First, there are states of being in pain. Second, there are observable phenomena that are criteria. Third, there are those observable phenomena that are symptoms. The symptoms are established as such by being correlated with the phenomena that are criterial for the states of pain. Finally, these criterial phenomena show that a person is in pain even though they are not correlated with states of pain.

Circumstances

The above picture naturally suggests to us that the difference between symptomatic and criterial phenomena is the difference between phenomena that are correlated with states of pain and phenomena conceptually connected to states of pain. At first Malcolm wanted to say that criterial phenomena are logically necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of pain, but he found a difficulty with this. He claimed that there could always be circumstances that could point to the person behaving in the ways criterially associated with pain not being in pain. Let us call these circumstances *countervailing circumstances*.

The circumstances in which pain-behavior is a criterion of another person's pain are any circumstances that do not include countervailing circumstances. When the circumstances of pain-behavior do not include any countervailing circumstances, then the circumstances are normal relative to a person's being in pain. Conversely, countervailing circumstances are abnormal circumstances.

Malcolm says that pain-behavior is a criterion in certain circumstances. This is misleading because it suggests that these "certain circumstances" are of some special type that might be given a general description. What he should have said is that pain-behavior is our criterion in circumstances that do not include countervailing circumstances, which is to say that pain-behavior is our criterion in normal circumstances.

Here is what Malcolm is driving at. In the face of another person's pain-behavior, doubts about whether or not the person is in pain can properly arise only if some countervailing circumstance is present or thought to be present.

My view of Malcolm has him saying that behavior is our criterion in the sense that if a person pain-behaves and if the circumstances are normal, then nothing more need be cited than his behavior to show that the person is in pain. A doubt can properly arise only if some countervailing circumstance can be reasonably suggested to exist.

These are ideas toward which Malcolm advances. The ideas are implicit, not explicit in his paper. The reason they are not made explicit by Malcolm, I believe, is that, for Malcolm, they do not help us with the problem of knowing another person is in pain. Malcolm does not reject the notion that if a person behaves in the criterial ways in normal circumstances then he or she is pain. But he does not see how this can help for he cannot determine that any given circumstances *are* normal. No matter what description we give of any situation there will always be indefinitely many countervailing possibilities that are not excluded by that description.

Skeptical Doubt

Let us imagine a philosophical dialogue about knowing that someone is in pain. The dialogue is about a man hit by the truck. Let the skeptic be S, and let M be a philosopher who is not a skeptic.

- S. The man might be only pretending.
M. What do you mean *pretending*—a truck hit him and his arm is broken.
S. Well, it is possible that he is not in pain and is only pretending.
M. But how could he not be in pain?
S. Having a broken arm does not *guarantee* that you are in pain. Of course, it looks like he is in pain. But is he really? How can you know he is?
M. Look, let's just move off and then spy on him and see if he continues to groan.
S. That won't show anything. Even if he continued to groan that might be because he was suspicious of someone spying on him. Or he might be afraid of someone coming along and catching him relaxing.
M. Well look, suppose we go over to him and ask him and then closely examine him and then go into his past history and then set someone to watch him for the next two weeks.
S. But that will not do. Even if all that meshed with the hypothesis that he was in pain, he still might not have been in pain. For all we can tell he may be one of those people who never feel pain.
M. Now we have you. Because we *can* tell about that. Why else would he be groaning?
S. Who knows? Maybe he doesn't want anyone to know that he never feels pain.
M. But we could check him out. We could talk to his parents who knew him as an infant when he could not pretend.
S. But what if he always behaved the right ways—say because of a special physiological adjustment—and thus never seemed to be abnormal.
M. Well, an examination of his nervous system would reveal this.
S. Surely it is possible for someone to have a normal nervous system and yet never feel pain.

S begins with the remark that the man might only be pretending. M replies by citing some of his obvious behavior and circumstances. S replies that he may be putting that behavior on and not be in pain. We then move off and observe the man unnoticed. Still, pretense is possible. We trace the man's history. He still might be pretending. At no point does S give any reason for thinking that the man is not in pain. There is no reason for thinking this. All S is telling us is that for all we can tell the man might not be in pain. S tells us this in a limited number of ways, for example, he might be pretending. He uses this limited number of ways over and over again. S sees M (and Malcolm and us) as the ones obliged to give reasons.

S sees the logic of the situation just the opposite of the way we (and Malcolm and M) see it. S takes it that merely citing behavior and circumstances always

leaves it open that the man might not be in pain. S finds the burden of proof to be on whoever says the man is in pain. S does not picture himself as bringing what is *prima facie* the case (the man's being in pain) into doubt. Rather, S is exploiting the situation to find different ways of expressing the (to him) given fact that the man might not be in pain. He utilizes the limited number of ways of not being in pain by saying, for example, that the man might be pretending, that he might be hoaxing, that he may never feel pain, again and again.

The skeptic's doubt, when entered into actual cases, would be endless. But it would not be endless in the way Malcolm pictures it. The skeptic would not endlessly think up different *ways* in which a person might not be in pain. He would only be endlessly reiterating the limited number of ways the man might not be in pain.²

The Impossibility of Skeptical Doubt

How does Malcolm argue that the logic of pain-ascribing situations is as Malcolm sees it rather than as the skeptic sees it? His argument is subject to interpretation because he does not spell it out.

Here is my interpretation of Malcolm's argument. If the skeptical philosopher is right, then there is always reasonable doubt that someone else is in pain. If there is always reasonable doubt that someone else is in pain, then there is no way of verifying that someone else is in pain. If there is no way of verifying that someone else is in pain, then it makes no sense to say that someone else is in pain. If it makes no sense to say that someone else is in pain, then there is no concept of pain. Thus, if the skeptical philosopher is right in saying that there is always reasonable doubt that someone else is in pain, there is nothing to doubt.

² Malcolm gives a short list of ways the man might not be in pain. He mentions: pretense, play-acting, and pre-planned hoax. Yet he claims that there are indefinitely many countervailing circumstances.

To this list we could add ecstatic behavior that resembles pain-behavior; we could also add cases of giving an imitation of and giving an example of someone being in pain; we could also add cases of people who never feel pain. We might get more sophisticated and distinguish pretending and feigning. How much more? That is about it.

Of course, the possibilities are indefinitely many at a very specific level. For example, there are different hypnotists; there are different motives for a hoax; and so on. But Malcolm does not have this in mind. His claims have to do with the *types* of circumstances that can show that a person is not in pain.

We are familiar with the type of cases that turn out to be cases of a person who seemed to be in pain but was not in pain. Let us consider Malcolm's case of the man who is hit by a truck and lies there writhing and groaning with a broken arm. He is not on the stage giving a performance. He is not giving a vivid imitation of someone writhing in pain with a broken arm. He isn't ecstatic. Maybe he is one of those people who never feel pain. What else might we suggest? There are a few remote possibilities. For instance, we could think up ways in which he is under the influence of drugs or hypnotized or pretending. But an indefinite number of further possibilities? No.

Now even if we were to accept this argument (and one ought to have qualms since it is a standard verificationist argument), it would only prove that behavior has some essential connection with pain. It does not advance us one step in saying what that connection is. And this is what was to be done by developing the notion of a criterion.

The chief defect in Malcolm's paper is that it does not tell us the relation between a natural expression of pain and the pain it expresses.

An Argument from Explanation

Malcolm writes: "My criterion of another's being in pain is. . .his behavior and circumstances. . .Does it follow that my interest is in his behavior and words, not his pain?" (p. 548), and "Does 'He is in pain' mean behavior?"(p. 548)

Malcolm answers his own question by widening his notion of circumstances. He says that the general pattern does not merely include pain-behavior and countervailing circumstances but also the behavior of one person towards another. We do not merely observe people in pain but also pity them and sympathize with them. Sometimes we take pleasure in another's pain. Sometimes we are indifferent. The web of intermeshing patterns is very complex.

We might argue that people do more than merely behave when they are in pain. They talk about their pain. They react with complaints and respond to sympathy. They themselves offer sympathy. They try to inflict pain and carefully avoid those situations that cause pain. Thus if we do not limit ourselves to gross behavioral elements, such as groaning and crying out, but set these elements in their proper context, then we shall be able to say both that pain and behavior are distinct but that we know that when people behave in certain ways then they must (typically or normally or usually) be in pain. What emerges from Malcolm's thoughts is a form of an argument from explanation: if other people did not feel pain in normal situations in which they displayed pain-behavior, then we could not make sense of their complaints, their response to sympathy, and the rest.

The Key Proposition

We examined the idea that the occurrence of pain-behavior creates a *prima facie* assumption that the person who displays pain-behavior is in pain. In ordinary cases we find the demand that we supply a reason that the person displaying pain-behavior is in pain out of order. Malcolm supplies a theoretical basis by saying that pain-behavior must normally occur in normal circumstances, that is, circumstances devoid of countervailing conditions (such things as winks, exaggerated groans, suspicious motives, and so on). He takes this to be a necessary or conceptual truth.

Let us agree that if no countervailing conditions are present the person displaying pain-behavior is in pain. If it is a conceptual truth that pain-behavior normally occurs in normal circumstances then it follows that normally people displaying pain-behavior are in pain. This provides a guarantee that we will not generally be wrong about people being in pain. It also provides a basis of certainty for

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the common sense belief we have that other human beings feel pain. But it cannot show in any particular case that it is anything more than probable that the person displaying pain-behavior is in pain.

This point is easily illustrated. Suppose you have a barrel of blocks. I happen to know that most of the blocks in that barrel are colored red. Now you take a block from that barrel. Shall I say, upon observing you do this, that you have taken a red block from the barrel? No. Should someone ask me what color the block is, I would answer by saying that it is probably red but that there is a fair chance that it is not red. Analogously, suppose we do know for a fact that most people displaying pain-behavior are in pain. Now we meet a person displaying pain-behavior. Will we say this person is in pain? No. I think it is clear that if we rely only on our knowledge about the general relation between pain-behavior and pain, we will say no more than we would say in the barrel case. We will say that probably the person is in pain, but that there is a fair chance he or she is not in pain.

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