

# CONCEIVING OF SOMEONE ELSE'S PAIN ON THE MODEL OF ONE'S OWN\*

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In his essay on Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, Malcolm (1963, pp. 96-129) distinguishes two arguments against the possibility of a private language. First he spots the most famous one, which he calls "internal", because it challenges the very assumptions which seem to make possible the existence of such a language. Then he describes a second argument, which he names "external", because instead of questioning the presuppositions of a private language, it purports to show (adopting the form of a *reductio*) that, if we accept its existence, totally implausible consequences supervene. According to this last argument, which I shall call (following Malcolm) "External Argument", if we learn the concepts of pain and other sensations from our own private experiences, as the Cartesian tradition supposes, then we could not meaningfully attribute sensations to others. And this means that Cartesianism and the whole modern tradition lead us to an almost absurd "conceptual solipsism".

In this paper I intend to challenge the External Argument. For this purpose, I will first make some clarifying remarks, then I will present the argument by quoting Wittgenstein and Malcolm, afterwards I will sum up Kripke's objection and, finally, I will raise my own.

## 1. PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The External Argument has been associated with a third Wittgensteinian argument which also accuses Cartesian philosophy of leading us to conceptual solipsism. This third argument could roughly be put forward as follows. According to traditional epistemology, other people's sensations are "*in principle*" *unobservable* and their relations with behavior are *contingent*. But from these facts it ensues, according to Wittgenstein, that Cartesian epistemology cannot provide us with any "criterion" for attributing sensations to others. And this, in turn, implies (again according to Wittgenstein) that those attributions would be meaningless.

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I will consider the External Argument as being totally independent from this criterion-based argument. Here I will follow Kripke (1982, pp. 119-21) – who offers reasons for treating it in such an independent way – and also those philosophers who sustain this argument today. In fact these authors – for example, Dancy (1985, p. 70), Bilgrami (1993, p. 318), Thornton ([www.utm.edu/research/iep/s/solipsis.htm](http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/s/solipsis.htm)) and Levin (1974, pp. 65-70) – portray it as a purely conceptual and self-sufficient argument against traditional epistemology.<sup>1</sup> The approach is based on Wittgenstein's remarks made in his *Philosophical Investigations* (§ 302 and § 350), which contain the substance of the argument and where the notion of *criterion* seems to play no role at all.

## 2. THE EXTERNAL ARGUMENT

In his *Investigations* § 302, Wittgenstein says:

If one has to imagine someone else's pain on the model of one's own, this is non too easy a thing to do: for I have to imagine pain which I *do not feel* on the model of the pain which I *do feel*. That is, what I have to do is not simply to make a transition in imagination from one place of pain to another. As, from pain in the hand to pain in the arm. For I am not to imagine that I feel pain in some region of his body. (Which would also be possible.)<sup>2</sup>

Malcolm (1963, pp. 105-6) tries to strengthen Wittgenstein's point in the following way:

If I were to learn what pain is from perceiving my own pain then I should, *necessarily*, have learned that pain is something that exists only when I feel pain. For the pain that serves as my paradigm of pain (i.e., my own) has the property of existing only when I feel it. That property is *essential*, not accidental [...]. So if I obtain my *conception* of pain from pain that I experience, then it will be part of my conception of pain that I am the only being that can experience it. For me it will be a *contradiction* to speak of *another's* pain.

<sup>1</sup> Obviously, this argument against other minds is different from the more traditional one, which challenges the *reasons* (presumably based on the argument from analogy) but not the *meaningfulness* of our beliefs in the existence of other minds.

<sup>2</sup> According to Wittgenstein, if our language were private then, although we could meaningfully attribute our own pains to other people's bodies, we could not meaningfully attribute pains to others. So, according to Wittgenstein, the private language philosopher must admit that the statement "the Pope's head hurts me" is meaningful, though, however, the statement "the Pope has a headache" is meaningless. This example shows that the External Argument has the form of a *reductio*.

### 3. KRIPKE'S OBJECTION

Kripke (1982, pp. 116-117) reasonably challenges the validity of the External Argument as follows:

If I see some ducks for the first time in Central Park, and learn my 'concept' of ducks from these 'paradigms', it may be plausible to suppose that it is impossible ('nonsense', if you will) to suppose that *these very ducks* [my emphasis] could have been born in the fifteenth century. [...] It by no means follows [...] that I cannot form the concept of *ducks* [my emphasis] living at a different time, having different genetic origins, or of a different species, from the paradigms I used to learn the 'concept of duck'.

Based on the foregoing he wonders:

[...] imagining 'pain which I *do not feel* on the model of the pain which I *do feel*'. What is the special difficulty in this? Why is it more difficult than imagining ducks which are not in Central Park on the model of ducks which are in Central Park?

At this point a Wittgenstein's supporter could appeal to his well-known remark contained in his Investigations § 350:

'But if I suppose that someone has a pain, then I am simply supposing that he has just the same as I have so often had'. That gets us no further. It is as if I were to say: 'You surely know what 'It's 5 o'clock here' means; so you also know what 'It's 5 o'clock on the sun' means. It means simply that it is the same time there as it is here when it is 5 o'clock'.

Here Wittgenstein tries to show that some extensions of a concept, which intuitively seem legitimate, are not so, because they infringe some presuppositions which are essential to its meaningfulness.

However, Kripke (1982, pp. 117) sensibly asks himself:

What grounds, however, do we have to suppose that any special presuppositions of the concept 'pain' prevent its extension from me to others? After all, we constantly do apply concepts to new cases to which they have not previously been applied.

In my opinion, Kripke's reasonable and simple remarks quoted above suffice to show that the External Argument lacks an adequate ground.<sup>3</sup> However, today the argument has an ample acceptance and it is

<sup>3</sup> The rest of Kripke's work on this argument is purely exegetical and is focused on finding out which beliefs regarding the nature of mind could have led Wittgenstein

presented as valid even in introductory texts, as can be seen in Dancy (1985, p. 70), and also in reference books, as can be found in Bilgrami (1993, p. 318), and Thornton ([www.utm.edu/research/iep/s/solipsis.htm](http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/s/solipsis.htm)). Besides, if the argument were sound, it would provide a short *reductio* to traditional epistemology. Therefore, I want to confront it again. In order to do so I will try to reinforce Kripke's objection by providing a more specific and – I hope – more persuasive argument against it.

#### 4. ANOTHER OBJECTION

Kripke's comments are negative. First, he shows that the process of extending our general concepts from experienced to unexperienced cases is a common and accepted practice. Then he points out that the External Argument offers no reasons at all for claiming that the concepts, which refer to our own private experiences, cannot be similarly extended. In what follows, I will try to show not only that there seems to be no grounds for prohibiting such conceptual extensions, but also that there are positive reasons for thinking just the opposite.

##### a) "Person Stages" and "Former Selves"

As we have seen, the External Argument focuses on denying the possibility of conceiving other people's experiences and it does not question the possibility of conceiving our own ones. But our own experiences include not only our present ones: they also include our past and future ones. Thus, the External Argument should not question our capacity to conceive our past and future experiences.<sup>4</sup> Now, the tracing of a sharp distinction between our own experiences (whether they are present, past or future) and those of others presupposes a commitment with a "strong" theory regarding personal identity. That is, a type of theory which, in its classical form, grounds our personal identity on the identity of a *soul*, or *thinking substance*, or *ego*, which is simple and immutable and which remains identical throughout our lives. However, most contemporary philosophers

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to support such a thesis. Since many contemporary philosophers believe that this argument is valid without the help of any special supposition, I will leave aside Kripke's interesting conclusions on this subject.

<sup>4</sup> The non-problematic character of our capacity to conceive our own past experiences is presupposed by Wittgenstein (§ 350) when he assimilates "the same pain as I have so often had" with "the same time here".

(probably including some supporters of the External Argument), whether or not they adhere to the so called “first person approach”, reject with good reasons these “strong” theories and favor “weaker” ones such as the so called “Neo-Lockean” views, paradigmatic ally held by Parfit (1975, pp. 199-223).

Now, once we adopt these contemporary positions, we can start talking of “person stages” and “successive selves” and the all-or-nothing relation of identity (whether of the person or of the self) loses its importance in favor of a weaker sort of relation, *psychological continuity*, which has degrees and is held between different person stages. According to these views, what I call “my own” past pains, can be conceived of as belonging to a former self (or person-stage) which is different from my present one, and so, those pains could be conceived of as not being – strictly speaking – my own pains. But then, as the kind of private language presupposed by the External Argument allows us to conceive “our own” past pains, when we embrace these new doctrines regarding personal identity, we find that this language also allows us to meaningfully attribute pain to “others”. We must grant that these “others” are not the *ordinary persons* which extend from birth to death, but are instead *person stages* (or *former selves*). We must also admit that these person stages, unlike the minds of other people, are linked to our present self by the relation of psychological continuity. However, regarding the requirement of psychological continuity, we must notice that this relation has *degrees* and is capable of becoming increasingly weaker and tending almost to zero as we go sufficiently backwards or forwards in time.<sup>5</sup> Now, the only thing that the mechanism of conceptual extrapolation seems to require in order to operate is the existence of degrees: such existence works, so to speak, as a track which allows the mind to gain momentum and advance much further than “the length of the track”. But then, why could we not extend our attributions of pain to selves and person stages which are “zero-degree-linked” by psychological continuity to our present self, that is, with person stages of other people?

## **b) Fusions and fissions**

In order to reinforce and make this argument more vivid, I will appeal to the well known (hypothetical) cases of fusions and fissions which appear in the philosophical literature. Let's take, for example, the case

<sup>5</sup> I am thinking of the weak degree of psychological continuity which holds between my present self and “my” future one in such cases as senility and Alzheimer, and also in the one which holds between my present self and my past self when my past self is that of a baby or in cases of partial amnesia.

where two human beings *fuse*. As it is argued convincingly by Parfit (1975, pp. 199-223), the subject who emerges after the fusion will not be identical to either of its “ancestors”. However, he will be able to recollect “from the inside”, so to say, not only his own past experiences but also the ‘experiences of his “ancestors”, i.e., of others, and furthermore he will also be able to recognize them as belonging to different persons.<sup>6</sup>

But then, Wittgenstein’s External Argument loses plausibility. For, as far as it grants that according to the traditional philosopher’s private language we can conceive of our own past experiences (which we recall “from the inside”), given the possibility of fusions and fissions, it should also grant that according to this language we can conceive of past experiences belonging to other persons (which we would also recall “from the inside”). Admittedly, in the case of fusions and fissions, those other persons whose experiences we remember “from the inside” are connected to ourselves by the relation of psychological continuity. But as we saw, given that this relation is contingent and has degrees, we could extend the concept of “other person’s pain” to the pain of persons which are zero-degree linked to ourselves by that relation, and this includes anybody’s pains.<sup>7</sup>

## 5. A DIGRESSION ON SOLIPSISM AND PRIVACY

a) The External Argument challenges the meaningfulness of those statements which refer to the experiences of others and not those which refer to our own ones, whether they are past, present or future. However, the most basic and problematic transition which traditional foundationalism has to cope with, is the passage from the *given* or *the experienced* to the *non given*, from what is *present* to what is *absent*, from the pain I *do feel* to the pain I *do not feel* (to put it in Wittgenstein’s words). But, as some philosophers in this tradition have pointed out – Russell (1948, Ch. ID, Lovejoy (1955, pp. 380-82), Fumerton (1995, pp. 31-36) –, this line is crossed when we go from our present experiences to our own past ones, and this happens logically before arriving at the problem of the external

<sup>6</sup> The phenomenon of recollecting “from the inside” other person’s experiences has been called “*quasi-memory*”, in order to distinguish it from *memory* which is supposedly restricted by definition to our own past experiences.

<sup>7</sup> Parfit himself (1975, p. 210) notices that his analysis of personal identity (which makes extensive use of the possibilities of fissions and fusions) can be helpful to the problem of other minds.

world and much before arriving at the problem of other minds. Therefore, if traditional foundationalism has a conceptual problem, then, presumably, this problem will not be located in the transition from our own (present and past) experiences to those of others, as the External Argument supposes, but in the passage from our present experiences to our own past ones. In other words, if foundationalism has a problem, whether conceptual or "doctrinary" (as Quine would put it), it will probably be found, not in the attempt to transcend solipsism, but in the attempt to transcend "solipsism of the present moment".<sup>8</sup>

**b)** The possibility of fusions and fissions shows that every form of solipsism which goes beyond "solipsism of the present moment", as it is incompatible with the existence of such possibilities, becomes untenable.

**c)** More importantly, these possibilities also show that the doctrine of the necessary privacy of our subjective experience (in which Wittgenstein's most famous private language argument is strongly supported) is untenable, since they show that other people's sensations are *in principle* as accessible (or inaccessible) to my present self as my own past ones.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> In a paper on foundationalism (1993, pp. 288-296) I suggest a possible way of overcoming a conceptual problem, which arises at this basic stage.

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