

CAN A PERSON KNOW THAT HE IS IN PAIN?

Houghton Dalrymple
University of Texas at Arlington

Ordinary language philosophers often try to show that philosophical theories are wrong by showing that the theories have consequences that no sane person can accept. I agree that a philosophical theory that has entirely skeptical consequences is wrong. I argue, however, that there is a widely held view among ordinary language philosophers that entails the very skepticism that they deplore.

I will indicate what the view is and the reason for holding it by quoting from two philosophers. One of the most succinct statements comes from Gustafson: "It is, as a matter of fact, false that no one else ever knows whether or not I am in pain. And it is equally false that I never know whether some other person is in pain. On the other hand, it is incorrect for one to say that he knows he is in pain. . . ." ¹ Gustafson does not say that it is sometimes correct for some other person to say that he knows that I am in pain or for me to say that I know that he is in pain, but I assume that he thinks that it would sometimes be correct to make statements like these. Nor does he explicitly deny that I can know that I have a pain, though it is always incorrect for me to say that I know. Anscombe is more explicit, and she also states clearly why it is that we cannot know that we are in pain.

Knowledge exists, she says, only when "there is a possibility of being right or wrong: there is point in speaking of knowledge only when a contrast exists between 'he *knows*' and 'he (merely) *thinks* he knows.' Thus, . . . I should wish to say that one ordinarily *knows* the position of one's limbs, without observation, but not that being able to say where one feels pain is a case of something being known."² If Gustafson's words only imply (in the sense of strongly suggest) that one cannot know that he is in pain, Anscombe is more straightforward. Still, there is something obscure or odd in what she says. What does she mean when she says that there are occasions when a person is able to say that he is in pain? I can think of only three meanings that might be assigned to the expressions "being able to say" and "can say." They might mean (in this context) that a person is able to utter the words "I am in pain," but a person might be able to do that even if he is ignorant of the language. They might mean that a person is able to utter the words while knowing what the words mean. Since I speak English, I can do that even if I am not in pain. However, it is unlikely that it is either of these things that Anscombe means. But the only other use that I can think of is the use that "can say" has in the following sentence: "I cannot say exactly how long your wife will have to remain in the hospi-

tal, but I can say she will have to be here at least two weeks." Although this is the use that the expression normally has, if Anscombe had been using "able to say" in this way, she would have had to admit that a person can know that he is in pain—which she denies. Anscombe has a great deal to say about being able to say, but unfortunately, she never makes clear what she means.

Neither Anscombe nor Gustafson denies that other people can know that I am in pain. Other people can find out on the basis of behavioral evidence or criteria. But if they can know in this way that I am in pain, why cannot I know in the same way that I am? Normally, what is evidence or criteria for one person is evidence or criteria for anybody else. Thus, if I can find out that metal A is harder than metal B by scratching metal B with metal A, so can you. Further, even if the ordinary behavioral tests were out of order in my case, could I not come to know about my pain by asking somebody else in a position to know? We do come to know a lot of things by asking other people. This case would, however, be unique in two important respects: (1) I find out that somebody else is in pain by observing his behavior, but I find out that I am in pain by observing the verbal behavior of somebody else. (2) Many things that I know are known on the basis of the testimony of others, but in this case the testimony of somebody else that I am in pain can be checked (if at all) only by comparing his testimony with that of others. The absurdity of asking somebody else if you are in pain is universally recognized, of course; and, as far as I know, the second person, present tense is never used for the purpose of reporting pain.

It seems that if I can take any behavior as evidence for my pain it is my own behavior. Yet this, too, seems odd. Consider the sentence, "I am in pain." Hearing these words is often the best and sometimes the only evidence that another person has that I am in pain. But for me it is no evidence at all, and there is nothing peculiar about it. If you say that there are ten people in a certain room, this can be evidence for me that there are; but my saying the same thing is not evidence for me. Nevertheless, if I were relying on behavioral evidence for my pain in the same way that others rely, this would often be my principal piece of evidence. At one point, Ryle says, "Our knowledge of other people and of ourselves depends upon our noticing how they and we behave."³ If what Ryle says is correct, then the thesis that we cannot know that we are in pain is true.

Neither Gustafson nor Anscombe argue that one makes use of evidence when one says that one is in pain, but they cannot give a clear account of why this is so without losing their case or proposing radical linguistic change. Saying that a person is in pain entails that he is aware or conscious that he is in pain. "Awareness that" or "consciousness that" should be distinguished from "awareness of" or "consciousness of."⁴ This is not to say

that the two sorts of constructions are always used in different senses. Thus I suspect that saying that a woman is conscious of a man's intention to seduce her is the very same thing as saying that the woman is conscious that the man intends to seduce her. Nevertheless, there does seem to be a sense of "awareness of" and "consciousness of" such that a person can be aware of something without being aware that it is the kind of something that it is. He might, for instance, be aware of that furry creature with tail held high without being aware that it is a skunk. Being aware of something in this sense does not imply knowledge, but being aware that something certainly does. So if a person is aware that he owns a pair of black shoes, he knows that he owns a pair of black shoes. As far as my pain is concerned, I am not only aware of my pain but I am aware that I am in pain. Hence, I know that I am in pain if I am. At this point the behaviorist can claim that it is senseless to say that one is aware that *x* unless a contrast can be made between "He is aware that *x*" and "He (merely) thinks that he is aware that *x*." Thus a person is permitted to say that he had a pain in his chest last week (because it might have been the week before), but he is not permitted to say that he has one now. If the behaviorist makes this move, he should recognize that he is proposing linguistic change, not offering a description of linguistic practice.

It is equally a proposal for linguistic change to insist that it can be said of a person that he knows only when a contrast can be made between "He knows that *p*" and "He (merely) thinks that he knows that *p*." The only contrast that can be made is this one. "He knows that *p*" makes sense only if he can distinguish a case of *p* from a case of not *p*. Pains come through unscathed under this test, i.e., he can distinguish times when he is in pain from times when he is not in pain.

In regard to the sentence, "I know that I am in pain," Wittgenstein asks, "What is it supposed to mean—except perhaps that I am in pain?"⁵ In most instances, prefacing "I am in pain" with "I know that" is an entirely gratuitous addition, and thus a bit odd. On the other hand, there is a need to distinguish odd or misleading language from language that is in violation of rules of meaning. For example, if you know that the chair standing in front of you will support your weight, it will be misleading to say that you think it will support your weight. Nevertheless, the person who sits in a chair that he knows will support him is a person who sits in a chair that he thinks will support him.

Saying "I know that I am in pain" is slightly odd, but there are cases in which one is tempted to use it; and there are other cases in which the sentence is not used but what it says is suggested by the context. Suppose, for instance, that a doctor asks you to tell everything you know about your condition. If you have a swelling in your limbs, you will tell him about

that; if you have been having dizzy spells, you will tell him about that, and if you have a pain in your chest, you will tell him about that. There are even cases in which the still odder expression "I believe I am in pain" is suggested. If the doctor asks you what symptoms you believe you have, you will certainly mention the pain.

If it were the case that "I am in pain" is true, and "I know that I am in pain" had the same truth conditions, this could be a reason for preferring the shorter construction. In fact, I believe that the sentences do have the same truth conditions, as does "He is in pain" said by somebody else about me. It, too, will be true when the other sentences are true, and false when they are. Obviously, the person who denies that I can know that I am in pain cannot explain the gratuitous character of "I know that" in the target sentence in the way that I have explained it. If he did, he would have to admit that I can know that I am in pain.

The person who denies that I can know that I am in pain admits that the sentence "He is in pain," said about me, has truth conditions; but he cannot easily admit that my utterance, "I am in pain," has truth conditions. If it did and it was true and I had a good reason for uttering the sentence, then I would know that I was in pain. Thus, if he admits that "I am in pain" has truth conditions, he must also hold that the person who utters the sentence never has an adequate reason for uttering it. Somebody else could perhaps become acquainted with its truth. But an indicative sentence which no one ever has an adequate reason to utter would be a distinctly odd indicative sentence. So it is not surprising that holders of the thesis commonly deny that "I am in pain" is a genuine indicative sentence.

What they usually assert is that "I am in pain" is an expression of pain. Malcolm, for instance, says, "The utterance is itself an expression of sensation, just as flinchings, grimaces, and outcries are expressions of sensation."⁶ I do not wish to deny that "I am in pain" can be an expression of pain, but I do wish to deny that this fact is what makes the sentence the kind of sentence it is. Expression of *p* entails *p*, and there is a meaning of "criterion" in which criterion of *p* entails *p*. If the utterance, "I am in pain," is an expression of pain because it is a criterion (in the strong sense) of pain, then I am in pain whenever I utter the sentence and regardless of any linguistic convention. So if this is what is meant by saying that "I am in pain" is an expression of pain, it has not so far been shown that the utterance is a sentence.

Perhaps the utterance is sometimes an expression of pain and sometimes not. Nothing essential is changed. If the utterance is an expression of pain, it is because it is a manifestation of pain, and that regardless of the conventions of language. In this respect, "I am in pain" is quite on a par with the flinchings and grimaces Malcolm is talking about. This approach can-

not show that "I am in pain" is a sentence, and if it is not a sentence it is not an indicative sentence. In fact, I cannot even say (in an important sense of say) that I am in pain. Since I am inclined to reject the conclusion that I cannot say that I am in pain, I am inclined to reject its premise that "I am in pain" is merely the expression of pain. Actually, the utterance is much more certainly the expression of my intention to say that I am in pain than it is the expression of a pain that I have. Intending to say is essentially connected with language, but I must also succeed in what I intend, that is, I must conform with the conventions of language.

Is the sentence, "I am in pain," an indicative sentence? First, the fact that it is in indicative form should be *prima facie* evidence that it is. Philosophers have not been loath to declare a wide range of sentences in indicative form to be systematically misleading. One thinks here of the way value judgments have been treated in some quarters. Nevertheless, the burden of proof is on the person who claims that a sentence, apparently indicative, is really something else. It cannot be the case that most sentences that look like they are indicative are not really that.

Second, the identity of a person who ascribes a property does not normally determine whether the property is ascribed truly or not, nor does it determine the meaning of the words that are used to ascribe the property. Consider: "I weigh two hundred pounds," "You weigh two hundred pounds" (said to me), and "He weighs two hundred pounds" (said about me to some other person). The same property is ascribed in each instance, and the three sentences necessarily have the same truth value. Compare with: "I am in pain," "You are in pain" (said to me), and "He is in pain" (said about me to some other person). Said as if it were a report to me of something I did not already know, "You are in pain" is merely ludicrous; but said in the right tone of voice, it can have the same point as "I know that you are in pain." What is important to recognize, though, is that regardless of the point (which is probably the expression of sympathy), saying, "You are in pain," *does* ascribe the property of being in pain to me. In fact, this is all that linguistic rules determine.

If one holds that being in pain entails knowledge of pain, there is not a peculiarity of grammar here at all. All three sentences ascribe the same property to the same subject, and the three sentences necessarily have the same truth value. Philosophers like Malcolm and Gustafson rightly insist that other people can know that I am in pain; hence, they should (and I think do) admit that the sentences in the second and third persons are genuine indicative sentences. Furthermore, I should suppose that they would agree that the same property is being ascribed and that the ascriptions necessarily have the same truth value. "I am in pain," however, is remarkably different. This non-sentence neither ascribes a property to a subject nor

does it do any other grammatical work. This is out of line with dictionaries, grammar books, and common speech, all of which give full license for the use of pain-predicates in first person sentences. Nor is there the slightest evidence that the word "pain" either changes or loses its meaning when uttered as a part of a first person sentence.

Third, tense does not usually determine the nature of what is predicated, and it is usual for sentences to have the same set of truth conditions in one tense as they have in another. "I weigh two hundred pounds now" and "I weighed two hundred pounds then" are typical of countless comparisons that can be made. Philosophers who hold that I cannot know that I *have* a pain give no reason why I should not know that I *had* a pain. So I assume that they would agree that "I had a pain then" is an ordinary indicative sentence that the utterer can sometimes know to be true. And I also assume that they would agree that the sentences, "I had a pain then," "You had a pain then," and "He had a pain then," in which the pronouns refer to the same person, are either all true or all false. It would be another linguistic oddity if the pronoun made as much difference as it is supposed to make in the present tense but made no difference at all when the past tense was employed.

If a sentence is exactly the same (containing exactly the same words in exactly the same order), it will nearly always, if not always, have the same truth conditions whether it stands alone or as a part of a complex sentence, and that regardless of whether the complex sentence is truth functional or not. Now, this is not supposed to be so with respect to "I am in pain." For instance, the following remark can be made about "You are in pain": It will be true if I am in pain and false if I am not. Or, if this example won't do, take the example from Gustafson: It is false that no one else ever knows that I am in pain. Unless "I am in pain" is an ordinary indicative sentence, it is difficult to make sense out of what Gustafson says. This is another remarkable way in which pain-sentences are different from other sentences that resemble them in form.

The sentences, "You know that I am in pain" and "He knows that I am in pain," deserve special attention. Because of their insistence that other people can sometimes know that I am in pain, Malcolm and the others should accept these as indicative sentences that are sometimes true. And since it is possible for me to be wrong about whether you know or he knows that I am in pain, no reason has been given why these sentences should not sometimes be assertions of something I know. Now, quite generally one person knowing that another person knows that *p* implies that he himself knows that *p*. In the ordinary cases, I know that *p* and then discover that he has adequate grounds for saying that *p*. But even if it could somehow be imagined that I could come to know that he knows that *p*

without prior assurance that *p*, it would still be theoretically impossible for me to know that he knows that *p* without myself knowing that *p*. Relate this to our target sentences. It is a characteristic of both that what he says is true, then he knows that he is in pain. The conclusion that I can know that I am in pain can be avoided only in counterintuitive ways. It can be argued that the sentences are mysterious indicative sentences that can be known to be true by other people but never by the ones who utter the sentences. Or it can be argued that "You know that I am in pain" and "He knows that I am in pain" are, like "I am in pain," merely expressions of pain.

Philosophers who hold that a person cannot know that he is in pain subscribe in one form or another to Anscombe's criterion that it is legitimate to speak of knowledge only when a contrast can be made between "He knows" and "He (merely) thinks he knows." The criterion would not be an especially important one if it excluded only first person knowledge of pain or first person knowledge of pain and the other sensations. As a matter of fact, it excludes much more. Although I will not attempt to adequately characterize the kind of knowledge that is ruled out, it certainly rules out all first person knowledge of conscious states.

Take an example. "What are you thinking about?" Reply: "A large furry creature with six tails and three heads." This example is in every important respect exactly like the example of pain. A distinction cannot be made between me knowing that I am thinking about the creature and me merely thinking that I know. Also, "I know that" in front of the sentence would normally be superfluous, and just as my knowledge that I am in pain is not knowledge that is based on observation, neither is my knowledge that I am thinking about the creature.

I believe that the point of view that is being attacked leads to a deep skepticism. In order to show this, I will put in the center of the picture a class of sentences that refer to the appearances of things. Though I will be concentrating on vision, the same line of reasoning would apply to the other modalities. A man sees a rock and exclaims, "That rock looks like a camel." He might have said, "To me that rock looks like a camel." The first sentence *could* be an assertion that it would look that way to most people, but the second sentence says nothing about the way it would look to other people. If the first sentence does indeed mention other people, it would not sound very odd to say that the man observed or saw that it looked like a camel. But it would sound odd to say that the man observed (saw that) it looked like a camel to him. (In general, it makes sense to speak of observation only when a distinction can be made between evidence and what it is evidence for.) Perhaps the first sentence passes Anscombe's test. Not the second, or at least not in a satisfactory way. If there

is no rock there, the sentence is not true (though perhaps not false either), but if there is a rock there, the sentence fails Anscombe's test. The man would not then know that the rock had to him the look of a camel.

To say that something looks like something (or has the look of something) is not generally to imply that it is not what it looks like. The rock has the look of a camel, but it also has the look of a rock. I may say of a man that he looks like Harry Smith, thinking maybe he is, and if it turns out that he is, I do not say that my utterance is false. "I saw Harry Smith" is the report of an observation, and the reason I had for saying that the man was Harry Smith was that he had the look of Harry Smith. What is true of the Harry Smith case is true of other observations of material objects. The question now arises whether a person can have justified belief if he does not know what his reasons are. A person's reasons for believing or doing something should be distinguished from reasons that he might have for believing or doing something. Thus, a man may have a reason for closing the pasture gate whether he knows it is open or not, but the gate being open could be his reason for closing the gate only if he knew it was open. In a similar vein, we would not say that a man believed something for a good reason unless we thought he knew what his reason was. If I do not know that the man has the look of Harry Smith, this cannot be my reason for saying that he is. And if the looks of material objects can in no instances justify my beliefs about the natures of material objects, neither can the sounds of material objects, the smells of material objects, or the tastes of material objects. In general, if we cannot know these appearances, experience can teach us nothing about the natures of the material objects that they are appearances of.

Ordinary language philosophers have often taken pride in their ability to solve the other minds problem. That problem, however, is completely intractable if a person cannot know that he is in pain. For if he cannot know that he is in pain neither can he know some other things that he needs to know in order to know how material bodies behave. It is, of course, agreed that all we know about the minds of other people are based on our observations of their behavior. The behavior of a person, whatever else it is, is the behavior of a material body—thus my conclusion that a person cannot have knowledge of other minds if he cannot know that he is in pain.

NOTES

1. Donald F. Gustafson, "Privacy," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, 3 (1965), 141.
2. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention*, 2nd ed. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1963), p. 14.
3. Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1950), p. 181.

4. Gregg Franzwa has made the same distinction in "'Aware of' and 'Awareness That' In The Identity Theory," *Southwest Philosophical Studies* (April 1977), 60-64.

5. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), Paragraph 246.

6. Norman Malcolm, "The Privacy of Experience," in *Epistemology: New Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Avrum Stroll (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 150.