THE PRIVACY OF EXPERIENCE

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Philosophical behaviorists have often argued that the admission that a person has privileged access to his or her own mental states would lead to solipsism. Ryle is a good example:

> But in principle, as distinct from practice, John Doe's ways of finding out about John Doe are the same as John Doe's ways of finding out about Richard Roe. To drop the hope of Privileged Access is also to drop the fear of epistemological isolationism; we lose the bitters with the sweets of Solipsism.[1]

In this paper I argue that a person does have privileged access to many of his or her mental states and that the admission of this does not imply solipsism.

Something is a private particular if and only if observation (or evidence) is irrelevant to self-ascription. Some philosophers of the past seem to have advanced something like this as definitive of a mental state, but it is actually definitive of a conscious state. Nothing but something that is a wholly conscious state could be a private particular in the strict sense. If a subject enjoys epistemic superiority in the ascription of other mental predicates and the superiority is enjoyed merely because he or she is a self-ascriber, the superiority is enjoyed either because the private particular is a constituent of what is predicated or it is related to what is predicated as the exercise of a disposition is related to the disposition. Thus, intention is essential for action (the gnashing of the subject's teeth was a mere bodily movement unless he or she intended it), and beliefs and desires are dispositions that are manifested in consciousness (though they are also manifested in behavior).

Present contents of consciousness are ideal examples of private particulars because the self-ascriber does not use evidence to ascribe these states to himself or herself. From the standpoint of the self-ascriber, it is not clear that a distinction can be made between his or her evidence and what it is evidence for. "I am thinking of a rosebud." "What is your evidence for

that statement?" In contrast, the distinction can always be made when something in the environment is observed. In some cases the distinction is obvious, but observers of the environment do not always make a distinction between their evidence and what it is evidence for. I would not do so if my friend were standing a few feet away in broad daylight (though I might if she were standing three hundred feet away). But even if she were standing only a few feet away, my seeing her is one thing and her standing there another. So, "I see her" would be an admissible answer to the curious question, "What evidence do you have that she is standing there?"

The view that a person has a kind of cognitive access to his or her own conscious states and to other mental phenomena that have some special connection with these states and that this kind of cognitive access is not available to others is a commonsense view. The flip side is that others find out about these states by observing behavior in certain circumstances. The dictum of Wittgenstein that inner states require outer criteria is almost universally accepted. Knowledge of what these criteria are is implied in the recognition of the mental states of others, but our awareness of the criteria is at its height when we pretend to something--to be angry or in pain or to have enjoyed the dinner of the hosts. Something else that is implicit should be explicitly mentioned. If I say, "I am thinking of the Loch Ness Monster," and you say (speaking of me), "He is thinking of the Loch Ness Monster," we are saying the same thing; but, if you say, "He is not thinking of the Loch Ness Monster," you are contradicting me. The fact that you rely on criteria, but I do not, makes no difference.

Behaviorism, which denies asymmetry of access to mental states, is not as popular as it used to be, but it is still alive. The following quotation from an article by Paul Ziff in a recent anthology is a classic example of the behavioristic attitude:

> I say "I am angry." My statement is true if and only if a certain organism is behaving in certain ways. If I say "George is angry," my statement is true if and only if a certain organism, viz., George, is behaving in certain ways.[2]

This is a strong statement. It makes behavior more than a mere criterion of anger. Deflection of a galvanometer needle is a criterion of electrical current, but we would not say that a wire is conducting electricity if and only if a galvanometer needle is deflecting. The impression that Ziff is identifying anger with behavior is confirmed when he says, "A behaviorist maintains that to be angry is to behave in certain ways."[3] We cannot be sure what the intended scope of Ziff's analysis is, but there are indications that he intends for it to have a wide scope. How would he analyze "I am thinking of a fat man"? Would he want to say that my statement is true if and only if I am saying out loud that I am thinking of a fat man? He should be prepared to say something like that if he wants his behaviorism to apply across the board.

Ziff's behaviorism has a feature that is absent from traditional behaviorism, but which is foreshadowed by interpretations of some of Wittgenstein's remarks. He seems to be denying Gilbert Ryle's principle that John Doe's ways of finding out about John Doe are the same as John Doe's ways of finding out about Richard Roe. Ryle is wrong because John Doe does not find out about John Doe. Thus, Ziff says that it is a mistake to say either that I find out that I am angry or that I find out that I am behaving in certain ways.[4] I agree that it is generally odd to say that I have found out that I was angry or behaving in certain ways (though I do not see why Ziff, who denies that behavior has an inner side, should think that it is), but I reject the suggestion that I have no way of knowing whether I am angry or behaving in certain ways.

Norman Malcolm discovers two meanings that the word "private" has when writers claim that experience is private. He believes that these claims are founded on illusion.

> . . . two themes can often be discerned, one of which I shall call "the privacy of observability," the other "the privacy of ownership." The first means that I can *observe* (or perceive, or be aware of, or know) something that no one else *can* observe (or perceive, or be aware of, or know). The second theme means that I *have* something that no one else *can* have.[5]

The first theme is (roughly) what I argue for--that the

subject in ascribing mental states to himself or herself often makes use of a basis that is not available to others. Nevertheless, perhaps I sometimes discover that I am angry when I suddenly notice my rude behavior. The point is that, whenever the self-ascriber uses the basis, he or she is using a basis that is not available to others.

Malcolm thinks that the second theme is not a distinct theme from the first, and I am inclined to agree. The basis of my knowing that I have an ache or a thought is apt to be my having the ache or thought. Nevertheless, the second theme makes a point that has to be established in order to indicate what the private particulars are. Malcolm says that "the contents of consciousness have only generic identity" and that "there is no sense to the expression 'same pain' such that it is impossible for two people to have the same pain."[6] The following would also be included in a long list of things that have only generic identity: bruises, cuts, actions, reflexes, the shape of a person's nose, and color patches. Sentences like, "I did the same thing as you," mean that the same kind of action has been performed, but the word "same" could also be used to make the point that actions have only generic identity. If a person were to say something of the form, "Your action of doing *X* is not the same action as my action of doing *X*," he could be saying that it is a matter of logic that the actions are numerically different. "My action is numerically different from your action" is logically unlike "The car in the parking lot that looks exactly like yours is a numerically different car." However, assuming that the car in the parking lot is not your car, both statements are alike in being true. So Malcolm is clearly wrong in the following passage:

> The assumption that your sensation and mine must be numerically different is a *bad* mistake, philosophically speaking, because it embodies the idea that the contents of your mind (your thoughts, feelings, sensations) are hidden from me. Thus it puts us on the road to skepticism about other minds, and even to solipsism.[7]

Anyone who has mastered the use of the term "numerically different" can see immediately that the bad mistake is Malcolm's. And Malcolm surely must be wrong in supposing that the numerical difference between your sensation and mine would imply solipsism.

Malcolm's challenge is put in the form of the question "What is it that you have that I can't have?" This sets up a verbal move. Suppose the answer is "My toothache and neuritis." Malcolm can reply "But I can have the same, i.e., toothache and neuritis." This does nothing to undermine the identification of the particulars, and this is all that the believer in private particulars has to do. Furthermore, something should be noticed that cramps Malcolm in making his point. He wants to claim that he can have toothache and neuritis, but it is doubtful that he has a right to make the claim. It is doubtful because he seems to be saying that it is only other people who can know what his mental states are. Perhaps at some time in his life he has had toothache or neuritis, but this is something he can never know.

There are a number of places where Malcolm says fairly explicitly that a person should never say "I know *X*" where *X* is the name of a conscious state. Malcom says that the sentence, "I know I am in pain," is senseless and that there are good reasons why it should be excluded from the language.[8] The exclusion of the sentence from the language has important consequences, one of these consequences being that although "A husband is in a privileged position in regard to the question of whether his wife snores," it would be wrong to make the same claim in regard to his pain.[9]

Malcolm's reasons for wanting to exclude the sentence "I know I am in pain" from the language are that it is a queer-sounding sentence and that it is impossible for a person to be wrong about whether he is in pain.[10] Since the "I know" in front of "I am in pain" is often superfluous, it is usually somewhat odd to say "I know I am in pain." Saying, "I know it is snowing outside," might also sound odd if no one was inclined to challenge the announcement. Still, there could be conversational contexts in which neither statement would sound particularly odd. "Yes, I know that it's snowing outside and that I'm in pain, but I'm going anyway because it's important for me to be there." Other writers besides Malcolm have said that it is

improper to say that a person knows something if it is impossible for him or her to be wrong, but it still sounds strange. According to a highly idealized conception of knowledge, sentences in the form "He knows that *p*, but he might be wrong" are contradictory. Even after the idealized conception has been rejected, it sounds almost as odd to say "He knows that his wife snores, but he might be wrong" as it is to say "He knows that he is in pain, but he might be wrong."

Malcolm says something else that can serve as a lead into my concluding remarks. He compares what he calls the philosophy of "from one's own case" with behaviorism and finds that they make the common mistake of assuming that first-person, present tense psychological statements are verified by self-observation.[11] Malcolm does not indicate what kind of self-observation goes along with the "from one's own case philosophy," but I assume that it is introspection. It is, at any rate, a kind of observation that cannot be checked. According to behaviorism, the self-observation is made by observing one's own behavior. The first position is unintelligible; the second is false. He concludes that these statements cannot be verified by self-observation, and then goes on: "It follows that they have no verification at all; for if they had verification it would have to be self-observation."[12]

If what Malcolm says is left just like it is without further clarification, it has unacceptable consequences. If it is understood that it carries no implication that I cannot know that I am in pain, it can perhaps be admitted that I cannot verify my statement that I am in pain. This is not serious, because I do not need to; and, you can verify your statement "He is in pain" (said about me) by seeing me wince or by hearing me utter the words "I am in pain." Malcolm would agree that your statement can be verified; he would not accept my utterance as a report of anything, but he would accept the wince and the verbal behavior as criteria for pain. But what Malcolm may not recognize is that your utterance makes the same statement that mine does. Therefore, Malcolm is wrong when he says that first-person, present tense psychological statements "have no verification at all."

Though both are first-person present tense psychological statements, there is a substantial difference between "My tongue is tickling" and "That leaf on my tongue is tickling my

tongue." Let us agree that it is unacceptable to say that I verify that my tongue is tickling. However, I think it is quite acceptable to say that I can verify that it is the leaf that is tickling my tongue. If my tongue started tickling soon after I put the leaf on my tongue and it stopped tickling soon after I took the leaf off, this would be fairly conclusive verification that the leaf was tickling my tongue. If I tried the experiment with several leaves of that same general appearance, one could say that I had learned from experience that a certain kind of leaf tickles my tongue. And other people could learn from their experiences that leaves of that sort tickle their tongues.

Grant only so much as that I can verify that leaves of that plant tickle my tongue, and I see no reason why it cannot be established that leaves of a certain plant tickle human tongues. The property is as objective as any other property. Some people might be disposed to deny this. The trouble is that a tickle is a bodily sensation, on a par with aches and pains, just the sort of thing that is commonly labelled by the pejorative term "hidden." Nevertheless, it is not unheard of for objects to be identified by means of bodily sensation. I have been told that certain foods can be identified by slight pain sensations that the foods produce inside the mouth. Nor is there a hard and fast line to be drawn between the names of bodily sensations and the names of properties of objects. "Bitter" is ordinarily the name of a property possessed by quinine and other substances, but when the same term is applied to the bitter taste that a person sometimes has when he or she has the flu, "bitter" is being used as the name of a bodily sensation.

Substances should be identifiable by more than one sense. The leaves of the plant named "tickle tongue" could pass that test. They could be identified by their visual appearance, by the tickle, and perhaps by a distinctive taste produced by chewing the leaves. Because more than one person can see the same leaf at the same time, the visual observation has an objective ring to it. But it would be a mistake to suppose that the visual observation is decisive. It might require a trained eye, and even then the judgment might be somewhat uncertain. Identification of the leaf by means of the tickle might be more certain, and it would not require special effort or training.

The person who would deny that I can verify that the leaves of "tickle tongue" tickle my tongue is on a slippery slope.

Nearly everybody believes that we learn many things about the world from experience. But it is a fact that all experiences are private in the fairly precise sense that other people must rely on criteria to say what the subject's experiences are. Often the criteria are satisfied by mere knowledge of a person's presence in a certain neighborhood at a certain time. Thus, the criteria are satisfied for my saying that you see the elephant if I see you looking at it from a short distance away. On other occasions the criteria are more specific and we are more aware that criteria are being used. The criteria for saying that persons see something or hear something may come into prominence when they are given tests for eyesight or hearing.

To say that we cannot learn anything from our private experiences is the same thing as saying that we cannot learn anything from our experiences. The word "private" in front of experiences does not designate a subclass of experiences. To deny that we learn anything from our private experiences is to abolish the very concept of learning from experience.

NOTES

[1]Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1950), 156.

[2]Paul Ziff, "About Behaviorism," in *The Philosophy of Mind*, ed. V. C. Chappell (New York: Dover Publicaitons, 1981), 147.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Norman Malcolm, "The Privacy of Experience," in *Epistemology: New Essays in the Theory of Knowledge*, ed. Avrum Stroll (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 129.

[6]Ibid., 147.

[7]Ibid.

[8]Ibid., 148.

[9]Ibid., 149.

[10]Ibid.

[11]Norman Malcolm, "Knowledge of Other Minds," in *The Philosophy of Mind*, ed. V. C. Chappell (New York: Dover Publications, 1981), 157.

[12]Ibid.