

## »I can't have your pains«

# First Person Statements and the Ambiguity of Meaning

Volker A. Munz, Graz

In *PI 246* Wittgenstein remarks: »In what sense are my sensations *private*?« This question is embedded in a broader context that deals with the possibility of a private language (cf. *PI 243-315*). Sensations can thereby be considered with respect to an epistemic as well as a possessive kind of privacy. In *PI 246* Wittgenstein refers to statements of the form »Only I can know that I am pain whereas others can only surmise it«. He then argues that such expressions are in one sense false and in another nonsense. Although this remark refers to the epistemic aspect of privacy I shall argue that this semantic differentiation also holds for sentences stating the ownership of sensations.

It is of course clear that those paragraphs involve a huge amount of questions such as: Are sensations private objects? Is there a logical difference between sentences using the verb »to have« in connection with mental expressions such as »I have a bad feeling«, »I have no idea«, etc. and sentences such as »I have 5 Euro in my pocket«, »I have grey hair« etc.? Can two sensations be identical? What is the connection between sensations and their expressions? Can present mental phenomena justify my using mental vocabulary in referring to them? just to mention a few. For several different reasons none of those questions can explicitly be taken into account here, although I think the problem of ambiguity concerning first person psychological statements can at least be pointed at. The paper shall therefore concentrate on the question in what sense statements of the above kind can in one way be false (or true) in another nonsensical for this also seems to be one of the crucial arguments in Wittgenstein's treatment of metaphysical propositions.

In order to understand the remark in *PI 246* we have to get clear about the problem that is involved here and Wittgenstein's way of dealing with it. This is, generally speaking, part of his whole conception of language and the role metaphysics plays in it.

All of Wittgenstein's writings centre around the relation between language and reality, so to speak. There, the question of what it means for a sentence to have sense, of what it means to say something plays an essential role. And within this context of language, sense and nonsense we also have to look for the placing of metaphysics.

When Wittgenstein started doing philosophy again in 1929 he realized the incompleteness of the Tractarian symbolism that seemed to have forced him to introduce the concept of a rule, in a sense that rules that are *not* part of the logical syntax could rule the use of propositions. The concept of »logical syntax« disappeared in his writings and he introduced the idea of a *grammar* which was closely connected with the *application* of language. In a single lecture on necessary propositions (hitherto unpublished) Wittgenstein remarks: »What I call a rule of grammar is not what would be found in grammar books. (...) Ordinary grammar deals with rules about the order of words, gender etc. No one could learn the use of language from such a grammar only. (...) You could make quite formal rules about the use of the language, the sounds etc. You could

also make rules relating to the sort of situation in which the sounds were used. Finally you could get what I choose to call 'rules of grammar'.« Although Wittgenstein does not tell us explicitly what he means by »rules of grammar« it seems clear that the concept of a rule or grammatical sentence is closely related to the way an expression is used in language. To understand the idea that a proposition can both be true (false) and nonsensical we have to look at this conception of a rule and its relation to empirical and metaphysical propositions:

»The statement 'Only I have real toothache', either has a commonsense meaning, or, if it is a grammatical proposition, it is meant to be a statement of a rule.« (Wittgenstein 1979, 22). This remark already indicates the problem of a particular semantical ambiguity that is involved in statements of such kind. About the relation between grammatical rules, metaphysical statements and empirical propositions Wittgenstein makes the following interesting remark: »And it is particularly difficult to discover that an assertion which the metaphysician makes expresses discontentment with our grammar when the words of this assertion can also be used to state a fact of experience.« (Wittgenstein 1972, 56-57). Thus when in a particular situation someone claims that only his pain is real he might just want to say that all the others are pretending. Or when he argues that a particular object does not exist when no one looks at it, he might just want to point out that it vanishes, when it is not looked at. A solipsist, however, who states that only his pain is real pain, does not want to make any empirical assumptions about the pretense of other people, e.g., that he has good reasons to assume that they are only cheating. What he wants to say is that it is inconceivable to imagine that anyone except him *could* be in pain. This conception of what is possible to imagine and what makes sense to say is already found in the *Tractatus*. A proposition that has sense expresses a possible state of affairs, a state that is imaginable in the sense that the statement that expresses it does not contain a contradiction or concepts excluding each other (cf. *Some Remarks on Logical Form*). And as we shall see the distinction Wittgenstein draws between empirical and logical impossibility is crucial for the whole understanding of a grammatical proposition.

In *PI 251* we find another remark about the idea of inconceivability of the opposite and the confusion of grammatical and empirical propositions. In this passage Wittgenstein points out that this impossibility is not due to the human powers of imagination as if it were only a question of trying hard enough. The form of a sentence like »I can't imagine the opposite« in contexts of the privacy of sensations or the knowledge about having pains etc. equals an empirical proposition but is really a grammatical one.

So, let us look at a few examples to try to clarify the semantic ambiguity of the two kinds of expressions. If our assumption is right, sentences such as, »Another person can't have my pains«, »I can't feel your pain«, »I feel my toothache«, »Two people can't have the same pain«, »Only I have real pain« etc. can both have a truth value or be nonsensical.

The best way to point out the ambiguity is to choose a rather radical example Wittgenstein introduces to point out the difference between logical and empirical impossibility. This grammatical difficulty becomes most obvious when we introduce the idea of having pain in another person's body, say teeth. Here the metaphysical proposition »I can't feel another person's pain« differs from the experiential proposition »I can't have pain in another person's mouth« (cf. Wittgenstein 1972, 49), which is the expression of an empirical impossibility. Since the negation does, however, not contain a contradiction, it is imaginable to have pain in another person's body. So to say »I cannot have your pain« would be false if it is meant in the sense »I cannot have pain in your tooth« whereas »I cannot have your toothache« because my pain is mine and yours is yours would be nonsense, forbidden by syntax, as Wittgenstein puts it. In the *Philosophical Remarks* and elsewhere he argues that the concept of pain differs according to intensity and location but not according to a possessor and in particular to a physical body, an assumption that is fundamental to understand the idea of having pain in another person's body. So the toothache case is a perfect example to illustrate the difference between logical and physical impossibility which I think is basic for Wittgenstein's distinction between sense and nonsense he draws in *PI 246* and elsewhere.

This example also shows the grammatical asymmetry between first person and third person statements in metaphysical contexts as opposed to empirical one's. Here the question of given criteria seems crucial. When Wittgenstein raises the question about the criteria of identity for pains (cf. *PI 253*), it looks as though he wants to imply that there are no such criteria which I think is a false interpretation. What the question does imply is that the criteria show in what way it makes sense to speak of »the same« in connection with pains. In one of his lectures (1979, 18) Wittgenstein's remarks the following: »It makes sense to say "His ache is worse than mine", but not to say "I feel my toothache" and "Two people can't have the same pain". Consider the statement that no two people can ever see the same sense datum. If being in the same position as another person were taken as the criterion for someone's seeing the same sense datum as he does, than one could imagine a person seeing the same datum, say, by seeing through someone's head. But if there is no criterion for seeing the same datum, than "I can't know that he sees what I see" does not make sense. We are likely to muddle statements of fact which are undisputed with grammatical statements. Statements of fact and grammatical statements are not to be confused.« So if there are criteria that allow to speak of »sameness« even in cases of sense perception than it does make sense to apply the concept and the particular propositions would either be true or false.

Furthermore, if the expression »toothache« has the same meaning both in first person and third person statements than why should we not say that two persons have the same pain? Wittgenstein's point seems to be that we can speak of »the same pain« if »I« and »he« are on the same *logical* level. If I use such a proposition in a context where both pronouns are meant to be on the same level than the proposition does have sense. This means in other words that both those pronouns are possible arguments for the same function. If we, e.g., allow an expression such as »unconscious pain«<sup>1</sup> than I can

<sup>1</sup>»Again, when in a metaphysical sense I say "I must always know when I have pain", this simply makes the word "know" redundant; and instead of "I know that I have pain", I can simply say "I have pain". The matter is different, of course, if we give the phrase "unconscious pain" sense by fixing experiential criteria for the case in which a man has pain and doesn't know it, and if then we say (rightly or wrongly) that as a matter of fact nobody has ever had pains which he didn't know of.« (Wittgenstein 1972, 55). And in his lecture on

equally say with sense »He has pains I do not feel« and »I have pains I do not feel« or generally speaking substitute first person for third person pronouns. In both cases the verification methods could be the same. If on the contrary we are in a context where someone (say a solipsist) wants to point out the unique role of the first person in the sense that in his grammar »I« or »personal experience« has »no neighbour« (cf. Wittgenstein 1972, 71 or Klage 1993, 229) than first person statements of the above kind are nonsense. This point obviously hangs together with Wittgenstein's understanding of metaphysical statements being used without an *antithesis* (cf. Wittgenstein 1972, 45).

Another example concerning »sameness of pains« is found in the *Blue and Brown Books*. Wittgenstein introduces the phrase »I won't feel your cold« in a context where we might be angry with someone who wants to go out on a cold day with a cold in his head and this phrase could mean something like »I don't suffer when you catch a cold« which is a proposition taught by experience. »For we could imagine a, so to speak, wireless connection between the two bodies which made one person feel pain in his head when the other had exposed his to the cold air« (Wittgenstein 1972, 54). And against the argument that my pain is my pain because it is in my head Wittgenstein constructs a scenario which is quite similar to the Siamese twins case. Two persons share one part of their bodies, say, a hand. Nerves and tendons of A's arm are connected to B's hand by operation. Now let's imagine that the hand got stung by a wasp, both A and B cry, contort their faces give the same description of the pain etc. Would we now say they have the same pain or a different one? Wittgenstein goes on: »"We feel pain in the same place, in the same body, our descriptions tally, but still my pain can't be his", I suppose as a reason you will be inclined to say: "because my pain is my pain and his pain is his pain". And here you are making a grammatical statement about the use of such a phrase as "the same pain". You say that you don't wish to apply the phrase, "he has got my pain" or "we both have the same pain", and instead, perhaps, you will apply such a phrase as "his pain is exactly like mine".« (Wittgenstein 1972, 54).

The same point is illustrated by the Siamese twins example (cf. *PI 253*) where a sentence like »Each of them has a different pain« is *opposed* to »They both have the same pain«. So if one of them is true the other is false but not nonsense, e.g. when one feels a throbbing pain the other a burning one. Again, one who wants to state that they *cannot* have the same pain, using »cannot« as a logical cannot, does not want to distinguish two experiences.

Those examples show, it seems to me, at least two things:

If there are criteria for calling something, e.g., the »same pain«, such as location or intensity, than it does make sense to say that two persons can feel the same pain and so sentences like »We can't have the same pain«, »I can't have his pain« would be false but not nonsensical and

If one makes a metaphysical statement about »the same pain« where there are no such criteria than the proposition is nonsense. He should therefore consider something like: »I don't wish to apply the phrase "He has

necessary propositions Wittgenstein says: »There is no reason why I should not say "I have unconscious toothache" if a.) I feel no pain, b.) I have a bad tooth. Saying this would produce depression and fear. It suggests that if I don't feel it now I shall feel it in a second.« The notion of »unconscious toothache« is also discussed in the *Blue and Brown Books* (cf. Wittgenstein 1972, 22-23).

got my pain”, “We both have the same pain”« etc. as a rule that would forbid expressions of such kind.

These two assumptions already point at one of Wittgenstein's proposals to avoid meaning ambiguities which he discusses in several places: the introduction of an alternative notation with a system of rules that determines the use of expressions in a way that avoids the confusion of empirical and metaphysical statements. (Another rather simple alternative is indicated in *PI* 116: »What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday usage.«)

This solution, however, does not touch Wittgenstein's second diagnosis of metaphysical propositions which is certainly more fundamental for it directly points to the claim of such statements: The metaphysician wants to say something about the *nature* of things but all he really does is confusing such statements with grammatical rules about the use of expressions, for according to Wittgenstein »I can't feel his pain« is not something about the nature of pain but a grammatical remark about the concept of pain. »It seems as though it would be not false but nonsense to say "I feels his pains", but as though this were because of the nature of pain, of the person etc. as though, therefore the statement were ultimately a statement about the nature of things. So we speak for example of an asymmetry in our mode of expression and we look on it as a mirror image of the essence of the things« (Klagge 1993, 208-209).<sup>2</sup>

## References

- Ambrose, A. (ed.) 1979 *Wittgenstein's Lectures Cambridge 1932-1935*, Totowa NJ: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Klagge, J. C. and Nordmann A. (ed.) 1993 *Ludwig Wittgenstein Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951*, Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1953 *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1972 *The Blue and Brown Books. Preliminary Studies for the »Philosophical Investigations«*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1992 *Werkausgabe Band 8: Bemerkungen über die Farben; Über Gewißheit; Zettel; Vermischte Bemerkungen*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.

---

<sup>2</sup>»Philosophische Untersuchungen: begriffliche Untersuchungen. Das Wesentliche der Metaphysik: daß sie den Unterschied zwischen sachlichen und begrifflichen Untersuchungen verwischt.« (Wittgenstein 1992, 381)