

Predictive Knowledge in Wittgenstein

Antonio Marques, Lisbon / Portugal

Predictive statements deserve a specific grammatical inquiry, since they have not only an epistemological status, but also appear in Wittgenstein's writings on philosophy of psychology and touch deeply the problem of free will. So predictive knowledge covers a very large spectrum of human experience. This grammatical exploration leads to acknowledge an essential difference between predictive statements, which are expressions or exteriorisations of will (*Willensäußerungen*) and predictions, which are made from the perspective of the third person (although they can be uttered in the first). As Wittgenstein notes: "Two things however, are important: one, that in many cases someone else cannot predict my actions, whereas I foresee them in my intentions; the other, that my prediction (in my expression of intention) has not the same foundation as his prediction of what I shall do, and the conclusions to be drawn from these predictions are quite different" (*PI*, lixi, 224e). It is the grammatical elucidation of predictive language games that allows us to solve the problem of the incompatibility between predicted and at the same time free choices.

The problem we wish to clarify in this paper is the following: in his *Lecture on Freedom of the Will* Wittgenstein states that "Prediction is incompatible with choice in the case where you yourself predict what you will choose, or I predict and then tell you" (*PO*, 442), on the other hand, he acknowledges the factum of voluntary choice and behaviour in predictive expressions such as "...when it strikes 5, I raise my arm". (*PI* 627). Thus, on the one hand, it seems that the fact that I predict that I will raise my hand within 5 minutes, makes it impossible that that event (the raising of my hand), in that precise moment, be a true choice. On the other hand, if we admit that that movement of the hand was voluntary, we seem to implicitly admit that it has resulted from a choice: I could give up raising my arm. Which therapeutics for this (we'll see if apparent) contradiction? How in this case "to shew the fly the way out of the flybottle" (*PI* 309)? The only way will be to clarify the concept of predictive knowledge and the different meanings in which we use it.

Wittgenstein acknowledged a special statute to language games that express prediction and, curiously, he refers to them almost always with regard to knowledge of volitive activity. Thus, the characteristics of predictive knowledge, obtained by reflexion on different predictive language games are relevant to psychological and cognitive topics, as well as to self-knowledge and to the volitive subject nature. One first and decisive characteristic of predictive sentences is the *asymmetry* between predictions that are expressions of will (example of Wittgenstein himself: "I am going to take two powders" (*PI* 632)) and predictions that are anticipations of events in the 3rd person's perspective.

If we consider the predictions:

"I will raise my arm within 5 minutes"

"My arm is going to raise itself within 5 minutes, due to an electric current that in that moment will stimulate it",

it becomes easy to characterize more rigorously the asymmetry between (a) and (b).

More precisely, (a) is a predictive statement under the form of an expression or exteriorisation of the 1st person's will (in Wittgenstein's words, a "Willensaüßerung"), while (b) is a pre-knowledge of a future event, and the one who predicts is, in this case, an observer, and not an agent, even though he keeps speaking in the 1st person. (Notice that, the first sentence (a) is equal to "I want to raise my arm within 5minutes"). Thus, the last sentence (b) is truly a prediction of the 3rd person's perspective, even though it is pronounced in the 1st person of the indicative present. Truth is that, in that situation, the subject is someone who places himself in the position of observer of an event that he does not control, even though the prediction concerns the movement of his hand.

An identical asymmetry between these types of prediction was described by Wittgenstein in *PI* 627. There, he offers two possible descriptions of voluntary movement: "Examine the following description of a voluntary action: 'I form the decision to pull the bell at 5 o'clock, and when it strikes 5, my arm makes this movement'. Is that the correct description, and not *this* one: '...and when it strikes 5, I raise my arm?...'. Wittgenstein adds that the correct description of voluntary act does not include surprise, as he writes in the next section (*PI* 628): "So one might say: voluntary movement is marked by the absence of surprise". With this remark, Wittgenstein emphasizes an important characteristic of that kind of acts. There will be surprise only in those predictions where the subject does not verify the accomplishment of the event that he had predicted on the basis of external rules and events. For example, I predict a certain chemical reaction when I assemble two elements because I have verified it every time I made that experiment in laboratory, or I predict the behaviour of someone I know in a certain situation, because I have observed that same behaviour of his several times in identical situations, etc. Any of these predictions will provoke *surprise* in the subject that predicts, if the events predicted do not take place. But when the prediction is a volitive expression of the 1st person, "...and when it strikes 5, I raise my arm", *surprise can not arise* and it makes no sense to say: "See, my arm is going up!".

When Wittgenstein notices that it is the *absence of surprise that characterizes voluntary movement*, it is important to ask if surprise does not exist because in the prediction of a voluntary movement made in the 1st person the subject knows in a completely infallible way his actions. Does the subject, in the prediction of his voluntary acts made by himself have a special knowledge, radically different from the other types of predictions made in the 3rd person's point of view? Our suggestion is that it should not be this the interpretation of the characteristic of absence of surprise that Wittgenstein refers with regard to voluntary action prediction made by the one that predicts. There is surprise when something doesn't happen in the chain of a process we thought we knew. For example, if my arm does not move itself when stimulated by an electric current, I can't help surprising myself. In fact, it was on the basis of the observation of what happened every time my arm was stimulated that I made the prediction which then, *surprisingly*, didn't occur. At first sight, one would say that in the case of predictions in the 3rd person's point of view, it is a knowledge that still allows error and, therefore, surprise:

the subject realizes that, after all, his prediction was fallible. Is it the case, then, that the prediction made in the form of a 1st person expression is infallible and because of that there is no place for surprise? Well, it's not that what happens in these expressions or *Willensäußerungen*. The truth is that type (a) sentences are not more certain than type (b) ones; on the contrary, these are the ones that deserve to be called *knowledge*. In fact, any prediction I make relatively to any voluntary behaviour of mine in the future can fail, and we all have the experience of the contingency of that our kind of predictions. I only have to decide otherwise before the predicted event. But precisely, because it is me who decides, I cannot surprise myself with the fact that the prediction I made about my future behaviour did not fulfil. *The absence of surprise is, then, due to the fact that the predicted event depends on my decision, since the moment of its prediction, until its fulfilment (or not fulfilment)*. Once again, notice how, in fact, it is *grammatically* possible to say that I doubt that my hand will raise itself within 5 minutes (prediction in the perspective of the observer, or the 3rd person), and it makes *grammatically* no sense to say that I doubt that I have the intention of raising my hand within 5 minutes (predictive expression of the 1st person).

The prediction made by myself of my voluntary behaviours is, then, a special case among the totality of predictive knowledge. Wittgenstein attributes two fundamental characteristics to it: 1) the absence of surprise and 2) the fact of not being made on the basis of observation of myself. Such characteristics distinguish the predictive expression (in the sense of *Willensäußerung*) from all the other forms of prediction, which are pre-knowledge in the 3rd person's point of view. Between predictive knowledge based on observation of the others or of myself, and the one that doesn't need that ground, there is a notable difference. "Why do I have doubts about his intentions, but not about mine? To what extent am I indubitably acquainted with my intention? That is, what is the use, the function, of the expression of intention? That is, when is something an expression of intention? Well, when the act follows it, when it is a prediction, I make the prediction, the same one as someone else makes from observation of my behaviour, *without* this observation" (*RPP I*, 788).

But can we speak of knowledge when we refer to this kind of predictions? Volitive predictions, in which the subject announces a behaviour or decision of his, are, after all, expressions or exteriorizations of the will, and because of that, much different from the cognitive point of view, from the other predictions obtained by the observation of states of affairs or behaviours. So that expressions and exteriorizations of the will, intentionality, belief, pain, etc. could be knowledge, they would have to, from the beginning, be subject to the game of certainty and doubt, but it makes no sense to doubt that "I want p" or "I intend p" or "I have a pain". To Wittgenstein, sentences like " 'I know what I want, wish, believe, feel,.....' (and so on through all *the* psychological verbs) is either philosophers' nonsense, or at any rate *not* a judgement *a priori*" (*PI II*, xi, 221e). Likewise, "I can know what someone else is thinking, not what I am thinking. It is correct to say 'I know what you are thinking' and wrong to say 'I know what I am thinking'. (A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar)" (*PI*, II, xi, 222e). In a similar way, also in the prediction that exteriorises or expresses a future voluntary behaviour of the subject himself, there is no

place for doubt. I cannot say with sense that I doubt that I want p, or that I intend p, but I can say with sense that I doubt that it will rain tomorrow or that someone with a certain disease will die, even though a better observation and a more profound knowledge of physical laws might, later, deny such utterances. If knowledge supposes the possibility of doubt, then, it is possible to say that expressive predictions in the 1st person of my acts are pseudo-knowledge, because the term *knowledge* always evolves the game of certainty and doubt. Those predictions are outside the game of knowledge and doubt. Actually, it is grammatically impossible that that game enters in the predictions that are exteriorisations of the 1st person.

From that we conclude that *the asymmetry between sentences of type (a) and type (b) is not epistemological*. In fact it would be epistemological if we assumed that in the first ones the subject *knows* his future decision in a way that the other does not (the one of raising his hand), because it is he who predicts his behaviour and, thus, he cannot be wrong, while in type (b) sentences it will always be possible to there be an error about the physical process that causes the raising of the hand, whether the prediction is made by me or by somebody else. This would be an epistemological asymmetry, which extreme version supposes a kind of cartesian transparency based in an introspective faculty (on this subject, see Hacker, 2001, 133-36). But we have already seen that in the expressive prediction of the 1st person it is not correct to say that the subject *knows* his future decision (to raise or not my arm). Predictive expressions of the type "I'm going to raise my hand within 5 minutes" are exteriorisations of the will, *Willensäußerungen*, and not predictive knowledge like sentence (b) or "it will rain tomorrow". To say that "I want to (or I intend to) raise my hand within 5 minutes" is a pseudo predictive knowledge, but an exteriorisation of the will, which logic is essentially different from a knowledge in which I always place myself as observer of the 3rd person's perspective.

Let's go back to the difficulty enounced in the beginning. How to affirm, on the one hand, that the prediction of my behaviour annuls its voluntary character and, on the other hand, to admit that the raising of my hand, in sentences like "I'm going to raise my hand within 5 minutes", corresponds to a true choice? The contradiction is solved if we admit that, on the one hand, the prediction of voluntary acts can be made from the perspective of the 3rd person and, in this case, the true choice is, in fact, annulled. It will be said, then, that the previous knowledge of my future decision annuls its true choice character. However, in the case in which the prediction is an expression of will or intention in the 1st person of indicative present, the predicted choice is not annulled and it is possible to speak of voluntary behaviour. That's why Wittgenstein in the mentioned *Lecture on freedom of the Will* also says that "As a matter of fact, it is possible we know the whole time what we are going to choose and that nevertheless a process of choice is going on" (*PO*, 442)

In conclusion, predictive knowledge of the 3rd person's point of view is not compatible with free choice, even though a free choice may take place being announced (predicted) by an expression of the will in the 1st person. But as we saw, in this case, we are in presence of a false knowledge.

Literature

Hacker, P. M. S. 2001 "An orrery of intentionality", *Language & Communication*, vol. 21, 2, Oxford: Pergamon, 119-141.

Hacker, P. M. S. 1996 *Wittgenstein, Mind and Will*, Oxford: Blackwell.

Winch, Peter 1968 "Wittgenstein's Treatment of the Will", *Ratio*, 10, pp. 38-53.

Wittgenstein:

LWPP 1 – Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, 1982, vol. 1, ed. G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

LWPP 2 – Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology, 1992, vol. 2, ed. G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, Oxford: Blackwell.

PI – Philosophical Investigations, 1978, Oxford: Blackwell.

PO – Philosophical Occasions 1912-1951, 1993, ed. J. Klagge and A. Nordmann, Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett.

RPP 1 – Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, 1980, vol. 1, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, Oxford: Blackwell.