

## Minimal Self, Mineness, and Intersubjectivity

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### Abstract

In our presentation, we investigate the commonalities between Wittgenstein's account of sensation and recent accounts of the "minimal self" and its definition as "mineness" of experience. These recent accounts hold that "mineness" is characterized, (1) by a difference between the way I access my sensations as opposed to how others can access them and (2) by the *experiential* givenness of the self. We argue that Wittgenstein agrees with the first claim and that he holds that sensations are in a sense had by one person. Nevertheless, he implies that, if the determinate quality of a sensation conditions the meaning of a word in a language, that quality is intersubjective. With regard to the claim of *experiential* givenness, we argue that Wittgenstein would be unlikely to find a common kind of experience in all uses of the first-person pronoun, but that he may find resemblances between some uses.

### 1. Mineness of experience

There is a sense in which an experience such as pain may be bound to one person: only the person who is in pain *has* that pain (in this paper we are *not* concerned with the question if there are conscious experiences that might be shared with others). In this sense, we may speak of a "sense of ownership" (Gallagher 2000) or "mineness" of experience (Zahavi 2014). In other words, the having of an experience implies a "minimal self," which Zahavi also calls the "dative of manifestation."

According to Gallagher and Zahavi (2012), this minimal self is an implicit self-awareness; one is aware of oneself not as an object of experience, but implicitly as the subject who has the experience. For instance, if I perceive a tree in front of me, I am not only aware of *the tree itself*, but also implicitly aware of *myself seeing* the tree. Gallagher's and Zahavi's point is not restricted to a conceptual analysis, but fundamentally involves the lived experience of a person. It shows that I always experience my experience as mine rather than someone else's experience.

Would Wittgenstein agree with this notion of minimal self? He is widely considered an anti-subjectivist philosopher. One interesting connection is Gallagher's and Zahavi's indirect reference to Wittgenstein through their notion of "non-observational self-awareness." In their account of minimal self, they use the notion of non-observational awareness synonymously

with “mineness of experience”: in being consciously aware of a tree, I am non-observationally aware of my consciousness of the tree.

Gallagher and Zahavi take this notion from Shoemaker’s work on self-reference and self-awareness, which is itself based on an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s account of the use of the first-person pronoun. Shoemaker (1968) uses the notion of non-observational self-awareness to explain Wittgenstein’s distinction between “subject” and “object use” of the term “I” in the *Blue Book*. There, Wittgenstein considers the difference between utterances like “I have toothache” and “I have a bump on my forehead” (BBB 1960, p. 66). Wittgenstein calls the former use “the use as subject” and the latter the “use as object” (BBB 1960, p. 66). While one can ask “are you sure that *you* have a bump on the forehead?” it is nonsensical to ask, “are you sure that it’s *you* who have pains?” (BBB 1960, p. 67). For instance, if I experience a pain I will not doubt that I do in fact experience a pain. Yet, if I look into a mirror and recognize that there is a bump on my forehead, I refer to my body and thus to myself as an object. Under some circumstances, it might even be reasonable to ask whether it is *me* who I see in the mirror.

In other words, when I am using the term “I” as a subject (in first-person present tense statements), I am immune to misidentifying the referent of “I”, which is by default me. This is true even for statements in which it makes sense to scrutinize my authority, such as “I see a *birch*”. While I can be wrong in thinking that I see a *birch*, I cannot err in identifying myself as the one who sees it (independent of *what* is seen). The referent of the term “I” (in its subject use) is not some observational phenomenon; it is not an object of an inner “sense-perception” (Shoemaker 1968, p. 563). Shoemaker claims that the first-person pronoun refers to something even though it does not refer to an object, or a state of affairs. Self-reference, in his opinion, is only mysterious if we construe the self as *object* to which I have access by inner sense-perception. But does the subjective use imply that there is a *phenomenally experienced* self? According to Shoemaker, the self of the subject-use of the first-person pronoun is the non-observational awareness of the experience.

Wittgenstein, too, holds that experiences such as sensations such as pain play an important role in language-games. In (PU 1998: 304) Wittgenstein’s dialog partner accuses Wittgenstein to hold that “the sensation itself is a nothing.” Wittgenstein responds: “Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either!” In the above remarks from the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein does reject the idea that the first-person pronoun in the use as subject refers to a worldly object. He does not, however, deny the existence of sensations. While he holds that “only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious” (PU 1998: 281). This is not to be understood as a behaviorist statement. In (PU 1998: 304–308) Wittgenstein objects to the indictment of behaviorism, stating that there could be no greater difference between pain behavior with and without the sensation of pain (PU 1998: 304, also cf. Sluga 1996, p. 341).

But if it is clear that sensations are not reducible to behavior, does that not vindicate the common view that they are internal to the subject who has them? At least with regard to sensations such as pain one may be tempted to think that their qualitative character is only accessible to the subject who is in pain.

## **2. The intersubjectivity of experience**

Wittgenstein points out that in the ordinary use of language experiences are conceived to be the same for different people. For instance, we take it as a matter of course that others can have the same impression of the blue sky (PU 1998, 275). Wittgenstein recognizes that colors have different aspects and that one can concentrate on either the color of an object or the vivid impression of a color (PU 1998, 277). Yet, the color of the object and the color impression are not two different things. Rather, the color impression is the way the color appears to the observer. The red color of the object and the way it appears to a person are two aspects of what we call “red.”

One may try to object against Wittgenstein that there could be variation between the quality of experience between different persons. But the same holds for only one person, as well: there could be variation between the quality of experience the person has at different times. For instance, the color we see in objects often varies with changes of light—this is not something unusual in our perceptual experiences. We experience a white wall as being white independent of whether it reflects the warm evening light or the colder daylight. Besides the distinction mentioned above from PU §277, one may here distinguish two different impressions: 1. the immediate color impression one has of an object, such as a white page, which “really” appears white even under red light. 2. the impression one has when carefully concentrating on the color of the page and realizes that it “really” looks red. Such ambiguities in perceptual experience call into question the idea that the quality of one’s immediate perception suffices to determine the meaning of a word.

Wittgenstein clearly rejects the idea that sensations are not intersubjective and only understandable by the subject of experience. What is often called the “private language argument” is a rejection of the claim that the meaning of words can be determined by the quality of the inner state of a subject. Wittgenstein’s famous thought experiment of the beetle in the box (PU 1998: 293) is an analogy for the view that “pain” is a name for some inner object, the impression of pain. If the concept of pain is thus construed, it would be like a beetle in a box only one person can open. But here, Wittgenstein points out that it would not matter what the beetle would look like. Indeed, it would not even matter if there were no beetle in the box at all, for the determinate qualities of the object in the box play no role in the imagined language game. This thought experiment doesn’t show that there couldn’t be any qualities or feelings associated with a word by only one subject, but that these cannot determine the meaning of a word.

It is here important to distinguish between two ways by which Wittgenstein shows that even sensations such as pain are intersubjective. Firstly, sensations are not things in themselves independent of language, and language does more than merely naming them. This is not to say that there are no sensations without language, but that language shapes what counts as a sensation and assigns certain roles for the sensation in the respective language-games. One may here take it that Wittgenstein disregards the sensation and opts for a purely externalistic and behavioristic account of meaning, but, as we saw in the last section with regard to PU §304–308, this is not the case. What he rejects is the assumption that mental events or states are something inner. Rather than inner states indexed by an external concept, sensations are part of more complex language-games. Since language-games are intersubjective, so are the sensations that feature in them.

This takes us to the second claim, that the quality of sensations itself cannot be exclusively subjective. If pain would feel different to the majority of English speakers, or if it wouldn't be a feeling at all, the word "pain" would have a different meaning. Imagine, for instance, that the majority of people perceive pain as pleasurable rather than painful. This would surely shift the meaning of "pain" significantly. Wittgenstein's claim is not that there is no subjective quality to experience but that, in as far as it conditions the meaning of a word in a language, the determinate quality is intersubjective.

### 3. Conclusion

We have shown that Gallagher and Zahavi consider the "minimal self" as characterized by the "mineness" of experience. By this, they mean two things. On the one hand, that there is a difference between the way I access my sensations as opposed to how others can access them. In addition, they hold that the "mineness" implies an *experiential* givenness of the self. This second sense of "mineness" and "for-me-ness" is subtly but decisively different, however. Zahavi claims that for-me-ness entails "that we have a distinctly different acquaintance with our own experiential life than with the experiential life of others" (Zahavi forthcoming, p. 6). The difference of the acquaintance is supposed to be a matter of "what-it-is-like-for-me-ness" (ibid., p. 3).

With regard to the first claim, we have shown that Wittgenstein agrees that there is a difference between the way I access my sensations as opposed to how others can access them. We then explained that for Wittgenstein even sensations such as pain are nevertheless intersubjective in two senses. On the one hand, their determinate quality is not all there is to the use of a word such as "pain"; the word is not a name for an (internal) thing in itself. On the other hand, as far as the determinate quality is important for the meaning of "pain," it must be intersubjective.

It is far from clear, however, if Wittgenstein would also agree with the second claim, that there is a non-observational, *experiential* givenness of the self. Wittgenstein admits that

having a sensation plays a non-redundant role in expressions of the sensation. That the person who has a sensation has access to it that differs from that of others does not imply by itself that there is a phenomenal givenness of the self.

Wittgenstein's frequent emphasis on the manifold of different uses of the same word in different language-games makes it unlikely that he would subscribe to the view that there is a common phenomenon to be found in all uses of "I." This does not exclude the possibility, however, that there are family resemblances between some uses of the first-person pronoun.

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## 4. Literature

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