

WITTGENSTEIN'S ANTI-DESCRIPTIVISM

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to show that Wittgenstein's anti-descriptivist approach to the meaning of mental states ascriptions is not restricted to a particular kind of first person mental states attributions –avowals. Our strategy is threefold. We will first provide textual evidence to make it apparent that Wittgenstein's non-relational treatment of mental states ascriptions is not restricted to avowals. Secondly, we will analyze three different arguments provided by Wittgenstein against the relational nature of mental states ascriptions. Finally, we will develop some ideas to try and make sense of the claim that by using third-person mental states ascriptions we are not describing, but expressing mental states.

KEYWORDS: Wittgenstein, descriptivism, avowals, mental-state attributions, expressivism

1. Varieties of anti-descriptivism

At least three uses of the term 'descriptivism' can be clearly distinguished in the literature, corresponding to different senses in which a certain theory can be said to be 'descriptivist':

- i) Frege-Russell Theory: The meanings of proper names *are* sets of definite descriptions.
- ii) Intensionalism: The meanings of proper names are *determined* by definite descriptions.
- iii) Relationalism: mental states attributions are used to state a relation between a thinker and something else –a wish, a belief, some piece of knowledge, etc. (cfr. criticisms in Urmson, 1956; Kiteley 1964; Prior 1971; Recanati 2000, 2007, etc.)

Even though Wittgenstein opposes descriptivism in senses i) and ii) (PI 79), it is the third sense that is of interest for the purpose of this paper. Mental states attributions are not used to claim that any kind of relation is held between a thinker and an object, they are not used to describe a state of affairs, to represent 'a distribution in a space and time' (cfr. PI, ix).

In recent literature on the meaning of belief reports, arguments against relationalist views have been summarized in (Boër 2007, 39-65) and (Matthews 2007, 97-117). Matthews writes:

‘even a cursory examination of the problems that plague the relational conception of belief should disabuse anyone of the notion that this assumption has any presumptive status. These problems have been carefully catalogued elsewhere (e.g., Richard 1990; Schiffer 1987, 1992), so I shall limit myself to a few brief reminders, which are intended to set the stage for a criticism of the relationalist presumption that one can read the relational logical form of belief sentences back onto the attributed belief states themselves.’ (Matthews 2007, 102).

This could perhaps lead someone into believing that the relationalist view is no more than a relic from the past, but this diagnosis would be dead wrong when the reception of Wittgenstein’s views is taken into consideration. As we will see, an important number of theories proposed in the past few years to deal with the problems concerning avowals assume that Wittgenstein’s rejection of descriptivism is confined to first-person mental states attributions. The aim of this paper is to show that Wittgenstein’s anti-descriptivist approach to the meaning of mental states ascriptions is not restricted to this particular kind of first person mental states attributions –avowals.

2. The scope of Wittgenstein’s anti-descriptivism

Wittgenstein’s defense of the plurality of language games, the idea that we are usually wrong in considering that the sole purpose of language use is to describe a portion of reality, goes hand in hand with his arguments against the alleged “descriptive” –or “relational”– nature of certain sets of expressions. This raises no particular debate amongst Wittgenstein’s commentators and profiteers. Quite a different attitude can be found when the scope of this critique to relationalism is at stake. On the one hand, a number of authors favor a restrictive position, according to which Wittgenstein’s anti-descriptivism only affects a particular kind of first-person mental states ascriptions (Bar-On & Long 2001; Fogelin 1976, 188 ff.; Fogelin 1996, 44 ff.; Bar-On 2004, 228 ff.; Finkelstein 2003; assumed in Wright 1998). Wittgenstein’s anti-descriptivism would be for them an explanatory mechanism to provide a take on the nuances of avowals (particularly on immunity to error through misidentification), a realm in which it this theoretical attitude can be safely identified with *expressivism*. On the other side of the fence, some classical commentators have defended that Wittgenstein’s arguments against descriptivism have a wider reach, and that mental states ascriptions in general are to be considered under this non-descriptivist light (cfr. Hacker 1996, 5 and ff; Hacker 2005, 246; Glock 1996).

Even though both sides have good historical reasons, as well as some textual evidence from Wittgenstein’s corpus, to back their claims, we think neither of them does complete justice to the reach of Wittgenstein’s arguments against descriptivism. Unlike the first group, we agree with Hacker and Glock that Wittgenstein’s anti-descriptivism cannot be confined to a particular kind of

first-person mental states ascriptions. Against the second group, we think that Wittgenstein's take on the meaning of mental states ascriptions is not exclusively motivated by his rejection of the superficial grammar of the accusatives in these ascriptions. Wittgenstein offers a wide variety of arguments against the relational nature of mental states ascriptions, and his expressivism can only be understood by building up on this complex set of arguments.

Just to be clear: we do not claim that Wittgenstein did not establish a well-founded difference between first-person and third-person mental state attributions, we simply do not think that this difference hinges on the descriptive nature of the latter. Neither is our purpose to show that according to Wittgenstein mental states cannot be *described*. As a matter of fact he punctually gives examples of this activity. It is just not the job of mental state ascriptions to describe mental states.

3. Wittgenstein's *extended* anti-descriptivism

Our strategy is *threefold*. We will *first* provide textual evidence to make it apparent that Wittgenstein's non-relational treatment of mental states ascriptions is not restricted to avowals. *Secondly*, we will analyze different arguments provided by Wittgenstein against the relational nature of mental states ascriptions. *Finally*, in the next section, we will develop some ideas to try and make sense of the claim that by using third-person mental states ascriptions we are not describing, but expressing mental states.

Firstly, many times in PI first-person attributions are preceded by questions in the second grammatical person, and it is difficult to defend that a non-descriptive first-person ascription suffices to answer a question containing a descriptive second person attribution. In PI 677, for example, Wittgenstein writes:

"When you were swearing just now, did you really mean it?" This is perhaps as much as to say: "Were you really angry?"—And the answer may be given as a result of introspection and is often some such thing as: "I didn't mean it very seriously", "I meant it half jokingly" and so on. There are differences of degree here. And one does indeed also say "I was half thinking of him when I said that."

The question 'Were you really angry?' is posed in the second person. If Wittgenstein's anti-descriptivism was restricted to first-person attributions, then this kind of question would have to be interpreted as a relational question about a state of affairs, similar to questions concerning the relative positions of the objects in our office, for example. 'Were you angry?' would have to be taken on a par with questions like 'is my computer on under the table?'. Only the latter, nevertheless, can be answered by providing an accurate description of the space in front of us. How is it possible to imagine a *descriptive* question successfully answered in *non-descriptive* terms?

Besides, a whole range of non-relational attributions are systematically expressed using second-person ascriptions: normative statements (see, e. g. PI 190, PI 214, PI 231). If reporting how I obey an order is not describing a situation in which a certain event is a proper interpretation of a rule, since ‘any course of action can be made out to accord with the rule’ (PI 201), what reason could we have to suppose that reporting how somebody else obeys an order is *descriptive* in any sense? Rules, as expressed in the second person (‘do not feed gremmlins after midnight’) are not *descriptions* in the very same sense in which a report of my behavior in accord with a rule (‘I didn’t feed the gremmlin after midnight’) is not a *description* of the way my action accords with a rule. Accordance with a rule is not a fact to be described, and thus normative reports, irrespectively of the grammatical person that they use, are not descriptions either. The connection between the non-descriptive nature of mental state attributions and normative statements is made apparent, for example, in §PG 47: “When we say that somebody understands, we do not mean that he has a certain definition or image present to his mind. That is “mere history” .”Must he have such a picture present whenever we would say he was using the word “rouge” with understanding? (Think of the order: “Imagine a red patch””,

More importantly, Wittgenstein directly addresses third person attributions in a number of places (e. g. PI § 321, PI §402, PI §453, PI § 572, PI 573, etc.). Take the following excerpt from PI 453, for example: ‘To say of an expectant person that he perceives his expectation instead of saying that he expects, would be an idiotic distortion of the expression’. Throughout PI, Wittgenstein does not avoid the attribution of mental states, like expectation in PI 453, in third person. There is no reason to suppose that his views on second and third-person attributions are going to be any different from first-person attributions, with respect to their *non-descriptive* nature. Moreover, his general characterization of intentionality is orthogonal to any distinction between first and third person mental states attributions (see PG pp 161-162; Zettel §55).

Secondly, Wittgenstein provides a series of arguments against the descriptive nature of mental states attributions that, together with those taken into account by Hacker and Glock concerning the confusion between two different kinds of accusatives, apply to first, second, and third person attributions alike. We will focus on Wittgenstein’s rejection of the idea that it is always meaningful to ask about the duration of a mental state (PI §638-640 on intention, PI §llxi on ‘struck by’, PG §12 on understanding, Z §78 on hope, Z §286 on orders, etc.). Being descriptions distributions in space and time, it should be meaningful to ask about described event ‘when did it happen?’, ‘for how long did it happen?’, etc. Wittgenstein shows that these questions make no point when asked after some attributions of mental states.

PI 661: 'I remember having meant him. Am I remembering a process or state?- When did it begin, what was its course; etc.?'

PG 12: 'In order to get clearer about the grammar of the word "understand", let's ask: when do we understand a sentence? - When we've uttered the whole of it? Or while uttering it?'

Z 78. 'Is "I hope..." a description of a state of mind? A state of mind has duration. So "I have been hoping for the whole day" is such a description; but suppose I say to someone: "I hope you come"--what if he asks me "For how long have you been hoping that?" Is the answer "For as long as I've been saying so"? Supposing I had some answer or other to that question, would it not be quite irrelevant to the purpose of the words "I hope you'll come"?'

It seems quite straightforward that the reasons why an utterance of 'I understood the sentence at 12:00 sharp' is meaningless should apply to 'you understood the sentence at 12:00 sharp', and 'he understood the sentence at 12:00 sharp' as well.

4. Wittgenstein on the expression of other people's mental states

Perhaps the most challenging passage for the view here presented is the following one:

Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology vol I, §63: 'Psychological verbs characterized by the fact that the third person of the present is to be verified by observation, the first person not. Sentences in the third person of the present: information. In the first person present: expression. ((Not quite right.)) The first person of the present akin to an expression.'

Is it possible to refrain from the idea that Wittgenstein is establishing here a principled distinction between first and third-person mental state attributions? Isn't *observing* unavoidably linked to *description*? We don't think it is.

Wittgenstein does not deny the existence of mental states, and his position doesn't preclude the possibility of observing or describing them. We can train somebody to *observe* mental states, to 'put himself in a favorable position to receive certain impressions' (PI ix), and emit a certain sound when they struck him. This would still not be *describing* them. We can nevertheless describe somebody's mental state in the following way: 'he wasn't feeling great this morning, he wondered what was the purpose of getting up before he even opened his eyes, he looked at the coffee machine for 5 minutes before he finally made some coffee, all that while his kids were waiting for breakfast, worried that they were going to be late for school'. We are describing a mental state, and we get closer and closer as we provide more details on the situation. We might even reach the point where no word –'abulia', 'depression', or any other– could be used to express his situation (cfr. PI 588).

How can we be said to express, as opposed to describe, somebody else's mental states? The problem becomes apparent once we realize that Wittgenstein's story about how words about sensations are learned is not easily exported outside the realm of first-person attributions.

'This question is the same as: how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations?-of the word "pain" for example. Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour. (PI 244)

How can a human being learn to substitute 'natural expressions of sensations' by words? How can one "express" somebody else's fear? How can a third-person ascription "manifest" somebody else's expectations, beliefs, desires, etc.? How can I substitute with an expression of mine a third person's mental state's ascription, the expressive behavior that the ascriber would have undertaken, had she been in the appropriate circumstances?

An answer to these worries –compatible with the reach that Wittgenstein concedes to his considerations on the meaning of mental states attributions– could be developed along the following lines. When I make a second or third-person mental state ascription, I'm displaying the attitude of a *spoke-person*. I'm making it apparent that the ascriber is in a position in which it could have made perfect sense for her to express herself via the use of the corresponding first-person ascription. For a moment I become his mouthpiece, so to speak, with the purpose of conveying information about about the circumstances she is in to others (or herself). One of the crucial improvements introduced by the invention of language, Hobbes explained, is the ability to *personate* other peoples's desires and interests (cfr. *Leviathan* 16.1, cfr. Pettit 2008, 70 and ff.). I can, in this sense, *represent* other people's mental states without entertaining a *representation* (viz. a description) of them. This sense of 'representation' can be used to understand, for example, how is it that I can be said to express my neighbor's anger.

Like communication agencies, third person attribution of mental states is not necessarily constrained by *acceptance*. Agencies' formal statements are not usually written exactly as the companies, families or individuals, would have done them. That is one of the main reasons why these services are required. For a statement to represent my interests at a certain point, my explicit understanding or acceptance of it is not required. In the same vein, when we ascribe mental states to others, we do not necessarily have an obligation to use the words the ascriber would have used to manifest her situation.

It makes no sense, according to this view, to check the world in order to find the state of affairs that would make a mental state ascription true or false. Mental state ascriptions are not claims about how the world is. We learn to master these ascriptions when we are proficient in our grasp of the circumstances that would make such an ascription appropriate. It is not only to ourselves that we can give voice to by ascribing mental states, we can also act as a spoke-person for others, explaining the circumstances they found themselves in, and predicting their behavior. This can be cashed out in terms of *expressing* mental states, rather than *describing* them.

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