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Wittgenstein and Dostoevsky on Aesthetics and the ‘Inner’ Life

Abstract

Wittgenstein, with his Private Language Argument (*Philosophical Investigations*, §§243-315) is often accused of seeking to abolish ‘inner life’. However, reading it together with Wittgenstein’s remarks on perception and aesthetics in *Investigations*, Part II, iv and xi, reveals potential for a sophisticated account of discernment of other people’s intentions and ‘inner’ states. And his scattered references to Dostoevsky’s novels—which reflect the role of art in the refinement of perception—point towards an aesthetic-ethical account of emphatic perception.

Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Private Language Argument (PLA) in the *Philosophical Investigations* §§243-315, where he strives to show with numerous intertwining examples that there cannot be a private linguistic reference to purely ‘interior’ states in one’s body, even pain, has often been accused of abolishing ‘inner life’.¹ The overall focus on social practices of the *Philosophical Investigations* seems to imply a reductionist behaviorism that only takes into account externally visible public conventions of behavior to explain intentions and sensations. However, this common misunderstanding of the *Investigations* does not stand up to a close reading of the actual text. Furthermore, Wittgenstein’s scattered references to aesthetics and literature, such as to his life-long fascination with Dostoevsky, point towards potential for a sophisticated, aesthetic-ethical² account of the ‘inner life’ from within Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

Even though most of the core examples in the PLA deal with the impossibility of privately designating one’s own sensation without recourse to public language, other examples seamlessly address the perception of others’ ‘inner’ states. For instance, in §293 Wittgenstein compares the notion that interior states are comparable to ‘things’ that we can label with names

¹ Cf. e.g. Iris Murdoch’s criticism of Wittgenstein along these lines in “Nostalgia for the Particular”, p. 52.

² It is well known that Wittgenstein frequently addressed both ethics and aesthetics simultaneously. Cf. *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* 6.421; “Lecture on Ethics“, where speaks of ethics in “wider terms“ which generally “includes aesthetics“) p. 38; *PI* §77.

with the notion that each one of us possesses a box with something inside it, which we agree to call “a beetle.” Nobody can look into the other’s box and everybody assumes they can only know what a beetle is by looking in their own box. There is no way of proving that all really do have the same kind of object in their boxes, just like there is no way of proving that “pain” feels the same to everyone.

§293 concludes in the following manner: “Das heisst: Wenn man die Grammatik des Ausdrucks der Empfindung nach dem Muster von ‘Gegenstand und Bezeichnung’ konstruiert, dann fällt der Gegenstand als irrelevant aus der Betrachtung heraus.” I.e. one can refer to the other’s “beetle” without having seen it, just like one can inquire of, empathize with, and speak of the other’s pain without having felt it. This means that Wittgenstein does not mean to abolish inner life per se—it is only *if* we reified ‘interior’ sensations and took them to be ‘things’ we refer to, then these postulated interior objects would be irrelevant for our language. For we can, in fact, know that somebody is in pain without having unmediated access to their actual bodily sensations. Inquiring about their wellbeing, helping them etc. that is—all the practices surrounding the concept of “pain” in our life form are possible without having immediate access to this purported “object”. This shows that the “object” is irrelevant to the grammar of pain and that the facile representationalist notion of pain attribution is a good example of what Wittgenstein calls a “picture” that “held us captive” in §115.

Furthermore, in Part II of the *Investigations*, he asserts “The human body is the best picture of the human soul”.³ To apply this to PLA: when we say “I believe he is suffering”, we are not making hypotheses about an object hidden inside the suffering person’s body—namely “pain”—rather, we are quite capable of non-inferentially perceiving suffering by looking at them. However, this does not mean that the ‘inner life’ is reducible to behavior orchestrated around public conventions. By dissolving the notion that ‘interior’ states are a special class of ‘things’, which are somehow ‘inside’ us, richer conceptual resources are made available to address it.

Beside his relativisation of the ‘inner’/ ‘outer’ dichotomy, Wittgenstein also points towards a notion that perceiving others’ ‘inner life’ is a *capacity* that is not just straight-forwardly there, but that can be exercised well and improved upon. For instance, towards the closing of the *Investigations*, he asks whether there is “expert judgment about the genuineness of expressions of feeling”:

Gibt es über die Echtheit des Gefühlsausdrucks ein ‘fachmännisches’ Urteil? – Es gibt auch da Menschen mit ‘besserem’ und Menschen mit ‘schlechterem’ Urteil. [...] Kann man Menschenkenntnis lernen? Ja; Mancher kann sie lernen. Aber nicht durch einen Lehrkurs, sondern durch ‘Erfahrung’. – Kann ein Anderer dabei sein Lehrer sein? Gewiss. [...]⁴

³ Part II, iv, p. 178.

⁴ Part II, xi, p. 574f.

In continuing the discussion on “expert judgment of the genuineness of expressions of feeling”, he considers “a genuine look of love”. Here he introduces an aesthetic consideration:

“wäre ich ein höchst talentierter Maler, so wäre es denkbar, dass ich in Bildern den echten Blick und den geheuchelten darstellte”, and “frag dich: Wie lernt der Mensch einen ‘Blick’ für etwas kriegen?”⁵ It is suggested that a talented artist, a painter, would have developed “an eye” for subtle signs of hypocrisy, and would furthermore be able to express them in his art in a way communicable to others. Wittgenstein implicitly suggests a correlation between a talent in art and a capacity to perceive “imponderable [*unmögliche*] evidence [...] subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone.”⁶

In recurring remarks in private notebooks, Wittgenstein explicitly turns to literary art to answer the question how to represent ‘inner life’, such as an intention. He evokes Dostoevsky in this context:

Wie ist das: die Absicht haben, etwas zu tun? Was kann ich drauf antworten? Eine Art der Antwort wäre: das zu sagen, was /das zu sagen/das sagen, was ein Romanschriftsteller sagt, Dostoevsky etwa, // wäre: einen Romanschriftsteller ... reden zu lassen/zu zitieren /aufzuschlagen //wenn /wo/ er die Seelenzustände einer Person / eines Menschen /beschreibt/die/der/ eine bestimmte Absicht hat.⁷

Artists like painters or novelists provide one avenue of a sophisticated representation of intentions and other mental states (*Seelenzustände*), which goes beyond the kind of representationalism out to simply label ‘interior’ objects.

One of the early novels, the semi-autobiographical *Notes from a Dead House*, which Wittgenstein considered Dostoevsky’s greatest work,⁸ depicts life at a Siberian hard labor penal colony. Its main theme is the narrator’s shift in perception of his fellow inmates. With time, he is able to see ‘beneath’ “the revolting crust that covered them outside”, to see them as “good people, capable of thinking and feeling”.⁹ However, the novel never bluntly refers to the changes taking place ‘in’ the narrator’s head, nor does he locate the convicts’ worthiness by naming isolable thoughts and feelings the latter may have had. Rather, the changes become apparent by the narrating structure employed, by the manner subjectively felt temporality is extended in the beginning, and condensed later on, and by the manner in which he refers to his fellow convicts.

⁵ *PI*, Part II, xi, 576.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Nachlass*, [180b, 17r; 129, 135f; 228 § 284; 230 § 486] Qtd. in Biesenbach, p. 87. The series of references and the variation in formulation show that Wittgenstein re-typed this remark after jotting it down in his notebook and referred to it in several manuscripts.

⁸ Norman Malcolm and Georg Henrik von Wright, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: A Memoir*, p. 45.

⁹ P. 228

Dostoevsky's last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*—which Wittgenstein was “certifiably obsessed with”¹⁰—deals not only with perception and just representation of others’ ‘interiority’, but it self-reflectively considers the role of art in perception. Similarly to the closing of the later *Philosophical Investigations*, the novel furthermore depicts perception not as a brute physiological fact, but as a capacity subject to the will and the imagination, and capable of refinement. Wittgenstein was primarily impressed with one of the novel’s main protagonists, Father Zosima, especially by the monk’s extraordinary capacity to “look into others’ hearts”.¹¹ Drury recalls Wittgenstein telling him,

When I was a village schoolmaster in Austria after the war I read *The Brothers Karamazov* over and over again. I read it out loud to the village priest. *There really were people like Staretz Zosima, people who could look into others’ hearts [...]*.¹²

Father Zosima’s “fine discernment” is emphasized within the novel, as well:

[...] having taken into his soul so many confessions, sorrows, confidences, [Staretz Zosima] acquired in the end such fine discernment that he could tell, from the first glance at a visiting stranger’s face, what was in his mind, what he needed, and even what kind of suffering tormented his conscience; and he sometimes astonished, perplexed and almost frightened the visitor by this knowledge of his secret even before he had spoken a word.¹³

However, the novel does not reveal Staretz Zosima’s own ‘inner’ life. Rather, it focuses on Zosima’s disciple, Alyosha and his budding capacity for emphatic perception. Furthermore, Alyosha’s judgment of people and emphatic analysis of their circumstances is described in aesthetic categories. For instance, when he visits Lisa, a childhood friend with whom he “day-dreamed together and made up long stories between them”, he tells her about his encounter with the poor and proud Captain Snegirov, whom he tried to help by offering money:

Alyosha sat down at the table and began telling his story, but from the first words he lost all his embarrassment and, in turn, carried Lise away. He spoke under the influence of strong emotion and the recent extraordinary impression, and succeeded in telling it well and thoroughly.¹⁴

His story “carried Lise away”, evoking the effect of absorption in the artwork;¹⁵ it is mentioned that he “succeeded in telling it well”, a criterion not ordinarily applied to everyday conversations. It goes on that “Lise was greatly moved by his story. Alyosha managed to paint the image of

¹⁰ Cf. Klagge, *Wittgenstein in Exile* p. 136; furthermore, Dmitry Karamazov’s mysterious purse around the neck had allegedly inspired Wittgenstein’s beetle in the box example. Cf. “Fortune Smiles on Mitya” in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and Duncan Richter’s “Beetle in the box”, *Historical Dictionary of Wittgenstein’s Philosophy*, p. 34.

¹¹ Wittgenstein had reportedly read *The Brothers Karamazov* so often, that he knew large passages by heart, especially the speeches of Father Zosima. Cf. Ray Monk’s *The Duty of Genius*, 136.

¹² Cf. Rhee (ed.), *Recollections*, p. 79; emphasis added.

¹³ *BK* p. 29.

¹⁴ *BK P.* 214.

¹⁵ Denis Diderot—whose name recurs repeatedly throughout the novel, mostly in parodic contexts—stresses absorption in his aesthetic philosophy. For a discussion of Diderot’s notions of absorption and theatricality in relation to Wittgenstein’s aesthetics, cf. Fried, Michael. “Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday”.

“Ilyushechka” [Captain Snegirov’s son] for her with “ardent feeling.” Alyosha’s talent of describing people and circumstances is described with the *topos* of a painter and his image.

They discuss why the poor Captain did not accept the two hundred roubles Alyosha wanted to give him and discussed what words he should use to convince the proud man to take it without losing his face. Lise asks, in a manner revealing her utter absorption in Alyosha’s story,

Listen, Alexei Fyodorovich, isn’t there something in all this reasoning of ours, I mean, of yours...no, better, of ours...isn’t there some contempt for him, for this wretched man...that we are examining his soul like this, as if we were looking down on him? That we have decided so certainly, now, that he will accept the money?¹⁶

Alyosha, very seriously, denies that there is any contempt in him for Snegirov, that he in fact considers himself pettier than the Captain. Because he does not consider himself better than Captain Snegirov, he is not expressing contempt of him. Alyosha quotes Father Zosima that “most people need to be looked after like children, and some like the sick in hospitals”. Alyosha, while embracing this task wholeheartedly, however adds that he does not feel quite ready, “sometimes I am very impatient, and sometimes I don’t see things”¹⁷, suggesting that the very way one “sees things” is part of an attitude that expresses either contempt or active love, patience and the readiness to “look after people.” His manner of expression reveals that he considers his own perception of others a capacity he could improve on, because he attributes his momentary inability to “see things” to his impatience. It reveals that he considers the aesthetics of his narrative to have ethical implications—it might turn out to be contemptful of the object of his narration.

In conclusion, by denying that there can be a private language about ‘interior’ states, Wittgenstein does not therefore abolish ‘inner life’. Rather, he seeks to subvert a simplified picture of the mind, according to which ‘interior’ states are reified. He recommends turning to artists and novelist for a finer discernment and expression of ‘inner life’, especially to Dostoevsky. The refinement of discernment in the perception of others is a prominent motif in the latter’s work, which often serves as a structuring principle of narrative. Furthermore, Dostoevsky’s novels themselves reflect the role of art in the refinement of perception and the ethical implications of aesthetic objectification. In Alyosha’s case, his literary talent to “paint” absorbing “images” of other people with his words is shown as an ethical matter, i.e. as potentially expressing contempt or active love.

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¹⁶ BK, P. 217.

¹⁷ P. 217 in “The Betrothal”.

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