

Feelings and the Ascription of Feelings

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A small child runs and falls and hurts himself; he begins to cry. One of the many virtues of David Finkelstein's *Expression and the Inner* [Finkelstein (2003)]¹ is that it encourages us to start here if we wish eventually to understand how the things we think and say about ourselves are related to the states we are in when we think or say them.

To really start here let us imagine a child so young he cannot say anything about how things are with him. He cannot *say* 'I am in pain' or even 'It hurts'. But it does hurt, and he feels it; he is aware of the pain. That is the state he is in. *We* know he is in that state; that is what he expresses in crying as he does. But he does not think of himself as in pain. He does not know he is in pain. He is aware of the pain, but he is not aware that he is in pain. He does not ascribe a feeling of pain to himself.

A slightly older child who has developed some linguistic and recognitional capacities might be very good with her colours. Hold an object of a certain basic colour up in front of her, and she immediately and confidently tells you what colour it is. If she says of a presented object 'That's red', and we are sure she understands what she is saying, we can say that the child believes or knows that the object is red. But the child herself at that stage might not be able to say or understand such things about herself. She does know that the object is red; that is what she has learned from her training with the colour words. She expresses that state of mind in saying 'That's red', but she doesn't know she is in that state of mind. *We* know something about the child's state of mind that the child herself does not know.

This child will learn to ascribe such attitudes to herself and to others by coming to understand herself and others as saying things like 'That is red' in the presence of objects she can see. She will see that other speakers are right, or wrong, in what they say, so she will make sense of them as knowing or believing things about the colours of the objects. And she will be able to say the same kind of thing about herself. She will understand sentences in which either her own name or personal pronoun or the name or pronoun of another person can be put in the blank space in sentences like 'So-and-so knows that

that object is red'. She thereby learns to ascribe such knowledge or belief to others and to herself simultaneously (roughly speaking). It is part of one and the same predicational capacity.

Once she has acquired that predicational capacity, she can ascribe to herself knowledge of the colour of an object as soon as she has determined what colour that object is. No further investigation is needed. No 'justification' or 'ground' or 'basis' for ascribing that state of mind to herself is called for beyond her having seen what colour the object in front of her is. A competent self-ascriber can therefore know what she knows or believes without having to gaze into a special 'inner' or 'private' repository where her beliefs and other attitudes are thought to reside. In this simple case, she has only to look at an object and see and thereby know what colour it is. With more complicated questions it is not that easy. But even when complex thought and elaborate investigation are called for, a person's coming to know or believe what she does is something she is responsible for in the sense that it is the outcome of her own active reflection and deliberation. That is what puts her in a position to ascribe that knowledge or belief to herself.

All this is true of knowledge and belief and other so-called propositional attitudes. But with feelings and sensations and other such reactions it seems different. One seems to be only on the receiving end of such states of mind. Certain feelings and sensations simply come to us; one simply *finds* oneself with them. They are not the products of our deliberation or agency; we are not responsible for their presence even as we can be said to be responsible for our knowing or believing what we do. With feelings and sensations, it is much more as if we are simply a receptacle or a site for something that comes or goes independently of our wishes and of whatever linguistic or conceptual competences we happen to have mastered.

The child I imagined at the beginning was in pain even though he lacked the ability to say he is in pain. When he learns to ascribe pains to himself, the state he ascribes to himself is the kind of state we knew he was in before he could say that he was. We can see and hear him crying, and he can come to see and hear other people crying or expressing their states of mind in other ways. That will be part of his learning to ascribe such states to others, and so part of his learning to ascribe them to himself. He must understand that what he thereby ascribes to himself is the same kind of state that he can also ascribe to others – and vice versa. Like the child who knows the colours of things, he learns self-ascription and other-ascription of certain states of mind simultaneously. He comes to understand sentences in which either his own name or personal pronoun or someone else's name or pronoun can appear linked together with one and the same psychological predicate to ascribe feelings and sensations to someone.

The child who is good with her colours knows that an object is red as soon as she sees it. The presence of a red object in plain view is all it takes. The child who learns to ascribe feelings of pain to himself learns to ascribe to himself the kind of state we know he was in before he could say that he is in it. He was aware of the pain even then; he felt it. Once he has the capacity to ascribe such states to himself, his being in such a state is all it takes for him to ascribe that state of mind to himself. That is what he learns from his training with the predicate 'is in pain'. If he learns his lessons well, and so is a competent self-ascriber of pains and other such states, I think he can be said to know that he is in pain when he says he is in pain.

This is something some people appear to have denied: Wittgenstein, perhaps. I think there is no reason to deny it, when it is properly understood. The question is how this knowing is to be properly understood. I think it is a matter of what a competent self-ascriber can be said to be competent in doing, and of what he can be said to know in exercising that competence.

Think of the first-personal pronoun 'I' or the first-person singular inflection of a verb. I believe an experienced, competent user of the first-person pronoun knows who he is talking about when he uses it. He knows he is talking about himself, and he knows he is distinguishing that person from someone else when he says 'I went to Philadelphia last year, but you didn't'. But he does not pick out the person he thinks went to Philadelphia by recognizing some distinctive feature or criterion on the basis of which he identifies that person and then applies that predicate to him. If he knows he is talking about himself, as I think he does, that is not the way he knows it. The fact is that he cannot fail to be talking about himself when he says 'I'. No speaker can fail in that way, and that is something I think any speaker competent with the first person could be expected to know, whatever he might happen to believe to be true about himself. So I think there is no good reason to deny that a speaker competent with 'I' refers to himself, and knows he is referring to himself, when he uses that pronoun. This too is something that has been denied, perhaps by Wittgenstein, but certainly by Elizabeth Anscombe [Anscombe (1975)].

When we come to the capacity for self-predication – saying of myself 'I am in pain' – I think knowledge of the truth of what is said is also part of competent self-ascription. Wittgenstein says that when I say 'I am in pain' I do not "identify my sensation by means of criteria" [Wittgenstein (1953)].² The child who knows the colour of an object she sees does not identify the colour of that object by means of criteria either. She just knowingly says 'That's red'. Wittgenstein says that a person's use of the expression 'I am in pain' is where "the language-game" "begins". The "language-game" he is talking about is the practice or "language-game with the words 'I am in pain'" [§300]. In §290 someone protests, "But doesn't [the language-game] begin with the sensation – which I describe?" [§290]. The young child who falls and hurts himself certainly has a sensation, but since he cannot speak that is

not the beginning of any language-game in which that child has a speaking part. So we can say No, the language-game does not begin with a sensation, but with the use of some linguistic expressions.

What then can the person who says 'I am in pain' be understood to be doing? Wittgenstein wants to resist the idea that he is identifying an object and saying something about it. He raises doubts about whether the speaker can be said to be *describing* his sensation. But the protester insists that, whether or not 'describe' is the right word for the relation between the words and the sensation, "there is a *something* there all the same, which accompanies my cry of pain" [§296], or something that is said to be there by what I say when I say 'I am in pain' or 'I have a pain'. "You will surely admit", the protester goes on, "that there is a difference between pain-behaviour with pain and pain-behaviour without pain" [§304]. "Admit it?", Wittgenstein predictably says, "What greater difference could there be?" [§304].

Here we come to passages from Wittgenstein that Finkelstein discusses carefully and helpfully. I will take up some of these remarks with a slightly different purpose, and so in a different order. Finkelstein is primarily concerned with John McDowell's interpretation of these passages, and I agree with him completely in rejecting McDowell's earlier idea that a sensation must be understood as "something that is not present prior to or independently of its being brought under a concept" [p. 131]. I have already rejected that idea in my story of the child who has a sensation and cries out in pain even before he can speak or apply any concepts to it.

What can we make of Wittgenstein's reply to the protester's complaint "And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*"? Wittgenstein says:

Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either!

The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing can be said. We've only rejected the grammar which tends to force itself on us here [§304].

Why does the protester think Wittgenstein reaches the absurd conclusion that "the sensation itself is a *nothing*"? That is one question. And what is "the grammar" that Wittgenstein thinks "tends to force itself on us here"? These two questions are answered, I believe, in §293. Imagine that everyone has a box with something in it that they all call a 'beetle', and no one can ever look into anyone else's box. If the word 'beetle' has a general use in that community, then even if everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his own beetle, the word 'beetle' would not be the name of a kind of thing. As Wittgenstein says, it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box, or even for the thing in a particular box

to keep changing, or for a box to be empty. So, as Wittgenstein says, “the thing in the box doesn’t belong to the language-game at all”. If there is something in each person’s box, it does not belong to the language-game “even as a *something*” [§293].

That is to say, if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of ‘object and name’, the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant [§293].

The only object that need be involved when someone says ‘I am in pain’ or ‘I have a pain’ is the person who says it. He says something about himself, but not by naming an object he has or thinks he has. He predicates something of himself. The established general use of the word ‘beetle’ as described in §293 shows that when someone in that community says ‘I have a beetle’, or ‘I have brought my beetle with me to the party’, the person is not naming an object in his box. His box might be empty. He is predicating something of himself: that he has a beetle, or that he has brought his beetle to the party. He speaks of his beetle in the way we might speak of our ‘earthly possessions’ or our ‘assets’ or ‘the contents’ of a box. The words ‘possessions’, ‘assets’, ‘contents’, and so on are not names of objects, or particular kinds of objects, or particular collections of objects. They are ways of speaking of something that everyone has, whatever his possessions or the contents of his box happen to be.

If we resist the grammatical model of ‘object and name’, and take this description of the use of the term ‘beetle’ as the appropriate grammatical parallel for remarks like ‘I am in pain’ or ‘I have a pain’, then those remarks too are best understood as my predicating something of myself, ascribing a certain state to myself, and not naming an object, especially not a so-called ‘inner’ object. What I am talking about when I say I am in pain is in that way “not a *something*”, if that means an identifiable object of a certain kind. When I say ‘I feel ill’, for instance, I ascribe a certain state to myself, but I do not name or refer to any object or entity (except myself). I am saying that I am in a certain state, when my being in that state is all it takes for me, as a competent ascriber of such states, to be right in saying I am in that state. What I say is correct, but I need not be acquainted with or reporting on the presence of some object.

To say that what I am talking about when I ascribe a sensation to myself or say how I feel is “not a *something*” is of course not to say it is “a *nothing*”. That would suggest, as the protester complains, that there is no difference between having a certain sensation or feeling a certain way and not having it, or not feeling that way. Saying it is “not a *something*” does not deny that obvious difference. What is said of someone said to be in pain is the denial of what is said of someone said not to be in pain. No difference could be greater. And what is true of the people described in §293 – that each

of them has a beetle – is not something that is true of any of us. None of us has a beetle in the sense in which each of them has one. But what all those people have and each of us lacks is “not a *something*” – a thing of a particular kind. The difference between us is that a predicate that is true of every one of them is not true of any of us.

Finkelstein’s book is distinctive in “paying the right sort of attention to what Wittgenstein has to say about expression and the expressive dimension of mental state self-ascriptions” [p. 148]. He thinks one important outcome of taking that dimension seriously is that “one does not retain a desire to accommodate the idea that whenever one describes one’s own state of mind, one is epistemically justified” [p. 136]. He does not think that when someone honestly avows a headache, for instance, “she is, typically, expressing an epistemically justified belief”. “When someone complains of a splitting headache, she does not judge on this or that basis that she is in pain” [p. 135]. In fact, he says in a footnote on the same page, “She does not *judge* at all”. “Rather, she expresses her pain” [p. 135].

I think someone who says ‘I have got a splitting headache’ is certainly expressing her pain. But she does so not by holding her head or moaning, but by uttering an articulate sentence whose structure and meaning she understands and which is either true or false. She asserts that sentence, or puts it forward as true. That is what she learned to do when she learned to ascribe mental states to herself rather than simply expressing them non-linguistically. Her saying that she has a splitting headache is not to be understood as a “mere effect” of her being in that state of mind or feeling, as a wince or a moan might be. The person says what she says knowingly and intentionally, and she knows what she is doing. That is a much more elaborate way of expressing something than simply wincing or moaning. But if the person asserts that she has a headache, can it be said that she does not judge at all?

Finkelstein rightly draws attention to the importance of what Wittgenstein calls a “plan for the treatment of psychological concepts”. As Wittgenstein describes that ‘plan’ in what is published as *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* volume 2 it says:

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)) [Wittgenstein (1988), §63, p. 12].

Why is it not quite right? Wittgenstein does not say, at least not as the plan is published there. That same plan, and apparently that same passage, as published in Wittgenstein’s *Zettel*, has another sentence following the ‘((Not

quite right))'. It says "The first person of the present akin to an expression" [Wittgenstein (1967), §472, p. 84].

This is an important addition. Use of the first person present tense of a psychological verb is 'akin' to an expression in being an expression and also more than an expression. That is what was not quite right. Saying 'I am in pain' is an expression of pain made by a competent speaker who knows how to say of herself that she is in pain. Such a speaker knows how to say the correct thing about herself on the appropriate occasion while understanding what she is saying. She does not use the words 'I am in pain' wrongly or incorrectly. She knows how to get it right. If she did not have that capacity, she would not have the competence to ascribe pains to herself as she does.

Finkelstein imagines a man who has a sharp pain in his knee and who infers on the basis of other reliable information that he is therefore likely to get a certain disease. The man would not draw that conclusion about himself if he did not have the pain, but Finkelstein thinks the man can be justified in believing that he is likely to get the disease even though he is not justified in making the statement that it appears to rest on, viz., that he has a pain in his knee. That is because the man who says 'I have a pain' does so "without epistemic justification but not without right" [p. 149]. To say he does it "not without right" is to say he does not "base" his self-ascription of pain on anything; there is nothing that is his "epistemic justification" or his "ground" or "basis" for saying what he says. In that sense Finkelstein thinks we can reject "the idea that self-ascriptions of pain are, as a rule, epistemically justified" [p. 148].

In rejecting that idea of epistemic justification while nonetheless holding that the man ascribes pain to himself "not without right", Finkelstein apparently wants to allow that the person is "so to speak, entitled", to ascribe pain to himself [p. 150]. That is not to say that there is something that "entitles" the person to say or think what he does. There is nothing that serves as the "basis" or "ground" of his entitlement. But the man is said to be "entitled" to say what he says even though he is not "epistemically justified" in saying or thinking it.

I end with some questions about this. I wonder about the sense in which a fully competent self-ascriber of mental states can be said to be "entitled" to ascribe those states to himself as he does. Is his being *entitled* something more than his being fully competent in ascribing the states correctly? Is it more than his simply knowing how to do it, and doing it right? Not doing it 'with right' or 'justifiably', in the sense of something like legitimacy or warrant, but simply doing it right or correctly. If he is fully competent in saying he is in pain when he is in pain, then when he says it (if he is honest), he is right. For the most part, what he says is true. Is there a further question whether he is entitled to say it?

Is the child who cries *entitled* to cry as he does? If he is too young, and cannot *say* he is in pain, is he nonetheless *entitled* to say he is in pain, even if he can't yet say it? Or is he entitled only when he at least has the competence necessary for saying he is in pain? In gaining that competence does he thereby gain some entitlement that he didn't have before, or does he just gain the competence?

I have been talking about beliefs and knowledge and sensations and feelings. There is also self-ascription of actions and intentions. Suppose someone is looking for a book he was reading yesterday. He knows that is what he is doing. He is doing it intentionally. He can say to himself or others that that is what he is doing. Is that something he is *entitled* to say or think about what he is doing? Does putting it that way help us understand how he knows what he is doing? It looks as if he knows that he is looking for the book because that is what he is intentionally doing. In the case of sensations is it not enough to say that we learn to ascribe them to ourselves by coming to understand what is said in ascriptions of feelings and sensations to people, and then intentionally saying such things about ourselves only when they are true (if we are honest).

Finkelstein imagines three different possible responses to the man who has a pain in his knee and is thereby justified in believing that he is likely to get a certain disease. The first is to say that it is "unnatural" or "misleading" or even "sheer nonsense" to say the man knows (or does not know) that he has a pain in his knee. The second is to say that the man's ascription of pain to himself "is not epistemically justified; he doesn't *know* that he's in pain". The third is to say the man "*does* know he's in pain; we *can* say this about him" [p. 151]. Given these three alternatives, I would go along with this third response. But Finkelstein elaborates it by adding: "The mistake is to think that knowledge always requires epistemic justification". I agree that there are certain 'grounds' or 'bases' or 'justifications' the man does *not* have. But I think that in saying that he knows he is in pain we need to understand the kind of knowledge in question better than we now do.

Finkelstein says philosophers who differ in these ways about whether the man can be said to know he is in pain need not be disagreeing about anything of genuine philosophical import. I am not so sure about that. I think anyone who is inclined towards the third response, as I am, can make good on that choice, philosophically and not just as something it is all right to *say*, only if more can be said about the kind of knowledge we have of ourselves and our states and our actions and intentions, and about what it takes for us to have that kind of knowledge. I think what is involved is a kind of knowledge of what we think and feel and what we are doing that we must have if we are to have any of the other more mundane, straightforwardly propositional knowledge that many philosophers appear to think is the only knowledge we have. If that is right, then the third response to the man who recognizes that

he is in pain is the one to explore and to try to understand. Those who are inclined to one or the other of the first two responses would then have to be missing something. And that would be a matter of genuine philosophical import.

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NOTES

- ¹ Page numbers alone in square brackets in the text refer to this volume.
- ² Section numbers alone in square brackets in the text refer to this volume.

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RESUMEN

Adscribirse sensaciones a uno mismo incluye posesión de capacidad predicativa, que está incluida también en la adscripción de sensaciones a los demás. Aunque "Tengo dolor" es especial en que se trata del dolor que uno mismo tiene, pienso que los hablantes competentes pueden saber que tales enunciados son verdaderos, incluso si no tienen "justificación epistémica para afirmarlos", en el sentido de Finkelstein. Pienso que necesitamos una mejor comprensión de ese género de conocimiento.

PALABRAS CLAVE: auto-adscripción de sensaciones, Wittgenstein, Finkelstein, autoridad de primera persona.

ABSTRACT

Ascribing feelings to oneself involves the predicational capacity also involved in ascribing feelings to others. Although 'I am in pain' is special in that it is an expression of one's pain, I think competent speakers can know such statements to be true, even if they are not, in Finkelstein's sense, "epistemically justified in affirming" them. I think we need a better understanding of that kind of knowledge.

KEYWORDS: Auto-Ascription of Feelings, Wittgenstein, Finkelstein, First-Person Authority.

MUSIC, ART, & METAPHYSICS

Essays in Philosophical Aesthetics



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