

PEACOCKE ON WITTGENSTEIN AND EXPERIENCE

BY PHILIPPA FOOT

In his Critical Study "Wittgenstein and Experience" (*Philosophical Quarterly* for April 1982) Christopher Peacocke discusses three topics in the *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*: firstly what he calls Wittgenstein's "non-designative, expressive theory of sensation and other concepts"; secondly the distinction Wittgenstein draws between states of consciousness (*Erfahrungen*) and such things as knowledge, understanding, intention and belief; and thirdly Wittgenstein's account of the imagination. He believes that Wittgenstein's non-designative theory made it difficult for him to distinguish states of consciousness from "dispositional psychological states" and also more difficult to solve certain problems about images.

As many readers will know Peacocke himself has idiosyncratic and interesting views on topics such as *experience* and *imagination*, and I hope later to discuss these with him in print. But for the moment I want to confine myself to raising doubts about his interpretation of Wittgenstein. In places it seems to me misleading and in places definitely wrong.

Most of the trouble can, I believe, be located in thoughts Peacocke has about "the non-designative, expressive" theory of *pain* and other concepts; so I must begin by explaining how I myself understand this part of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. In what sense, if any, does he hold that the language in which we speak of pains and other sensations, of beliefs, intentions, understanding, etc. is "non-designative" and "expressive"? What, for instance, might we mean by saying this of Wittgenstein on pain?

That Wittgenstein thinks it wrong to construe 'pain' as a name designating an object is certainly true in some sense of the words 'designating an object'. For he explicitly says in *Philosophical Investigations* 293 that its grammar is not to be construed "on the model of object and designation" (*Gegenstand und Bezeichnung*) in the famous passage about the "beetle in the box", where he insists that 'pain' is not the name of a private object which each person knows only in his own case.

The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as *something*: for the box might even be empty. — No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.

That is to say: if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and designation' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.

What Wittgenstein is denying here is that the meaning of the word 'pain' is determined even in part by a connexion set up by private ostensive definition between the word and something it stands for, as the word 'red' is connected, but publicly, with red things. To construe the language of pain on this model of object and designation is to construe it as being like e.g. the language of colours in a way that it is not.

If it is right to speak of Wittgenstein as giving a non-designative account of pain-language, is it also right to say that he sees this language as "expressive"? Again it clearly is right if we understand the word in a certain way. It is clear to begin with that he thinks it important that 'I am in pain' may in some contexts serve the very same function as a cry, being as little a *report* on what we feel as the cry is. (He makes this point explicit in connexion with the language that serves to express fear, and also belief.) But this is not how we should understand the thesis that this language is expressive; or rather that it is akin to expression, since in *Zettel* 472 he says

Psychological verbs . . . 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.

We must ask, therefore, in what way Wittgenstein thought that 'I am in pain' is *akin to*, say, a cry or a groan. (The word Wittgenstein used was '*verwandt*'.) Two points seem to be involved. The first is that it is by its connexion with the natural expressions of pain that the word 'pain' has a determinate use. It is when others cry, groan, wince etc. that we say they are in pain; and we learn to say 'I am in pain' or 'It hurts' when we ourselves do such things, though of course this is different because the behaviour is not *evidence* for us in our own case. So we learn the first person present tense of the verb to be in pain much as we learn to say 'ow!', and it is by its *connexion* with one kind of natural expression rather than another that a particular sensation word is the name of a particular sensation. But Wittgenstein is making a second point, which is that saying the words 'I am in pain' is itself a piece of pain behaviour, with the same status vis à vis the sensation as a cry or a groan, so that it is no more possible to separate one than the other from the pain itself, except on the postulate of special circumstances such as pretence or inhibition. It is in this way that the words 'I am in pain' replace crying, as Wittgenstein says that they do, and in such ways – having to do with their grammar – that the two are *akin*.

Thus it seems right, if one is careful, to say that the first person present tense use of pain-language is expressive, as it is right to say that the word 'pain' is "non-designative". It is another matter, however, to agree with Peacocke that in Wittgenstein's opinion "First-person present-tense psychological utterances are not descriptive at all: they should be understood solely as expressive." (Op. cit. p. 162). For this suggests a view about the function or point of saying 'I am in pain': that the words serve to give expression to what we feel, rather than describing it. And Wittgenstein seems to think that this – what we do with the words – is, as I have already suggested, a matter of the *context* in which they are uttered. He has no objection to speaking of *describing* one's sensations, images or state of mind, and he says that even a cry which is "too primitive" to be called a description may nevertheless serve as one. (*Philosophical Investigations* Part II p. 189). As a cry may be a complaint but is not always a complaint, so 'I am in pain' may be a description of one's sensations but is not always this. (Wittgenstein speaks here about the words 'I am afraid' but the same seems to hold good for 'I am in pain'.) The opposition 'designative/non-designative' is therefore quite different from the opposition 'descriptive/non-descriptive'. On account of its first-person present-tense use the word 'pain' is non-designative; but not even the first person present of the verb to be in pain always functions non-descriptively.

It seems, therefore, that Peacocke's description of Wittgenstein's views about *pain* and other psychological concepts is not quite accurate. But what is much more

important is that he seems to commit himself to a strange interpretation of these views when he tries to show that they created problems for Wittgenstein when it came to giving an account of imagination and of the distinction between *Erfahrungen* and "dispositional" psychological states. He suggests, for instance, that it would be hard for Wittgenstein to give an account of the phenomenon of someone's trying to imagine a face or a tune and not succeeding, and he attributes the supposed difficulty to "the non-designative theory". "It seems probable that Wittgenstein's non-designative theory is one source of his acceptance of a theory which has these problems: for one cannot believe in a process/product distinction here if one holds that *expressions purportedly designating the product do not really designate anything*' (Op. cit. p. 169. My italics). But surely Peacocke is mistaken. For in the sense relevant here Wittgenstein did not deny that "expressions purportedly designating the product" really designate anything. He had no reason to deny that expressions such as 'the image I have just formed' or 'the image I have now' are genuine referring expressions which succeed in referring on occasions when one *has* an image. About the difference between product and process (trying to form an image and the image one has formed), he would presumably make various "grammatical" remarks, as e.g. that processes take time for their accomplishment and can have stages, while products do not. Designation *as in the "model of object and designation"*, which Wittgenstein does of course deny for the language of images as for the language of sensations, would not be in the least helpful here.

The impression one gets, extraordinary as it may seem, is that Peacocke thinks that on Wittgenstein's theory the having of a pain or an image are not "real events". In a passage in which he appears to be contrasting his own opinions with those of Wittgenstein he says that on his own theory "pains can be real events and stand in causal relations to other events, and states" (Op. cit. p. 164). But Wittgenstein insists that he is not denying the reality of sensations:-

"And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*." - 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 could be said. We have only rejected the grammar which tries to force itself on us here.
(*Philosophical Investigations* 304)

Nor does Wittgenstein have any reason to deny that pains, images and so on can enter into casual relations. Obviously we speak of such causal links when we say e.g. that a sudden pain caused us to turn pale, or to forget what we were saying. The "model of object and designation" is not needed for this. Whether the same misinterpretation of Wittgenstein, or a different one, is operating in the section of his paper in which Peacocke tries to show that the non-designative account of 'psychological' language makes it especially difficult for him to solve the (admittedly difficult) problem of the distinction to be drawn between states of consciousness and e.g. understanding, belief, and intention I am not quite sure. The passage is so mysterious that I shall do my best to quote it in full and to offer a small prize to any reader who can sort it out. On p. 166 of "Wittgenstein and Experience" we find the following paragraph:-

Wittgenstein is vividly aware of a distinction between those psychological states which are dispositional (knowledge, understanding, intention) and

those which are states of consciousness or "undergoings" (which is the translation Anscombe gives, with apologies, to 'Erfahrung'). "Undergoings" have duration and a course: they may run on uniformly or non-uniformly. They have intensity. They are not characters of thought. Images are undergoings. A sub-class of 'undergoings' are 'impressions'" (*Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* vol. I 836). But there is a special problem for Wittgenstein in explaining the distinction. For expressive behaviour and distinctive non-inferential first-person utterances are associated with both dispositions and other states of consciousness. An utterance of 'London is the capital' is expressive of belief in as good (if not a better) sense as that in which an utterance of 'It looks red to me' or discriminative and sorting behaviour is expressive of the character of one's experience. Yet expression was supposed to be essential in the non-designative account of experiential vocabulary: so what does differentiate states of consciousness from dispositions?

Peacocke is of course right in saying that the verb 'to believe' is in Wittgenstein's sense a psychological verb, and that an assertion is a piece of linguistic behaviour expressive of belief as 'I am in pain' is expressively related to a sensation and 'It looks red to me' to a visual experience. The distinction between *Erfahrungen* and such things as understanding, intention and belief falls within the class of the psychological. So why should the fact that "expression was supposed to be essential in the non-descriptive account of experiential vocabulary" and also of the account of e.g. belief indicate a special difficulty in distinguishing the two? It almost seems as if Peacocke must have imagined himself in the position of one who, wrongly, expected the distinction to be in terms of "expression" and then himself slipped into thinking of the difficulty such a one would encounter as if it were real. *How* the idea of expression could have been thought to help with the distinction is never made clear.

One final comment: which has to do both with Peacocke's discussion of Wittgenstein's view in "Wittgenstein and Experience" and also with his earlier article called "Rule-Following: the Nature of Wittgenstein's Arguments" (in *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule*, ed. C. Leich and S. Holtzman, London, 1981). The discussion is about the relationship between Wittgenstein's non-designative view of psychological language and his anti-private-language arguments. On my interpretation of "non-designation", which makes the beetle in the box passage (in which "the model of object and designation" is introduced) crucial for its explanation, the two are of course very closely related. For in *Philosophical Investigations* 293 Wittgenstein is telling us that we fail if we try to speak of a private object of which 'pain' is the name. And by emphasising the tie-up between pain-language and the natural expressions of pain he is showing us how we can get on without private meaning, while still keeping the "inner" nature of sensations. In this way the denial of "designation" and the invocation of "expression" is essential if the case of sensations is not to show the necessity of private language in spite of the arguments brought against it in earlier sections on the publicity of following a rule. Peacocke, on the other hand, believes that the private language argument can be maintained without any commitment to treating 'experiential vocabulary' as "non-designative" ("Wittgenstein and Experience" p. 168). He refers at this point to the earlier article where he has defended this claim. But unfortunately this earlier argument cannot be taken seriously. For there Peacocke gave a reconstruction of Wittgenstein's argument for the thesis that "the grammar of 'pain' is not to be construed on the model

of object and designation", and concluded from it that the anti-private language argument does not commit Wittgenstein to the non-designative view. And this reconstruction depended on the attribution to Wittgenstein of the "premise" (Peacocke's premise (6) op. cit. p. 79) which says that 'For any state such that others can know that the subject is in that state, the subject can be in error about that state'. But as he himself admits a few pages later (p. 82), "To assert (6) is to rule out the correctness of a combination of views according to which others can understand and know the statement that I am in pain, while also I cannot be in error about my being in pain." He does not draw the conclusion that as this is a combination of view that Wittgenstein holds, the attribution to him of premise (6), which not surprisingly Peacocke never finds "explicitly" formulated, is dubious to say the least. Peacocke says that the premise is needed if the non-designative claim is to go through, and that "it is a consequence of several of [Wittgenstein's] statements taken together" (Op. cit. p. 81). But this last statement turns out to be based on a quite faulty reading of section 288 of *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein says there "... if I assume the abrogation of the normal language-game with the expression of a sensation, I need a criterion of identity for the sensation; and then the possibility of error also exists". This, says Peacocke, "gives us the conditional that if there is a criterion of identity, there is the possibility of error." But of course what Wittgenstein must mean is that we do not *need* a criterion of identity to tell us whether this that we have is a pain, or whether what we have is the same as what someone else would call a pain. We have been taught to use 'I am in pain' or 'it hurts' in certain behavioural contexts, and having learned the language we go on *using the words* without there being any place in what we are doing for such things as evidence or doubt. If, however, we now think this language game away we are left with a *different* use of the language of sensations. And *then* we should worry about criteria of identity for sensations, and might suppose that we might be in error in thinking that what we had was really a pain. As to the supposed fact that without premise (6) the "non-designative claim" does not go through: if this seemed to him to be the case Peacocke might have suspected a misinterpretation of Wittgenstein somewhere along the line.

*The University of California at Los Angeles
and Somerville College, Oxford.*

Copyright of Philosophical Quarterly is the property of Blackwell Publishing Limited and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.