Exposing the conjuring trick: Wittgenstein on subjectivity

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Abstract. Since the publication of the Philosophical Investigations in 1953, Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of mind has been the subject of numerous books and articles. Although most commentators agree that Wittgenstein was neither a behaviorist nor a Cartesian dualist, many continue to ascribe to him a position that strongly resembles one of the alternatives. In contrast, this paper argues that Wittgenstein was strongly opposed to behaviorism and Cartesianism, and that he was concerned to show that these positions implicitly share a problematic assumption. This assumption is a seemingly innocent idea that subjectivity, or mind, is some kind of object or thing. The paper provides a detailed survey of Wittgenstein’s critique of Cartesianism and behaviorism, as well as an outline of Wittgenstein’s alternative account of subjectivity.

Key words: behaviorism, Cartesianism, Heidegger, subjectivity, Wittgenstein

Introduction

Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of mind has been the subject of many books and articles since the publication of the Philosophical Investigations in 1953. Despite the efforts of many excellent commentators, however, there still is nothing resembling a consensus on what Wittgenstein’s position is. To be sure, most commentators by now agree that Wittgenstein is opposed to both Cartesianism and behaviorism, that, indeed, it is central to his philosophy of mind to overcome these alternatives. But at the same time, there is substantial disagreement regarding what Wittgenstein’s own positive contribution amounts to.

One very fundamental point of disagreement thus revolves around the way Wittgenstein’s philosophy of mind is actually to be placed in relation to the positions of Cartesianism and behaviorism. While (more or less) everyone rejects the labels of Cartesianism and behaviorism as applied to Wittgenstein, there seems to be significant differences as to what these positions, and Wittgenstein’s alternative, actually involve. For instance, one interpretation holds that Wittgenstein is not at all critical of the notion of an “inner world, populated by definite states and processes” (McDowell 1989, p. 644), thus making it rather difficult to see exactly where, if at all, Wittgenstein parts with Cartesianism. The notion that there are two realms or worlds – an “inner” and an “outer” – is surely the essence of what we usually understand by Cartesian dualism?
On the other hand, it has recently been claimed that if “behavior” is “defined in terms of physical movements or singular and dateable occurrences”, then Wittgenstein is no behaviorist (Glendinning 1998, p. 10). But still, it is claimed, “in response to a philosopher who attempts to ‘thicken’ mere behavior by reference to the presence ‘in’ or ‘behind’ it of a self-present subject”, Wittgenstein will reply that this subject is a mere fiction (Glendinning 1998, pp. 10, 150). Now, some behaviorists would presumably agree with the rejection of mere “physical movement” as all there is to mental states – this being more of a primitive (perhaps roughly Hobbesian) form of materialism rather than the kind of behaviorism they would subscribe to. And the rejection as merely fictional of the idea of some subjectivity “in” or “behind” behavior (or dispositions to behavior) seems to be characteristic of ontological behaviorism. In other words, it is not at all clear that this interpretation does not after all commit Wittgenstein to some (even quite strong) version of behaviorism. Similarly, if according to Wittgenstein, “mental states of affairs” (seelische Sachverhalte) are nothing but “patterns” of behavior (cf. Savigny 1996, pp.179, 253), this seems only to confirm his commitment to some sophisticated kind of behaviorism. So how, then, are we to understand Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of mind?

In what follows, I shall argue that both interpretations just outlined are fundamentally wrong. Wittgenstein’s distance from Cartesianism on the one hand and behaviorism on the other is much greater than these interpretations seem to suggest. Wittgenstein, in fact, thinks that the opposition between Cartesianism and behaviorism conceals a substantial agreement – one that he considers deeply problematic. As I shall demonstrate, he criticizes both positions in a number of ways, and instead tries to conceive of subjectivity in completely different terms. Wittgenstein’s critique of these positions, although he also employs arguments in a more narrow sense, is quite often phenomenologically based, i.e., it tries to show how Cartesianism and behaviorism are positions that in important respects conflict with our actual experience of ourselves, and each other. Wittgenstein’s contribution here is extremely important, and in line with much of what has been argued in continental phenomenology. Though this is not central to the account developed in this paper, I shall try to provide some hints as to how Wittgenstein’s position converges with some of Heidegger’s insights in the last part of the essay.

Against Cartesianism

Cartesianism, or Cartesian dualism, is here the view that, at least apart from God, there are two radically different kinds of things (or substances) in the world: extended things (spatial and physical things) on the one hand, and thinking things (minds, souls) on the other. A human being is thus somehow composed of two quite different kinds of stuff, on the Cartesian account: