

## CONDITIONS FOR THE INTER-SUBJECTIVITY OF PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE AND PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

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*Following a discussion of the status of our cognition and description of things in publicly observable physical material reality, and of our internal states, such as our thoughts, emotions and feelings of pain, it is argued that conditions exist which apply equally for the inter-subjectivity of cognition and description of both publicly observable things and internal states. It is shown that on these conditions rests the possibility of persons together developing criteria or standards for determining and distinguishing between what is and what is not publicly observable. These same conditions, so I argue, rule out any consistent notions of private cognition and languages. On these conditions, furthermore, relies the possibility of persons talking about their individual differences – concerning both what is and what is not publicly observable, and thus for a person to be a person different from other persons. The paper concludes by outlining the consequences for constructivist and traditional Cartesian assumptions on the acquisition and development of cognition and language which underly present day Cognitive Science.*

### Introduction

For centuries the nature and status of knowledge and descriptions of our so called *internal states*, such as our thoughts, feelings, emotions, pains, and other mental phenomena, have been extensively debated within philosophy. Given that internal states are not publicly observable, but may only be known or experienced by the persons who have them, how then can it be maintained that experience of and assertions about such states have the same status as our knowledge and descriptions of things existing in publicly observable material reality? Moreover, in view of the lack of public criteria or standards for determining the existence of such states, as well as for determining the truth or falsity of knowledge of and assertions put forward about them, how could it then be maintained that our experiences of them amount to *knowledge*, or that our assertions about them amount to *descriptions*? Indeed, how can we be sure that assertions put forward about such

states and other non-publicly observable phenomena have the same implications and use for different persons and language users? Or be sure that when making assertions about such states or phenomena we are using language in the same way – or indeed using the *same* language – as we do when talking about and describing things in public material reality. Indeed, given that internal states are not the sorts of things which are publicly observable, and in this sense not *shareable*, how do we ever come to learn and talk about them in a language we do share?

That solutions of these issues have serious consequences for the possibility of scientific psychological investigations of persons, is obvious when we consider that a crucial part of the knowledge a person has of himself, of his mind, body and acts – and, not the least, *of his mind and body being his*, and *of his acts being acts intended by himself* – rests on observations and experiences to which only the person himself has access. Furthermore, no one except the person himself will ever be able to experience what it is like to be the person he is *in the way he experiences* it, or to know what it is like to have his perceptions, thoughts, or feelings of pain in his body *in the way he does*, because no one except the person himself can see with his eyes, feel his pain or think his thoughts.

To this uniqueness of our personal experience must be added the differences in our knowledge and conception of ourselves, of others and the world in which we find ourselves, due, for example, to differences in our upbringing, training, education or cultural background. And yet, neither the knowledge of persons which is uniquely personal, nor the differences in knowledge and conceptions of themselves, of others and the world, due to their different backgrounds, can be said to be *private*. For, despite these differences in our personal experiences and conceptions, to be a person is something fundamentally social. Indeed, no one can be a person, and thereby someone who may realize that he or she is uniquely different from other persons *without* other persons from whom he or she may differ. Nor may one be a person being different from others without having possibilities of determining *how* one differs from others – whether such differences concern one's notions and experiences of things or states in material reality, or one's inner feelings, thoughts, beliefs, emotions or pains. Indeed, it would seem that no one could be a person, that is someone who differs from others, without being able to communicate and talk with others about how one differs from them.

In the sections which follows I shall argue that conditions do indeed exist for *intersubjectivity* of cognition and use of language, which apply equally for knowledge and description of things in public material reality and for knowledge and description of non-publicly observable internal states and phenomena. They are conditions on which relies the possibility of persons talking about and communicating their knowledge and experience to others, and of determining and discussing their individual differ-

ences concerning their cognition and experience – both of that which is publicly observable, and of that of persons which is only directly observable to themselves, such as their thoughts, emotions and feelings of pain. In other words, they are conditions on which relies the possibility of a person to *be* a person, i.e. someone who is different from other persons. By the same token they are conditions on which relies the very possibility of persons together to develop criteria or standards to determine and distinguish between what is publicly observable and what is personal, and equally importantly, by which any notion about private cognition and private languages are rendered untenable. Furthermore, I shall argue that despite the significant differences in the conditions for cognition and description of things existing in public material reality and of our internal or mental states, we shall have to assume that the language in which we may talk about both these things and states, is a language which necessarily relies on and is part of the very same language we use to describe things in public material reality.

### **Conditions for description of internal states**

One of the significant differences in the conditions for cognition and description of things in publicly observable material reality and of our non-publicly observable internal states concerns the procedures for determining the truth and correct application of description of such things and states. In the case of descriptions of publicly observable things, for example, we will be able to take part in a procedure for determining whether the implications of the descriptions hold true for the things in question, and thus to observe the result of a test as to the correct application of the description. This is not the case when somebody says e.g. that he has a pain in his finger. We may discuss what the *implications* of such a description are, at whatever length necessary, and in the course of the discussion arrive at better and better agreement about what they may be. But no public procedure exists for determining whether a »pain-description« is a true description of what the person feels in his finger. Such a test can only be carried out by the person himself, for only he knows and may observe what he feels in his finger.

But given that no public procedure exists for determining the correct use of our description of internal states such as feelings of pain, how then can we be sure that when different people talk about pains, they are talking about the same kind of »thing«? How, more precisely,

- (1) »Can I be sure that when I use the term ‘pain’, I use this term to refer to the same kind of ‘thing’ as others do when they use the same

term?« Or, conversely, »when other people use the term ‘pain’ do they then use this term to refer to the same kind of ‘thing’ as I do when I use the same term?«

This would seem a perfectly sensible question. But at the same time it appears to be a question which, for obvious reasons, is impossible to answer. However, it is also a question which is impossible to *ask*. For this question, and the various ways it may be put, is a question in which the very condition for putting it forward is itself questioned. When asking, »do I use the term ‘pain’ to refer to the same ‘thing’ as others do when they use the term«, I am obviously asking this question in a language of which the term ‘pain’ is part – and thus a term which is supposed to have a meaning and correct use, which I and other people with whom I share the language know *in virtue* of being speakers of that language. In other words, it is a term that I and other speakers of the language know how to use correctly, and who therefore also know and may determine what kind of »thing« the term may be used to refer to. If I did not know this – and did not *presuppose* that all other speakers of the language knew this – neither I, nor they would have any idea what I was asking about, and no further discussion of the question would seem possible.

Admittedly, we may have all kinds of difficulties in giving *adequate* verbal accounts of the pain we may feel, and we often feel uncertain about the choice of appropriate terms. Is this pain, for example, a sharp, piercing, dull, shooting, tender, searing pain, or is it a nagging or stabbing pain? Indeed, we may have great difficulties in conveying precisely to others the suffering we endure when we are in pain. However, these problems and difficulties of adequately describing pains are not relevant to the question being discussed, nor do they invalidate the point just made. Indeed, these problems and difficulties of adequate descriptions of pains, and discussions about such problems, could not take place *unless* the people discussing them had a concept of and a term for pain which they shared, and knew of what it may be used correctly.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, the question is *obtuse* in the sense that putting it forward presupposes that we know the meaning and correct use of the terms of the question – but then we are asked to put this knowledge within a parenthesis and »forget« that we do, or pretend that this knowledge is immaterial for a discussion of what the terms may be correctly used to refer to – or whether they may be used correctly to refer to anything at all. But naturally, it is a question which can only be asked granted we have already learned a language which we may use to talk about pain, and thereby granted pain to be

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1 In a later section I shall argue more thoroughly why it does not make sense to propose, i.e. in a language we share, that pains and other internal states are fundamentally *private*, and hence that descriptions of them are equally private.

the kind of »thing« which we may talk *correctly* about and *refer* to. Hence, if we do ask this question, the answer is logically implied: an affirmation would be redundant, while a denial would be contradictory.

This, I think, would probably have been obvious if the same question had concerned the use of the term ‘cups’ instead of ‘pains’; indeed it would probably have been so obvious that we would hesitate to ask it. For if we did ask this question about the use of the term ‘cups’, we might as well ask the same question about all other terms in our language – and we would be well on the road to asking whether we can be sure that we may use terms in our language to refer to and talk correctly about *any* objects in material reality. However, although in *particular* cases we may be in doubt as to whether a particular term may be correctly used to refer to some particular thing, i.e. a thing which has been identified in a shared public world, we cannot doubt that as language users taking part in this discussion, we do know (other) correct terms for the thing (i.e. those forming part of the identification of the things), nor doubt that we know how to use *these* terms correctly. One cannot doubt the necessity of these conditions for settling the question under discussion – unless, of course, one has been seriously contaminated with scepticism, and mistakenly assumes that one may get away with using language to question the very possibility of using language to talk correctly about anything.

Now, it might be objected that in the case of the use of the term ‘pain’, we do have a special case. For one thing, pains are exactly the sorts of things that cannot be observed or identified in a shared, public world. Only the person in pain may observe and identify his pain. Only he can experience his pain, and there is no way that he may »show« his experience of the pain to others. And if, instead of the original question (1), we had asked

(2) »Can we be sure that different people *experience* pain the same way? Or, can I be sure that when I experience pain, my experience of pain is the same as the experience of pain of other people?«

then it would have to be admitted that this is both a sensible and a serious question. For, surely, the very possibility of answering the question of whether different people in fact use the term »pain« to refer to the same sort of »thing« (as in question (1)), relies on the possibility of an answer to the question of whether people actually *experience* pain the same way (as in question (2)).

Well, if question (2) is the sort of question to which an answer *could* be given, it could not consist in a test of which the *experiences of pain* of different people were compared. The question could *only* be settled by verbal means, e.g. by comparing the *descriptions* that different people may put forward about their experiences of pain. Consequently, the question would have to be reformulated, for example as follows:

(2a) »Would other people use the term ‘pain’ to refer to what I now feel in my finger, if they could experience the pain that I feel in my finger«?

However, this brings us back to where we began – i.e. to a question which cannot be asked, let alone be discussed, without presupposing that we have already learned a language with terms not only for pains, but also for experiences of pains, and that, *in virtue* of being users of this language, we know what these terms may be used to refer to. Thus, it is presupposed that about the experience of pain something is the case, or true, and that something else is not the case, or false, and that any one of us is able to determine when it is the case, and when it is not the case, i.e. determine when we experience pains. But it *also* presupposes that as users of this language, and thus able to ask this very question, we do have terms for such experiences, the correct implication and applications of which we do know.

There are good reasons, then, why it is impossible both to ask and to answer the question, »can we be sure that different people use the term ‘pain’ to refer to the same kind of ‘thing’?« Whatever may have urged philosophers to ask this question<sup>2</sup>, it obviously implies and presupposes assumptions which at the same time are called into question. To assume the tenability of this kind of question, makes no more sense than assuming that we share a language in which we may communicate about objects in the world, and at the same time assuming that objects in the world do not exist as the sorts of things which may be talked correctly about.

I am not saying that the fact that we have a language with terms for both objects in reality and pains in bodies *proves* the existence of objects in reality and pains in bodies, nor that all and every concrete statement we put forward about either objects or pains are always or infallibly correct. What I am saying is that we cannot begin to discuss or investigate language and the use of language to talk about such things as objects or pains, without assuming, generally, that both objects in reality and pains in bodies exist as things of which we have knowledge and may talk correctly about. In short, what I am saying is that one cannot take part in this kind of philosophers’ discussion without committing oneself epistemologically.

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2 – as for example Wittgenstein did, cf. his discussion of »the beetle in the box« to which I shall come back in a later section.

## **The inter-subjectivity of public and personal knowledge and experiences**

It has to be admitted that it is somehow puzzling that pains and other internal states, which are only directly observable to persons who have them, and thus cannot be shared by others, are nevertheless things which we may talk and communicate about in a language we do share with other persons. And puzzling how a crucial part of the knowledge a person has of himself and of being the person he is, rely on observations and experiences to which only the person himself has access. And yet, despite of not being directly accessible to others – and in this sense not shareable by others – we both can and do communicate with others about such knowledge, observations and experiences, and thus, undeniably, we do have a language in which we may talk both meaningfully and correctly about them. So, shareability in the sense of being publicly observable and known cannot be a condition for the possibility of inter-subjective communication among persons about things which only they may directly observe, experience and know about.

In the case of observing, experiencing and communicating about objects in material reality, our situation is arguably significantly different. Take for example two people sitting on either side of a table with cups and plates, a teapot, a bowl of sugar and a bottle of milk. All these things exist in a shared public world and are perfectly observable to both persons; they may together determine what is on the table and also whether the descriptions they put forward about them are correct. And yet, it could be argued that how these things are observed and appear to them from their different vantage points on either side of the table is different, i.e. due to the fact that the parts and features of the things which are directly observable to the one, are not the same as those which are so observable to the other. To the person sitting on one side of the table the sugar bowl and milk bottle will be to the left of the teapot, while to the other they are to the right of it, and so forth. However, this does not present any serious difficulties since, first, it is part of our knowledge of things having been identified as particular things, that they will appear differently when looked at from different vantage points – and that, generally, things do appear differently when observed with regard to different possibilities of observations and action. Thus, having identified the things on the table as cups, plates etc., the persons at the table know that if they move to different positions, the things will look differently because other properties and parts of the things will now be observable to them. And these differences of perception and experience do not represent any serious problem since, secondly, none of the particular ways of perceiving and experiencing the things on the table, and none of the descriptions by either person of their experiences of the cups, plates, etc., are unique to him or her. Indeed, it is assumed that they are not, just as in general any person

and language user will assume that if other people could look at the things from his or her vantage point(s), they would observe what he or she does, and report that they perceive the same features and properties of the things, and describe what they perceive as he or she does. So, although two people sitting opposite each other at a table do not share exactly the same perceptions or experiences of the things on the table, they both know and take for granted that if the other person could be in their position, the person would perceive and observe what they do, and describe what they perceive and observe as they do. *If we could not count on this assumption, communication and action between persons about things in the world would be impossible.*

But there are numerous other ways in which the knowledge and description of persons concerning things in publicly observable reality may differ. Just think of the differences due to differences of our background, education, previous history of experiences, and the opportunities to act with, observe and describe such things which are or have been available to us. Examples are *legion* – I only have to think of the knowledge I have of aeroplanes, their construction and how to fly them compared to that of a pilot. Or, conversely, think of the knowledge I have as a clinical psychologist about the transference phenomena occurring between client and therapist during psychotherapy compared to that of an aeroplane pilot, who has not encountered such phenomena, and who does not have the language and terms to describe them that I have. And yet, despite the fact that our knowledge of these and numerous other matters are not exactly the same, and probably never will be, we are indeed able to communicate the knowledge that each of us has about aeroplanes and transference problems and those other matters, and thus to share our knowledge of what in this respect is personal to each of us. But if the condition for the inter-subjectivity and shareability of knowledge and description in the actual case as well as between persons in general, is not and cannot be that persons have exactly the same knowledge and experience of things, nor the same possibilities of describing things, since this condition is only rarely if ever met due to their different background, education, history of experiences, and so forth, on *what* then relies this inter-subjectivity of knowledge and description of persons?

It relies no doubt on the fact that, apart from differences in our knowledge, experience and background, we do share a substantial amount of knowledge and description of the world in which we live and act, of the things with which we may act, of ourselves and of the persons with whom we may co-act. However, to say so does not of course add anything to our notions of ‘shared knowledge and description’, nor does it suffice to account for the inter-subjectivity of knowledge and description that we do *not* share with others, and which is *personal*. It does not do so unless it is assumed that vantage points, background, and situations we may be in are



*in principle* shareable, and thus that other persons could be or could have been in the same situations. But nor does it suffice independently of assuming that, granted other people had had the same background, or had been in the same situations that we ourselves have been or are in, then they would have the knowledge of the situation and the things that we have, and describe them the way we do. However, this suffices, indeed it will *have* to suffice to say that it must be fundamental to the cognition and experience of persons that, although other people may not be in our situations, and may not have, or may not have had, exactly the same experiences and knowledge that we have or have had, they would – *could* they be, or *had* they been, in our situations. Likewise, it suffices, and will *have* to suffice to say that to be language users and to share a language with other persons *logically* implies and presupposes that other language users, granted that they could be in our situation and have the experience, knowledge, background, points of view etc. that we have, would use language to describe what we experience, know of, etc., in those situations as we do. Or, that they would consent that the descriptions we put forward about these things and this knowledge are correct and correctly applied.

Now, if we can agree that these presuppositions are fundamental to the cognition, use of language and communication of persons, and indispensable for any meaningful discussion among persons about what they know and how they describe what they know, I think we shall also have to agree that this inter-subjectivity of cognition and language relies on a notion of ‘truth’ which logically implies that what is true or false, correct or incorrect, is also true or false, correct or incorrect for other persons, or just for ‘others’. Indeed, I think that the inter-subjectivity of knowledge and language of persons may be boiled down to such a notion of ‘truth’ – and therefore that our notion of truth both *implies* and *presupposes* a notion of ‘others’. The assumption of this notion must be the rock bottom, the point of departure from which any discussion about our knowledge and description must be based and proceed – whether such discussions concern our knowledge and descriptions of things in publicly observable material reality, or our personal so called internal states, such as our emotions, thoughts – or feelings of pain. No analysis of our cognition and use of language in general, nor of the differences which exist between different persons concerning their cognition and description of that which they cognize and describe can go beyond this assumption; nor, as will hopefully be clear in the discussion which follows, can it be proved or denied without being conceded. For this reason, I call the assumption about the inter-subjectivity of cognition and language *The principle of the logical relation between the notion of ‘truth’ and the notion of ‘others’*. In the section which follows, I shall argue that the assumption of this principle (for short: *the principle of inter-subjectivity*) is a condition for distinguishing what is publicly observable from what is personal.

### **Conditions for distinguishing what is publicly observable from what is not**

Although we may sometimes find it difficult to give adequate and satisfactory descriptions of our internal or mental states, we do seem to know, and assume that we know, what it implies to describe, for example our different emotions as happiness, anger, or sadness, just as we seem to know, and assume that we know, what it implies to describe our thinking as attempts e.g. to solve some particular problem and finding various solutions to it. Nor do these occasional difficulties seriously shake our certainty about the existence of such states – any more than similar difficulties sometimes encountered in giving adequate and satisfactory descriptions of things and events in material reality would shake our certainty as to the existence of such things and events.

More importantly though, the lack of possibility of public examination, test or direct comparison of such states do not prevent us from assuming that we may indeed talk about such states – and even discuss our individual differences concerning such states – and, hence, from assuming that we do share a language in which it makes sense to talk about such states.

Let me give an example. Let us suppose I am discussing the taste of a particular apple with someone, and let us suppose that the issue of the discussion is whether the apple tastes sour or sweet. I, for example, maintain that to me the apple tastes sweet, while my opponent maintains that to him it tastes sour. Well, we are obviously disagreeing about the taste of the apple (and may not come to an agreement), indeed, we may even realize that we are not agreeing. But what does it take to realize that we disagree about the taste of the apple?<sup>3</sup> Apparently not that we have procedures or independent criteria for discernment in the situation, because we do not. What it takes and presupposes to discuss our taste of the apple and to realize that we disagree about it, is that we both know what it implies to say of something that it tastes sweet, and what it implies to say that it tastes sour. That is, it presupposes that we know the implications and use of these terms, and thus we know and presuppose that ‘sour’ and ‘sweet’ refer to experiences of the tastes of things, which we both know of. Lastly, but not least, it presupposes that when describing our experience of the taste of the apple, we describe it as others would, could they have our experience. Otherwise, we could not make experiences of taste – or for that matter any other of our non-publicly observable states and experiences – the subject of everyday conversation, still less the subject of an inquiry into individual differences or similarities. There would simply be no way that we could

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3 – as opposed to assuming that one of us must be using the term »sweet« or »sour« wrongly, or does not know the implications of such terms.

talk about or determine individual differences, disagreements or similarities between different persons about such experiences and states.

Now, it may be objected that there are significant differences between what may be rigorously determined, referred to and talked about and what cannot, and that it does not make sense to maintain that all knowledge and description is equally correct or true, or that assertions of what we know may be put forward with the same kind of certainty – if only in all instances of knowledge and description the same notions of ‘true’ and ‘correct’ are employed. Just think of the considerable variations which exist in how things are described by different persons, and by the same person in different situations, not only when the things concerned are »internal« states and events, but even things in material reality. Not only our intentions, purposes and possibilities of observation and action, but even our moods and temperaments may at times determine what we experience and how we experience ourselves and the rest of reality, and thus what we know of, and how we describe ourselves and the rest of reality. So, would it not then be reasonable to reserve the notion ‘correct use of language’, and ‘true knowledge and assertions’ for cases in which no such individual differences and variations exist, and to reserve the terms ‘exist’ and ‘determinable’ for things and events about which no uncertainty prevails – because they belong to what is materially and publicly observable?

This solution has been attempted, notably by the logical positivist and by the radical and logical behaviourists in psychology and philosophy respectively, who aimed to establish a firm epistemological basis for scientific research. In this pursuit they argued that only *that* exists objectively, and hence can be the object of scientific research, which may be determined by rigorous public criteria and standards, and that only knowledge and description of what had been thus determined and observed, can be said to be meaningful and true. In effect, any determinate notions of the truth and meaning of statements and knowledge would have to derive from observations fulfilling such criteria and determinations. Consequently, what cannot be subject to rigorous public scrutiny and observation fulfilling such standards and criteria does not exist, nor can description of things which cannot be so observed be true; hence, descriptions and the existence of knowledge of such things may be discarded as nonsensical.

However, against such arguments we only have to consider that the very process by which we determine a situation, and what in this situation is materially and publicly observable, presupposes that something is the case or true about the situation and things being determined and observed – which is also the case or true to other people – *in casu* the people involved in the observations. Thus, it is not because situations exist or may be arranged, in which things are publicly observable, and which we may come to agree to describe in particular ways, that certainty »emerges« of what – for everyone involved – is true or correct about things and situations. It is

the other way round; for, no such determinations of correctness of knowledge and description of things and situations could be agreed upon, let alone be arranged and function as criteria or standards for correctness among language users, unless it was presupposed that *when* arranging and determining these criteria or standards, we already have a concept of ‘truth’ which we know how to use correctly; a concept of ‘truth’, furthermore, which is such that what is true or false, correct or incorrect, is also true or false, correct or incorrect for others.

This is a presupposition and condition on which, logically, rests the possibility of distinguishing that which is publicly observable from what is not, and on which rests our determination and characterization of individual differences and variations in that part of our knowledge and experiences of things in public reality which is personal. Thus, the point, so easily overlooked, is that even in a situation in which the things and events being described are publicly observable and identifiable, it is logically implied and presupposed of descriptions put forward and being understood by others that these others, being in the same situation in which we are, will have the knowledge we have about these things and events, and will describe them as we do. In general, it is presupposed that our notion of ‘correct’ or ‘true’ is such that what is true or correct, is also true or correct for others. It is because of this logical implication of the notions of ‘true’ and ‘correct’, fundamental to use of language and communication, that we may talk correctly and rigorously – not only about our knowledge of what is publicly observable, but also about that which is not – and thus *that we may distinguish between what is and what is not publicly observable*. So, from an epistemological point of view, there is no need to restrict what may be talked about, and talked *correctly* about, to things which are materially and publicly observable. In particular, there is no need, nor any grounds for assuming that the notions of ‘truth’ and ‘meaning’ applying to knowledge and description concerning things that are not publicly observable, are different from those applying to knowledge and descriptions of things which are publicly observable.

So, rather than attempting to avoid or do away with the problem of individual differences and the fact that part of the knowledge of persons of themselves and of reality is *personal*; and rather than to characterize this knowledge as uncertain and what it is about as being non-existent, a proper epistemology should be able to account satisfactorily for such differences of knowledge and personal experience. For such an epistemology it would be obvious to ask how it is possible to talk about *criteria* or *standards* for what count as »correct« descriptions and »publicly« existing things, unless it is presupposed that different persons – in spite of the differences and variations in their knowledge, background, opportunities for observation and action – *are able to distinguish between conditions under which such criteria or standards apply, and in which they do not*. And ask how we could

ever determine what are the conditions for individual differences and variations to exist in knowledge and descriptions of the same things, unless such differences could be *rigorously* determined, *correctly* talked about and referred to – and thus unless we presuppose that we do have correct descriptions and are using language correctly when discussing and communicating about these differences. That is, without presupposing that both the knowledge shared by different persons, and the knowledge of persons which is personal, are perfectly sensible issues of inter-subjective discourse.

Let me illustrate this point by giving the following example. One of my friends tells me: »I am terribly depressed; everything looks so grey and colourless – even the trees and flowers look grey and colourless«. Now, could it not reasonably be argued that at least in this case we are not talking about a »public« issue, but rather of something »private«, and also that it is a situation in which it would make no sense to maintain that my friend is still using language correctly? Is it not a situation in which any well-defined notions of correct or true assertions have been suspended? Not at all. For one thing, I do understand what my friend is saying. I am perfectly able to communicate with him about his – in this case – curious experience of the colours of trees and flowers. But a condition for maintaining that I understand what he says, and for communicating with him about his curious experiences of the colours of trees and flowers is, naturally, that he still uses language correctly when talking about his experiences of these things. That is, it is a condition that he knows the correct implications of terms for various colour categories, and that he knows how to apply them correctly. And it is a condition that what he is talking about is something he may refer to, and about which true and false assertions may be made, i.e. his curious experiences of the colours of trees and flowers. Thus, it is a condition that both of us are still using the same language – indeed the very same language that he and I use under normal circumstances to talk about quite ordinary everyday matters; and it is a condition that we are together able to determine *what* he is talking about. If we are able to do so, and thus able to talk about his experiences, however curious, it has to be maintained that he is using language correctly when describing his experiences.

However, it is quite clear that his description of the colours of the trees and flowers is not of *general validity*, and I do not take his description as an attempt on his part to produce descriptions of general validity – i.e. descriptions which would be correct under normal everyday conditions of observation. But an important part of the message he is trying to convey to me – and which I understand – is precisely that his situation is *not* normal, i.e. that his depression affects his perception and descriptions of things in ways which differ from how he normally perceives and describes them. A fact of which he himself is perfectly – and probably painfully – aware.

So, although my friend may feel eminently on his own with his unusual and personal experiences during his depression, his experiences are not *pri-*

vate, nor are his descriptions of his experiences. They are perfectly understandable to others because it is presupposed – by us and by him – that he is using language when describing what he experiences as others would – could they be in his situation and experience what he does. Indeed, our communication about what he experiences relies on the presupposition that what to him is the case or true about his experiences would also be the case or true for others, had they his experience.

Let me conclude my discussion of this example by saying that it shows that individual differences in the cognition and description of reality of different persons may indeed exist and be determinable. However, it also shows that a condition for these differences between persons and their cognition and description to exist, is that persons and language users, despite such differences, share a vast amount of knowledge and correct descriptions of reality. And it shows, furthermore, that the possibility of determining and of talking correctly about such differences relies on the presupposition that, when we describe what we know of or experience, we use language to describe it as others would, if they had our knowledge and experience; however, this in its turn both presupposes and implies that the notions of ‘correct’ and ‘true’ of persons are such that what is correct or true, is also correct or true to others – i.e. the notions of ‘true’ and ‘correct’ are not well-defined independently of a notion of ‘others’. If these presuppositions and implications of what I have called *the principle of inter-subjectivity* did not apply, no personal differences in knowledge and experiences could exist, nor any possibility to determine or talk sensibly about such differences – whether these differences concern what is publicly observable or what is not. Conversely, granted the presuppositions and implications of this principle, a person is someone who may be different from other persons – and thus *be* a person. Someone, furthermore, who together with others may develop criteria and standards to determine and distinguish between what is publicly observable and shared and what is personal.

In the section which follows I shall argue why the notion of »private languages« describing »private experiences« is incompatible with this principle – and hence with the conditions which necessarily apply for the cognition and use of language of persons.

### **Further implications of the principle of inter-subjectivity: the impossibility of private cognition and languages**

Suppose my friend’s condition has deteriorated; he now tells me: »I have experiences and knowledge about some particular ‘things’, but what is the case, true or correct about them, is not the case, true or correct for others, – or I cannot be certain that it is«. Now, what could he possibly mean by

that? Could what he says mean, for example, that if others could experience and know of the »things« that he experiences and knows of, and thus could know what is the case or true about them, then it would not be true or correct for them? Well, if that is what he means, he is obviously contradicting himself.<sup>4</sup> Or, could it be that he means that these »things« of which he knows and experiences, are in principle inconceivable to others, because what is true or correct about them, is true or correct in a sense which is different from the sense in which the statement he puts forward about his (exclusive) experiences and knowledge may be? That is, the notion of true and correct in the case of his unique experiences and knowledge of these »things« is different from the notion of true and correct which others have, and which he himself has in other cases, for example when communicating to others his unique experiences and knowledge. In other words, does he mean that this concept of true or correct, which applies to his experiences and knowledge about these particular »things«, is a concept which is special to him, in the sense: *private*, and consequently, that his experiences and knowledge of these »thing« are equally private?

Now, for such a claim to have any bearing – even for himself – would seem to require that he be able to account for how his »private« concept of true and correct differs from the one he shares with others, i.e. account for it in the language in which the claim is put forward. But if he could do that, his »private« concept of true and correct would *not* be private, nor inconceivable to others. Likewise, in order to maintain that what he experiences and knows to be the case or true about these particular »things« is not the case or true to others, would seem to require that he be able to determine what would be the case or true to others about these »things«, and how it differs from what is the case or true to him – again in the language in which the claim is made. However, if he could do that, then what to him is true or false about the »things« would be perfectly conceivable to others, and what he knows about them would be perfectly expressible in terms of the language which he shares with others.

So, we may conclude that my friend is either contradicting himself or talking nonsense – or both. This would have been immediately obvious if instead he had said »I have discovered that the statement, « ... .. »is true or correct, but it is not true or correct to others, or I cannot be certain that it would be true or correct to others«. What is obvious is that he mistakenly thinks that one could share a language with other people, and also that in

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4 For, to say that others may experience and know of the »things« that my friend experiences and knows of means, necessarily, that the »things« being experienced and known are »things« about which what is the case or true for my friend, would also be true or the case for others. Otherwise, the »things« being experienced and known by my friend and others would not *be* the same »things«.

this language the notions of ‘true’ and ‘correct’ could be different for different people.<sup>5</sup>

I think we shall have to agree that for the same reason that nobody may claim to possess private knowledge or a private language, and thus a private notion of truth, no such private language or knowledge may be ascribed to others – neither *in toto*, nor in part. For, how could we justifiably ascribe a private language or knowledge to others without being able to account for both such a language and knowledge in a language which is *not* private, and into which this knowledge and language must somehow be translatable? This, together with results of the discussion above of other examples, should suffice to show that *I cannot know for myself what others might not know as well*; and to show, once again, that to be a user of a language I share with others, means that I cannot know what is true or correct to say about a »thing«, which may not be true or correct to others, could they experience and know what I know about the »thing«.

At this point it would be relevant, I think, to bring in a much quoted paragraph from Wittgenstein’s *Investigations*, and compare the points he argues with the ones presented above. In the paragraph in question Wittgenstein says,

»If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word ‘pain’ means – must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalise the one case so irresponsibly?

Now someone tells me that he knows what pain is only from his own case! – Suppose everyone had a box with something in it; we call it a ‘beetle’. No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. – Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. – But suppose the word ‘beetle’ had a use in these people’s language? If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. 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.« (Wittgenstein (1945/1953), para. 293, p. 100.)

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5 There is of course the possibility that what he means is merely that he is not sure of the correct implications and application of the statement – but that is a quite different matter.



Well, for a start, Wittgenstein does not only *imagine* that the word pain has »a use in people's language« – he knows it for a fact; indeed when – in the example above as well as in general – he is discussing the issue of pain and the meaning and use of the term 'pain' he is deeply involved in a »language-game« of which the term 'pain' – to everyone involved in that game – is an expression given to a sensation, i.e. pain somewhere in one's body. So, he knows and presupposes that he and everyone else taking part in this game know the meaning and use of the term 'pain', and thus know to what it may be applied, *in casu* pains in ones body. And he presupposes, therefore and necessarily, that sensations or feelings of pains are the sorts of »things« which may exist, and to which one may refer. Without presupposing this, and thus presupposing that others would use the term 'pain' to refer to the feeling of pains that he may have in his body – could they feel what he feels – he would not have a clue of what he himself is talking about. The whole discussion of the »language-game« of giving expression to pain relies on this presupposition and, thus, that he may indeed generalise from himself to others, when they use the term 'pain' – just as they may generalise from their use of the term to his and the use of the term by others.

Now, having made explicit the presupposition on which the discussion and issues raised in Wittgenstein's example must obviously be based – as must indeed any other discussion of the meaning and use of the term 'pain' – we observe that he begins the example by suggesting – for the sake of argument – that he only knows from his own case and others from theirs what pain is, and what the term 'pain' means and may be used to refer to. Indeed, for the sake of argument he invites us to assume that it would make sense to say so, and that within the »language-game« of pains such statements would be perfectly understandable to everyone. But, obviously, it does not make sense to say anything of the kind – in any »language-game« – unless the implications of the term 'pain' is shared by everyone involved, and unless this term is used to refer to the same sorts of things. Without these presuppositions the example disintegrates into nonsense.

But instead of saying exactly that – and contrary to the presupposition on which his whole discussion is based – Wittgenstein goes on to suggest that because my feelings of pain, and those of others, are not publicly observable, *my* feelings of pain may be completely different from the feelings of pain of others and, thus, I and others may use the term 'pain' to refer to completely different things. What Wittgenstein is saying, then, is that it makes sense to say that differences could exist in how different people feel pain, and even that this could be said in a »public language«; yet this needs not be a language in which we may talk *correctly* about pain, even less a language in which it would make sense to talk about differences between experiences of pain of different persons. However, to say so comes uncomfortably close, if not all the way, to saying the sort of thing that my friend was saying in the earlier example: »I know that I feel pain in my body and

also that to me it would be correct to use the term ‘pain’ to refer to these feelings, but it would not be correct for others, or I cannot be certain that it would be«. But if we say that, we have yet to understand what it means to take part in and to share with others the »language-game« of pain, and to understand that such statements violate the very presupposition on which this and any other »language-games« necessarily rely.

However, instead of concluding thus, Wittgenstein contends that there can be no such things as pains to which we may refer, nor of observation or knowledge of pain – neither from our own cases nor in general. If so, Wittgenstein’s analysis of the language game of giving expression to pain leaves us in a situation in which nothing exists but »words« which may be used quite arbitrarily, and games played according to arbitrary rules. For, in our own cases all we have – and others in theirs – are words or expressions, yet not of anything. For, as he says, »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.« Exit my pains as well as those of yours; henceforth, we may all live happily without them!

However, rather than questioning the existence of internal or mental states, such as pains, and the possibility of having knowledge about and of correctly describing and communicating about our experiences of such states, the discussion above seems to show that this questioning logically rests on the assumption of both their existence and this possibility. Following the arguments against »private languages« and »private cognition«, moreover, any inter-subjective communication about our cognition and description of such states logically rests on the presupposition that, although our experiences of these states may not be, indeed cannot be *numerically* identical, other people will experience these states the way we do, and use language to describe them as we do. That is, it is assumed and implied that when different people use the same terms to describe what they experience, their experiences are also *ontologically* the same. Thus, when the people in the example above describe the taste of an apple as *sweet*, it is assumed that the experience of »sweet« is the same for both of them. And in the event that they disagree on whether a particular apple tastes sweet or sour, communication among them about this disagreement necessarily rests on the presupposition that the experience of *sweet* and *sour* is the same for both of them. Otherwise, communication about experiences of taste, or of individual differences concerning such experiences of taste – and *mutatis mutandis* of other non-publicly observable internal or mental states – would be impossible.

## Summary and consequences for theories concerning the acquisition and development of knowledge and language

In this paper I have argued that inter-subjectivity among persons would be inconceivable without a notion of the ‘truth’ of cognition and language which implies that what is true and false, correct and incorrect, is also true and false, correct and incorrect for other persons. This notion of truth, I argue, must be among the conditions on which rest the possibility of persons to communicate what they experience and know, as well as to discuss and determine any individual differences in their cognition and description – be it of things in public material reality or their internal or mental states. Put differently, I have argued that the notion of ‘truth’ of the cognition and language of persons logically implies and presupposes a notion of ‘other persons’, or just ‘others’ – and thus is a notion which in a fundamental sense is social.

Well, it would seem to be almost self-evident that to be able to communicate about what one knows, implies knowing that one’s knowledge, categories, conceptual systems and descriptions are indeed »inter-personal«, i.e. that one shares such categories, conceptual systems and descriptions with others. Although I may know of and describe things which others do not (yet) know of, or know different things about them than others do, to know and to say so necessarily implies that if others had the possibilities of observing and describing the things that I have, then others would know what I know about them and describe them the way I do. In other words, what to me is true or false would also be true or false to others. Conversely, it would not make sense to say that what I know to be the case, true or correct, would not be the case, true or correct to others, nor understandable to others or translatable into the language I share with others. This would not make sense, since I would be unable to substantiate such a claim – i.e. specify the nature of the difference of my knowledge as opposed to that of others – save in a language I share with others. In short, we cannot know for ourselves what others may not *in principle* know just as well.

Hence, that knowledge and language are fundamentally social, and that persons have a notion of ‘truth’ such that what is true is also true to others, does *not* mean that this can be explained by our social practices or »forms of life«. Nor does it rely on the fact that persons may come to agree on and make conventions, and develop criteria, standards or rules for what may »count« as objective and true knowledge and descriptions of the things or situations in the world in which they find themselves. On the contrary, no social conventions, agreement or criteria about the truth and objectivity of knowledge and correctness of descriptions could be established among persons, unless *prior* to establishing such conventions, agreement and criteria, they had together determined and identified *both* things and situations to which these conventions and criteria apply, and *therefore*, unless they

already had a notion of ‘truth’ of which it is presupposed that what is true or correct is also true and correct for others. Hence, to say that our notion of ‘truth’ is fundamentally social does not mean that the notion of ‘truth’ is a social phenomenon, i.e. a product of socially agreed practice. On the contrary, social phenomena and practice, including the development of conventions, criteria, rules or agreement on how to use language and its terms, depend on notions of ‘correct’ or ‘true’ and ‘incorrect’ or ‘false’ which are inherently shared.

Let me conclude by admitting that the principle of the inter-subjectivity of the notion of *truth* and its logical dependence on a notion of *others* is almost embarrassingly banal. However, had the implications of this principle been fully understood, many problems within philosophy and psychology concerning persons and their knowledge and experience – both that part which is personal and that which persons have in common with others – would probably have been set out differently. Let me just give one example. According to the traditional assumption, shared by many philosophers even today, we all start out as »Cartesian subjects«, having knowledge and experience of the content of our own mind, i.e. our sense data, perceptions, thoughts, emotions and feelings. From this supposed private, though certain knowledge and experiences »from our own cases« it is believed to be possible to work towards true knowledge of the nature of what causes this content and the rest of the objective order of reality, including other persons, and to develop a language in which we may talk of this knowledge and experience. This same assumption also seems to inspire and lie behind the so-called functional models and accounts about the acquisition of knowledge and language currently being developed within Cognitive Science – be those models computational *cum* representational or connectionist. However, it is not difficult to see that with this assumption, it becomes an insoluble problem as to how knowledge of individuals, formed in »splendid solipsistic isolation«, come to accord with the knowledge of reality of other individuals, and impossible to explain how individuals, say children, come to acquire the sort of knowledge and language, which is shared by the community in which they, grow up. That is, it becomes impossible to explain how individuals, children or otherwise – not having the notion that what from their point of view is known to be the case, true and false about the world, themselves and other persons, would also be known to be the case, true and false, for other persons, could they be in their situation and share their point of view – could ever come to be able to co-act with other persons in a publicly shared world of things, and to communicate with others what they know and experience about the things on which they may co-act. And impossible without such a notion to explain, moreover, how they come to distinguish that part of their knowledge concerning themselves and the world which is *personal*, from that which is *public* available and shared by others.

George Herbert Mead was among the first to deliver substantial arguments against the assumption that individuals living mentally in isolation from others, could ever develop or acquire knowledge about themselves, others and reality of the kind and in the way that we humans actually do, and in particular to argue that no such individual could be aware of its own existence – since, according to Mead, to be aware of oneself is to »look« at oneself from the standpoint of another (Mead, 1934). In view of the arguments presented in this paper, it seems that we are now able to strengthen Mead's original claim. If we suppose with Mead that to be aware of oneself requires being able to »look« at oneself from the standpoint of another, it has to be conceded, that this »looking« both presupposes and implies that if one could be in the position of other persons and look at oneself as they do, then one would see and come to know oneself the way others do. Without the presupposition that what, from the position of others is known by them to be the case or true about me, would also be the case or true for myself, could I be in their situation and have their knowledge, there would be no sense in talking about seeing oneself from the point of view of others. Hence, to be aware of oneself as a person presupposes that one shares with others a concept of 'truth' which is such that what is true for others is also true for oneself – and vice versa. That is, it presupposes that one's notion of truth is inherently inter-subjective in that it *logically* implies a notion of »others«. This notion of truth, I argue, must necessarily *precede* the possibility of anyone »looking« at himself from the standpoint of another; it is not something which may be acquired by such »looking«, nor by imagining such »looking«.

Apart from these logical reasons why an individual, living in mental isolation from others, could not acquire knowledge about oneself as a person, let alone acquire a notion of other persons and their minds, there seems to be empirical psychological support for assuming that for an individual, say a child, to acquire such knowledge and to develop into someone being aware of himself as a person, it is necessary that he or she be *received* and *understood* by others as a person. Thus, empirical research of early mother-infant communication seems to show that for a child to develop knowledge about himself, reality and other people around him, and later on to acquire a language to communicate this knowledge and that of others, depend on the mother's (or other care-person's) indefatigable effort and willingness to understand and see the child's behaviour as being *intentional*. And it seems to rely on the mother's efforts to understand, not only what goes on »inside« the child, but to interpret the child's reactions to her, and his action with things, as expressing his knowledge about things, and his attempts intentionally to act upon them, (for an excellent account of the development of early mother-infant interaction and communication, see e.g. Bruner, 1983).

Empirical investigations also seem to show that the child up to a certain age – presumably due to an over-generalisation of what he sees as his mother's apparent unlimited knowledge about his experiences, intentions, needs and actions – believes that others are in the same situation as he himself and share his point of view, and the knowledge he has about things in those situations – and even that they may »have« his thoughts and feelings. Thus, the child seems to over-generalise the fact that »what he knows may also be known by others« to mean that others do indeed find themselves in exactly the same situation as he does, and having the same knowledge he has, and having access to his thoughts and feelings. Only later on does the child learn that other people may perceive the same situation from points of view, which are different from his. And only later does the child realise that part of himself, his feelings and thoughts, are only directly observable to himself, and also that this part of him is what makes him uniquely *him*, being a person both physically and mentally distinct from other persons.

If we go back to the assumption held by most philosophers even today, namely that the child starts with »private« and »subjective« knowledge about himself and the world, it would now seem that this assumption turns the issue on its head. For, it is right what empirical investigations of the child's initial development of knowledge seem to indicate, and what from a logical point of view must necessarily be the case, the child does not start with private knowledge »from his own case«, but with knowledge of which it is assumed by the child that it is indeed shared by others – i.e. by his mother. The problem, it would seem, is rather to account for how the child later in his development comes to appreciate that, although what he knows may indeed be known and shared by others, others may not be in exactly the same situation as he himself. Thus, the problem seems to be to account for how the child begins to learn to appreciate the notion of 'different points of view', and how he begins to learn and appreciate the difference between what is and what is not observable to him as opposed to others, i.e. that the knowledge one may have of a situation and of oneself may be *personal*.

However, what cannot be accounted for nor explained, but which has to be presupposed and taken for granted, is that for a child to be able to learn this from other people in the community in which he grows up, and be able to take part in their »forms of life«, the child must have a notion of 'truth' which is such that what is the case, true or false, is also the case, true or false for others. What is wrong and what is lacking in epistemological approaches which starts from the position of the individual alone set against the rest of the world – be they generic constructive approaches, or biological or computational functional approaches – is not just a social context of others, which enables the individual to confront and compare his knowledge with the knowledge of others with the purpose of determining, for example, whether his knowledge is in accordance with theirs, and thus

may »count« as objective or true, or whether it relies on one's subjective dreams, illusion or imagination. What is lacking is precisely a notion of 'truth' which logically implies and presupposes a notion of 'others', which makes it possible for persons together to develop procedures for determining the objectivity and truth of their knowledge, and for everyone to compare his knowledge with the knowledge of others. That is, an intersubjective notion of 'truth' which makes it possible for a person to *be* a person, i.e. someone who may share an incredible amount of knowledge with other people, but who also has knowledge about himself and the world which is uniquely personal – and thus is someone who also differs from other persons; someone with whom we may agree – and disagree.<sup>6</sup>

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6 I want to thank both Dan Zahavi, who read an earlier version of this paper, and Jørgen Aage Jensen for their informed criticism and useful suggestions