David Finkelstein on the Inner

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I

In *Expression and the Inner*, David Finkelstein emphatically distances himself from Crispin Wright’s reading of the lessons Wittgenstein has to teach us about our ability to speak authoritatively about our inner lives. But he in effect agrees with Wright about why philosophers need to concern themselves with this topic. Finkelstein shares with Wright the idea that what philosophers are called on to do, in connection with the authority with which we speak about our inner lives, is to explain the special features of that region of our language, in particular the fact that, at least in normal circumstances, we are not liable to requests for grounds for what we say about our inner lives.

Finkelstein begins with a discussion of what he calls “detectivism”, which purports to explain the fact that self-ascriptions of inner states and episodes have an authority that does not require grounds in terms of the idea that one finds out about goings-on in one’s inner life by exercising a cognitive capacity that is more or less special. (He considers two varieties of detectivism, which differ in respect of how special the cognitive capacity is supposed to be.) He argues convincingly against detectivism, and the rest of the book is structured as an inquiry into what we ought to substitute for it. By starting with detectivism, Finkelstein in effect endorses Wright’s view that the default response to what Wright calls “the cardinal problem of self-knowledge” [Wright (2001a), p. 330] is a “privileged-observation” account of knowledge of one’s own inner world, and that “a deconstruction of the privileged-observation solution to the problem of self-knowledge is the indispensable prerequisite of an overall satisfactory philosophy of mind” [op. cit., p. 334]. And by framing his inquiry as a search for an acceptable replacement for detectivism, he in effect endorses Wright’s view that philosophy is required in order to discharge the supposed explanatory task unsatisfactorily attempted by detectivism.

The first alternative to detectivism that Finkelstein considers is constitutivism, the position he finds in Wright’s reading of Wittgenstein: an approach according to which the facts (or “facts”) stated in self-ascriptions of inner items are, not prior to self-ascriptions and correctly reported by them, as in
detectivism, but constituted by self-ascriptions or dispositions towards self-ascriptions. This view, too, he finds wanting.¹

Those two positions, with their opposite orders of priority, might seem to exhaust the possibilities, apart from Finkelstein’s own radically different approach. But he also considers a third view of first-person authority of the same general sort, which he thinks figures in my reading of Wittgenstein [McDowell (1989), (1991)]. This is what he calls “the middle path account of inner awareness” — “middle path” because it splits the difference between detectivism and constitutivism. He rejects this option too.

In the second half of the book Wittgenstein comes to the rescue. On Finkelstein’s reading, Wittgenstein points to a good explanation of why one is not subject to a call for grounds when one speaks with first-person authority. The idea that grounds might be needed simply gets no grip in connection with non-linguistic expressions of goings-on in one’s inner life, so it is not surprising that it should get no grip in connection with linguistic expressions either. The key to an authentically Wittgensteinian, and satisfactory, approach to first-person authority, according to Finkelstein, is the thought that self-reports express what they report.

II

In taking me to have offered, on Wittgenstein’s behalf, a response to the supposed “cardinal problem”, a position that competes with detectivism and constitutivism to explain the fact that self-ascriptions of inner items need no grounds, Finkelstein starts his treatment of me off on the wrong foot. I do not believe we should read Wittgenstein’s treatment of the inner as aimed at a solution to the “cardinal problem”.

More specifically, Finkelstein is wrong to think I recommended, and purported to find in Wittgenstein, a position that incorporates elements from both detectivism and constitutivism. In particular, there is no detectivist strand in the conception of the inner I meant to describe — no whiff of the idea that self-ascriptions report states of affairs that obtain anyway, independently of their subject’s ability to report them, with the ability conceived as involving the exercise of a special capacity to ascertain facts about the subject’s inner world. I will go into this a bit, not just in self-defence, but more because it is a way of raising issues about the interpretation of some familiar and important passages in Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein implies that in self-reports of sensations one uses words “without a justification” (though not “without right”): PI §289.² I suggested that there is a way of understanding the idea that one is, normally at least, justified in self-reports of sensations that does not conflict with what Wittgenstein means here. Finkelstein thinks that in making this suggestion I was affirming
the detectivist strand in the “middle path account”. He thinks I was suggesting that in self-reports a person is, normally at least, epistemically justified, in a sense that is to be understood in terms of the idea of the person’s “reporting something that he has learned” [p. 145]. But the idea that self-reports state something one has learned is no part of what I was recommending.

Wittgenstein’s target in PI §289 is the target of the “private language” polemic: that is, the fantasy that one can direct language or thought at one’s sensations otherwise than in a way that depends on competence with ordinary sensation talk and the conceptual competence that is part of a package with that linguistic competence. (See PI §384: “You learned the concept ‘pain’ when you learned language.”) Wittgenstein is rejecting a conception, or supposed conception, according to which what justifies one in a self-report of a sensation is the sheer presence to one, conceived as something independent of conceptual capacities one acquired in learning ordinary sensation talk, of “the sensation itself” — a presence one can supposedly register by means of, for instance, a special “this”, not owing anything to one’s competence with ordinary sensation talk. (Not even to one’s competence with the concept of a sensation: see PI §261.) The supposed justification is that that, the supposed referent of the special “this”, is correctly described by the words one uses.

It is the point of the “private language” polemic that we can have only an illusion of understanding this picture. But we can take the point of the “private language” polemic, and still acknowledge that when one makes a self-report of a sensation, apart from very special circumstances, one speaks truly: things are as one says they are. Certainly self-reports are expressions, but, as Finkelstein himself insists, that does not preclude their being statements; when they are correctly made, one speaks the truth. And my point was that (whatever one is talking about) if things are as one says they are (otherwise than by coincidence), that is itself a way of being justified in saying what one says. This is not the specific idea of a way of being justified in what one says, about inner items in particular, that Wittgenstein is rejecting in PI §289. And to invoke this different way of counting makers of self-reports as justified is not at all to suggest that in a self-report of a sensation one is affirming something one has ascertained to be the case. That would imply that its being the case is a reality independent of one’s being in a position to say that it is the case, and that conflicts with a central feature of the “grammar” of self-reports of sensation. The supposed “middle path account”, with its detectivist strand, is irrelevant.

I made much of PI §290, where an interlocutor voice, protesting against the direction Wittgenstein is going in, says: “But isn’t the beginning the sensation — which I describe?” This is another expression of the fantasy that is the target of the “private language” polemic. The interlocutor is trying to hold on to the idea that one is justified in one’s self-report of a sensation in the way Wittgenstein has just rejected: that is, that one is justified by the pres-
ence to one of "the sensation itself", with this presence conceived as something that makes it possible for one to direct language or thought at the sensation without needing to exercise the ordinary linguistic competence one exercises when one speaks with this supposed justification, or the conceptual capacities one acquired when one acquired that ordinary linguistic competence.

The ordinary linguistic competence and the associated conceptual capacities belong together (recall my citation from §384). On that ground I wrote of transposing the interlocutor's talk of describing the sensation, which the interlocutor conceives as there independently of my capacity to describe it, into talk of conceptual capacities being in play in connection with the sensation, correspondingly conceived as there independently of my conceptual capacities. The interlocutor's idea, or illusion of an idea, is that "the sensation itself" comes first, and then one puts words to it. His idea could be equally put by saying that the presence to one of the sensation is prior to any actualization of conceptual capacities. My claim is that Wittgenstein aims to unmask this, in either version, as a fantasy. Exploiting my talk of transposing in the opposite direction, Finkelstein reads into my interpretation the absurd implication that the only way to avoid the interlocutor's confusion is to hold that one cannot have a sensation unless one actually puts words to it. But that is captious. The point is simply this: a sensation's presence to one — a sensation's being an element in one's stream of consciousness, an item one can direct thought at — is not, as the interlocutor thinks (or thinks he thinks), independent of one's competence with ordinary sensation talk and the conceptual competence that is part of a package with that linguistic competence. That is just a way of saying, in perhaps misleadingly positive terms, what it comes to for the target of the "private language" polemic to be nothing but a fantasy.

One falls into that fantasy if one supposes one can use that special "this", which is supposed to work independently of any ordinary competence with sensation talk, to refer to a sensation one feels. So it is a way of rejecting the fantasy to say that a sensation's being present to one, a potential object of one's thought, is not a circumstance independent of and prior to one's ordinary conceptual competence. I tried to capture this by saying that having a sensation in one's stream of consciousness is already, itself, an actualization of elements in one's ordinary conceptual competence.

Finkelstein takes this to imply that according to me the experience of consciously undergoing a sensation has propositional content [see, e.g., p. 148]. But even in the case of perceptual experience of the environment, I have come to doubt that we should follow Sellars, as I used to, in conceiving experiences as having propositional content, the kind of content claims have [see McDowell (2009)]. And certainly the idea of actualizations of conceptual capacities does not imply that just anything describable in those terms must have propositional content.
Finkelstein thinks my picture involves maintaining "that pains represent — that the pain in my wrist is about something, namely itself" [p. 148]. Again, this is captious. When I consciously feel a pain in my wrist the pain is what I feel, the object, if you like, of the experience I undergo in feeling it. My proposal for understanding the direction in which Wittgenstein's reflections tend is that the experience is an actualization of some of my conceptual capacities — a thought, in a somewhat extended sense. In this case, the idea of the object of a thought has to work in a rather special way. Even though the pain is what I feel, it is not something that is there anyway, independently of the thought, in that extended sense, that is my feeling it. We cannot think away my experience, my consciously feeling the way I do, and still have in our picture the element in my stream of consciousness that the pain is. (Maybe something is left if we think away my experience, but it can no longer be an element in my stream of consciousness.) But even though the object of my experience is in that way inseparable from my experiencing it, we can still invoke a limiting case of the distinction between experience and its object, so as to block the problematic implication Finkelstein saddles me with, that the pain, which is what I feel, somehow has itself as its own intentional object.

I think Finkelstein makes unnecessarily heavy weather over the consequences of my claim that having a sensation in one's stream of consciousness is an actualization of conceptual capacities. This belongs with the fact that he thinks I was recommending, and attributing to Wittgenstein, a "thesis about what sensations are" — an instance of a sort of thing Wittgenstein implies that philosophers should not try to advance (PI §128; see Finkelstein's discussion at pp. 140-1). But to repeat, my formulation only says, in positive terms, what it comes to for the supposed special "this" to be a fantasy. The formulation is in a metaphysical register, but that does not disqualify it from being a "grammatical" remark.

III

In PI §304, a protesting interlocutor voice accuses Wittgenstein of concluding "that the sensation itself is a nothing", and a responding voice says: "Not at all. It is not a something, but not a nothing either!" Finkelstein chides me for regarding this as a misstep. He insists that by "the sensation itself" the interlocutor is trying to mean a supposed item that can be referred to "apart from the sort of context in which it is intelligible that a creature should feel pain" [p. 139, n. 6]. The interlocutor is succumbing to what Wittgenstein calls, in the same section, "the grammar which tries to force itself on us here", and the point of Wittgenstein's paradoxical remark is to stop us in our tracks, to compel us to think about that "grammar" and resist its attempt to captivate us.
Fair enough. But I do not see that this exempts the remark from criticism. The responding voice talks as if in trying to give a sense to the phrase “the sensation itself” independent of the anchorage of sensation talk in “the weave of life”, the interlocutor provides us with a topic all right (the “it” that is “not a nothing”), but one of which we can nevertheless say that “it is not a something”. But rejecting the fantasticated “grammar” should be rejecting the thought that the interlocutor’s attempt to confer a use on the phrase “the sensation itself” provides us with a topic at all. A better use of paradox would be to say, of that supposed topic, that it is a nothing. There is no “it”. And now it still seems a live option that we might explain Wittgenstein’s apparent willingness to talk as if we do have a topic in view, of which, however, we should say that “it is not a something”, in the way I did: as an attempt to say something about the sensation itself, but not, now, in the interlocutor’s merely illusory sense — an attempt to capture the fact that a pain I consciously feel, say, is not an object of my experience in feeling it in the way in which a tree I see, say, is an object of my experience in seeing it. The pain is not a something distinct from my experience in feeling it, as the tree is a something distinct from my experience in seeing it. But, as I remarked, its not being a something in that way is not the same as its not being a something at all.

Part of the trouble with Finkelstein’s treatment of my response to PI §304 is that he thinks the source of “the grammar which tries to force itself on us here” is the “privileged-observation” picture of self-knowledge. He writes [p. 138]:

What’s at issue is an impulse to represent us as knowing what goes on in our own minds by a kind of inner observation — as if our mental states and processes were like physical ones, at least insofar as we ourselves can see them, even if no one else can. We could say that the grammar which tries to force itself on us is that of observable physical states, processes, and objects.

This belongs with Finkelstein’s Wright-like casting of detectivism as the primary villain of the philosophical drama. In this immediate context, I think it reflects a misreading of a passage from PI §305: “When one says ‘Still, an inner process does take place here’ — one wants to go on: ‘After all, you see it.’” “The grammar which tries to force itself on us here” is the supposed feasibility of the special “this”. The interlocutor, here as throughout these sections, cannot see how refusing to let that “grammar” force itself on us can be anything but denying that something happens in one’s mind when, say, one feels a pain, or — in this passage — when one recalls something. The wish to say, in protest against this supposed implication, “After all, you see it” could be just as well expressed by saying “After all, it’s there for you”. The interlocutor’s motivation here is not epistemological. A better word for it would be “metaphysical”. The interlocutor thinks the presence to one of items in
one's inner world is under threat; he is not particularly concerned to affirm a specific view about the character of one's knowledge of such items.

And it is of a piece with the misstep in *PI* §304 that there is a misstep when, in *PI* §305, Wittgenstein says that we — he and those who are thinking with him — are "setting our faces against the picture of the 'inner process'". A better response to the accusation of denying something the interlocutor understandably finds obvious — a response more in line with, say, *PI* §423 — would be to give a better understanding of the picture of the inner process (or happening: "Vorgang"). The right thing to do is to free the picture of the inner process from the appearance that there is nothing for it to be except the picture of a referent for the supposed special use of "this".

IV

Of course Finkelstein is right to insist that it is central to the "grammar" of ordinary talk of goings-on in the inner world that in the first person such talk expresses what it reports.

If it were correct to think the need for philosophy in this area comes from a propensity to be puzzled about how it can be that self-reports need no grounds, generating a need to dislodge detectivism and replace it with a better response to such a puzzlement, expression might be the key to the philosophy we need, as Finkelstein thinks. But I think there is something wrong with that Wright-like conception of why the topic is one for philosophy. The reason we need philosophy in this area is rather that we can easily be induced to mishandle the picture of the inner world, to misunderstand what it comes to for its inhabitants to be present in it. As I have been insisting, the mishandling is not specifically epistemological.

The idea of an inner world has to be modelled on the idea of the world of ordinary observable facts — the outer world, as it is natural to say by way of contrast. But we go astray if we assimilate the idea of an inner world too closely to its model. We do that if we suppose that the presence of something in an inner world would have to be a reality independent of the linguistic and conceptual competence of the person whose world it is. That is how it is with something's being there in the outer world — except that the outer world is not someone's, as an inner world is. If we assimilate the idea of an inner world too closely to its model, we fall into thinking we can acknowledge that an inner world is someone's even while we insist that its inhabitants are present in it independently of its owner's linguistic and conceptual competence. Our illusion is that we can construct a picture that conforms to that specification by exploiting the supposed intelligibility of the special use of "this". Our idea is that with the special use of "this" someone can in principle register the independent presence of items in her inner world — independent, that is, of
her ordinary linguistic and conceptual competence. In imagining a use of language that includes the special use of "this", we imagine a use that would not seem to contradict our picture, as the "grammar" of ordinary talk about the inner does (to echo *PI* §427).

If our problem is that we are bewitched by this picture of the inner world, being reminded that expression is central to the "grammar" of talk of the inner is no help. When we fall into the fantasy of the special use of "this", it need not be news to us that we are abrogating the "grammar" of our ordinary language-game (compare *PI* §288). That is not enough to rescue us from the fantasy. Our problem is that we seem to be obliged to abrogate the grammar of the ordinary language-game. That "grammar" seems to contradict our picture of the inner world, and it seems that we must retain the picture, on pain of denying what is obvious, that items are there in our inner world. What we need is to be shown how to understand the presence of inner items to us in a way that does not induce that dissatisfaction with the "grammar" of our ordinary talk. Insisting that the "grammar" of our ordinary talk is as it is — in particular, insisting that self-reports of inner episodes express what they report — does not by itself do anything towards showing us how to dislodge the conviction that our ordinary talk, with the "grammar" it has, is doomed to fail to capture the important thing (compare *PI* §298).

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Notes

1 I shall not consider this part of Finkelstein's argument.
2 I shall use this style to cite passages from *Philosophical Investigations* [Wittgenstein (1953)].
3 Generalized now to include topics for what Wright calls "attitudinal avowals" as well as what he calls "phenomenal avowals". It is striking that the interlocutor shifts easily from protesting against Wittgenstein's supposed denial that anything happens in one when one feels a pain, in *PI* §304, to protesting, in *PI* §305, against a supposed denial that anything happens in one when one remembers something (presumably in a case in which one might say something like "Now I remember"; the topic is not having some knowledge thanks to having retained it, which does not even look like a case of something's happening in one).
REFERENCES


RESUMEN

Finkelstein supone que la tarea filosófica que Wittgenstein emprende en sus reflexiones sobre la idea de lo *interno* consiste en explicar por qué las auto-adscripciones de elementos internos no necesitan fundamento alguno; en particular, su tarea consistiría en ofrecer una explicación mejor que la presentada por el detectivismo, la idea de que tales autoadscripciones tienen su autoridad en virtud de que son el resultado de una capacidad cognitiva especial. Finkelstein me atribuye una lectura de Wittgenstein de acuerdo con la cual éste se habría embarcado en la tarea de encontrar una “vía media” entre el detectivismo y el constitutivismo, esto es: la idea de que aquello sobre lo que versan los informes sobre uno mismo está constituido por informes sobre uno mismo o ciertas propensiones a hacer tales informes. No estoy de acuerdo con esta lectura de Wittgenstein. Defiendo que el objetivo que Wittgenstein ataca es una mala concepción, no de la epistemología de las autoadscripciones, sino de la propia idea de la presencia de tales elementos en tanto que objetos de la auto-adscripción. La mala concepción que Wittgenstein tiene como objetivo es el tema de la polémica del “lenguaje privado”, que se revela como la idea de que hay un modo especial de referencia a los elementos internos, que es independiente de la competencia lingüística que se manifiesta en la capacidad de participar en el habla ordinaria sobre tales elementos.

ABSTRACT

Finkelstein assumes that the philosophical task Wittgenstein undertakes in his reflections about the idea of the inner is to explain why self-ascriptions of inner items need no grounds; in particular, to do better at that task than detectivism, the idea that such self-ascriptions have their authority by virtue of issuing from a special cognitive capacity. He attributes to me a reading of Wittgenstein as engaged in that task; in particular, as pursuing a “middle path” between detectivism and constitutivism, i.e. the idea that what is reported in self-reports is constituted by self-reports or propensities towards self-reports. I protest against this reading of my reading. I argue that Wittgenstein’s target is a misconception, not of the epistemology of self-ascription, but of the very idea of the presence to one of inner items. The target misconception is the topic of Wittgenstein’s “private language” polemic: it shows up as the idea of a special mode of reference to inner items, independent of the linguistic competence that is manifested in being able to engage in ordinary talk about such items.