

Beetle Boxes: Demonstrating the Logic of P-predicates

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In order to illustrate the logic of P-predicates, predicates that apply only to persons but not to material objects, I have conjured up not only an example but a "demonstration". The purpose of the "demonstration" is to facilitate the understanding of the role played by "inner" and "outer" data, by sensation and behavior, in the correct application of these types of predicates. The discussion that follows describes the nature of this "demonstration".

Materials

For the "demonstration" one needs the following items:

1. One opaque envelope for each member of the class and one for the instructor.
2. One translucent envelope for each member of the class and two such envelopes for the instructor. (I made my envelopes out of light-weight (9 lb.), erasable bond, typing paper.)
3. A number of small objects to place in the envelopes (e.g., paper clips, coins, stamps, medallions, slips of paper, etc.). You must have enough of the same kind of object to enable you to place one of that kind in each translucent envelope.

One then proceeds according to the steps listed below.

Step 1

Place various kinds of objects in the opaque envelopes. Distribute one envelope to each student. You should distribute a few envelopes with nothing in them. Keep one opaque envelope for yourself. Do not put anything in your envelope. Ask each student to write his name on the upper right hand corner of his envelope. (This is merely to facilitate the re-distribution of the same envelope to the same student at a later date.) Then ask each student to look into his own envelope but not to look into anyone else's nor to tell anyone else what is in his own envelope.

Questions and Discussion 1. Now ask each student to suppose that the word "pain" refers to what is in his envelope. For now we will suppose that the word "pain" derives its meaning through its reference to the "inner" content of each envelope. Thus, the envelope will be analogous to our own body while its contents will be analogous to the sensations, or "inner" experiences, we have when we have a pain. Now it is time for the first question.

Question 1A: Would it make *sense* to say either that you and I (or you and any other person in the class) have the same “pain” or that we have a different “pain”?

Whatever the answers may be (whether “yes” or “no”), the thing to do is to pursue the reasons behind the various answers. If a student says that it would make sense to say that you and I have the same (or a different) “pain” because we *could* look into each other’s envelope and find out, you must point out that this is contrary to the rules of the game. Also, in the case of *actual* pain-sensation (which is the real concern lying behind the demonstration), it is impossible in principle to look into another’s body in order to find the pain-sensation that is to be compared with your own.

If a student replies that it would make sense to say that we have the same “pain” *even though we cannot* in principle find out whether our “pains” are the same, you might switch the burden of proof onto his shoulders by asking him why he thinks that the claim would be sensible under these circumstances. You might also produce some other examples of claims whose truth it is logically impossible to discern. A claim about the *numerical* identity of *non-continuously* observed particulars would be one such example. However, any new examples will probably not fare any better than the original, especially if the student is rational enough to be concerned with consistency.

If you convince anyone that it would not make sense to ask Question 1A (or to assert the correlative identity claim), then the thing to do is to apply the analogy to our ordinary sense of the word “pain”. If in our ordinary language “pain” refers to pain-sensation and derives its meaning from this reference, then it would make no more sense to say that you and I have the same kind of thing, viz., a pain, than it would to say that you and I have the same contents in our respective envelopes. There is no way to tell whether we are talking about the same thing or anything at all (show the class your envelope that has nothing at all in it). An intersubjective language is impossible if mental predicates refer to private “contents” or events from which they derive their meaning.

If you wish, you can now turn to the question concerning the possibility of a “subjective” language where the words refer to “contents” accessible to only the subject himself. You might ask the following question:

Question 1B: Would it make *sense* for you to claim either that *you* had the same “pain” (or that you had a different “pain”) on some given day, D2, as (than) you had on some other day, D1?

If the consideration of Question 1A takes up at least one class period, you can re-distribute the opaque envelopes to the appropriate people when Question 1B is taken up. You can then let D1 = the day of the earlier class meeting, and D2 = the day of the later class meeting.

If someone suggests that it would make sense to claim that the “pain” had on D2 was the same kind of “pain” had on D1, you can ask on the basis of what criteria could identity be established. If someone suggests that memory is the basis for the truth or falsity of the identity claim, you can ask on the basis

of what criteria could correct memory be distinguished from incorrect memory. Could there be any difference between seeming to remember correctly and actually remembering correctly, given the present conditions? (You might choose to read Wittgenstein's diary example to the class at this point (*PI*, sec. 258, 270).) If the criteria for correctness of memory disappear, then the truth-criteria for any identity claim about non-continuously observed "pains" (the contents in one's *own* envelope) disappear also. You can then point out that the situation is similar to the one encountered in the discussion following Question IA. In that discussion, too, we found that there were no truth-criteria applicable to identity claims. The only difference is that in the earlier case the truth-criteria concerned the identity of the "pains" of two *different* envelopes considered at the same time while here the truth-criteria concern the identity of two temporally distinct "pains" of the *same* envelope. But if the lack of truth-criteria made an intersubjective language impossible in the first case, the lack of truth-criteria will also make a "subjective" language impossible in the second case.

Step II

Put a penny (or at least the same kind of object) in each *translucent* envelope that you will distribute to the class. Keep two translucent envelopes for yourself. Get some construction paper that is nearly the same color as the objects that you place in the translucent envelopes. Cut from this paper a piece that is the size and shape of the objects in the translucent envelopes. (If you place a penny in each translucent envelope, you will cut out a circular disc the size of a penny.) Put the piece of paper in one of your translucent envelopes; leave the other empty.

Questions and Discussion II. This part of the demonstration will be concerned with a criticism of behavioristic interpretations of the meaning of all mental predicates. Here the purpose will not be to show the students that a language is impossible if the words refer only to private "contents". Rather it will be to show that the logic of certain mental concepts does not depend *solely* on observable data.

Ask the students to suppose that the word "pain" refers to what can be seen through the translucent envelope by others. Ask them again not to look into any other person's envelope and not to tell anyone what is in their own. They can look into their own, and they can let others look at the outside of their own envelope from a distance of a few feet. Here is the first question to ask.

Question II: Would it make sense to say either that you and I (or you and any other person in the class) have the same "pain" or that we have a different "pain"? (This is Question IA repeated.)

After you solicit various replies, hold up your translucent envelope that does not contain anything. Ask the students if one could be said to have a "pain" in this envelope. Suppose someone answers "no" on the grounds that there is no observable data, no "pain" behavior. If the answer is correct about

this new sense of "pain" (i.e., as "pain" relates to envelopes and their contents), then it shows that this new sense of "pain" differs from our ordinary sense of the word. In the ordinary sense of the word, one can have a pain without there being any distinctive observable "data", i.e., without there being any pain behavior, as in cases of mild headache or toothache. So observable "data" (pain behavior) is *not necessary* in order to have a pain given the ordinary sense of that word.

Now hold up the envelope with the paper disc in it. Ask the students whether that has a "pain" in it. Suppose the answer is "yes" on the grounds that the right kind of observable data is present, the right kind of "pain" behavior. Now take the paper disc out of the envelope and show it to the class. Ask them to take the contents (the pennies) from their envelopes and hold them up. If the paper disc is a "pain" despite the difference of "inner content", then this sense of "pain" is not our ordinary one. This paper cut-out is analogous to feigned pain behavior. The outward appearance is all right, but the necessary kind of "inner" experience is missing. This shows that given our ordinary sense of the word "pain," behavior is *not sufficient* for having a pain.

Step III

You must now try to tie Step I and Step II together.

Question III: If the word "pain" does not derive its meaning from something "inner" as shown in Step I, and if it does not derive its meaning from something "outer" as shown in Step II (i.e., the "outer" is neither necessary nor sufficient for there to be a "pain"), then from whence does the term derive its meaning?

You might suggest the theory of natural expressions that Wittgenstein puts forth as a possible answer to Question III.

Step IV

You can use the translucent envelopes to illustrate a discussion of other P-predicates. You might take the notions of love or honesty and try to see what role "inner" and "outer" data play in the logic of these concepts. As you go along, you can summarize your results in a table like the one below.

| P-predicate | If the P-predicate is applied correctly, then the relevant "inner" data is — | | If the P-predicate is applied correctly, then the relevant "outer" data is — | |
|-------------|--|------------|--|------------|
| | Necessary | Sufficient | Necessary | Sufficient |
| Pain | X | X | O | O |
| Love | X | O | X | O |
| Honesty | O | O | X | X |

You can either leave the appropriate box blank, put an "O" in it, etc., if the relevant data is not necessary (or sufficient). You can put an "X", a check,

etc. in the appropriate box if the relevant data is necessary (or sufficient).

The peculiar logic of the word "pain" becomes obvious if one looks at the above table. While certain "inner" data, certain kinds of sensation, are both necessary and sufficient in order for one to have a pain, the meaning of the term does not derive from reference to this "inner" data.

Conclusion

This discussion has by no means been intended as a thorough philosophical discussion of the issues that can be raised through use of the "demonstration", but I hope that I have said enough to make evident what the purposes of the "demonstration" are, and how they are supposed to be realized. I have found this graphic illustration helpful in clarifying the pertinent philosophical points and questions that it is meant to raise concerning P-predicates.

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