

From Publicity to Interactivity

Michael Bavidge

Contents

Our Problem.....	2
Normativity.....	3
The Argument from Publicity to Sociality.....	5
Summary of the Argument.....	7
Expression.....	7

That is a deep and wide saying, that no miracle can be wrought without faith – without the worker's faith in himself, as well as the recipient's faith in him. And the greater part of the worker's faith in himself is made up of the faith that other's believe in him.
George Eliot, *Amos Barton*, Ch. II

Our Problem

One way of putting our problem about self-knowledge is to point up an apparent conflict between two aspects of talk about our own thoughts, feelings and intentions. First, we seem to know what we are talking about when we talk about our inner states in a way we cannot claim when we talk about anything else. The dentist may know more about the causes of my toothache than I do, but he doesn't know better than me whether I have a toothache and what my toothache feels like. Furthermore, I seem to be in the best possible position to talk about what I feel. If you want to know whether I have a toothache, I am just the chap to ask. Our knowledge seems secure and not open to the challenges that we face in relation to anything else. If I say I have a toothache, I can't be wrong about it. I may be lying, but I can't have a false belief about it.

On the other hand, when we talk about our own toothaches we use the language we learnt at our mother's knee. We acquired it from others and we share with others. I rely on resources other than my own just as much when I talk about my inner states as when I talk about carburettors or the Andromeda Galaxy. At the risk of a philosophical multiple pile-up, we might say, *what we know* relies only on our own resources, but, the concepts we deploy, captured in *the language we use* to express what we know, depend upon the social world.

In explaining this contrast I have relied on one example, a toothache. Essentially the same general point can be made about mental states other than sensations, such as emotions, beliefs and intentions. There are important differences, for example, between beliefs and sensations, but the same general point about sensations holds for beliefs (only more so): we don't need more than a belief to know that we have the belief, while, on the other hand, our avowals of beliefs depend for their intentional content on public language.

There have been two main responses to this tension. The most familiar, and at first sight, the most plausible, hitches its wagon to the first element. It says we have private access to our own inner states. Our thoughts and feelings are available only to us, and they are immediately available to us. We are locked onto them. Having them is being aware of them; you cannot have them without knowing you have them. The language we use, the way we conceptualize our experience may be socially framed but it is rooted in individual experience. The word 'toothache' is part of the English language – it has a particular history and determinate use that can be captured in a dictionary definition. But its meaning

is an individual experience. We know what a toothache is because we experience toothache. If we forget that, we leave out what matters most about the toothache, namely what it feels like, i.e. we leave out what it is, because what it is is what it feels like.

The second response is prepared to leave out what others take to be the essential element. It commits itself to the public nature of language and knowledge. Behaviourism is an example. It points out that science requires publicly available data and publicly checkable procedures and all knowledge is or aspires to be scientific knowledge. Consequently it downplays the special security that we think we have in relation to self-knowledge. What really supports and provides content to our talk about inner states are physiological states, public behaviour and dispositions to act in particular ways. If our personal language does not seem to operate like that, it can be discounted as an oiling of the wheels of social life without any serious cognitive commitment. Special cognitive security is really misread cognitive emptiness. Of course, the bank vault is secure - because there is nothing in it.

If both attempts to manage with just one element of the contrast fail, is there a Third Way? If there is, it will have to do two things: it will have to preserve the special character of personal ascriptions; and it will have to account for the public nature and communicative power of the language we use to express our thoughts and feelings. To work towards these objectives I offer two slogans: first, normativity reaches all the way down; second, we speak *out of* our experience before we speak *about* it.

Normativity

By 'normativity' I mean the shaping of areas of activity or discourse by rules or conventions, such that there is a distinction to be made between what is appropriately or rightly done or correctly said in those domains. Normativity features whenever we say things like 'You must ...', 'It follows ...' or 'The rule demands ...'.

The idea that normativity reaches all the way down means, among other things, that one cannot stand outside a normative domain and find arguments of the same normative type to force oneself into that domain. For example, there are reasons in chess why in a particular situation you *must* play this or that move - understanding these constitutive rules is part of knowing how to play chess. And there are reasons in a particular situation where you *should* play this or that move - understanding these reasons is part of competence in playing chess. But there is no reason *in chess* for playing chess or why chess is played this way.

Imagine teaching someone to play. You give them the rule: the Bishop moves only diagonally. Suppose someone, a child or a philosopher, asks why *must* the Bishop move diagonally? What answer can you give? ‘It just does. That’s the rule. That’s the way the game works. That is what we do’. Are these good answers? Well, they are not straightforward answers because they are not answers to a straightforward question. ‘Why *must* the Bishop move diagonally?’ is not a question in chess – If you insist on asking it, seeking a *justification*, the only available response is resorting to the plain fact. But it is a funny fact: you appeal to what we do when we play chess. We are not making the move prohibited by Hume from a fact to a value. The fact we appeal to is behaviour already structured by the rule. Normativity reaches all the way down.

If you try to reach down to value-free fact, you end up with a question like: why must this piece of wood move diagonally? But there is no moment at which to ask this question: if you see the chess piece as just a bit of wood, it doesn’t *have to* move in any particular way; but if you see it as a chess piece, you already see it as something which has a distinctive possible set of movements – and you see that, even if you do not yet know what that set is. If the child does not know that there is more to the Bishop than he knows, he does not yet know enough to learn to play chessⁱ. Edith, my 3-year old granddaughter, likes playing chess but without the board: she thinks the board is a silly limitation on the endless possible things you can do with these interesting bits of wood.

Suppose someone, perhaps a bored child, asks: why must I submit myself to this rule? (They are more likely to say ‘I don’t want to play’.) An answer might be: You don’t have to, you don’t have to play at all; but if you do, you must move bishops diagonally. Wittgenstein wrote: *"How am I able to obey a rule?" - if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do. If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: "This is simply what I do."*ⁱⁱ But this can’t mean: you must do this because this is what I do. As if it made sense to say ‘well, this is the way *I* play chess’, as if *I* had anything to do with the normative grip of the rules of chess. It gets no better if I say ‘This is what *we* do’. Not, at any rate, if I mean to cite a sociological fact: *we here happen* to play chess this way. Normativity is a feature of the game; it reaches all the way down. We do not introduce it by choosing the rules or taking up an attitude to them or throwing our weight around.

But how can normativity be a feature of the game itself? Well it has rules. Saul Kripke pursued Wittgenstein’s ideas about normativity to a sceptical conclusionⁱⁱⁱ: if, for example, you and I are together following a rule and we call out the numbers 2, 4, 6, 8, we both must next say ‘10’. The rule I have been

following is ‘add 2’ so it seems to me that 10 *must* be the next number. But suppose you say ‘12’ and, not only that, you claim that you did not change rule mid-stream, but were always following the same rule – let’s say ‘add 2 for single digit numbers and then add 4 for double digit numbers’. Your behaviour conforms to your rule just as mine does to my rule; your continuation of the sequence was just as right as mine. This has alarmingly sceptical implications: there is no way that either of us can tell which rule the other is following; there is nothing in your performance that enables me to know which rule you were following. But that is not the most alarming conclusion. The real shock is that there is nothing which determines which rule *I* was following. There is no way in which my own past performance determines what I must do now. And that means: I don’t know *now* which rule I am now following.

Lots of things have been said about this argument. I want you to think just about this: it seemed at first, in my example, that everything goes swimmingly up to 8 and then disaster strikes. But in fact the disaster was there from the beginning. From the start, we only *seemed* to be doing the same thing; our counting only happened to coincide. The disaster after 8 only shows that we had been at odds all along. If we really understand each other, if it is not just that our behaviour coincides, we must be assured that we are doing the same thing.

Worse than that, if I think only about myself, I never knew from the start what the real meaning of what I was doing was. Something must determine for me what is really going on in my own mind. There has to be something objective. But what on earth could provide that assurance?

The Argument from Publicity to Sociality

The conclusion of these difficulties is that normativity, in all its forms, requires objectivity. That is the first conclusion of Wittgenstein’s actual argument against privacy at PI §258: *‘Let us imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign "S" and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation ... in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about "right".’*

The difficulty Wittgenstein insists on has essentially nothing to do with the innerness or privacy of sensations. It hangs on the absence of an objective *criterion of correctness*. Nothing his opponents suggest allows for a gap between being right and thinking one is right; that could only be provided by something independent of an individual’s beliefs.

Wittgenstein attacked two attempts to provide objectivity: Platonism and Empiricism. The Platonist thinks that our ability to do things correctly ultimately depends on something or other which is just right in itself in terms of which whatever we do can be assessed: rules that apply themselves or rules without interpretations; self-evident truths or truths without judgments. The Empiricist cannot take this transcendental route because his world could not contain anything as weird as a Platonic Idea. He commits himself to brute naturalism: there are no ultimate reasons just causes. His Empiricism commits him to the idea of data delivered up by a generous Nature, which is then processed by natural psychological capacities. As if there were some brute fact that could of itself determine the way we must talk about it.

Given that these strategies fail, what makes the Wittgenstein's appeal to "*This is simply what I do*" work? Some people understand the appeal as part of a sort of Wittgensteinian Quietism. The idea is that you downplay scepticism as Wittgenstein does in *On Certainty*; you emphasise the contexts in which meaningful doubts are raised and accuse the sceptic of trying to opt out of those contexts. Philosophical therapy lulls the sceptical mind into accepting the commonsense certainties of everyday life. To some, Crispin Wright for example, this seems like an avoidance of philosophy: a refusal to consider questions that might 'yield a philosophical illuminating answer'.^{iv}

On the other hand, if you don't try to duck the problem, if you think of the statement, "*This is simply what I do*", as providing a foundation that stops the sceptical search, then the appeal to brute behaviour seems no more immune to criticism than any other candidate. Simon Blackburn writes in *Spreading the Word*,^v "*it is going to be difficult to picture the emergence of truth and falsity out of customs and practices, just as it is difficult to picture the emergence of meaning out of any amalgam of mental and physical facts*". That is why he draws the conclusion that "*If an individual cannot [create and abide by his own use of a term], the fact that he is surrounded by others seems a doubtful source of help.*"^{vi} John McDowell puts a similar point in his own funny way: "*How could multiplying what are, considered by themselves blind responses, ... bring it about that the responses are, after all, not blind*".^{vii}

If we continue to think that Wittgenstein's "*This is simply what I do.*" is an answer to a question asked by a Cartesian individual looking for solitary assurance, it will look as unconvincing as any other answer. If nothing changes in this philosophical debate other than the answer to the sceptical question, the brute pragmatist is no more convincing than the impatient parent who says to the disobedient child 'Do it, because I say so'.

I hope the point is now clear why I went on about the chess example. The lesson was that there is no moment at which to ask the question, ‘why must the bishop move diagonally?’ We either ask the question too early, in which case we are not asking it about the chess piece, but about a piece of wood; or we ask it too late, in which case in recognising its status as a chess piece we already know that it is determined by a particular pattern of moves.

Blackburn asks: how can being ‘surrounded’ by others help? He has, so to speak, asked the question too early. He thinks of our socially embeddedness as if it were just a matter of being surrounded by people, much as Edith thinks the chess pieces are irritatingly surrounded by the board. But we are not *surrounded* by others. In my next paper I will ask: what is it about being socially embedded that goes beyond being surrounded by others? Part of the answer is that language requires normativity, normativity requires publicity, and publicity requires other people, not just their simultaneous existence but their normatively structured interaction. When we think about language we must think not just about syntax and semantics but about the dynamics of language.

Summary of the Argument

The line of argument I am searching for goes something like this: Self knowledge in its full-blown linguistic version involves language. Language involves normativity; normativity requires publicity; publicity requires objectivity; no fact empirical or transcendental can provide a basis for objectivity. Objectivity requires other people, but not as some brute power that enforces conformity, but as fellow participants in a normatively structured domain. Being a participant in a normatively structured domain involves self-expression.

Expression

Now I want to return to the subject of expression. Remember one of the requirements we specified for an adequate account of self-knowledge was that it preserve the special character of self-knowledge – the fact that it is different from and somehow more secure than other sorts of knowledge. An essential part of my answer is an appeal to expression. Other philosophers have had the same idea, Finkelstein and Bar-On, for example. But Ian and I put expression at the centre of our species-neutral theory of mind in *Can We Understand Animal Minds* back in 1994 –so no modesty here.

My slogan, you recall, was ‘we speak out of our experience before we speak about it’. That is meant to suggest, among other things, the following:

- a metaphysical position: expression is constitutive of experience
- a semantic position: our *reports* of our experiences depend on our prior *expressions* of those experiences.
- an epistemic position: we know what other people are thinking, intending and feeling primarily through their expressions.

I want to develop these points by contrasting what I am proposing with what Finkelstein writes in his excellent book *Expression and the Inner*. I agree with the whole drift of that book but I am constantly disconcerted by it because almost everything he says seems slightly skew-whiff. Now I might be deeply misunderstanding him (and then we really disagree) or maybe I am trivially misreading him (in which case I am embroiled in pointless verbal divergences), but, in either case, by contrasting what I think I believe with what I think he means I can make my points relatively quickly.

My metaphysical position is that expression is constitutive of experience. Finkelstein identifies a position which he calls ‘Constitutivism’ and which consists in the theory that ‘...*what I say or think about my own mental state plays a constitutive role in determining what it is*’^{viii}. He goes on to interpret this as ‘...*the content of an intentional state, like that of a rule, is a matter for us to decide*’^{ix} and ‘... *intentional state attributions are not based on interpretation but on ... stipulation.*’^x. It is these stipulations that are ‘regress-stoppers’, as he calls them, and for that reason they purport to explain the security of self-knowledge^{xi}.

Now I don’t deny that some thinkers have argued this way – he cites Crispin Wright and Charles Taylor – but not me. I never thought of Constitutivism in relation to the content of language, but in relation to the dynamics of language. What seems to me important about Constitutivism is the idea that experience gets expressed. An experiencer who has a ‘world’ (in something like McDowell’s sense of ‘world’) that it experiences as distinct from itself, will give expression to its take on, and response to, the world. The very idea of observer-experiencer, without interactive and responsive activity, is inconceivable.

When he develops his own alternative account of expression later on Finklestein writes ‘*a pain and its expression hang together in their logical space of animate life*’^{xii}. Though this formulation is problematic – a point I will return to – it sounds much more like my sort of Constitutivism.

In the case of language-users, mental states become linguistically expressible and avowable. They don’t have to. Maybe there was a period when human

beings found non-linguistic expressive behaviour sufficient for socially communication, as many animals do, and never extended language beyond practical dealings with the environment. But if they came to voice their feelings and thoughts, they did so first as expressers, not as introspecters. Acquiring language involves becoming competent in the various dynamics of language not just with the meaning of words: it involves engaging with language as an expresser, not as reporter. We speak out of our mental states before we speak about them. The meaning of our expressive vocabulary goes through our expressive use of it.

My epistemic position is: we know what other people are thinking, intending and feeling primarily through their expressions. I agree with Finkelstein's theses that avowals have truth-values and that they have a special epistemic status - but not primarily because they are, as he persists in calling them, 'self-ascriptions'. I do not deny that avowals can be self-ascriptions but, in so far as they are, they are already putting in jeopardy their unique status (which Finkelstein is so anxious to defend); they don't look that much more secure than any other sort of report or description or ascription.

This is not meant to be wordplay. 'Ascription' is too much like 'attribution' and hyphenating a 'self' to it does not improve matters. When I *avow*, I am not primarily ascribing or attributing a mental state or an intention to myself, I am speaking *out of it*. In this respect an avowal has the character of an expression. But unlike expressive *behaviour* an avowal depends upon the resources of actively engaged language. The child who screams when hurt, expresses his pain; when he cries out 'It hurts; it hurts' he hasn't just replaced words for the screams, despite what Wittgenstein says at PI §244, *A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour. "So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?" - On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it.*

Certainly the child is not describing his pain. But he has not just substituted words for screams nor just added a wallpaper of words to his expressive behaviour. What is new, is that he has recently become a member of an expressive community with the ability to speak authoritatively. The child who avows and does not just express his pain, exercises his recently acquired power

- to voice, not just vent, his inner states to others
- to call on others
- to put his truthfulness on the line
- to demand belief.

This is the point at which to cite Wittgenstein's remark: *To use a word without a justification does not mean to use it without right.* (PI 289)

Finkelstein recognises the importance of authority in relation to the role of self-expression in underpinning self-knowledge. This matters because it focuses our attention on the dynamics of language rather than on semantics. But here again his account makes me uncomfortable. He quotes Crispin Wright: *'The authority which our self-ascriptions of meaning, intention and decision assume is not based on any kind of cognitive advantage, expertise or achievement. Rather, it is, as it were, a concession, unofficially granted to anyone whom one takes seriously as a rational subject'*. Finkelstein summarizes this view: *'A subject's authority about his own intentions is very much like the authority of an army colonel when he declares an area off-limits'*^{xiii}. Then he comments that 'first-person authority' is *'a bit of philosopher's jargon'*^{xiv} and the colonel analogy, if not downright wrong, is misleading.

Note the weasel words in Finkelstein's sentence *'... [authority] is, as it were, a concession, unofficially granted to anyone whom one takes seriously as a rational subject'*. The authority of the linguistic expresser is not any sort of *concession*; it is not *unofficially* granted to anyone whom one takes seriously as a rational subject. It is constitutive of taking someone seriously as a subject. The colonel's order is an exercise, reasonable or unreasonable, of authority; it is not constitutive of his authority. Finally, he is right to point out that authority involves social recognition but authority is not *granted*; it is acknowledged.

Finkelstein understands an avowal to be a self-ascription or report or comment: *'...an avowal of happiness typically performs two functions: it expresses the speaker's happiness, and it says something true – that the speaker is happy.'*^{xv}; and again, *'... one of the ways in which a person may express her state of mind is by commenting on it'*^{xvi}. From the start, he rejects the sort of Expressivism that claims that *'self-ascription or avowals of mental states should be understood as expressions rather than assertions.'*^{xvii} Well, I don't disagree with the drift of what he is saying and particularly with what he is aiming at, which is the idea that an avowal can be true or false. But an avowal is not a self-ascription or report or comment; it is an expression or a declaration. We may well treat an expression or declaration detached, as it were, from its expressive role and context, for example, if we report it to a third party or if we draw back from a conversation and wonder about the sincerity of the person we are talking to. Then the natural question may be: is his avowal true? But in the heat of conversation, the primary issue is not: is it true? But is he trustworthy? Or, though it sounds like philosopher's jargon I admit, has the speaker the competence to exercise his authority? Edith screamed, in fierce 3 year-old rage, *'I don't like watching butterflies, I only like frightening them'*. We did not take her seriously. We can even distrust our own authority. Dennis Nilsen, an intelligent and sensitive serial killer as serial killers go, recognised this problem

“Words like ‘sorry’ hold little comfort for the bereaved, I mistrust my own inner sincerity to bear even to utter them.”

These are failures of authority. The 3 year-old is having a tantrum and, as we say, she’s lost it. Nilsen is so lost in self-delusion or wickedness that not even he can trust himself even when he tries to be honest.

There are two perspectives on the security of self-knowledge: from our point of view, our special confidence in our own self-knowledge does indeed spring from a sort of immediacy; but not the epistemic immediacy of the *Cogito* or of introspection, but from the directness of expression: we experience our conceptualised inner states and we voice them. From the point of view of other people, the confidence they rightly place in our avowals depends on their direct experience of authoritative expressive behaviour.

ⁱ Locke was wrong when he wrote: ‘Each of these [the child, the adult, the chemist] uses equally the word gold, when they have occasion to express the idea which they have applied it to: but it is evident that each can apply it only to his own idea; nor can he make it stand as a sign of such a complex idea as he has not.’ John Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Bk III, Ch. 2.

ⁱⁱ PI 217

ⁱⁱⁱ Saul Kripke, 1982. *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

^{iv} David Finkelstein, *Expression and the Inner*, Harvard p. 78.

^v Simon Blackburn, 1984, *Spreading the Word*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, p. 87.

^{vi} Blackburn criticises analogies (an orchestra, money) which have been offered to illuminate the emergence of meaning. His criticisms miss the point: his “pressure to conform” is an example of reduction of authority to power. In the orchestra all the players are playing prior to playing together. Compare singing. We can distinguish making noises from individuals singing, from communal singing from choral singing. First individuals make noises; then there is communal singing (Howler Monkeys); then individual singing; finally choral singing.

^{vii} McDowell, 1998, p. 408

^{viii} Finkelstein, p. 28

^{ix} Finkelstein, p. 37

^x Finkelstein, p. 43

^{xi} Finkelstein, p. 44

^{xii} Finkelstein, p. 135

^{xiii} Finkelstein, p. 38

^{xiv} Finkelstein, p. 102

^{xv} Finkelstein, p. 101

^{xvi} Finkelstein, p. 102

^{xvii} Finkelstein, p. 5