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Wittgenstein and Understanding Others: Mind, Body and Language

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Wittgenstein rejects the idea that 'secure understanding is only possible if we first doubt everything that can be doubted, and then remove all these doubts'. This paper attempts to clarify what this rejection implies, especially in connection with the problem of mind-body dualism and to show what the 'understanding' of others means from the perspective of 'misunderstanding'. On the basis of Stanley Cavell's reinterpretation of Wittgenstein his view on 'an attitude towards a soul' is examined from the perspective of limitation in the understanding of others.

INTRODUCTION

In *Philosophical Investigations* Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) presents his view of language and introduces the key concept of a "language game". He thinks of language not as a solid structure but as dynamic movement like a game, so it requires us not only to use it but to commit ourselves to it. This suggests that when we use words we have to make a judgment. In other words, it requires of us 'something of the space of responsibility and judgment', which translation especially exposes (Standish, 2010, p. 6). How, then, is this view of language connected with the understanding of others? What is the secure understanding of others which is based on this view of language? In this paper I want to answer such questions.

In the first section two kinds of secure understanding are shown; the Cartesian and Wittgensteinian. In the second section Wittgenstein's criticism of the Cartesian thought is made and Wittgenstein's idea of understanding is revealed. In the third section, based on the idea of the second section and on Stanley Cavell's reinterpretation of Wittgenstein, his view on 'an attitude towards a soul' (Wittgenstein, 1953, p. 178)¹ is examined from the perspective of limitation in the understanding of others.

TWO INSTANCES OF A SECURE UNDERSTANDING

Wittgenstein shows us in *Philosophical Investigations* an instance of understanding such that 'secure understanding is only possible if we first doubt everything that can be doubted, and then remove all these doubts' (Wittgenstein, 1953, §87). In this instance, to understand something means to make any uncertainty of it vanish, then to make it clearly defined. This means that the secure understanding is something 'complete, final, or conclusive' (Baker & Hacker, 1980, p. 445). It is, so to say, metaphysically true.

This way of searching for secure understanding, namely to ‘doubt everything that can be doubted, and then remove all these doubts’ can be called the ‘Cartesian method’ (p. 446). On this method any misunderstanding imaginable to us must be cleared away.

Wittgenstein also regards the removal of misunderstanding as important in his way of investigating (Wittgenstein, 1953, §90), but he suggests that ‘an explanation serves to remove or to avert a misunderstanding—one, that is, that would occur but for the explanation; not everyone that I can imagine’ (§87). This means that he does not care about all imaginable misunderstanding but only those misunderstandings that would happen on this occasion. Wittgenstein is not concerned about the misunderstanding that would not happen in this very circumstance, so it can be said that Wittgensteinian secure understanding is also connected with its occasion. This suggests that it may not be metaphysically true.

Wittgensteinian secure understanding is obviously opposite to the Cartesian secure understanding, so the way of investigating it is also different. Norman Malcolm says that Wittgenstein’s emphasis is ‘on the role that *not doubting* plays in human thinking, language and action’ (Malcolm, 1988, p. 306). In fact, Wittgenstein states that ‘the essence of our investigation’ is not to ‘seek to learn anything *new* by it’ but to ‘understand something that is already in plain view’ (Wittgenstein, 1953, §89). So it can be said that Descartes encourages us to doubt everything that can be doubted, while Wittgenstein warns us not to doubt too much.

THE CRITICISM OF THE CARTESIAN SECURE UNDERSTANDING AND THE CARTESIAN METHOD

As mentioned above two types of secure understanding are shown in §87 of *Philosophical Investigations*, namely, the Cartesian secure understanding and Wittgensteinian secure understanding. Each understanding has its own way of searching or investigating; the Cartesian method and the way of Wittgensteinian investigation. Both of them could apparently coexist as two ways of searching or investigating. The truth is, however, that Wittgenstein denies the Cartesian secure understanding and the Cartesian method. First I examine the denial of the Cartesian secure understanding and then the denial of the Cartesian method.

Wittgenstein’s Criticism of the Cartesian Secure Understanding

The Cartesian secure understanding is like the final destination of the Cartesian method, so it is, as mentioned above, the metaphysical truth. So it can be said that the Cartesian secure understanding is a state. The understanding as a state could be the basis of one’s perception as if it were the source of one’s knowledge, because it is the conclusive definition. It would enable us to perceive something and we would apply it in various situations. The Cartesian secure understanding is such a state and its secureness, or its certainty is, as Norman Malcolm says, ‘absolutely unconditional’ (Malcolm, 1988, p. 312).

Wittgenstein, however, rejects the idea that ‘the understanding itself is a state which is the source of the correct use’ (Wittgenstein, 1953, §146). He says, ‘the

application is still a criterion of understanding' (*ibid.*). The implication of this is the fact that understanding is always accompanied with application, or in other words, 'more than any of those more or less characteristic accompaniments or manifestations of understanding' (§152). This corresponds to the idea, which is remarked above, that Wittgensteinian secure understanding is closely related to the occasion, the situation and the context. Now it can be said rather that the application in the context of the language game precedes the understanding. Therefore understanding is, based on Wittgenstein's thought, not any hidden thing or state but manifested with processes 'which are characteristic of understanding' (§154). In this sense the understanding is 'akin to an ability' (Baker & Hacker, 1980, p. 626). It is not static as a state but dynamic as an ability.

This difference of understanding leads to the difference of certainty of understanding. Malcolm contrasts the Wittgensteinian certainty with the Cartesian certainty and states that the former is 'restricted', that is to say, 'conditioned by the regularities and vicissitudes of real life', while the latter is 'completely unrestricted and unconditional' (Malcolm, 1988, p. 312). The Cartesian certainty must be final and conclusive, while the Wittgensteinian certainty could not be so.

Wittgenstein's Criticism of the Cartesian Method

Second I examine Wittgenstein's denial of the Cartesian method. Wittgenstein says as follows:

It can also be put like this: we eliminate misunderstandings by making our expressions more exact; but now it may look as if we were moving towards a particular state, a state of complete exactness; and as if this were the real goal of our investigation (Wittgenstein, 1953, §91).

In this section Wittgenstein obviously rejects the Cartesian method, which is to move 'towards a particular state, a state of complete exactness'. Gordon Baker and Peter Hacker say that Wittgenstein's criticism of the Cartesian method intimates that 'of a philosophical search for the ultimate foundations of language' (Baker & Hacker, 1980, p. 446), which is the foundation of the ideal language. However, Wittgenstein regards the ideal language as 'our requirement', for it is not 'a result of investigation' (Wittgenstein, 1953, §107). This is because his investigation is into our actual language. Through his investigation Wittgenstein attempts to 'bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use' (§116), while the Cartesian method seems to attempt to bring words forward from their everyday to their metaphysical use.

These considerations have shown us Wittgenstein's way of investigating. He does not attempt to see hidden processes because if they are hidden he cannot know what he has to look for (§153), instead he attempts to see manifested processes. In short, he does not try to understand the hidden fact but to understand, or describe, the obvious fact. His investigation 'leaves everything as it is' (§124). Then, based on such a way of understanding, how can the understanding of others be described? In the next section I will answer this question comparing his thought with that of the dualist's.

THE ATTITUDE TOWARDS OTHERS

The considerations in the last section have shown that Wittgensteinian understanding is not a state but ability because of its manifestations, and it follows that it is not separable from its context. This implies that in Wittgenstein's thought understanding and his way of investigating are indistinguishable, so Wittgensteinian understanding is closely related to the attitude, which is the basis of investigating. How, then, is the attitude towards others in his thought? In this section I clarify Wittgensteinian attitude towards others, comparing with that of the mind-body dualist, who follows the Cartesian method. First I consider the latter.

The Mind-Body Dualist's Attitude towards Others

One who attempts to understand others on the basis of mind-body dualism has a certain attitude; the attitude that 'the ideal "must" be found in reality' (§101). This is because he follows the Cartesian method, which attempts to understand the matter of which others are made and to disclose hidden secret of others. He may attempt to disclose the mental process 'which seems to be hidden behind those coarser and therefore more readily visible accompaniments' (§153). Or he may attempt to search for something like the 'real other' or something between mind and body. However, as Stanley Cavell says, "[b]etween" is first of all a picture' (Cavell, 1979, p. 341), namely, an ideal which 'we think we already see it there' (Wittgenstein, 1953, §101). The dualist first of all covers the fact of others with such an ideal, so he ignores what is plain about others. This means that he ignores his limitation of the understanding of others because he attempts to understand others according to a metaphysical ideal, and he also ignores his finitude as a human being because he attempts to understand others with his mind alone. He does not care about how is the occasion or his position, which he occupies, with his body, as a human being.

Wittgensteinian Attitude towards Others

Wittgenstein naturally denies such an attitude, but he also says what a dualist might say. He suggests that '[m]y attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul' (p. 178). Doesn't this imply what a dualist might insist, for example, that the 'real he' is in his mind? But in the following line he also says '[t]he human body is the best picture of the human soul' (*ibid.*). How should his words be interpreted?

Cavell suggests that Wittgenstein does not support 'the myth of the body as a veil', which is, for example, that 'what we cannot see' is 'hidden *by* the body or hidden *within* it': instead he attempts to 'replace or to reinterpret these fragments of myth' (Cavell, 1979, p. 368). 'By' and 'within' are pictures provided by mind-body dualism, and Cavell says Wittgenstein regards them as false. Therefore the soul is not in the body or on the body. 'The human body is the best picture of the human soul'. Wittgenstein intends to '*understand* something that is already in plain view' (Wittgenstein, 1953, §89).

Does this mean, then, Wittgenstein is 'a behaviourist in disguise' (§307) because of his apparent ignorance of a soul or mind? In opposition to it Cavell claims that '[i]f

this is behaviorism in disguise then a statue is a stone in disguise' (Cavell, 1979, p. 400). Wittgenstein, that is to say, does not attempt to deny or agree with the existence of a soul or a mind, but to point out the unproductiveness of discussion about "something hidden". Cavell says that 'not to believe there is such a thing as the human soul is not to know what the human body is, what it is of, heir to' (*ibid.*). It is too natural a fact to discuss it.

Wittgenstein tries to 'fix [his] gaze absolutely sharply on this fact' (Wittgenstein, 1953, §115). This is, unlike the dualist's, the attitude out of his finitude as a human being because he realizes that it is his body on this occasion, which faces others. He does accept the limitations of the understanding of others because he attempts to be concerned with what is in plain view of others, viz, his body. Such secure concern for others, or attitude towards others, enables us to manifest what is characteristic of our understanding of our own judgments of, and responsibilities for, others. Taking such an attitude and committing ourselves in the language game with others provides our understanding of others.

NOTE

- 1 For the work of Wittgenstein (1953), section numbers in Part I are indicated by "§", and page numbers are used for Part II.

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