

"An Attitude Towards a Soul"

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With the remark "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul." (PI p. 178), Wittgenstein is responding to a specific philosophical discussion and the way it presents our relationship with other human beings. The tradition he is mainly turning against is the Cartesian tradition which regards human beings as consisting of two parts, a material body and an immaterial mind or soul. Of these two, the mind is seen as the real person while the body is seen as a mere automaton, that does not grant that the other bodies I see around me also have souls and thereby are persons. However, I will not begin this essay by giving a more detailed account of the Cartesian view of a person. Rather, I want to begin with giving a more personal account of the impact Wittgenstein's remark has had on my own thinking about these matters, and then go on to discuss what impact it should have on the philosophical discussion about other souls, minds and human beings.

I

One of the first thoughts that struck me when I, a couple of years ago, came in contact with Wittgenstein's remark that our attitude towards other human beings is "an attitude towards a soul" was that with this idea, much of the importance I had previously seen in the question whether human beings have souls or not disappeared. Before that, I had often had the feeling that, with the decreasing influence of the church and the Christian faith, we were slowly losing what grounds we might have had for acting morally towards our fellow human beings. I am not sure if I can describe exactly what my concerns were at this point, but they went in the direction that, if there were no such thing as a soul to the human being, there would be no justification for treating human beings in the special way the Judaeo-Christian tradition demands of us. Without a concept of a soul, there would, as I saw it, be no reason for treating a human being any differently than an animal, a tree or a stone, not to say that there are any great similarities in how we treat these. There would be no reason for regarding the human being as something special, no reason for valuing and respecting the human life. To be able to defend our moral behaviour, which I wanted to maintain unaltered, it then seemed as if we needed to give some kind of description of what a human being is, to make sense of the idea that a human being is to be treated in some other way than an animal, a tree or a stone. As I tried to find such a description of what a human being is, I looked for something that could be understood in terms of a non-religious soul, or, to escape the religious connotations, a mind, an entity that possessed certain qualities such as thinking or self-consciousness. Saying what this 'something' was, never mind finding it, or what the words 'soul' or 'mind' were meant to refer to, was of course very difficult, but the temptation to say that the real person was something else than the human body was still very strong. With Wittgenstein's remark however, the question whether human beings have souls, or what a soul, or a mind is, lost much of its appeal. The question now, was not so much

whether we can be said to have souls or not, or how we could understand this notion of a soul. The point was rather that we react to human beings as we react to souls, and that this was where we needed to start if we wanted to know what is meant with words such as souls and human beings.

Looking back, I have some difficulties in understanding that this was the way I thought about these things, but I can still remember the struggle I had with some of these questions and the importance I attached to finding an answer to them. I think this shows the powerful grip the Christian division between body and soul and the Cartesian division between body and mind has had on our thinking. We seem to be tempted to think about human beings in this way; it seems to be very easy to see the real human being or the real person as something else than the body and to attach more value to this unobservable non-bodily being than to the bodily being that stands in front of us. That we seem to be so drawn to this picture of a human being however, cannot only reflect on the impact certain philosophical or religious traditions has had on our way of thinking. There seems to be something more in our lives that tempts us to think in these ways, even if it probably is impossible to state exactly what. Descartes was not simply stupid or mistaken. He rather caught on to something that everyone of us has experienced who ever wondered whether they in fact were alone in the world or if they ever really could understand other people.

My first reading of Wittgenstein's remark feels as quite a crude reading of what he is saying, but I think there is something important in the way I first understood the remark. Wittgenstein wanted to take away our attention from one way of looking at the questions involved. He wanted to show that the questions we are asking are the wrong questions, that we, in a way, are looking in the wrong place when we are both asking and trying to answer these questions. The question is not whether I can be justified in thinking that other people have minds or souls, or a mental life like my own. The point that Wittgenstein wants to make is rather that we respond to human beings in a certain way, without having any justification for it. We have a certain attitude toward other human being that is not grounded in a certain opinion about what kind of beings they are, but rather presupposes opinions of this sort. Wittgenstein talks about these responses as primitive reactions. They do not build on certain thoughts or ideas that would justify us responding in this way. Rather the responses go to build these thoughts and ideas. The "behaviour is pre-linguistic ... a language-game is based *on it*, ... it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought." (Z 541). In the rest of the essay I will discuss how we are to understand these remarks in relation to the Cartesian picture of the human being.

II

One of the main problems I now see in my attempts to answer the question whether human beings have souls or not, is that it is very difficult to grasp what the question is about. How can I separate something like a soul or a mind from the living human being that I meet, and what would it be for me to think of them as not possessing this soul or mind? As John.W. Cook says in trying to state the problem of other minds in 'Human Beings', we cannot ask "Do other people have a mental life, as I do?" since that already comes with saying that they are people. They are not people if they do not have a mental life, think, feel and so on, and when we are posing the question about other minds, our interest is not to find out whether this particular person has a mental life, if he is in a coma for example. The question then seems to be more like "Are the things that I take to be people really people, that is, do they have thoughts and emotions and so on?" ("Human Beings", p. 121). If this is the question, it seems to be very difficult to answer. If they are not human beings, what are they? What else could they be? When I look at another human being, talk to him and so on, it is very difficult

for me to think of him as something else than a human being, a statue or a machine or something similar. There does not seem to be room to doubt that this, the 'thing' I have in front of me, is a human being.

Descartes however, seemed to have room for such a doubt. He seemed to have thought that, when we look at other human beings, we could imagine that they were mere bodies or automata, moving around by some strange force but not having minds as we do. Wittgenstein asks, "But, can't I imagine that the people around me are automata" and is able to picture "people with fixed looks (as in a trance) going about their business". When he tries to imagine that "[t]he children over there are mere automata; all their liveliness is mere automatism" however, the words only become meaningless or produce an "uncanny feeling" (PI 420). I can picture people as machines in some circumstances, even if this, as Wittgenstein says, might be a bit uncanny, but I cannot impress the picture of machines on human beings in their ordinary circumstances, at least not without getting the feeling that something weird is going on. Now, Wittgenstein claims that this is not because I believe or am certain that they are not automata. I do not see them as automata because I am justified in the belief that they are something else, namely human beings. I see them, first and foremost, as human beings and this is something that is more basic than anything I can entertain any beliefs about. Saying "'I believe that he is not an automaton', just like that, so far makes no sense." (PI p. 178). It does not carry with it any self-evident meaning, so that we, for instance, would know what it is to be uncertain that he is not an automaton.

Before I say more about this, I want to say something about the Cartesian idea that what we see when we see human beings is bodies. One way of replying to this would be to say that what we see is not bodies but human beings, but this idea might need some filling out before it is clear that this is so. Part of the Cartesian project was to separate the mind from the body and to see it as something distinct from the bodily being, to see it, as it were, as the 'real person'. With this idea they cracked open the possibility for doubting that other beings are the same kind of beings as we are. We are directly conscious of the 'real person', the mind, in ourselves, but we are never directly conscious of the 'real person' in the other beings we meet since we are only confronted with their bodies and only can infer indirectly that they have minds as we do. Now, as Cook remarks there is something "highly extraordinary" in Descartes' use of the word body. There is nothing in his use of the word that reminds us of how we think of bodies, nothing that would be comparable to uses such as, "'His body was covered with mosquito bites', 'His body was found at the bottom of the cliff' and 'He has a strong body but no brains'" ("Human Beings" pp. 123-4). In none of these cases is there a distinction between him and his body, as the one Descartes wanted to make. We do not for instance say "'His body, but not his mind, was covered with mosquito bites'", and might equally say 'He was covered with mosquito bites' ("Human Beings", p. 124). Another point is that, when we are talking about 'just the body', we are sometimes talking about the dead. We use the word body to describe a corpse, and even though Descartes' picture of bodies is not very far from the idea of moving corpses, I think this is very far from what we see when we see other human beings.

Following the remark that "my attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul" Wittgenstein makes the statement: "The human body is the best picture of the human soul". However, he is not thinking about the Cartesian body here. In Descartes' depiction of the body, our bodily movements become quite empty. They do not have any meaning in themselves, but only derive one from the mind behind the movements. When we see other beings however, we do not see this emptiness. We do not see limbs moving purposelessly, muscles contracting and so on, we see movements with a purpose, or a reason, we see people walking, waving their arms in hello, or writhing on the ground in pain. There is no step where we see just the bodily movements, and then go on and to judge them as walking,

waving or writhing in pain. We do not see the multitude of individual movements that goes to form the walking, waving or writhing, we simply recognise and describe the person as doing these things, although we of course can be puzzled about what a person is doing, what his movements are aiming at.

This is also true of what Wittgenstein has to say about the recognition or description of facial expressions. We do not see or describe a person's joy, anger, pain or fear by the measurements or the physiognomy of their faces. We see joy, anger, pain or fear in people's faces and this is something that goes with our concept of these emotions (Z 225). The joy, anger and so on, we see in somebody's face is part of how we understand these emotions, it is not something that is external to our concept of them, some behaviour that merely might accompany our true emotions, that necessarily have to be inner. In the same way as we see and react to emotion in other people's faces and do not only see facial movements, we also see and react to the human beings around us as human beings and not as bodies. It is the living human being, with all its vitality and variety of expression, that Wittgenstein is thinking of when he says that the human body is the best picture of the human soul, and when we think about that, what better picture could there be?

III

Another problem for the Cartesian story, and other similar stories, about the mind and the person, is that their idea of a person seems to be an individual that has been thrown into the world, already equipped with all the knowledge about minds and sensations that he needs to have. The only failure in his knowledge is that he does not know whether this also applies to the other beings he encounters. He already knows what it is to be conscious, to see and hear, feel pain, joy, anger or fear. He knows this because he has his own private experience to refer to when he talks about these things, but he does not know whether other people also have these experiences when they talk about pain, joy, anger and fear. Considering that he is an intelligent being, he pretty soon manages to conclude that, since the other beings behave as he does, they do also, with most probability, feel as he does. The possibility that he made a mistake however, always lurks in the background.

The problem with this idea, is of course that we do not come into this world as rational, thinking beings that already know how to make conclusions about ourselves and the rest of the world. Rational, thinking beings is something we become when we grow into a language and a community where much of the groundwork for being rational and thinking has been provided for. The idea that we come to know about emotions, minds and human beings, in a way that is essentially private also seems to carry some problems. I do not come to know what pain, joy, anger, fear, minds and human beings are solely from my own private experience. Words such as these are words in a public language, where not only I feel and talk about having pain, joy and so on, but where I also talk about other people feeling pain, joy and so on. I do not learn what pain is only because I have an inner experience of this pain, but also because I react to this inner experience in a certain way, I cry out, wince, rub the sore part and so on, and because other people react to this and talk about it as pain. An important point is also that I do not only react to my own pain, but also to the pain of other's. I see pain in their faces and behaviour, I tend, treat the part that hurts, look into their eyes, and so on. As Wittgenstein says, I pay attention to their pain behaviour in a way I do not pay attention to my own (Z 541).

That other people have pain, that I react to their pain as well as to my own and that they in turn react to mine, is as much part of my notion of pain as is my own pain experience. The same goes for the notions of minds and human beings. I do not start off with a theory about what a human being, or a mind is, that I have come to by looking inwards. It is not possible

for me to begin with a description of what I am that I then can go on to apply to other beings that seem to be similar to me, since the idea about what an 'I' is does not exist independent of an idea about what a 'they', as well as a 'you' and a 'we', are. To know what a human being is, it is not enough for me to look at myself as one. I also need to look at and react to other human beings as such, and have them look at and react to me as one in return. And these reactions are as much part of the notion of a 'human being' as is anything I can find by looking into myself.

IV

One point that Wittgenstein is making in his remark about an attitude towards a soul is that, in our relationship with other human beings, we are not dealing with a practice that we have any specific justification for. Rather, it is a practice that comes more naturally to us, a practice that builds on certain primitive responses and reactions to other people. In my attempts to encircle the problem Wittgenstein is responding to from different angles, I have not touched upon this point very much in the essay so far. As it is by far the most important point in Wittgenstein's discussion, the last part of this essay will be dedicated to it.

I have already mentioned that reacting to, and knowing how to react to a human being is part of our understanding of what a 'human being' is. Now, Wittgenstein makes the claim that some of these reactions do not come from learning the concept of a human being, but underlie the concept and go to form it. He talks about these reactions as primitive reactions and also explains this by calling this kind of behaviour pre-linguistic. The question then, seems to be how we are to understand these primitive reactions and this pre-linguistic behaviour. As an example of a primitive reaction we could see the way a baby responds to its mother's smile with a smile or the way we react to other people's pain with tending to the sore part and so on. The important thing here, is that we do not have any justification for behaving in this way. It is not because we conclude that somebody must be in pain because he groans or clutches his foot and this is the same thing that we did when we were in pain, that we react to this person. We simply react to his pain in certain ways, in the same way as we react to our own pain by for instance crying out. To demand a justification for crying out would sound absurd, and Wittgenstein's point is, that in a way it is 'absurd' to ask for a justification for reacting to other people's pain. The justification comes to an end at some point, and when we reach that point there is nothing more to say than 'This is what we do', 'This is what we are'. We might of course always ask what justification we have for reacting in these ways, and we might also come up with rational explanations for acting like this, as the argument from analogy that Descartes proposes, but if the explanations does not explain what it is we actually *do*, we might ask what need we have for these explanations.

Instead of asking for a justification for these kinds of reactions and responses, Wittgenstein suggests that we should see them as making the ground for certain parts of our language. This is what he means with talking about the behaviour as pre-linguistic. Parts of our language, concepts such as 'pain', 'joy', 'anger', 'fear' and so on, stem from these reactions; it is because we have these reactions that we have these concepts and can understand them in the way do. Therefore, we can see these reactions as a clue to how our thought and language works in these matters, and should not only look at them as a later product of our thought, as Descartes wanted to do. That I have an 'attitude towards a soul' then means that I have certain ways of reacting to another human being, I respond to their smiles, their pain, their joy and anger. These ways of responding to another person, also underlies our notion of a person, it is what paves the way for our concept of a human being, and it is also what makes it possible for us to think of him as a soul. I am not of the opinion that he is a human

being neither am I certain that he is, I simply have an attitude towards him as one. This is where everything begins, and where my need for justification ends.

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