
Published in: Handbook of Phenomenology and Cognitive Science

Publication date: 2010

Document version: Peer reviewed version

Document license: Other

Citation for published version (APA):
In our normal everyday encounters with other people it is generally assumed that the knowledge we have and the language we use to describe and communicate about things and events in the physical and social world of which we are part is intersubjective, that is, it is shared by the people with whom we may communicate and co-act. Indeed, this assumed intersubjectivity of cognition and language would seem to be a precondition for any co-action and linguistic communication to take place among people about things which exist in the so called “outer”, publicly observable physical and social world. Arguably, it is a precondition for our very notion of a publicly observable physical and social world, i.e. a world that may be observed and described objectively and truthfully from a so called third-person view.

Whereas scepticism is no longer in fashion when it comes to the possibility of so-called third-person description and cognition of publicly observable reality being true or objective – indeed, not only our everyday encounters but also our scientific investigations rely on this possibility – there has for centuries been an extensive debate within philosophy, and more recently within the scientific studies of mind and consciousness, concerning the status of the description and cognition of things which do not exist in a publicly observable and describable world, such as our so called “internal” mental states. The uncertainty and scepticism are expressed in questions such as these: Given that mental states such as thoughts, emotions and feelings of pain, are not publicly observable, but may only be known or experienced by the persons who have them, how then can we be certain that these states exist and may be observed in the same way by different people? Furthermore, in view of the lack of public criteria or standards, how can we be certain that assertions put forward about such states have the same implications and use for different persons and language users? Or be certain that we are using language in the same way – or indeed using the same language – as we do when talking about and describing things in public material reality? Indeed, given that internal states are not the sort of things which are publicly shareable, how do we ever come to learn and talk about them in a language we do share?

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That solutions to these problems have serious consequences, not only for the possibility of scientific studies of mind and consciousness but for a science of psychology in general, is obvious when we consider that a crucial part of the knowledge a person has of himself, of his mind, body and acts – and, not the least, of his mind and body being his, and of his acts being acts intended and controlled by himself – rests on observations and experiences to which only the person himself has access. No one except the person himself will ever be able to experience what it is like to be the person he is in the way he experiences it, or to know what it is like to have his perceptions, thoughts, or feelings of pain in his body in the way he does, because no one except the person himself can see with his eyes, think his thoughts or feel his pain.

To this uniqueness of our personal experience must be added the differences in our knowledge and conception of ourselves, of others and the world in which we find ourselves, due, for example, to differences in our upbringing, training, education or cultural background. And yet, neither the knowledge of persons which is uniquely personal, nor the differences in knowledge and conceptions of themselves, of others and the world, due to their different backgrounds, can be said to be private. For, despite these differences in our personal experiences and conceptions, to be a person is something fundamentally social. Indeed, no one can be a person, and thereby someone who may realise that he or she is uniquely different from other persons, without other persons from whom he or she may differ – nor without having possibilities of determining how one differs from others – whether such differences concern one’s notions and experiences of things in material reality, or one’s inner feelings, thoughts, beliefs, emotions or pains. Indeed, it would seem that no one could be a person, that is, someone who differs and knows that one differs from others, without being able to communicate and talk with others about how one differs from them.

In what follows an attempt will be made to argue that conditions for intersubjective communication exist which apply equally for knowledge and description of things in publicly observable material reality and for our non-publicly observable mental or internal states. They are conditions on which rely the possibility of persons to communicate about their knowledge and experience, and conditions for determining and discussing their individual differences concerning their knowledge and experience – be it of that which is publicly observable or of that which is uniquely observable to themselves, such as their thoughts, emotions and feelings of pain. By the same token they are conditions on which relies the very possibility of persons developing together criteria or standards to determine and distinguish between what is publicly observable and what is personal, and by which, so it will be argued, any notion about private cognition and private languages are rendered untenable. Furthermore, it will be argued that despite the significant observational differences applying to the cognition and description of things existing in public material reality and to the cognition and description of our internal or mental states, we have to assume that the language in which we talk about both these things and states, is a language which necessarily relies on and is part of the very same language we use to describe things in public material reality.
The section which follows first presents the problems concerning knowledge and description of internal or mental states as set out within traditional philosophy. To this end an analysis will be carried out of the position on these problems defended by Wittgenstein. It is the aim of this analysis to show why it has to be assumed that, despite not being publicly observable, our knowledge and experience of such states are as amenable to intersubjective discourse as are things in the publicly observable world.

**Conditions for Description of Mental or Internal States**

One of the significant differences in the conditions for the cognition and description of things in publicly observable reality and of our non-publicly observable internal states concerns the procedures for determining the truth and correct application of descriptions of such things and states. In the case of descriptions of publicly observable things, for example, we will be able to take part in a procedure for determining whether the implications of the descriptions hold true for the things in question, and thus to observe the result of a test as to the correct application of the description. However, in the case when somebody says e.g. that he has a pain in his finger, no such public procedure exists for determining whether a “pain-description” is a true description of what the person feels in his finger. For only he knows and may observe what he feels in his finger.

But given that no public procedure exists for determining the correct use of our description of internal states such as feelings of pain, how then can we be sure that when different people talk about pains, they are talking about the same kind of “thing”? How, more precisely, *can I be sure that when I use the term ‘pain’, I use this term to refer to the same kind of “thing” as others do when they use the same term?* Or, conversely, *when other people use the term ‘pain’ do they then use this term to refer to the same kind of “thing” as I do when I use the same term?*

This would seem a perfectly sensible question. However, in his classical “Beetle in the box” example, in which Wittgenstein attempts to make clear what this question entails, it seems to be a question to which, for obvious reasons, no sensible answers may be given. Thus, Wittgenstein writes:

> If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word “pain” means must I not say the same of other people too? And how can I generalise the one case so irresponsibly?

> Now someone tells me that he knows what pain is only from his own case!—Suppose everyone had a box with something in it; we call it a “beetle”. No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. But suppose the word “beetle” had a use in these people’s language? If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as something: for the box might even be empty. No one can ‘divide through’ by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is. (Wittgenstein 1945/1953, para. 293, p. 100.)
In the analysis which follows an attempt will be made to shown that the question about ‘pain’, posed in this radical sense, is not only a question which cannot be answered, but more importantly, it is also a question which cannot be asked. For it is a question in which the very condition for putting it forward is itself questioned – thereby debarring it of any sensible meaning.

Let me begin by noting that Wittgenstein does not only suppose that the word pain “has a use in people’s language” – he knows it for a fact. Indeed, when he or anyone else asks the question, “do I use the term ‘pain’ to refer to the same “thing” as others do when they use the term”, he and they are obviously asking this question in a language of which the term ‘pain’ is part – and thus is a term which is supposed to have a meaning and use which he and other people with whom he shares the language know in virtue of being speakers of that language, just as they know to what the term may be correctly applied, i.e. some particular unpleasant sensations somewhere in one’s body. If Wittgenstein did not know this – and did not presuppose that all other speakers of the language knew this – neither he, nor they would have any idea what he is asking about, and no further discussion of the question would seem possible.

Now, it has to be admitted that we may have all kinds of difficulties in giving adequate accounts in words of the pain we may feel, and that we often feel uncertain about the choice of appropriate terms. Is this pain, for example, a sharp, piercing, dull, shooting, tender, searing pain, or is it a nagging or stabbing pain? Indeed, we may have great difficulties in conveying precisely to others the suffering we endure when we are in pain. However, these difficulties of adequately describing pains are not relevant to, nor do they invalidate the point just made. Indeed, these difficulties of adequate descriptions of pains, and discussions about them, could not take place unless people discussing them had a concept of and a term for pain which they shared, and knew of what it may be used correctly to refer to.¹

We may contend then that Wittgenstein’s discussion of the “language game” of giving expressions to pain relies on this knowledge and these presuppositions, and hence on the assumption that sensations and feelings of pain are the sort of “things”, which do indeed exist and which we may use language to refer to. Furthermore, it

¹To spell it out, behind questions such as “do we mean the same thing when we talk about ‘pain’ – or, for that matter about other mental or internal states such as ‘memory’ or ‘recognition’ – lies the assumption that such terms are no more randomly applied to mental or internal states of human beings than ‘oak’ and ‘ash’ are randomly applied to trees. Indeed, to take such questions seriously is already, albeit implicitly, to endorse certain assumptions of how language functions in communicative contexts. Thus, it is implied and assumed that it is possible for language users together to identify – if only rudimentarily – what they are talking about (e.g. some particular states or properties of our mind, or some sensations felt somewhere in our body), and that, on the basis of such common consent, it is possible to investigate whether the implications of those terms are in fact the same for everyone – and whether we in fact use these terms to refer to the same sort of “things”. Conversely, such questions cannot be asked in any sensible way, nor may these terms be “mentioned” without or independently of how language and its terms are used to refer to actual things or events.
Intersubjectivity, Cognition, and Language

relied on the assumption that other people would use the term ‘pain’ to refer to the feeling of pain that he may have in his body – could they feel what he feels – and hence that he may indeed generalise from himself to others, when they use the term ‘pain’ – just as they may generalise from their use of the term to his and the use of the term by others.

However, contrary to the presuppositions on which his whole discussion of the question of ‘pain’ rely, Wittgenstein suggests, for the sake of argument, that because his feeling of pain, and those of others, are not publicly observable, his feelings of pain may be completely different from others and, thus, he as well as others may be using the term ‘pain’ to refer to completely different things – or to none at all. Indeed, he invites us to assume that in the language he shares with others it would be perfectly sensible so to say and suggest. However, it does not make sense to suggest that we may talk about, let alone determine any individual differences in our feelings of pain or in our use of the term ‘pain’, unless the implication of the term ‘pain’ is shared by everyone involved, and unless, furthermore, this term is used to refer to the same sort of “thing”. Without these presuppositions, any discussion of the question of ‘pain’ disintegrates into nonsense.

In summary, it would seem that the question of ‘pain’ as set out by Wittgenstein is obtuse in the sense that putting it forward presupposes that we know the meaning and use of the terms of the question and also to what it may be correctly applied. But then we are asked to forget or ignore this presupposed knowledge, and to pretend that it is immaterial for a discussion of what the terms ‘pain’ may be correctly used to refer to – or whether it may be used correctly to refer to anything at all. But it is a question which can only be asked and discussed granted we have already learned a language which we may use to talk about pain, and thereby granted pain to be the kind of “thing” which exists as something we may talk correctly about and refer to. Hence, if we do ask this question, the answer is logically implied: an affirmation would be redundant, while a denial would be contradictory.

Now, if the same sceptical question had concerned the use of the terms ‘cups’ or ‘neurons’ instead of ‘pains’, it would have been obvious why such a question would not make sense. Indeed, it would probably have been so obvious that we would hesitate to ask it. For if we did ask this question about the use of the terms ‘cups’ and ‘neurons’, we might as well ask the same question about all other terms in our language – and we would be well on the road to asking whether we can be sure that we may use terms in our language to refer to and talk correctly about any objects in material reality. However, although in particular cases we may be in doubt as to whether a particular term may be correctly used to refer to some particular thing, i.e. a thing which has been identified in a shared public world, we cannot doubt that as language users taking part in this discussion, we do know (other) correct terms for the thing (i.e. those forming part of the identification of the thing), nor doubt that we know how to use these terms correctly. One cannot doubt the necessity of these conditions for settling the question under discussion – unless, of course, one has been seriously contaminated with scepticism, and mistakenly assumes that one may get away with using language to question the very possibility of using language to talk correctly about anything.
However, similar conditions seem to apply to the question of ‘pain’ – and by extension to questions concerning other internal or mental states such as emotions, thoughts and belief – in the sense that scepticism as to whether we may use language to talk correctly – or at all – about such states, and make reference to them, presupposes that we know the meaning of terms for these states, and that together with other language users we may determine what they may be correctly used to refer to. So rather than questioning the existence of such internal or mental states and the possibility of having knowledge about them and of correctly describing them and being able to communicate about our experiences of such states, this questioning logically rests on the assumption of both their existence and this possibility. Indeed, without these assumptions concerning the intersubjectivity of both our experiences of, and of our use of terms to talk about and refer to our non-publicly observable internal or mental states, neither ordinary everyday communication nor philosophical discussions about such states would be possible.

In the section which follows I shall further clarify what it means that our cognition and use of language is intersubjective, just as I shall show that the very same assumption of intersubjectivity is a necessary condition for knowledge, descriptions and communication of both that which is and that which is not publicly observable and shared.

The Intersubjectivity of Public and Personal Knowledge and Experiences

It has to be admitted that it is somehow puzzling that pains and other internal states, which are only directly observable to the persons who have them, and are not observationally shareable by others, are nevertheless things which we may communicate about in a language we do share with other persons. So, apparently, shareability in the sense of being publicly observable and known cannot be a condition for the possibility of communication among persons about things which only they may directly observe, experience and know about.

In the case of observing, experiencing and communicating about objects in material reality, our situation is arguably significantly different. Take for example two people sitting on either side of a table with cups and plates, a teapot, a bowl of sugar and a bottle of milk. All these things exist in a shared public world and are perfectly observable to both persons; they may together determine the things

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2I am not saying that the fact that we have a language with terms for both objects in reality and pains in bodies proves the existence of objects in reality and pains in bodies, nor that all and every concrete statement we put forward about either objects or pains are always or infallibly correct. What I am saying is that we cannot begin to discuss or investigate language and the use of language to talk about such things as objects or pains without assuming, generally, that both objects in reality and pains in bodies exist as things that we may have knowledge of and use language to talk correctly about. One cannot take part in this kind of philosophers’ discussion without committing oneself epistemologically.
on the table and also whether the descriptions they put forward about them are correct. And yet, it could be argued that how these things are observed and appear to them from their different vantage points on either side of the table is different, i.e. due to the fact that the parts and features of the things which are directly observable to the one, are not the same as those which are so observable to the other. However, this does not present any serious difficulties since, first, it is part of our knowledge of things having been identified as particular things, that they will appear differently when e.g. we move around and look at them from different vantage points – and that, generally, things do appear differently when observed with regard to different possibilities of observations and action. And these differences of perception and experience do not represent any serious problems since, secondly, none of the particular ways of perceiving and experiencing the things on the table, and none of the descriptions by either person of their experiences of the cups, plates, etc., are unique to him or her. Indeed, it is assumed that they are not, just as in general any person and language user will assume that if other people could look at the things from his or her vantage point(s), they would observe what he or she does, and report that they perceive the same features and properties of the things, and describe what they perceive as he or she does. If we could not count on this assumption, communication and action between persons about things in the world would be impossible.

But there are numerous other ways in which the knowledge and description of persons concerning things in publicly observable reality may differ. Just think of the differences due to our different background, education, previous history of experiences, and the opportunities to observe and describe such things which are or have been available to us. Examples are legion – I only have to think of the knowledge I have of aeroplanes, their construction and how to fly them compared to that of a pilot. Or, conversely, think of the knowledge I have as a clinical psychologist about the transference phenomena occurring between client and therapist during psychotherapy compared to that of an aeroplane pilot, who has not encountered such phenomena, and who does not have the language and terms to describe them that I have. And yet, despite the fact that our knowledge of these and numerous other matters are not exactly the same, and probably never will be, we are in fact able to make available and to communicate the knowledge that each of us has about aeroplanes and transference problems and those other matters, and thus to share our knowledge of what in this respect is personal to each of us. But if the condition for the intersubjectivity and shareability of knowledge and description in the actual case as well as between persons in general, is not and cannot be that persons have exactly the same knowledge and experience of things, or the same possibilities of describing things, since this condition is only rarely if ever met due to their different background, education, history of experiences, and so forth, on what then relies this intersubjectivity of knowledge and description of persons?

It relies no doubt on the fact that, apart from differences in our knowledge, experience and background, we do share a substantial amount of knowledge and descriptions of the world in which we live and act, of the things with which we may act, of ourselves and of the persons with whom we may co-act. However, to say so does
not of course add anything to our notions of ‘shared knowledge and description’, that is, knowledge and descriptions of things which have been available to shared inspection. Nor does it suffice to account for how knowledge of things which may only have been available to ourselves, and which in this sense is personal, is amenable to description and intersubjective communication. It does not do so unless it is assumed that the vantage points, backgrounds, and situations we may be in, are in principle shareable, and thus that other persons could be or could have been in the same situations. Nor does it suffice independently of assuming that, granted other people had had the same background, or had been in the same situations that we ourselves have been or are in, then they would have the knowledge of the situation and the things that we have, and describe them the way we do. However, this suffices, indeed it will have to suffice to say that it is fundamental to the cognition and experience of persons that, although other people may not be in our situations, and may not have, or may not have had, exactly the same experiences and knowledge that we have or have had, they would – could they be, or had they been, in our situations. Likewise, it suffices, and will have to suffice to say that to be language users and to share a language with other persons logically implies and presupposes that other language users, granted that they could be in our situation and have the experience, knowledge, background, points of view etc. that we have, would use language to describe what we experience, know of, etc., in those situations as we do. Or, they would consent that the descriptions we put forward about our experience and knowledge are correct and correctly applied.\footnote{The importance of this intersubjectivity of human cognition, communication and co-action, becomes clear when we consider that a substantial part of our knowledge of both material reality and of the societies in which we live and co-act with others, does not rely on first hand personal experiences, but rather is knowledge we have adopted or acquired from others. In this sense knowledge of reality thus acquired resembles knowledge communicated to us by others about their mental states, and in the sense, furthermore, that both kinds of knowledge relies on and presupposes the conditions of intersubjectivity of cognition and use of language outlined above.}

Now, if we can agree that these presuppositions must be fundamental to the cognition, use of language and communication of persons, and indispensable for any meaningful discussion among persons about what they know and how they describe what they know, I think we shall also have to agree that this intersubjectivity of cognition and language relies on a notion of ‘truth’ which implies that what is true or false, correct or incorrect, is also true or false, correct or incorrect for other persons. That is, this intersubjectivity relies on a notion of ‘truth’ which logically implies and presupposes a notion of ‘others’. (I shall expand on this point in a later section.) This assumed intersubjectivity must be the rock bottom, the very point of departure from which any discussion about our knowledge and description must be based and proceed – whether such discussions concern our knowledge and description of thing in publicly observable reality, or our internal states, such as our emotions, thoughts or feelings of pain.\footnote{As argued extensively elsewhere (Praetorius 2000), this assumed intersubjectivity of cognition, language and of the notion ‘truth’ can neither be proved nor doubted without being conceded, and hence will have to be taken granted as a principle.}
In what follows it will be argued that the intersubjectivity of human cognition, language and of the notion of ‘truth’ is a condition for the possibility of rigorously determining and thus of distinguishing between knowledge and descriptions of that which is publicly observable and that which is not – and hence for people together to develop conventions, criteria or standards for the validity and objectivity of their knowledge and description of things and events in publicly observable reality. And it will be argued, furthermore, that on these conditions relies the possibility of characterizing and determining individual differences and variations in the cognition and description of different persons – both concerning that which is publicly observable and shared and that which is personal.

Conditions for Distinguishing What Is Publicly Observable from What Is Not

It is well known that considerable variations may exist in how things are described by different persons, and by the same person in different situations, not only when the things concerned are “internal” states and events, but even things in material reality. Not only our intentions, purposes and possibilities of observation and action, but even our moods and temperaments may at times determine what we experience, and how we experience and describe ourselves and the rest of reality. So, would it not then be reasonable to reserve the notion of ‘true descriptions and assertions’, and ‘knowledge of what exists objectively’ for cases in which no such individual differences and variations exist, and to reserve the terms ‘exist’ and ‘determinable’ for things and events about which no uncertainty prevails – because they belong to what is materially and publicly observable?

This solution has been attempted, notably by the logical positivists and by the radical and logical behaviourists in both psychology and philosophy, who aimed to establish a firm epistemological basis for scientific research. In this pursuit they argued that only that exists objectively, and hence can be the object of scientific research, which may be determined by rigorous public criteria and standards, and that only knowledge and description of what has been thus determined and observed, may be said to be meaningful and true. In effect, any determinate notions of the truth and meaning of statements and knowledge would have to derive from observations fulfilling such criteria and determinations. Consequently, what cannot be subject to rigorous public scrutiny and observation fulfilling such standards and criteria does not exist, nor can description of things which cannot be so observed be true; hence, descriptions and the existence of knowledge of such things may be discarded as nonsensical.

However, against such arguments we only have to consider that the very process by which we identify and determine a situation, and what in this situation is materially and publicly observable, presupposes that something is the case or true about the situation and things being determined and observed, which is also the case or true to other people – in casu the people involved in the observation. Thus, it is not because
situations exist or may be arranged, in which things are publicly observable, and which we may come to agree to describe in particular ways, that the notion “emerges” of what – for everyone involved – is true or correct about things and situations. It is the other way around – for no such determinations of correctness of knowledge and description of things and situations could be agreed upon, let alone be arranged and function as criteria or standards for correctness, unless it was presupposed that when arranging and determining these criteria or standards, we already have a concept of ‘truth’ which we know how to use correctly; a concept of ‘truth’, furthermore, which is such that what is true or false, correct or incorrect, is also true or false, correct or incorrect for others.

Thus, the point, so easily overlooked, is that even in a situation in which the things and events being described are publicly observable and identifiable, it is logically implied and presupposed of descriptions put forward and being understood by others, and of these others, being in the same situation in which we are, that they will have the knowledge we have about these things and events, and will describe them as we do. In general, it is presupposed that our notion of ‘correct’ or ‘true’ is such that what is true or correct, is also true or correct for others. This presupposition granted, it is possible for persons – in spite of the differences and variations which exist in their knowledge, background, opportunities for observation and action – to arrange conditions and develop criteria and standards for what may count as correct, objective descriptions and publicly existing things, that is, possible to determine and distinguish between conditions under which such criteria or standards apply, and in which they do not. Furthermore, it is because of this presupposed intersubjectivity that it is possible to determine individual differences in the cognition and descriptions of different persons – both concerning that which is publicly observable and that which is only observable to the persons themselves, such as their mental or internal states. In other word, it is because both the knowledge shared by different persons and the knowledge of persons which is personal, are perfectly sensible issues of intersubjective discourse that it is possible to distinguish between what is publicly observable and shared and what is personal.

Let me illustrate this point by giving the following example. One of my friends tells me: “I am terribly depressed; everything looks so grey and colourless – even the trees and flowers look grey and colourless”. Now, could it not reasonably be argued that at least in this case we are not talking about a “public” issue, but rather of something “private”, and also that it is a situation in which it would make no sense to maintain that my friend is still using language correctly? Is it not a situation in which any well-defined notions of correct or true assertions has been suspended? Not at all. For one thing, I do understand what my friend is saying. I am perfectly able to communicate with him about his – in this case – curious experience of the colours of trees and flowers. But a condition for maintaining that I understand what he is saying, and for communicating with him about his curious experiences of the colours of trees and flowers is, naturally, that he still uses language correctly when talking about his experiences of these things. That is, it is a condition that he knows the correct implications of terms for various colour categories, and that he knows how to apply them correctly. And it is a condition that what he is talking about is something
he may refer to, and about which true and false assertions may be made, i.e. his curious experience of the colours of trees and flowers. Thus, it is a condition that both of us are still using the same language – indeed the very same language that he and I use under normal circumstances to talk about quite ordinary everyday matters; and it is a condition that we are together able to determine what he is talking about. If we are able so to do, and thus able to talk about his experiences, however curious, it has to be maintained that he is using language correctly when describing his experiences.

However, it is quite clear that his description of the colours of the trees and flowers is not of general validity, and I do not take his description as an attempt on his part to produce descriptions of general validity – i.e. descriptions which would be correct under normal everyday conditions of observation. But an important part of the message he is trying to convey to me – and which I understand – is precisely that his situation is not normal, i.e. that his depression affects his perception and description of things in ways which differ from how he normally perceives and describes them. A fact of which he himself is perfectly – and probably painfully – aware.

So, although my friend may feel eminently on his own with his unusual and personal experiences during his depression, neither his experiences nor his descriptions of them are private. They are perfectly understandable to others because it is presupposed – by us and by him – that he is using language when describing what he experiences as others would – could they be in his situation and experience what he does. Indeed, our communication about what he experiences relies on the presupposition that what to him is the case or true about his experiences would also be the case or true for others, had they his experience.

Let me conclude my discussion of this example by saying that it shows that individual differences in the cognition and description of reality of different persons may indeed exist and be determinable. However, it also shows that a condition for these differences between persons and their cognition and description to exist, is that persons and language users, despite such differences, share a vast amount of knowledge and correct descriptions of reality. And it shows, furthermore, that the possibility of determining and of talking correctly about such differences relies on the presupposition that, when we describe what we know of or experience, we use language to describe it as others would, if they had our knowledge and experience; however, this in its turn both presupposes and implies that the notions of ‘correct’ and ‘true’ of persons are such that what is correct or true, is also correct or true to others. If these presuppositions and implications concerning the intersubjectivity of our cognition and language did not apply, no personal differences in knowledge and experiences could exist, nor any possibility to determine or talk sensibly about such differences – whether these differences concern what is or what is not publicly observable. Conversely, granted these presuppositions, and hence that situations, points of views and observations are in principle shareable, it is possible for persons to determine and distinguish between individual differences and variations in their cognition and description concerning both what is and what is not publicly observable, and to determine under what circumstances such individual differences occur. And it is possible therefore for persons together with others to develop
criteria and standards with which rigorously to determine and distinguish between first-person and third-person observation and description, so crucial for the possibility of developing sciences.

In the section which follows I shall clarify what it means that the intersubjectivity of cognition and language relies on a notion of “truth” which logically implies a notion of “others”.

Implications of the Logical Relation Between the Notion of “Truth” and “Others”: the Impossibility of Private Cognition and Languages

Suppose my friend’s condition has deteriorated; he now tells me: “I have experiences and knowledge about some particular “things”, but what I take to be true or correct about them, is not true or correct for others, – or I cannot be certain that it is”. Now, what could he possibly mean by that? Could what he says mean, for example, that if others could experience and know of the “things” that he experiences and knows of, then what for them would be the case or true about them, is not the same as what for him is true or the case about them? Well, if that is what he means, he is obviously contradicting himself, for in that case it would be impossible to ascertain that “the things” being experienced and known by others concern the same “things” as those experienced and known by my friend. Or, could it be that he means that these “things” of which he knows and experiences, are in principle inconceivable to others, because the notion of true and correct in the case of his unique experiences and knowledge of these “things” is different from the notion of true and correct which others have, and which he himself has in other cases, for example when communicating to others his unique experiences and knowledge. In other words, does he mean that this concept of true or correct, which applies to his experiences and knowledge about these particular “things”, is a concept which is special to him, in the sense: private, and consequently, that his experiences and knowledge of these “thing” are equally private?

Now, for such a claim to have any bearing – even for himself – it would seem to require that he be able to account for how his “private” concept of true and correct differs from the one he shares with others, i.e. account for it in the language in which the claim is put forward. But if he could do that, his “private” concept of true and correct would not be private, nor inconceivable to others. Likewise, in order to maintain that what he experiences and knows to be the case or true about these “things” is not the case or true for others, would seem to require that he be able to determine what would be the case or true for others about these “things”, and how it differs from what is the case or true to him – again in the language in which the claim is made. However, if he could do that, then what to him is true or false about the “things” he experiences would be perfectly conceivable for others, and what he knows about them would be perfectly expressible in terms of the language which he shares with others.
So, we may conclude that my friend is either contradicting himself or talking nonsense – or both. This would have been immediately obvious if instead he had said “I have discovered that the statement, “…” is true or correct, but it is not true or correct for others, or I cannot be certain that it would be true or correct for others”. What is obvious is that he mistakenly thinks that one could share a language with other people, and also that in this language the notions of ‘true’ and ‘correct’ could be different for different people.\(^5\)

I think we shall have to agree that for the same reason that nobody may claim to possess private knowledge or a private language, and thus a private notion of truth, no such private language or knowledge may be ascribed to others – neither in toto, nor in part. For, how could we justifiably ascribe a private language or knowledge to others without being able to account for both such a language and knowledge in a language which is not private, and into which this knowledge and language must somehow be translatable? This, I think, suffices to show that one cannot know for oneself what others might not in principle know as well; that is to show, once again, that to be a user of a language one shares with others, means that one cannot know what is true or correct to say about a “thing”, which may not be true or correct to others, could they experience and know what one knows about the “thing”.

**What It Means That Our Notion of “Truth” Is Fundamentally Social**

The previous section argued that the intersubjectivity of cognition and use of language of persons to describe what they know about themselves, others and the world around them relies on a notion of “truth” which logically implies a notion of “others”, and hence on a notion of “truth” which is fundamentally social. Now, it would seem to be almost self-evident that to be able to communicate about what one knows, implies knowing that one’s knowledge, categories, conceptual systems and descriptions are indeed “inter-personal”, i.e. that one shares such categories, conceptual systems and descriptions with others. Although I may know of and describe things which others do not (yet) know of, or know different things about them than others do, to know and to say so necessarily implies that if others had the possibilities of observing and describing the things that I have, then others would know what I know about them and describe them the way I do. In other word, what to me is true or false would also be true or false to others.

However, the notion that the ‘truth’ of cognition and language of persons is fundamentally social does not mean that it relies on the fact that persons may come to agree on and make conventions, and develop criteria, standards or rules for what may “count” as objective and true knowledge and descriptions of the things or situations in the world in which they find themselves. On the contrary, no social

\(^5\)There is of course the possibility that what he means is merely that he is not sure of the correct implications and application of the statement – but that is a quite different matter.
conventions, agreement or criteria about the truth and objectivity of knowledge and correctness of descriptions could be established among persons, unless prior to establishing such conventions, agreement and criteria, they had together determined and identified both things and situations to which these conventions and criteria apply, and therefore, unless they already had a notion of ‘truth’ in which it is presupposed that what is true or correct is also true and correct for others. Hence, to say that our notion of ‘truth’ is fundamentally social does not mean that the notion of ‘truth’ is a social phenomenon, i.e. a product of socially agreed practice. On the contrary, social phenomena and practice, including the development of conventions, criteria, rules or agreement on how to use language and its terms, depend on notions of ‘correct’ or ‘true’ and ‘incorrect’ or ‘false’ which are inherently shared.

**Consequences for Developmental Psychology: Conclusion**

However fundamental – and almost embarrassingly banal – the presuppositions concerning the intersubjectivity of cognition, language and the notion of truth of persons may seem, it has been widely overlooked within philosophy of mind and consciousness. According to the traditional assumption, shared by many philosophers even today, we all start out as “Cartesian subjects”, having knowledge and experience of the content of our own mind, i.e. our sense data, perceptions, thoughts, emotions and feelings. From this supposed private, though certain knowledge and experiences “from our own cases” it is believed to be possible to work towards true knowledge of the nature of what causes this content and the rest of the objective order of reality, including other persons, and to develop a language in which we may talk with others of this knowledge and experience. This same assumption also seems to inspire and lie behind functional models and accounts of the cognition and use of language of people currently being developed within Cognitive Science – be those models computational *cum* representational or connectionist. However, it would seem to be an insoluble problem for such models to account for how the cognition of an individual – formed in “splendid solipsistic isolation”, and with no notion of the intersubjectivity of its own cognition and that of others – would ever come to accord with the cognition of others. And it would be impossible without such a notion to explain, moreover, how they come to distinguish that part of their knowledge concerning themselves and the world which is personal, from that which is public available and shared by others.

George Herbert Mead was among the first within psychology to provide substantial arguments against the assumption that individuals living mentally in isolation from others, could ever develop or acquire knowledge about themselves, others and reality of the kind and in the way that we humans actually do, and in particular to argue that no such individual could be aware of itself – since, according to Mead, to be aware of oneself is to “look” at oneself from the standpoint of another (Mead, 1934). In view of the arguments presented so far, it seems that we are now able to strengthen Mead’s original claim. If we suppose with Mead that to
be aware of oneself requires being able to “look” at oneself from the standpoint of another, it has to be conceded, that this “looking” both presupposes and implies that if one could be in the position of other persons and look at oneself as they do, then one would see and come to know oneself the way others do. Without the presupposition that what, from the position of others is known by them to be the case or true about me, would also be the case for myself, if I could be in their situation and have their knowledge, there would be no sense in talking about seeing oneself from the point of view of others. Thus, a notion of truth which is such that what is true or the case is also the case for others, and hence a notion of truth which logically implies a notion of others, must necessarily precede the possibility of anyone “looking” at himself from the standpoint of another; it is not something which may be acquired by such “looking”, nor by imagining such “looking”.

Apart from these logical reasons, there seems to be empirical support from developmental psychology for assuming that for an individual, say a child, to become aware of himself and of others as persons, and of acquiring notions of his or her own mind and cognition and those of others, it is necessary that he or she be received and understood by others as a person. Thus, empirical research of early mother–infant communication seems to show that a child’s ability to develop knowledge about himself, reality and other people around him, and later on to acquire a language to communicate this knowledge and that of others, depends on the mother’s (or other care-person’s) indefatigable effort and willingness to understand and see the child’s behaviour as being intentional. And it seems to rely on the mother’s efforts to understand, not only what goes on “inside” the child, but to interpret the child’s reactions to her, and his action with things, as expressing his knowledge about things, and his attempts intentionally to act upon them (for an excellent account of the development of early mother-infant interaction and communication, see Bruner, 1983).

Empirical investigations also seem to show that the child up to a certain age – presumably due to an over-generalisation of what he sees as his mother’s apparent unlimited knowledge about his experiences, intentions, needs and actions – believes that others are in the same situation as he himself and share his point of view, and the knowledge he has about things in those situations – and even that they may “have” his thoughts and feelings. Thus, the child seems to over-generalise the fact that “what he knows may also be known by others” to mean that others do indeed find themselves in exactly the same situation as he does, and having the same knowledge he has, and having access to his thoughts and feelings. Only later on does the child learn that other people may perceive the same situation from points of view which are different from his. And only later does the child realise that part of himself, his feelings and thoughts, are only directly observable to himself, and also that this part of him is what makes him uniquely him, being a person both physically and mentally distinct from other persons.

If we go back to the assumption held by most philosophers even today, namely that the child starts with “private” and “subjective” knowledge about himself and the world, it would now seems that that this assumption turns the issue on its head. For, if what empirical investigations of the child’s initial development of knowledge
seems to indicate is correct, and what from a logical point of view must necessarily be the case, the child does not start with private knowledge “from his own case”, but with knowledge of which it is assumed by the child that it is indeed shared by others – i.e. by his mother. The problem, it would seem, is rather to account for how the child later in his development comes to appreciate that, although what he knows may indeed be known and shared by others, others may not be in exactly the same situation as he himself. Thus, the problem seems to be to account for how the child begins to learn to appreciate the notion of ‘different points of view’, and how he begins to learn and appreciate the difference between what is and what is not observable to him as opposed to others, i.e. that the knowledge one may have of a situation and of oneself may be personal.\(^6\)

However, what cannot be accounted for nor explained, but which has to be presupposed and taken for granted, is that for a child to be able to learn this from other people in the community in which he grows up, and be able to take part in their “forms of life”, the child must have a notion of ‘truth’ which is such that what is the case, true or false, is also the case, true or false for others. What is lacking in epistemological approaches which start from the position of the individual alone set against the rest of the world – be they generic constructive approaches, or biological or computational functional approaches – is not just a social context of others, which enables the individual to confront and compare his knowledge with the knowledge of others for the purpose of determining, for example, whether his knowledge is in accordance with theirs, and thus may “count” as objective or true, or whether it relies on one’s subjective dreams, illusion or imagination. What is lacking is precisely a notion of ‘truth’ which logically implies and presupposes a notion of ‘others’, which makes it possible for persons together to develop procedures for determining the objectivity and truth of their knowledge, and for everyone to compare his knowledge with the knowledge of others. That is, an intersubjective notion of ‘truth’ which makes it possible for someone to be a person, i.e. someone who may share an incredible amount of knowledge with other people, but who also has knowledge about himself and the world which is uniquely personal – and thus is someone who also differs from other persons; someone with whom we may agree – and disagree.

References


\(^6\)For thorough investigations of this development, see Tomasello and Rakoczy (2003).