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EGOTISM AND THE PRIVATE LANGUAGE ARGUMENT

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Egotism is the view that other people don't matter, except as a means to my own ends. A familiar argument for egotism is as follows: The only pain I have reason to end is the pain I feel, the sole reason being my sensation of the pain; so I have no reason to end pain I don't feel (i.e., someone else's pain). This 'experiential' argument makes egotism a default position for those who believe the argument, in the absence of a countervailing rationale for altruism (the view that other people matter, to some extent, as ends in themselves). Egotism prescribes doing as much as I can to avoid my own suffering, even at the expense of others. This attitude can, of course, give rise to cooperative behaviour for egoistic ends, but egoistic cooperation tends to break down under the strain of free-riding and non-compliance, and generally excludes the weak.

Is the experiential argument valid? From a Wittgensteinian perspective, it isn't; because my sensation of pain is not itself a reason to do anything. To begin with, reasons require justifications. It makes no sense to say "I have a reason to do such-and-such, but there is no justification for it whatsoever." According to the experiential argument, the justification for my ending the pain is the sensation itself, not something extraneous which would call for a separate argument. The sensation itself is, of course, private, in that it can be apprehended only by the subject. In his private language argument (PLA), Wittgenstein questions the epistemic status of private 'sense-data' (for want of a better term). The following begins with a very brief summary of PLA (for a more thorough survey, see the entry on 'Private Language' by Stewart Candlish in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy online):

In essence, PLA argues that the criteria for whether objects of experience are of one kind or another are all public (i.e. in principle accessible and verifiable by other people). Private 'criteria' won't do the job, because the subject would have no way of verifying if he's experiencing one kind of thing rather than another. This isn't skepticism about whether he can remember right, but about what counts as being 'right' or 'wrong' when no one else can correct you (In Wittgenstein's own words ". . . 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?'" *Philosophical Investigations*, Part 1 Remark 258). Of course, I don't usually doubt that I'm experiencing this or that kind of thing, but my certainty (if it is to be rational) rests on other people, in principle, being able to testify to my ability to tell the difference. So the criteria which justify my privileging my suffering above someone else's would have to be public in order to be authoritative (even for me, if I want to be rational). Go down the list of publicly defensible reasons, and none justify egotism.

To recap, a fairly orthodox interpretation of PLA derives the conclusion that private 'sense-data' don't count as justifying criteria. A valid justification relies on public criteria, arising out of collective linguistic activity (e.g., describing pain as 'unpleasant' or 'debilitating'). So, the experiential argument

is invalid. But, surely, doesn't my pain compel me to end it? Yes it does, but a compulsion isn't a reason. A strong wind compels me to fly off a cliff, but it isn't a reason to either go along or resist. We have a pain reflex that compels us to try and stop our pain, but a reflex isn't a reason. If the private experience of pain isn't a reason to end it, then not feeling someone else's pain is not a reason to ignore theirs.

Some argue that egotism doesn't rest on the experiential argument, but on the 'ownership' of suffering. The fact that the suffering is 'mine' makes a difference to me in a way that someone else's suffering doesn't. On the standard interpretation of PLA, whether something is 'mine' depends on public criteria (such as the fact that it has my name on it); and anything private (i.e., bare subjective consciousness) can't fix the reference of first-person pronouns ('I', 'me', 'mine'). In trying to find a sense of 'ownership' that justifies egotism, we find ourselves resorting either to public criteria which won't do the job, or a private use of 'my' which fails to refer. If there's no private sense of 'my', then any valid reason to end my pain would apply for someone else's pain.

What are the ethical implications? We can't appeal to skepticism about other minds, or privileged access to our own, to justify egotism. Even though egotism isn't rationally defensible, it is a plausible hypothesis that the pain reflex conditions us to behave egotistically through negative reinforcement. On this view, the real motive for egotism isn't a reason but a reflex, so arguments have little effect on egotistic attitudes. Wittgenstein noted the widespread, almost instinctive, rejection of PLA. Could the instinct be a subconscious resistance, conditioned by the pain reflex? Perhaps it's just too painful to be entirely selfless, and we would rather think it's irrational.