

**Making the Implicit, Explicit:
Looking at the philosophical method employed in P4C**

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When we use a story to start a community of enquiry, what prompts the philosophical discussion is the feeling that there is some conceptual relationship in the story that is puzzling or interesting. This feeling—what I will call an intuition—arises naturally when various concepts are in a relationship that is in some way problematic. Thus, for example, we intuit that the way we use the concepts 'mind' and 'brain' in relationship to each other gives rise, on occasion, to conceptual oddities. For example, I might assume that the mind is located in the brain and then feel logically uneasy about what I meant by 'in'. Where exactly?

One way to clarify such intuitions is to subject the problematic concepts to a kind of consistency analysis. This will involve exploring the assumptions and implications that radiate in all sorts of directions from the two concepts.

Here is an example: music prompts certain feelings in us that we quite naturally call emotions. Thus we think that there is sad music and happy music but if someone said: "Put on some jealous music" we would immediately recognize that there is something odd about using the language of emotions to characterize musical feelings. How can we explore this oddity in such a way as to clarify the conceptual relationship between emotions and musical feeling?

Professional philosophers gradually acquire the skills that are needed to investigate such puzzles but most of them would be hard pressed to explain exactly what method they use to go about their business. The beauty of P4C is that it makes these methods explicit: it specifies exactly what questions need to be asked in order to explore and thus clarify conceptual relationships. P4C tries to be explicit about these procedures so that its practitioners—who are usually not trained philosophers—will know how to prompt students in such a way that their subsequent discussions become philosophical enquiries.

What I want to do now is to illustrate why the prompting techniques (which are the basis of the P4C method) are *essential* to the process of philosophical enquiry. Following Wittgenstein, I am assuming that philosophical enquiry would never occur if the logical relations between the concepts that make up our language were consistent and therefore coherent. (Note: There are other ways of explaining the origin of philosophical inquiry but Wittgenstein's characterization of the origin happens to fit the P4C method more or less perfectly.) Thus I assume that philosophical inquiry is prompted by the fact that—in the course of using our

language—we occasionally experience a sense of incoherence a sense that that there are some underlying inconsistencies in the use of certain concepts.

According to Wittgenstein, the source of this sense of incoherence is a function of the fact that a word being used in one language game may then be used in some other language game. We intuit that this second use of the word is inconsistent with the first use and this yields a sense of incoherence, i.e., a feeling that we don't thoroughly understand what we are talking about.

Thus to stick to our example, I understand ordinary emotions as feelings which arise in line with my understanding of the situation with which I am confronted. Thus, ordinarily, I only feel pride if I understand that I have accomplished something through my own efforts. But when I feel a musical emotion (the music makes me feel sad) I don't *understand* anything about the situation—the music—that evokes it in me. So why do I regard the feeling which music evokes in me as an *emotion*? Here I have uncovered an inconsistency that lay behind the background feeling of incoherence that made me feel that I didn't really understand what I meant when I talked about music making me feel sad.

The occurrence of this background feeling of incoherence indicates that we all—as speakers of the language—have a capacity to detect whether or not what we hear or read follows the rules that govern the concepts we employ in our language. When I say: "That doesn't make sense", or "I don't follow you" or "That doesn't sound right" these are our common ways of signalling that we have detected some inconsistency in the use of these rules. Now, given that we have this inbuilt capacity to detect potential philosophical problems, how can we move forward in such a way that our subsequent discussion will constitute a *philosophical* discussion of the problem detected.

The techniques that P4C employs are meant to ensure that the subsequent discussion will be *philosophical*. What this in turn means is that after the discussion we will feel a better sense of understanding the issue than we did before it was initiated. This improvement marks the discussion as an instance of critical thinking where 'critical' means: we are clearer in our minds after the discussion than we were before, about what was the source of our sense of incoherence.

Now what are the prompting techniques P4C employs and how can we organize them in such a way as to understand how they are related to Wittgenstein's characterization of how philosophical problems are generated:

First prompt (Focusing the discussion)

We read aloud the little story that contains the inconsistency that is guaranteed to elicit a sense of incoherence and prompt as follows:

What is it that puzzles you?

What did you find interesting?

These questions are used to generate our intuitions: they simply direct us to articulate whatever felt sense of incoherence we encountered in the story. They *focus* the discussion. These intuitions will be expressed in a variety of ways by different members of the community of enquiry because there will be many inconsistencies between the key concepts when language games overlap. One of the delightful things about running a community of enquiry is the amazing variety of responses that these questions elicit and we can now see the reason why this is the case. Where language games overlap—where a word is being used in two slightly different ways—the incoherence generated due to conflicting sets of assumptions and implications—will run in all sorts of directions. For example we assume that we experience emotions as guides to action. But what action are we to take when prompted by a musical emotion? You might ask a choreographer.

Second Prompt (Asking for Reasons)

What makes you say that?

What reasons do you have?

Why do you agree or disagree with X?

The next step is to ask the person why she thought X was puzzling/interesting. She will have a reason ready at hand because no one could answer the first question: "What did you find interesting/puzzling about X?" without having a reason. We know this because on the model we are using—viz., that overlapping language games are the source of philosophical problems, we have an inbuilt capacity to detect incoherence—just because we speak the language—and we will, therefore, always be able to point roughly to why it is that we feel this logical uneasiness. Asking what the reason for this uneasiness is will clarify and serve to make more explicit the conceptual overlap that is the real source of the puzzlement or interest.

The music example is interesting in this particular case. Certain kinds of music make you feel sad and this is rather puzzling. You get a sense of incoherence when you feel sad listening to such music—*after all there is nothing to be sad about*. And if someone asked you why that music made you feel sad you would almost certainly say: "I don't know".

Third Prompt (Uncovering assumptions)

How do you know?

Why do you think that?

What have you based that on?

The next step in this process is to get the person to identify the assumption that makes her *reason* for finding X puzzling a *plausible* reason.

When I find out what assumptions a person was making then I can see why it was that she thought that x was puzzling or interesting. This sense of insight is expressed in common language in the sentence. "Oh, now I see why you gave that reason for thinking X. You were assuming that Y." Making assumptions explicit reveals the implicit reasoning that underlies the intuition.

In our music example when I asked you to give a reason for feeling that the music was sad you said that you couldn't. You didn't know why the music made you sad since you had nothing to be sad about. So you are *assuming* that you experience emotions only when you recognize a situation as one of that kind which typically prompts an emotion.

Clearly once I have uncovered that assumption I can immediately conclude that since I have nothing to be sad about, the 'sad' feeling prompted by the music is not actually making me feel sad at all. Feelings prompted by music are actually quite different from emotions and you can begin to explore this new language game concerning musical feelings without the overlapping connotations of the old one. One word—feeling—was being used in two different language games and what we now see clearly is that it isn't one word at all: it is two words with the same spelling!! The single word represents two different *concepts*, which overlap.

Fourth prompt (Compare and contrast)

Normally, when we go through this process, the children will come up with several different assumptions which—when explored—reveal the overlapping language games. A useful technique at this stage would be to compare and contrast the different language games that have been uncovered.

How is that different from (or the same as) X?

What is the difference between X and Y?

Do you think X and Y are actually the same?

This is an important step because the assumption I am making in this exposition of P4C techniques is that the intuition (the sense that something in the story is

incoherent) is a function of the fact that in the story we used a concept from language game (A)—where it fits—in a second language game (B)—where it doesn't *quite* fit.

Therefore, there should always be a positive response to both the 'how are they different' and 'how are they the same' questions when it is directed at the two language games that have been uncovered.

With our music example we can admit that musical feelings are the same as emotions because they move us, but we see that they are different in that the musical feelings simply make us want to dance so they *literally* move our bodies in a way which will match the music— watch those toes tapping. Temperamental feelings—emotions—move us in a different way, which depends entirely on our minds i.e., on our *understanding* of the situation.

Fifth prompt (Uncovering new implications of the assumption)

If that is true, what else follows?

What can we work out from that?

What does that tell us?

What follows from X?

Every assumption has a number of implications so we find ourselves saying: "To be consistent, if you believe x, you must also believe y". Often we are unwilling to accept the wider implications of our position (unwilling to "bite the bullet") and we are thus forced to go back and reconsider the assumptions that generated them.

Exploring implications and acknowledging their absurdity is the step that forces us to *question* our assumptions. These assumptions are now the items that are puzzling or interesting. I now want to ask: "Why have I been assuming X" since this assumption now seems puzzling given the implications which I have uncovered. Now I have to examine the reasons that underpin my assumption and I use the second prompt again:

What reasons do you have for assuming X?

This is the crucial step because of my assumption about how philosophically interesting intuitions are generated. When I question my assumptions, what I will discover is that the logic of the concept that has been transferred from game A (where it makes sense and generates implications I find acceptable) does not work properly in game B. In Game B the assumption will—*when I think about it*—generate implications that I would not accept. Even when I have not thought about it this potential for inconsistency —these unacceptable implications — is nevertheless

present. It is something that I sense—the sense of incoherence—and it is thus the source of the uneasy intuitions that prompt the philosophical discussion.

In the music example this would happen if you explored the implication of the assumption that musical feelings are emotions by suggesting that if this is so, there ought to be music that makes you feel disappointed. Now this explicit absurdity lets you know something is wrong—you can't accept this implication—and you now realize that you must re-examine your assumption about the feelings that music prompts in us—whatever they are, they are *not* emotions.

The sense of clarification that we achieve when we explore implications is striking. The unease that we felt originally—when in the story (that prompted the enquiry) we felt that there was something interesting or puzzling about it—is now intelligible. The P4C techniques have led us, in Wittgenstein's phrase, to 'a perspicacious overview' of the related language games.

So to summarize:

1) There will be no philosophical interest in the story unless there is something incoherent in it.

(Assumption: the incoherence is a function of overlapping language games which generate inconsistencies.)

That incoherence will be sensed in terms of an intuition (what interests us/puzzles us about the story).

(Assumption: we have a capacity to detect when a concept is being used inconsistently.)

2) We will be able to give a reason for our puzzlement.

3) That reason will be based on an easily identifiable assumption.

4) That assumption will have implications which go beyond the original intuition and these further implications will be clearly absurd not simply 'puzzling' or 'interesting'.

The absurdity will force us to question our assumptions.

5) That reconsideration will reveal that the assumption makes sense in one language game but not in the other related game.

Our original intuitions that something was 'wrong' will now be intelligible.

6) Further Project: to seek a cognate assumption for the related language game that will make it coherent in its own right.

Example: A story about vegetarians and meat eaters who are trying to understand each other.

1. Incoherence: Why should vegetarians want meat eaters to give up eating meat while meat eaters don't particularly care whether vegetarians eat meat or not?

2. Reason:

—Vegetarians think meat eating is *morally* wrong.

—Meat eaters think it's just a taste *preference*.

3. Respective Assumptions:

—Animals have rights that we must respect.

—Preferences are a just a matter of personal taste.

4. Unacceptable Implications:

—All animals have rights including houseflies.

—It's perfectly all right to drop horses off high buildings if you like to see them splash.

5. Questioning assumptions:

—All humans have rights but are *all* animals lives to be treated with respect?

Should *any* preferences be treated with tolerance?

—It's all right to prefer chicken to pork.

—Is it all right to prefer splashing horses to splashing water filled balloons?

5) The project: Articulating new assumptions

—How should we think about animals so that we could eat them with a clear conscience? —How should we think about preferences to avoid splashing horses?

The two related language games concerning moral choices and preferences are now distinguished and we see why the uneasy intuitions arose when we faced the vegetarian debate.

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