Jeremy Corbyn and the Problem of a Private Language

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It is fair to say that the new leader of the Labour Party has had a rocky ride. I begin with a newspaper report of one of the incidents that has created difficulties for him:

JEREMY Corbyn today refused to confirm whether he will sing the National Anthem at future state events as he defended his decision to stand silent at a memorial service to Britain's war dead. The embattled Labour leader railed against critics who have branded him "disrespectful and disloyal", saying that he "didn't see a problem" with his actions at the service commemorating those who lost their lives in the Battle of Britain. A series of Labour heavyweights have blasted the party's new hard-left leader for standing tight-lipped during the rousing rendition as veterans accused him of being "bigoted and small-minded". But sworn republican Mr Corbyn defended his stance today, insisting that he showed respect by standing silent. He said: "I was at the Battle of Britain memorial yesterday, I was there out of respect for that amazing moment in British history. "I was also thinking about my family, my mum and dad who were there at that time in London and worked as air raid wardens during the Blitz, and I was thinking about that. It was a respectful ceremony and I stood in respect throughout it." (Baldwin and Gutteridge, 2015)

It will be instructive to consider Corbyn’s behaviour in the light of the following remarks by Ludwig Wittgenstein concerning criteria for understanding.

Let us remember that there are certain criteria in a man’s behaviour for the fact that he does not understand a word: that it means nothing to him, that he can do nothing with it. And criteria for his ‘thinking he understands, attaching some meaning to the word but not the right one. And, lastly, criteria for his understanding the word right. In the second case one might speak of a subjective understanding. And sounds which no one else understands but which I ‘appear to understand’ might be called a “private language”. (Wittgenstein, 1958, para. 269, 94e, emphasis in original)

If the veterans quoted by the Daily Express are right, it suggests that, with regard to respect, Corbyn is a case of what Wittgenstein would deem simply not understanding the meaning of a word. However and crucially, that reading requires ignoring the fact that Corbyn himself argues that he is showing respect. Therefore, if we are not to treat his version as an outright lie, we must move to Wittgenstein’s second possibility. He thinks he understands what it means to show respect.
But then, taking into consideration both Corbyn’s view and the alternative one, represented not just by the veterans but also by ‘Labour heavyweights’, we are unavoidably confronted by the feature depicted by Wittgenstein as characterizing the second case. By not singing the National Anthem, Corbyn is attaching *some* meaning to the word respect but he is also making ‘sounds which no one else understands’.

Wittgenstein says about such a case that one might speak of one who has ‘a subjective understanding’. And then he formulates such an approach, with a phrase that has become very familiar from subsequent philosophical discussion. It is like speaking a ‘private language’.

Corbyn’s behaviour, in remaining silent and yet arguing that shows respect, does, I suggest, amount to attempting to speak while using a private language. That is, he means to show or communicate something, in this instance respect, but in a way that no one else will understand. We know that Wittgenstein has argued, most philosophers agree cogently, that a private language is actually impossible. My claim will be the more modest one that it is a wrong-headed approach, doomed to failure. The problem with it, I will suggest, is that it makes it impossible for a person to be intelligible.

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The need to be intelligible is a major focus of Alan Blum and Peter McHugh’s attempt to develop the necessary criteria for managing to be a rational social actor. They depict intelligibility as what is minimally required for rational social action. As they put it:

> In order to do X reflectively, it is essential to be seen to do X; X must be intelligible to any reciprocally oriented actor. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 114)

As this dictum applies to Corbyn, he would be failing to ‘do’ respect reflectively by his act of merely being silent while (he says) contemplating his parents’ contribution to the war effort because by only so doing he is not being seen to be respectful by others. Notwithstanding what he *thinks* he is doing, he is failing to do it reflectively because he does not make it, i.e. his respectfulness, intelligible to others.

Blum and McHugh’s dictum amounts to a sociological rather than philosophical critique of the possibility of a private language. Irrespective of whether a private language is (philosophically) conceivable, it is certainly not a rational thing to attempt precisely because it will make one’s meaning unintelligible to others.

That the problem of acting in ways that will enable other people to find one’s acts intelligible is a pervasive one can be shown by the fact that it applies even to states that are much more likely to be thought of as internal than is respect. Certainly boredom is a phenomenon that we picture as taking place inside an actor, or to use Wittgenstein’s term, it is legitimately thought to be subjective.
And yet, imagine that an actor who is really and truly not bored intends to leave a party prematurely. (McHugh et al. 1974, 29, 40) Assuming he does not wish his leaving to suggest to other actors that he is bored, it will surely be necessary for him to do more than merely not have the intention of leaving because of boredom. In such a position, a reflective actor would have to do some sort of elaborate repair work by explaining, in convincing fashion, the ‘real’ reason why he is leaving. Were he not to do so, it would be unreflective of him to respond to questions even days later as to whether he found the party boring by professing to be utterly dumbfounded. Even so-called subjective states, then, require of actors that they make them intelligible to others. So the need for intelligibility is a general requirement and one that we have seen Corbyn fail to satisfy in this, our first example.

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Corbyn’s next major test occurred in the wake of the horrible terrorist attacks in Paris. Asked about the policy that the Parisian police adopted to deal with the situation, Corby stated that ‘I am not happy with shoot to kill.’ In his own mind, this statement presumably amounted to a balanced and perhaps even nuanced response to the question but it is clear that what his answer meant to most people was that Corbyn might even lack the bare minimum for the kind of leadership our times requires. Thus, an erstwhile supporter wrote:

What very few will understand is Jeremy Corbyn’s response to the events in Paris. I write this with searing regret, because one of the qualities I have admired about him is his refusal to play dumb. He will not spout fatuous gibberish in populism’s cause, or be bullied into parroting nonsense by the confected hysteria of right-wing tabloids. He remains true to himself and the ideals he has held for half a century, which is splendid. It is even a touch heroic.

Yet there is a borderline between rigorous authenticity and damaging self-caricature. If last week’s ruminations on the execution by drone of Jihadi John took him to its edge, Corbyn strode across it this week when asked if, as Prime Minister, he would operate a shoot-to-kill policy should the nightmare of Paris come to London. The answer is excruciating to quote. “I’m not happy with the shoot-to-kill policy in general,” he told a BBC interviewer. “I think that is quite dangerous… You have to have security that prevents people firing off weapons where they can… But the idea you end up with a war on the streets is not a good thing. Surely you have to work to try and prevent these things happening. That’s got to be the priority.”

The problem with this lies not in what he said, but in what he didn’t say first. No one sane thinks shooting battles desirable, or wouldn’t be thrilled if they could be prevented. Of course the long-term priority must be to tackle the root causes of this psychosis. All of that would have been fine had he begun his reply by addressing the short-term priority: what to do when people with Kalashnikovs in their hands and bombs around their waists are rampaging through a British city. (Norman, 2015)
So, for a second time and now in increasing numbers, the public concludes that Corbyn does not understand something, first it was respect and now it is leadership. At the same time, Corbyn must again be feeling that his intentions are being misunderstood. Clearly what I have been calling an attempt to communicate via a private language is not proving a success.

In that this mode of communication is not effective, it is worth considering why, not just Corbyn, but anyone would attempt to speak in this way. It is possible that the problem could be social ineptness, a phenomenon that does exist. Making oneself intelligible requires knowing the rules—the conventions. These conventions apply not just to the meaning of words but also the meaning of actions. Leaving a party prematurely, singing a National Anthem, etc. do have agreed upon meanings and competent social actors must know them. If one does ignore or is innocent of these conventional meanings, it will inevitably lead to intelligibility problems.

Corbyn may well suffer from social ineptness but I will suggest there is also another explanation for the problems he is having. While, as we have seen, Blum and McHugh have identified intelligibility as a need for the actor who would act reflectively, they then go on to say that there is also a subtype of reflective action that necessarily risks intelligibility. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 117, 121) This risk can occur because for some reflective actors, merely managing to be intelligible is not an acceptable limit. At this point they offer, in what is admittedly a radical departure for sociologists (who tend to refrain from moral talk) a version of an actor that could be not just intelligible but also moral. They call this subtype of actors who are unwilling to treat as their only goal intelligibility, principled actors. (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 114 and passim)

A key factor in the surprising and indeed even shocking election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader is not so much his left wing politics but the impression that at last and for once we have no ordinary politician but instead someone who is principled. Thus, even many on the right have professed to admire Corbyn on this basis, notwithstanding that they are quick to add that his are not the principles they could ever share.

I will suggest that a source of Corbyn’s problems are the risks to intelligibility that are a feature of the attempt to act on principle but I will also suggest that Corbyn, because he has misunderstand the requirements of principled action, takes far too many and unnecessary risks. In particular, in order to be principled, it is not really necessary to take the drastic step of speaking what amounts to a private language. And so the general point will be that the case of Corbyn works best as displaying a pitfall that can afflict the would-be principled actor, namely the danger of making oneself unintelligible to others.

Blum and McHugh’s more detailed development of the requirements of principled action will prove helpful in identifying where Corbyn goes wrong. What in particular differentiates the principled actor from the actor whose
overriding concern is managing to be intelligible to others is the kind or level of reflection of these two types. The latter limit their reflection to determining how best to guarantee that they can be seen by others to be doing whatever the existing conventions require while the former, while not ignoring this issue, are ‘oriented to the nature of... undertakings as well as the quality of their expression.’ (Blum and McHugh, 1984, 117)

An example of an undertaking whose nature would need to be reflected on by the principled actor is singing the National Anthem at a commemoration of the Battle of Britain in one’s capacity as leader of the Labour Party. So there is certainly nothing wrong with Corbyn reflecting on whether to do this. Others may simply sing without reflecting but this is not an option for him qua principled actor.

However, there is a further issue that will confront the would-be principled actor: how to consider what an action will signify-mean- as a representation of his principles. It is not always or even often obvious what any given action will mean and so, while it is true that the principled actor will, unlike other actors, have to reflect even when the existing conventions make it clear what he is expected to do, it is not necessarily clear what the upshot of any particular reflection will be.

As an example, we can consider what form Corbyn’s reflections arguably should have taken at the Battle of Britain commemoration. Presumably he has no principled objection to National Anthems per se so the unwillingness to sing has to do with the fact that Britain’s anthem focuses on the Queen and one of Corbyn’s principles is republicanism. But what we can wonder is whether he has reflected on the fact that, after all, what he is expected to sing is the (current) National Anthem. Unless one cannot temporarily go along with a thing without it implying that that thing should never be otherwise, singing it does not mean one does not prefer or even actively desire an alternative.

Also, I wonder if he has reflected on the even more basic issue of what it is to sing a song, and in particular on the difference between how responsible singers are as distinct from sayers for the words that come out of their mouths. One can sing something without thereby being as responsible for the words as if one says the same thing. And, even if we go so far as to pay attention to the song’s actual words, it is questionable to what extent principled republicans even disagree with them unless they are so extreme as to not wish God to save the queen and even not wish that she have a long life. Given all of these considerations, I would suggest that it would be very difficult to argue that it means one is betraying one’s republican principles if all one does is sing the National Anthem at such an occasion.

And, while this is not to deny that some of the words will stick in Corbyn’s craw, e.g. the passage about reigning over us, he should also have reflected on what not singing will mean. Even fair minded observers (more fair minded, say, than
the stance of Baldwin and Gutteridge's paper, the *Daily Express*) who would not go so far as to say it means that he is unpatriotic, could legitimately feel that it shows him to be an overly uncooperative person and probably one who is not very good at entering into the spirit of an occasion. They could reasonably conclude that he is all too intent on pursuing his personal agenda even when it does not seem at all appropriate.

It is not at all self-evident what shape this necessary reflection would take in particular cases but in considering what any particular action would mean for one's principles, a major factor one would need to be alive to is the current context. Corbyn's failings in this regard are on show in our second example. He developed his principles concerning 'shoot to kill' at the time when the IRA was committed to terrorism. Objecting to 'shoot to kill' then managed to convey the meaning that one considered it wrong to kill people who, it must be admitted, could well be innocent. This meaning became strongly reinforced when it transpired that, in the aftermath of 7/7, a person who unquestionably was innocent, Jean Charles Menezes, became a tragic victim of 'shoot to kill'.

However, saying, as did Corbyn that he was 'unhappy with shoot to kill' when the context was the Paris terrorist attacks, instead of conveying, as Corbyn presumably thought it did, that he was interested in protecting possible innocents, instead conveyed the meaning that he was actually *disinterested* in protecting the country even when it was obviously and currently being attacked. It is very telling that another former supporter, columnist Mary Riddell, became, at this point, highly critical of him. As she put it:

> A principled stance is not, however, an excuse for peacenik platitudes that sidestep the grave questions of this pitiless age. (Riddell, 2015)

Corbyn should have reflected on what it means to insist on one's opposition to 'shoot to kill' when the context is such that it becomes downright ludicrous to conclude that X is only 'suspected' of something murderous. What such opposition means in such a context, as Riddell realizes, is that one's otherwise admirable principle is morphing into an evasive platitude.

The point here is that there are contexts for which the main challenge for a principle will be that how it could apply would be easily misunderstood to its extreme detriment. Thus whereas Corbyn used this occasion merely to affirm that 'he is not happy' with a 'shoot to kill' policy, he should have used it to make crystal clear that there is nothing about his supporting his longstanding principle that means he did not fully support the way the French authorities reacted to the particular situation they faced. The general lesson here is that there are some contexts where the possible meaning of a principle is such that the best way of representing it is by an action which clarifies what the principle actually does *not* mean.
It is fair to say that neither of the examples discussed in this paper offers an ideal opportunity for Corbyn to display what his principles actually are. Both are more situations for, as it were, damage limitation vis a vis his principles. But the difference between them is also worth noting. There are situations, epitomized by our first example, in which it is virtually impossible to display one’s principle without being misunderstood. In such cases, what reflection should lead one to conclude is that one is facing an occasion where one’s best option is to accept that one is not in a place where one can effectively show what one cares about.

There are also situations, epitomized by our second example, in which, while they also create a major possibility of one’s principles being misunderstood, the danger can be minimized if one realizes the particular problem of applying the principle to such a situation. For such a case, I suggest developing actions that indicate more about what a principle does not mean than what it does.

As a concluding question, it is worth asking what might be the cause of these troubles Corbyn is having. While I have argued that misinterpretation in the sense of feeling one has been misunderstood is an inherent danger for the would-be principled actor, it would be truly unfortunate if all principled actors must suffer such a fate to the extent that Corbyn has. I suggest that there is at least one specific to him factor that is compounding his problems. A reason he does not pay nearly enough attention to what his actions will mean is because he is overly concerned with the possibility of betraying his principles. In other words, he is too concerned with (merely) being true to himself. Hence the lack of interest in communicating with the result that he ends up speaking in what I have called a private language. If he could appreciate that betrayal is one or even the one problem that he is unlikely to face, it would free him to pay more—indeed much more—attention to how best, in the various situations that will arise, to communicate—represent—his principles via his actions.

In that Corbyn has become Labour leader only after a very long career on the backbenches, it might be thought that the problem with his way of being principled that I am pointing to is only of recent origin. It could seem that merely being true to himself was sufficient when his task was not to persuade the vast number of people necessary to win a general election. In that there is no way one could be a successful leader of a major Party while being unintelligible, certainly being leader has made the problem a more glaring one. However, to extent that Corbyn believes, as he surely must, that the principles he has long held are not just things he happens to believe but the right ones for Britain, it should be the case that he has always desired not just to adhere to these principles but to persuade others of their validity. Therefore, the need to find actions that represent his principles to others so as to minimize his own feelings of being misunderstood and maximize his intelligibility to all others should always have been with him. It has always been incumbent on him qua principled actor to strive for intelligibility, not withstanding the fact that being leader means there
are many more people paying attention to him and so what Corbyn does and does not do becomes much more important to the rest of us.

References


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