

A. Pichler & S. Säätelä
FIL 217/317

30.10.2018

Rule-following: conclusions

The “private language
argument”: introduction

The notion of "grammar"

In the PI a philosophical investigation is described as a
"grammatical" investigation

E.g. PI § 90:

Our investigation is [...] a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language.

Three ways to understand what W is doing in PI

1. The failed analytic philosopher. W presents some interesting ideas that can be developed into theories (Kripke)
2. The different kind of analytic philosopher. W is doing «connective analysis» and describing the «depth grammar» of different regions of language (Hacker)
3. The quietist. The aim is «complete clarity» and the dissolution of problems. If successful, the result is that nothing remains of the problem (late Baker, Diamond, Conant, late Mulhall,...)

Quietism?

"Wittgenstein's quietism is not a refusal to engage in substantive philosophy in the face of what everyone has to accept as genuine problems. It is an activity of diagnosing, so as to explain away, some appearances that we are confronted with genuine problems. The supposed problems disappear, leaving no need for theory construction to make things 'less mysterious.'"

(McDowell 2009, 371)

An example: «language» in PI

1. W presents (the outlines of) a theory of language as an assemblage of language-games, and an idea of «depth grammar» similar to Saussure's «langue».

An example: «language» in PI

2. W wants to show that it is a philosophical mistake to postulate *the* language and talk about the essence of language. Instead we should view language as a family-resemblance concept, as consisting of different interrelated language-games, the grammatical rules of which we can describe.

An example: «language» in PI

3. «Language-game» is an *object of comparison* (see PI § 130) and can as such make us see aspects of language and language use that we have been blind to. However, this is not an alternative theory or philosophical view of what language, or the essence of language, is.

The "private language argument"

- Is there such an argument?
 - Wittgenstein himself never employs the phrase 'private language argument'
 - Where can we find the argument and what is its relation to other themes in the PI (esp. the rule-following considerations)?
- What is it supposed to establish?

Structure

- § § 243-255: introduction of the problem
- § § 256-271: presentation of the private language scenario ("the private diarist")
- § § 272-315: consequences regarding the "inner/outer" distinction ("the beetle in the box")

Problematic starting-points

The section on private language is usually considered free-standing or self-contained (ie that it can be read without caring about the rest of the PI)

A majority of work on Wittgenstein on private language consists of critical responses to a number of canonical interpreters' readings of a small number of key passages

Two interpretations

1. The orthodox (substantial) interpretation:
Wittgenstein presents an argument against the possibility of private language and either succeeds (Rhees, Malcolm, Kenny) or does not succeed (Ayer, Strawson, Thomson)

Presuppositions of orthodox reading

1. The argument begins with with premises about the nature of a private language
2. It leads to the conclusion that such a language is impossible
3. The conclusion has far-reaching implications for philosophy as a whole
4. The argument, while not fully stated in the PI, is a deductive *reductio ad absurdum*

Problem with orthodox interpretation: the discussion is often carried on independently of Ws text

Not enough attention is paid to the question of whether or not the “arguments” presented can be identified with the views of the author of the PI (eg in § 258 and § 293)

Orthodox reading

- Wittgenstein’s aim is to provide an argument to the end that a specific conception of private language leads to a contradiction
 - the interpretive question is to reconstruct that argument, and to assess whether he succeeds or fails

Reading strategies

«Each generation of readers has discovered a Wittgenstein who seems to have anticipated their own philosophical concerns with remarkable far-sightedness. ... Instead of reading our own preconceptions into the gaps we find in Wittgenstein's telling of the story, we might reread the passage in question with an eye to detail, and look to the broader context [the PI as a whole, as well as W's other writings on private language] for further clarification.»
(Stern 2011, 11)

Two interpretations

2. The “unorthodox” (“Pyrrhonian”, “resolute”) interpretation:

the idea of a private language «implodes from within»; it cannot be coherently formed:

“We cannot really imagine this, or rather [...] there is nothing of the sort to imagine, or rather [...] when we as it were try to imagine this we imagine something else than we think.” (Cavell 1979, 344)

Unorthodox reading

- We must pay attention to the polyphonic structure of the passages in question (what is the narratorial position?)
- We do not get an argument against the possibility of private language. Rather, we see several attempts and an ultimate failure to give sense to the interlocutor's attempts at formulating the notion of a private language
- Cavell, Goldfarb, Mulhall, Stern, ...

Background of the PLA

Wittgenstein thinks our sensation-language is in "order as it is". However, when start philosophizing about our mind, and our use of sensation-words, many aspects of this use appear as problematic from a semantic, epistemic, and metaphysical point of view.

Peculiarities of our use of sensation-words

There is an asymmetry between the first person and the (second- or)third person regarding this use, which seems to be grounded in our access to the “inner life” of persons:

- 1) There seems to be an absence of doubt about my own experience, but an uncertainty about the experiences of others
- 2) My subjective experience often seems to be partly or wholly ineffable
- 3) I seem to have immediate knowledge of my own experience and only inferential knowledge of the experience of others

Wittgenstein and «private language»

Why does W introduce the discussion here?

In fact, the theme is hinted at already in § 1 (in Ws translation).

It is connected to questions running through the PI: the question of meaning and reference, understanding

«Natural, smooth sequence»? So there is some kind of progression from rule-following considerations to the pla?

What is a "private language"?

- It is a language referring to my sensations (Empfindungen)
- Sensations are intimately connected with one's body
- Philosophers often contrast sensations with perceptions of the external world, claiming that they provide one with awareness of nothing independent of them
- Alternatively sensations are taken to be a perception of the state and properties of one's body

What is a "private language"?

The words of this language are to refer to what only the speaker can know; to his immediate, private, sensations [*Empfindungen*]. So another cannot understand the language. (PI § 243)

What is a "private language"?

So a "private language" here is *not*:

- A private code
- A language used by a person only in soliloquy
- A (natural or invented) language spoken only by one person

What is a "private language"?

- The assumption about the privacy of sensations is coupled with the idea that sensations are (a strange kind of) objects, and all words are names (that the meaning of words is given by what they stand for or refer to)
 - The "Augustinian picture" of language
- As a result we can think of a language naming sensations that is unsharable and unteachable in *principle*, since its words are supposed to refer to immediate private experiences known *only* to the speaker

What is a "private language"?

- "Privacy" here is epistemic or metaphysical privacy ("privileged access"):
- Only *I* can know I have this sensation, and know what it is like to have it
 - Only *I* can be certain that this sensation exists
 - Cf. the notion of qualia

Who holds such a view?

- Wittgenstein is not arguing against any named philosophers here. Instead, he is addressing a temptation that is inherent in our ways of speaking about sensations, that can be developed into a full-blown philosophical theory about the mind and its contents. (cf. Augustine in PU § 1)

«Privacy» rests on a picture rather than a theory of the mind

PU § 115. *A picture held us captive. And we could not get outside it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat it to us inexorably [unerbittlich].*

PI § 254

.... What we 'are tempted to say' in such a case is, of course, not philosophy; but it is its raw material. So, for example, what a mathematician is inclined to say about the objectivity and reality of mathematical facts, is not a philosophy of mathematics, but something for philosophical *treatment*.

255. The philosopher treats a question; like an illness.

Several philosophers have developed theories that build upon an assumption about an essentially private language, e.g.

- Descartes
- Locke
- Russell
- Wittgenstein (ca. 1929-1930)?

The Cartesian picture

Mind or soul is a thinking substance, *res cogitas*.

Also sensations like pain belong to *cogitatio*.

I may always be wrong in my judgments about the external world, but the fact that I have a particular sensation (or thought) at a particular time is indubitable.

The Cartesian picture

My mental life in general is something that I have private and infallible access to, disregarding even the very existence of myself as a bodily creature.

The Cartesian picture

Results:

Priority of the private (first person) over the public (second or third person)

The "inner" is more certain than the "outer"

The language used by *res cogitans* must be private, since it cannot rely on anything "outer"

Problems: seems inevitably to lead to a skepticism about other minds and even solipsism

The Cartesian picture

The flip-side of Cartesian dualism is behaviourism:

The only way to give sense to our sensation-words is through outer criteria, i.e. to understand them as referring to observable behaviour only

The empiricistic theory of language

Locke:

- words represent speakers' translation of their internal mental vocabularies (ideas) into sounds, and are meaningful if the hearers can re-translate them into their own internal vocabularies
- words stand for "nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them" (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* III.ii.2)

The empiricistic theory of language

- The possibility of communication rests upon the (contingent) fact that we associate our words with more or less the same ideas
- But this association is basically private
 - For all I know, you might have the sensation of "green" but associate it with what I call "red" (i.e., you have the qualia I have when confronted with this colour)

Russell

- Knowledge by acquaintance/knowledge by description
- Direct acquaintance is immediate knowledge of eg. sense-data or sensations (ie mental objects)
- It forms the bedrock for all of our other knowledge
- Upshot: my experience is directly known to me, but can only be known to others by description ("Bismarck")

Wittgenstein ca. 1929-1930

Each person's sensation words have two meanings:

- A private, purely introspective meaning (that has a privileged status)
- A public meaning (associated with behaviour)
- See PR 88-89
(Child p.149-150)

The temptation

PI § 243.

A human being can encourage himself, give himself orders, obey, blame and punish himself; he can ask himself a question and answer it. We could even imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue; who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves.

...

§ 243 continues...

But could we also imagine a language in which a person could write down or give vocal expression to his inner experiences—his feelings, moods, and the rest—for his private use?

—Well, can't we do so in our ordinary language?

—But that is not what I mean. The individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language.

The dialogue continues....

244. How do words *refer* to sensations?—There doesn't seem to be any problem here; don't we talk about sensations every day, and give them names?

But how is the connexion between the name and the thing named set up? This question is the same as: how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations?—of the word "pain" for example. Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.

The dialogue continues....

"So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?"—On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it.

Äusserung (manifestation, avowal) vs.
Beschreibung (description)

"Privacy" cannot have to do with privileged knowledge

246. In what sense are my sensations *private*?—Well, only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it.—In one way this is false, and in another nonsense. If we are using the word "know" as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know if I'm in pain.—Yes, but all the same, not with the certainty with which I know it myself!—It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain. What is it supposed to mean—except perhaps that I *am* in pain?