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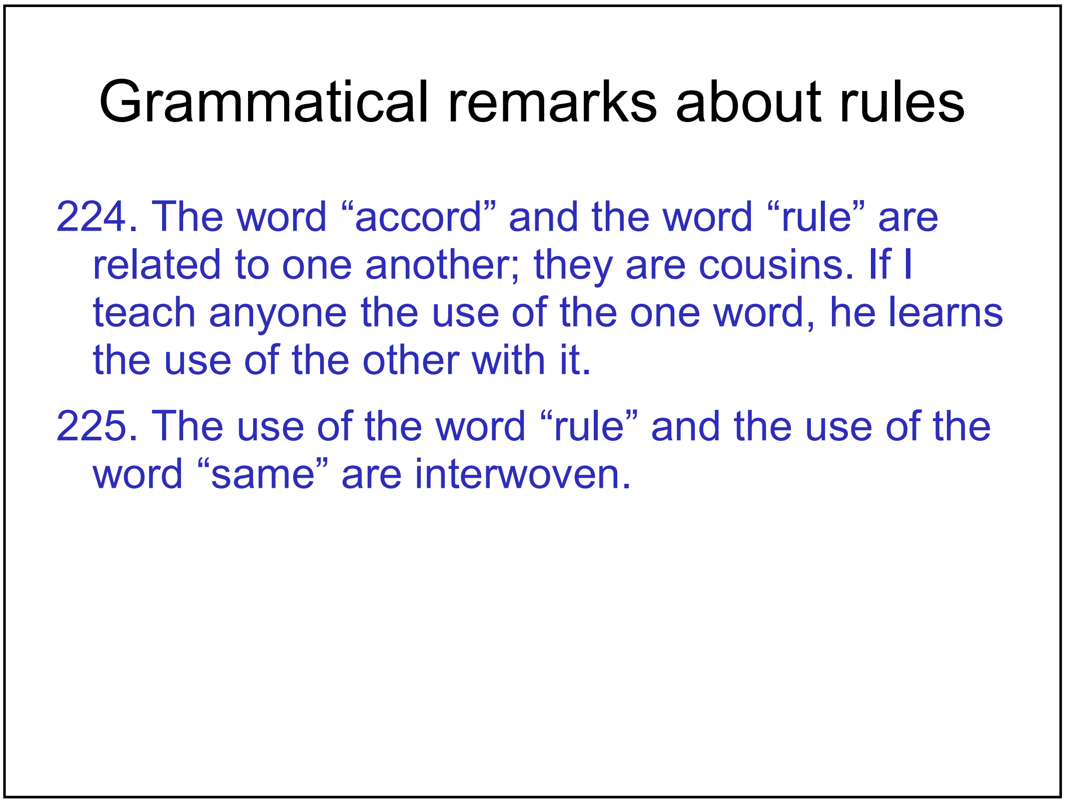
The "private language argument"

Conclusions from the rule-following remarks

There is a temptation to construe Wittgenstein's remarks as a theory of rule-following, and an explanation of what can or cannot ground rule-following.

However, we could, as Wittgenstein himself, characterize these remarks about rules as notes ”on the grammar of the expression 'to follow a rule'” (§ 199).

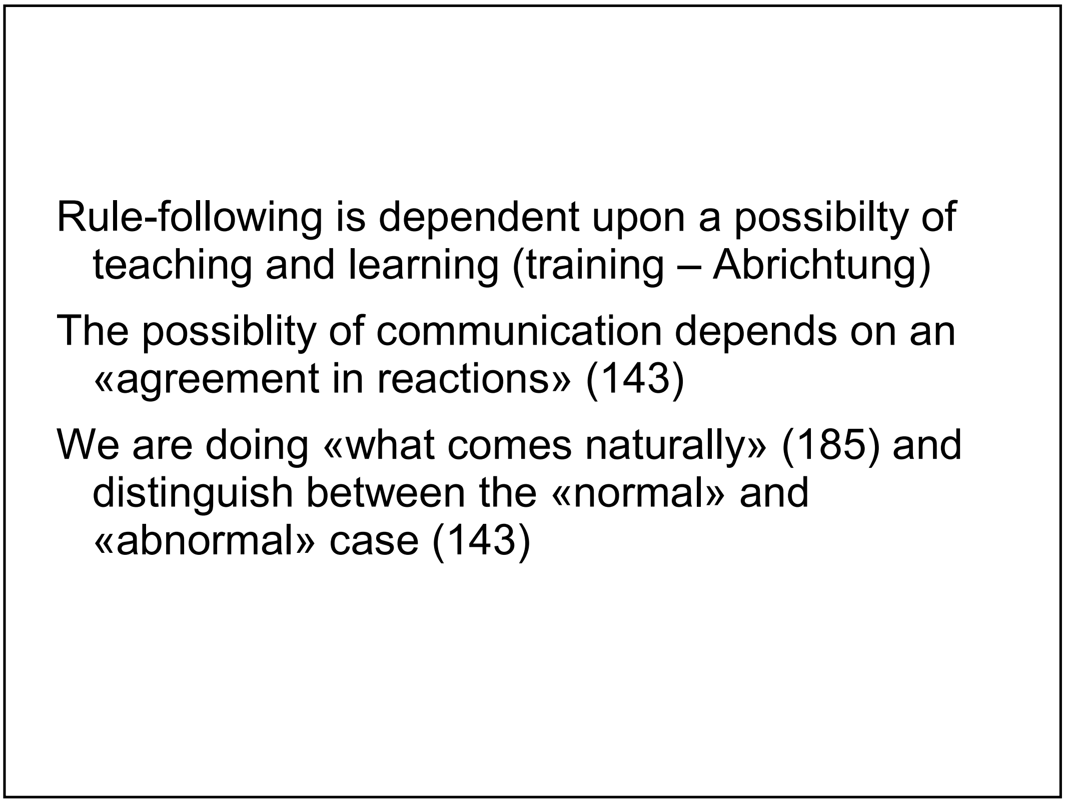
The investigation is purely descriptive, and the aim is to dispel misunderstandings that are deeply rooted in our ways of speaking about human beings and actions.



Grammatical remarks about rules

224. The word “accord” and the word “rule” are related to one another; they are cousins. If I teach anyone the use of the one word, he learns the use of the other with it.

225. The use of the word “rule” and the use of the word “same” are interwoven.



Rule-following is dependent upon a possibilty of teaching and learning (training – Abrichtung)

The possiblity of communication depends on an «agreement in reactions» (143)

We are doing «what comes naturally» (185) and distinguish between the «normal» and «abnormal» case (143)

Teaching and learning

> Once you have described the procedure of this teaching and learning, you have said **everything there can be said** about acting according to a rule.

(RFM VII § 26)

However, we (philosophers) demand something more (esp. when it comes to mathematics): a necessary connection between the rule and its application (logical compulsion)

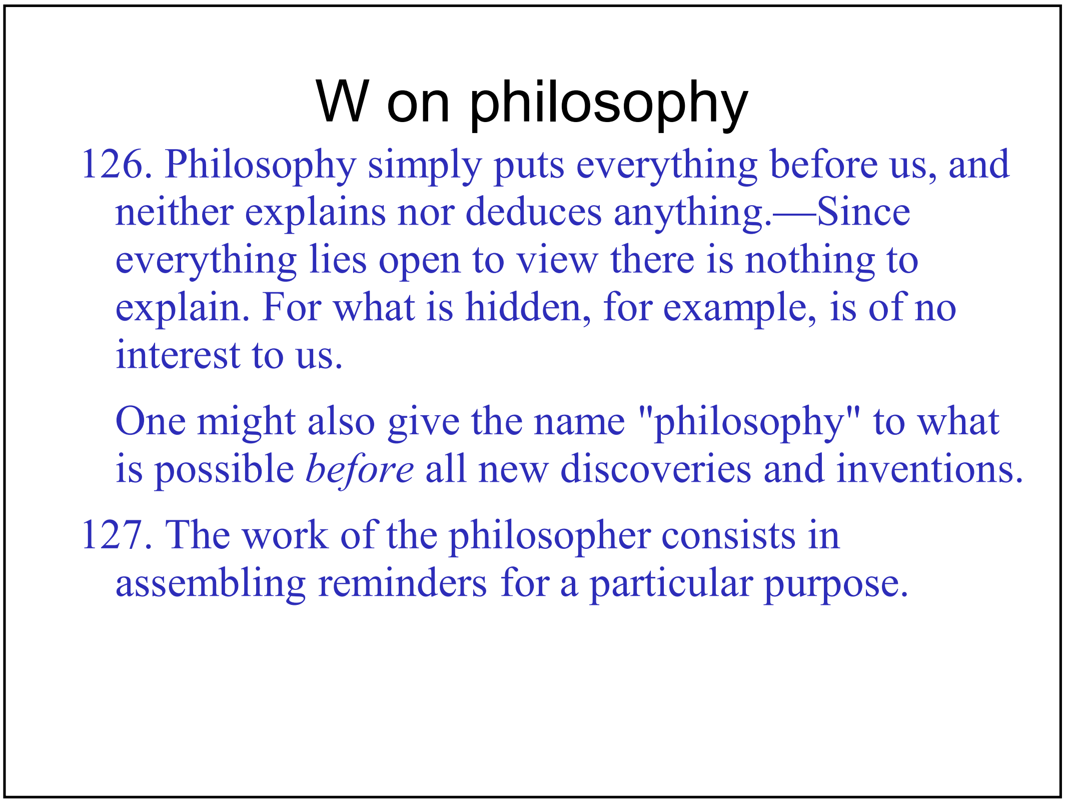
What is the status of these “grammatical” remarks?

They are not new discoveries about how language works

They are not an account of the essence of language, or an outline of a theory of language

They are reminders about things we tend to forget

They refer to quite trivial “facts about our language” and our life with language

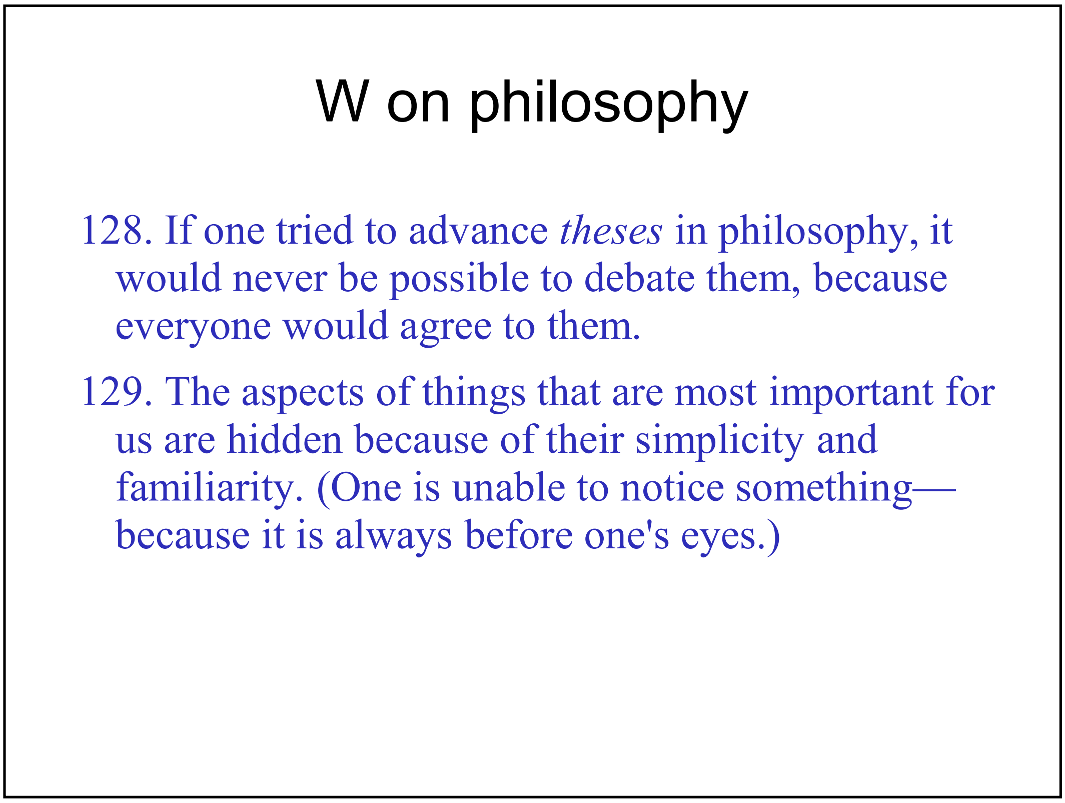


W on philosophy

126. Philosophy simply puts everything before us, and neither explains nor deduces anything.—Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us.

One might also give the name "philosophy" to what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions.

127. The work of the philosopher consists in assembling reminders for a particular purpose.



W on philosophy

128. If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.

129. The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes.)

summary

The grammatical investigation of the concept of rule-following tells us that it is learned and practiced in specific language games – which gives it order and support (vs. idea of total lack of link between rule and application of the rule).

Conclusions from rule-following discussion

(Later) Wittgenstein wants to connect “rule” and “rule-following”, as he wants to do with all concepts constituting philosophical problems, with *action* and *practice*, rather than treating them in traditional epistemological and ontological terms.

He wants to *describe* rather than *explain*.

- the idea of "language games" highlights how words and rules function within specific social and practical contexts.
- language is not a fixed set of meanings or rules; rather, it can be described in terms of various language games, each with its own rules and purposes.
- These language games are played by individuals as they communicate and engage in various activities.
- Language games are part of later W's "anthropological" approach to philosophy

206. Following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. We are trained to do so; **we react to an order in a particular way**. But what if one person reacts in one way and another in another to the order and the training? Which one is right?

Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. **In what circumstances** would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on?

The common behaviour of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.

“The common behaviour of mankind” – misleading translation?

“Die gemeinsame menschliche **Handlungs**weise”

Ways of **acting**, not mere behaviour

Rules work and are identified within «the sphere of reasons»

This «system of reference» indicates that we (humans) agree within a «form of life» (i.e. that people act like us in identifiable ways):

Agreement in form of life

240. Disputes do not break out (among mathematicians, say) over the question whether a rule has been obeyed or not. People don't come to blows over it, for example. This **belongs to the scaffolding from which our language operates** (for example, yields descriptions).

241. "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?"—What is true and false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. That is **agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life**.

The (internal)relation between rule-following and (language) games

Highlights that language/games (typically) depend on regularity and a background agreement on what counts as the same, etc.

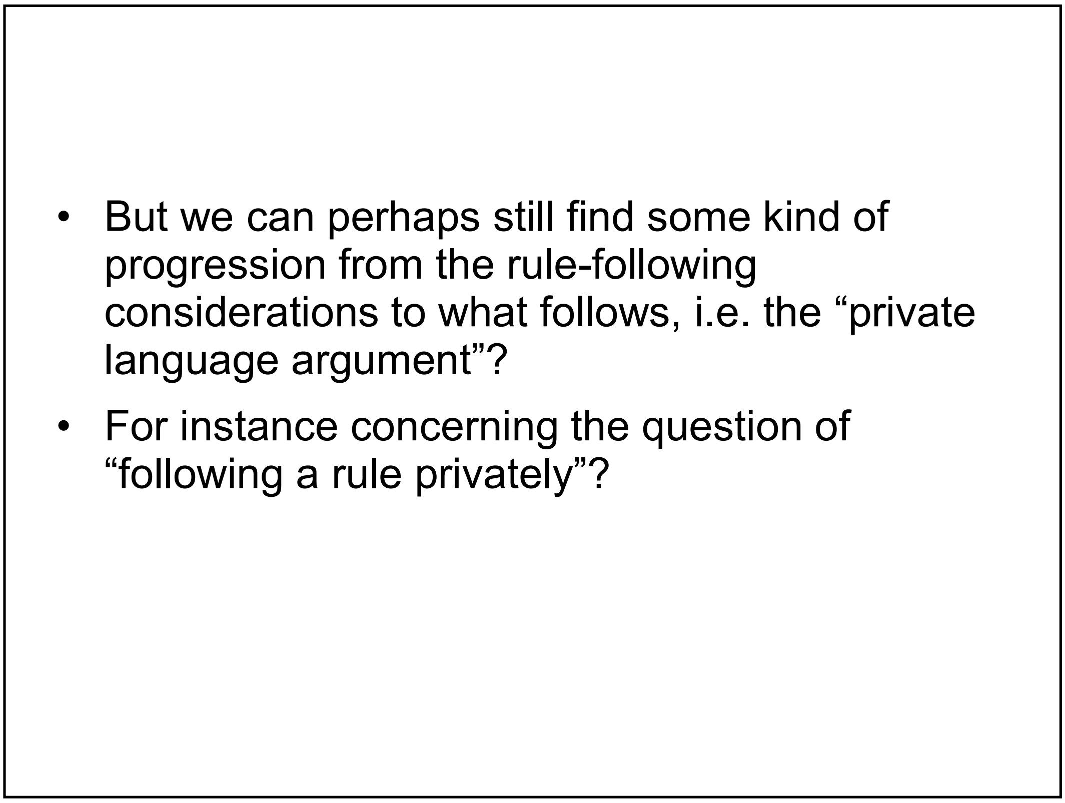
This is not an “agreement in definitions” or formal rules, but an “agreement in judgments” or “form of life”

The notion of *form of life* highlights the importance of shared practices, forms of acting and reacting (“the common behaviour of mankind”)

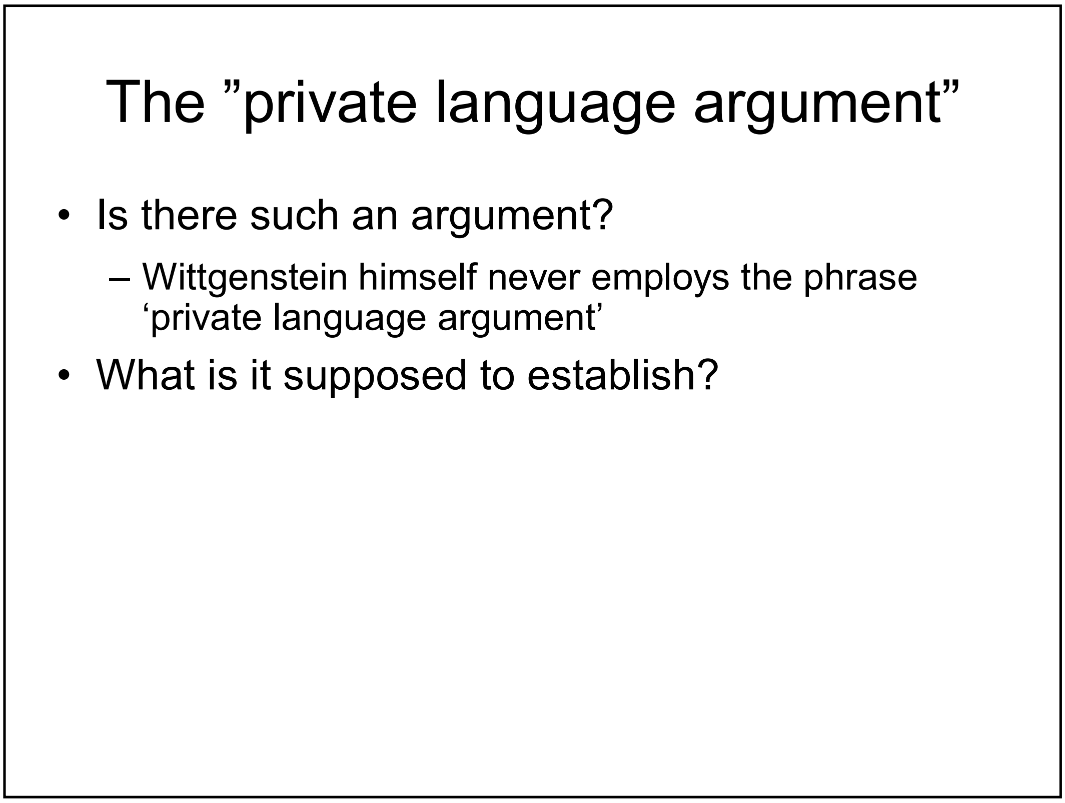
This kind of agreement is part of the “scaffolding” from which language operates

From rules to private language

- In the preface of the PI Wittgenstein says that he had thought it was essential that “in the book the thoughts should proceed from one subject to another in a natural, smooth, sequence”.
- But he says he did not achieve this – instead, “the same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions”



- But we can perhaps still find some kind of progression from the rule-following considerations to what follows, i.e. the “private language argument”?
- For instance concerning the question of “following a rule privately”?



The ”private language argument”

- Is there such an argument?
  - Wittgenstein himself never employs the phrase ‘private language argument’
- 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”)

Wittgenstein and «private language»

Why does W introduce the discussion here?

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

There are several connections between the rule-following considerations and the pla:

The rule following discussion ends with an emphasis on agreement and shared forms of acting and reacting as a background condition of meaningful use of language

For instance, if we want to be able to make ourselves understood, there must be some criterion for what counts as the same use of a word

So it seems I cannot make up the meaning of my words privately

(PI §35Z):

> Can I say "bububu" and mean "If it doesn't rain, I shall go for a walk"?—It is only in a language that I can mean something by something. This shows clearly that the grammar of "to mean" is not like that of the expression "to imagine" and the like.

Beginning of PLA

The interlocutor now wants to problematize this emphasis on agreement about public criteria of meaning, by moving to the first-person case.

We seem to be able to refer to things we can only access privately, for instance our mental images and sensations.

In these cases there does not seem to be any direct connection between the meaning of the word and agreement concerning public criteria (eg our behaviour)

Peculiarities of our use of sensation-words

There is an asymmetry between the first person and the (second- or) third person regarding the use of sensation-words like “pain”

In the first person case there does not seem to be any direct connection between the meaning of the word and agreement concerning public criteria (eg our behaviour)

This asymmetry seems to be grounded in our access to the “inner life” of persons.

Tempting conclusions

1) I seem to have immediate knowledge of my own experience and only inferential knowledge of the experience of others (based on their behaviour)
2) This implies an absence of doubt about my own experience, but an uncertainty about the experiences of others
3) My subjective experience often seems to be partly or wholly ineffable, i.e. not communicable to others

Beginning of the Private Language Argument (PLA)

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. So one could imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue; who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves. – An explorer who watched them and listened to their talk might succeed in translating their language into ours. (This would enable him to predict these people's actions correctly, for he also hears them making resolutions and decisions.)

...

§ 243

First reiterates the point about an “explorer” (cf. 204) being able to make sense even of such monolinguists by “watching them and listening to their talk” (this means there is, even in this borderline case, enough of “common behaviour” to go by)

However, the interlocutor wants to shift to the first-person case by finding an example of a “purely” private form of language concerning “inner experiences”:

What is a private language

PI § 243 […]

But is it also conceivable that there be a language in which a person could write down or give voice to his inner experiences—his feelings, moods, and so on—for his own 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 only the speaker can **know**; to his immediate private sensations [Empfindungen]. So another person cannot understand the language.

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”?

“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

What are «sensations»?

- A private language 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

Philosophical questions

The interlocutor (as usual) thinks we must answer the following sort of philosophical questions:

Semantic question: how do sensations words refer?

Epistemic question: what can we know about sensations; why is there a seeming asymmetry in my knowledge of my own (immediate, private) sensations vs my knowledge of other people's sensations (behavioral criteria, public)

W, as usual, seems to think that there are no such questions to answer. The PLA (frustratingly) begins by W seemingly brushing off this kind of questions (§ § 244-258)

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 name them? But how is the connection between the name and the thing named set up? This question is the same as: How does a human being learn the meaning of names of sensations? For example, of the word "pain".

Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, natural, expressions of sensation and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; 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.

Ausdruck (expression) or *Äußerung* (manifestation, avowal) vs.

Beschreibung (description)

First move

W introduces the example of our use of the word “pain”, and says that our sensation-language is connected to “the primitive, natural expressions of sensation and used in their place”.

The answer to the interlocutor’s questions of reference and knowledge are replaced by a scenario describing teaching and learning.

If we look at the proposed “private language” from this perspective, the idea of “metaphysical” privacy is dissolved (§ 256).

”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?

At this point, Wittgenstein seems to refuse to admit that there is anything problematic about the question how words refer to sensations:

- Our sensation-language is *internally related* to natural, instinctive ways of behaviour
- Sensations can (by an adult human being) be manifested either verbally or non-verbally
- First-person expressions of pain are normally not descriptions or knowedge-claims, but manifestations (*Äußerungen*) of pain
- If we describe the surroundings of our use of sensation-words, what seems problematic disappears

So what about the private language?

256. Now, what about the language which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand? How do I **use** words to signify my sensations? -- As we ordinarily do? Then are my words for sensations tied up with my natural expressions of sensation? **In that case my language is not a ‘private’ one.** Someone else might understand it as well as I.

The interlocutor is dissatisfied with this move, and wants to dissociate the private language from *any* behavioral criteria:

-- But suppose I didn’t have any natural expression of sensation, but only had sensations? And now I simply associate names with sensations, and use these names in descriptions. –

(remember baby Augustine in PI § 1!)

257. “What would it be like if human beings did not manifest their pains (did not groan, grimace, etc.)? Then it would be impossible to teach a child the use of the word ‘toothache’.” -- Well, let’s assume that the child is a genius and invents a name for the sensation by himself! -- But then, of course, he couldn’t make himself understood when he used the word. -- So does he understand the name, without being able to explain its meaning to anyone? -- But what does it mean to say that he has ‘named his pain’? -- How has he managed this naming of pain? And whatever he did, what was its purpose? --

Wittgenstein thinks this leaves unaswered all the questions of how the interlocutor supposes the “naming” actually works. In order to clarify the interlocutor’s claims, he then sketches out famous case of the “private diarist”.

The «private diarist»: setting

258. **Let us imagine** the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign "S" and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation.

Proposal: the meaning of ”S” is given through a private ostensive definition

—I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated [sich nicht aussprechen lässt].

—But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition.

—How? Can I point to the sensation?

— Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation—and so, as it were, point to it inwardly.

Problem: this kind of ”ceremony” is really no definition at all

—But what is this ceremony for? For that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign.

—Well, that is done precisely by concentrating my attention; for in this way I impress **on myself** the connection between the sign and the sensation.

However, in such a case any criteria for correctness are lacking

—But "I impress it on myself" can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection *correctly* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem correct to me is correct. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'correct'.

- *Why* is it impossible to talk about correct and incorrect here?
- Not merely because memory can deceive you (so you would not be sure whether you have remembered correctly)
- Instead, in this case there is **no** criterion for what would even count as a correct memory

Cf.

Every language-game is based on words 'and objects' being recognized again. We learn with the same inexorability that this is a chair as that 2x2=4.

OC §455

In the case of the private linguist there is nothing that distinguishes "recognizing the sensation" from "believing that one is recognizing it"

- *No* standard or criterion has been established for deciding whether the diarist remembers correctly or not, i.e. there is *no telling* whether ”S” stands for the same item or not (because the "definition" really did not make sense)
- But did not the diarist do *something* when he marked down ”S”?

PI § 260

260. "Well, I believe that this is the sensation S again."

—Perhaps you believe that you believe it!

Then did the man who made the entry in the calendar make a note of nothing whatever?

—Don't consider it a matter of course that a person is making a note of something when he makes a mark—say in a calendar. For a note has a function, and this "S" so far has none.

- So the case of the private diary is not at all like, say, using a mental image of a timetable to check whether one has remembered a departure time correctly (§ 265)
- There can be no ”subjective justification”, since justification means you can appeal to something independent
- This is ”as if someone were to buy several copies of today's morning paper to assure that what is said was true.” (PI § 265)

- To suppose one can give oneself a private explanation of a word is like supposing ”that my right hand can give my left hand money” [schenken vs geben], see PI § 268 – the proper surroundings are missing
- The whole idea that ”S” would get meaning through a private ostensive definition seems to disintegrate when thought through

261. What reason have we for calling "S" the sign for a sensation? For **"sensation" is a word of our common language, not of one intelligible to me alone**. So the use of this word stands in need of **a justification which everybody understands**.—And it would not help either to say that it need not be a sensation; that when he writes "S", he **has something**—and that is all that can be said. "Has" and "something" also belong to our common language.—So in the end when one is doing philosophy one gets to the point where one would like just to emit an inarticulate sound.—But such a sound is an expression only as it occurs in a particular language-game, which should now be described.

A reductio?

- It does not help *not* to use the word "sensation", since even the words ”something” and ”have” belong to our common language
- To really say something completely private seems to boil down to emitting an unarticulated sound
- But if this sound is to have any sense it must belong to a language game that we now can attempt to describe

Alternative reading: There really is no argument here. Instead, 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)

What is the interlocutor’s problem?

- When he describes the allegedly ”private language” he has no choice but to use the words of our language, because he assumes “S” means a sensation
- If ”S” has a use, the use cannot be something only the person who uses the sign can understand
- The very fact that he talks about a sensation puts certain demands on the intelligibility of what he is trying to say (a sensation has a duration, is pleasant or unpleasant, has a location, intensity, phenomenal qualities, is characterized by bodily movements, etc etc)
- Sensations are not inner "things" that we can privately identify and point to

Cf. § 257

> —When one says “He gave a name to his sensation”, one forgets that much must be **prepared in the language for mere naming to make sense**. And when we speak of someone's giving a name to a pain, **the grammar of the word “pain” is what has been prepared here**; it indicates the post where the new word is stationed.

Conclusions of the pla, so far

- The underlying question might be understood as: ‘Do we have a clear picture of the circumstances in which we should say that someone spoke a private language?’
- The line of reasoning that follows § 243 is hardly a cogent argument; instead it can be read as various attempts to take the interlocutor seriously and achieve a *clear picture* of what it might mean to speak a private language.
- All these attempts ultimately fail, with the result that what at first sight seemed intelligible (‘a private language’) turns out not to be intelligible after all.

Summing up:

- The interlocutor wishes to claim that he can invent a completely private language; however, he wants to avoid all the consequences that follow from the claim that these signs are meaningful (to him)
- He has not claimed anything *false* by saying: ”I have sensations, but nothing about them can be communicated in our language”
- The problem is that he has actually not claimed anything at all, but wants to continue using the words of our language

The upshot of the discussion

272. The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person possesses his own exemplar, but that nobody knows whether other people also have this or something else. The assumption would thus be possible—though unverifiable—that one section of mankind had one sensation of red and another section another.

Illustration: the ”beetle in the box”

293. 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 *that* of other people too? And how can I generalize the *one* case so irresponsibly?

Well, everyone tells me that he knows what pain is only from his own case!—Suppose everyone had a box with something in it which we call 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.

293 continues

—But what if these people's word "beetle" had a use nonetheless?—**If so, it would not be as the name of a thing.** The thing in the box doesn't belong to the language-game at all; not even as a *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.

That is to say, **if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and name', the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.**

294. If you say he sees a private picture before him, which he is describing, you have at any rate made an assumption about what he has before him. And this means that you can describe it or do describe it more closely. If you admit that you have no idea what kind of thing it might be that he has before him—then **what seduces you into saying**, in spite of that, that he has **something** before him? Isn't it as if I were to say of someone: "He *has* something. But I don't know whether it is money, or debts, or an empty till.“

Temptation: to think of e.g. a pain as an object the bearer of the pain has, or “owns”

Wittgenstein’s last word?

§ 304. "But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour with pain and pain-behaviour without pain.”

— Admit it? What greater difference could there be?

—"And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a Nothing.”

—Not at all. **It is not a Something, but not a Nothing either!** The conclusion was only that a Nothing would serve just as well as a Something about which nothing could be said. **We have only rejected the grammar which tends to force itself on us here.**

§ 304 continues

The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts—which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or whatever.

Morale

- The craving to say that a sensation must be a ”something” (a private mental object or process) is forced upon us by our forms of language
- But the paradoxes surrounding ”private language” disappear once we realize that language functions in many different ways
- We must call to mind how our language involving names of sensations actually gets meaning in particular circumstances (i.e. take note of its ”grammar”)

Does this make Wittgenstein a behaviourist?

The interlocutor’s accusation:

> 307. "Are you not really a behaviourist in disguise? Aren't you at bottom really saying that everything except human behaviour is fiction?"

The narrator’s reply:

> —If I do speak of a fiction, then it is of a grammatical fiction.

Why is Wittgenstein not a behaviourist?

Remember the asymmetry between first and third person regarding pain-language

- First person expressions cannot be translated into statements reporting behavioural occurrences
- First person utterances, being *Äusserungen*, are not reports; they do not describe behaviour, but neither do they describe inner objects (cf. the beetle)

- However, the words we use as Äusserungen get their sense from our public language-games involving sensation-words, *not* from the first-person case
- Third person statements are descriptions, and ascription of for instance pain to another person is internally dependent on observable behaviour
- But Wittgenstein's appeal to behaviour is non-reductive; behaviour is always behaviour in context

- Therefore knowledge claims about the third person's sensations and emotions are often vague and uncertain (indeterminacy of the mental)
- However, you usually perceive *directly* whether someone is sad, angry, in pain, etc.
- This does not mean that our judgment is infallible:

  "Fine shades of behaviour" and "imponderable evidence" ("subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone") (see PI II, pp. 204; 227-228; PPF 210; 358-360) instead of "exact rules of evidence" (LW II, 94) are crucial for our use of psychological concepts.

Is there such a thing as 'expert judgment' about the genuineness of expressions of feeling?—Even here, there are those with 'better' and those with 'worse' judgement.

In general, predictions arising from judgements of those with better knowledge of people will be more correct.

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can learn it. Not, however, by taking a course of study in it, but through '*experience*'.—Can someone else be a man's teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right *tip.*—This is what 'learning' and 'teaching' are like here.—What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. **There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them right. Unlike calculating rules.**

What is most difficult here is to express this indefiniteness correctly, and without distortion.

PPF xi, 355-356

Morale of discussion of psychological concepts

- Neither the explanations nor the uses of such concepts have the formal simplicity and uniformity we naturally expect (on account of their "surface grammar")
- We are lead astray by our expectations that language always functions in the same way, for example that all words are names that refer to objects
- Especially when we consider our ways of talking about the ”inner” and the ”outer”, we must take note of how words such as ‘pain’, ‘thinking’, ‘anger’ function in our language, instead of letting us be tempted by pictures that come to us “naturally”

The notion of "grammar"

Remember: 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.