

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?
- Whom is Wittgenstein arguing against?

Relevant Remarks in *PI*

§ 243-255: introduction of the problem

§ 256-271: argument that the very notion of privacy is false or incoherent (“the private diarist”)

§ 272-315: consequences regarding the “inner/outer” distinction (“the beetle in the box”)

What is a “private language”?

A “private language” here is *not*:

- A private or personal 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:

- Only *I* can know that 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 is a “private language”?

- The assumption about the privacy of sensations is coupled with the idea that 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 that names sensations and that is unshareable 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”?

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

Who holds such a view?

Wittgenstein does not name philosophers here. Instead, he is addressing a temptation that belongs to 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 *PI* § 1)

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*.

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

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

- Descartes
- Hobbes
- Locke
- Hume
- Russell
- Ayer
- Carnap
- Wittgenstein (ca. 1929-1930)

- Cf. Ian Hacking, *Why Does Language Matter to Philosophy*
(Cambridge, 1975)

The Cartesian Picture

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

Thinking can be conceived in logical isolation from a world independent of the *cogito*.

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 at a particular time is indubitable.

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.

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

The “inner” certain, the “outer” merely contingent.

The language used by *res cogitas* 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 Empiricist 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 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 the color green)

Russell and Sense-data, circa 1914-1920

- The meanings of our words must be anchored in sense-data (objects of direct acquaintance)
- Actually no two people mean exactly the same with their words (e.g. “Bismarck”)
- Two accounts of proper names. One for the user, one for the rest of us (cf. Theory of Descriptions).
- Cf. Cora Diamond, “Does Bismarck have a Beetle in his Box?”

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 behavior)
- See PR 88-89

(cf. 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.

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.

“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.

“Privacy” and “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?

Other people cannot be said to learn of my sensations only from my behaviour,— for *I* cannot be said to learn from them. I *have* them.

There may be nothing problematic with the question of how words refer to sensations

- Our sensation-language is tied to natural, instinctive ways of behaviour
- Sensations can (by an adult human being) be manifested either verbally or non-verbally.
- First-person expressions about pain are not descriptions, but manifestations (*Äusserungen*) of pain.
- Thus it is *normally* not meaningful to say “I know I am in pain”. (contra e.g. Descartes)
- Pain-language is essentially public: Can I say “bububu” and thereby mean “I have a pain in my ankle”? (cf. *PI* § 35Z)

- But the interlocutor insists there is a problem: How can I know that the same kind of cause (being pricked by a needle) will actually cause the same kind of sensation (and not just the same kind of behavior) in all of us?
- In order to clarify the question Wittgenstein asks us to imagine an example of such essentially private uses of language, where the reference of the words is knowable only to the speaker himself. This is the example of the “private diarist”:

A Private Ostensive Definition?

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. —I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated [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. —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.

Criteria for Correctness are Lacking

—But “I impress it on myself” can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection right 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 can't we talk about 'correct' here?

- Not *merely* because memory can deceive you (so you would not be sure whether you have remembered correctly)
- Instead, 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 didn't 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.

- The case of the private diary can be compared with 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 apply to an independent authority
- 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 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.

What is Problematic with the Interlocutor's Idea?

- He describes the allegedly “private language”, so he has no choice but to use the words of our language, because he has to assume “S” has meaning.
- If “S” has a *use* it's hard to see how that can be something that only the person who uses the sign can understand.
- The very fact that he talks about a sensation seems to put certain demands on the intelligibility of what he is trying to say
- Must we regard sensations as private “things” to which we can privately point?
- 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 inarticulate sound.
- But if this sound is to have any sense, it seems it belongs to a language game that we now can attempt to describe

What is the Conclusion of the “Private Language Argument”?

Is the idea of a “private language” in the sense envisaged by the interlocutor a falsehood or nonsense? (cf. § 246)

281. ... only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious.

282. “But in a fairy tale the pot too can see and hear!” (Certainly; but it can also talk.)

“But the fairy tale only invents what is not the case: it does not talk nonsense.”—It is not as simple as that. **Is it false or nonsensical to say that a pot talks?** Have we a clear picture of the circumstances in which we should say of a pot that it talked? (Even a nonsense-poem is not nonsense in the same way as the babbling of a child.)

§ 282 continues

We do indeed say of an inanimate thing that it is in pain: when playing with dolls for example. But this use of the concept of pain is a secondary one. Imagine a case in which people ascribed pain only to inanimate things; pitied only dolls! (When children play at trains their game is connected with their knowledge of trains. It would nevertheless be possible for the children of a tribe unacquainted with trains to learn this game from others, and to play it without knowing that it was copied from anything. One might say that the game did not make the same sense to them as to us.)

283. What gives us *so much as the idea* that living beings, things, can feel? ...

Couldn't I imagine having frightful pains and turning to stone while they lasted? Well, how do I know, if I shut my eyes, whether I have not turned into a stone? And if that has happened, in what sense will *the stone* have the pains? In what sense will they be ascribable to the stone? And why indeed should the pain here have a bearer at all?!

And can one say of the stone that it has a mind and *that* is what has the pain? What has a mind, or pain, to do with a stone?

Only of what behaves like a human being can one say that it *has* pains.

For one has to say it of a body, or, if you like of a mind which some body *has*. And how can a body *have* a mind?

284. Look at a stone and imagine it having sensations.—One says to oneself: How could one so much as get the idea of ascribing a *sensation* to a *thing*? One might as well ascribe it to a number!—And now look at a wriggling fly and at once these difficulties vanish and pain seems able to get a foothold here, where before everything was, so to speak, too smooth for it.

Conclusions of the PLA

- 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 stepwise deductive 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.
- Thus far we should say that the idea of a private language has not been made intelligible.
- However, this does not preclude that some of the interlocutor’s claims during the dialogue *might* be treated as false and not nonsensical.

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 it is unclear whether he has actually claimed anything at all. But he still wants to continue using the words or our language

Wittgenstein's Last Word?

§ 304. “But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behaviour accompanied by pain and pain-behaviour without any 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 tries to force itself on us here.

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 anything else you please.

Moral

- 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”)

Consequences: The Example of “Pain”

- We are misled by the Cartesian idea of the priority of the first person to understand “I am in pain” as a description of an inner object or process, instead of a manifestation of pain
- Such manifestations of pain are connected to our “instinctive behavior” and our pain-language grows out from this behavior
- Our natural expressions of sensations are “part of the language-game” where our pain-language is used and makes sense
- “Only of what behaves like a human being can one say that it *has* pains.” (PI § 283)

So I can neither Know, nor Doubt, that I am in Pain?

288. ... That expression of doubt has no place in the language-game; but if expressions of sensation—human behaviour—are excluded, it looks as if I might then *legitimately* begin to doubt. My temptation to say that one might take a sensation for something other than what it is arises from this: if I assume the abrogation of the normal language-game with the expression of a sensation, I need a criterion of identity for the sensation; and then the possibility of error also exists.

A Further Way of Articulating the Issue

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.

—But what if these peoples’ 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."

Does this make Wittgenstein a Behaviorist?

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?”

Wittgenstein's reply:

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

The assumption that pain language must refer to pains as a name refers to its referent is such a grammatical fiction.

Does this Make Wittgenstein a Behaviorist?

Ontological behaviorism: psychological phenomena simply *are* behavioral phenomena (i.e. there are no psychological phenomena) → Physicalism

Logical behaviorism: every psychological expression must be translatable into a statement about behavioral occurrences without affecting the meaning of the expression at issue → Verificationism

Why is Wittgenstein not a Behaviorist?

Asymmetry between first and third person regarding pain-language:

- First person expressions cannot be translated into statements reporting behavioral occurrences.
- First person utterances, being *Äusserungen*, are not reports; they do not describe behavior, but neither do they describe inner objects (cf. the beetle)
- While third person statements *are* descriptions, and ascription of, for instance, pain is dependent on observable behavior
- Wittgenstein's appeal to behavior is non-reductive; behavior is always behavior in context.
- Knowledge claims about the third person's sensations and emotions are often vague and uncertain (indeterminacy of the mental)

- “Fine shades of behaviour” and “imponderable evidence” (“subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone”) (see PI II, pp. 204; 227-228) are crucial for our use of psychological concepts

PI § 351- § 354

There is such a thing as colour-blindness and there are ways of establishing it. There is in general complete agreement in the judgments of colours made by those who have been diagnosed normal. This characterizes the concept of a judgment of colour.

There is in general no such agreement over the question whether an expression of feeling is genuine or not.

I am sure, *sure*, that he is not pretending; but some third person is not. Can I always convince him? And if not is there some mistake in his reasoning or observations?

“You're all at sea!”—we say this when someone doubts what we recognize as clearly genuine—but we cannot prove anything.

Is there such a thing as ‘expert judgment’ about the genuineness of expressions of feeling?—Even here, there are those whose judgment is ‘better’ and those whose judgment is ‘worse’.

Correct prognoses will generally issue from the judgments of those with better knowledge of mankind.

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can. Not, however, by taking a course 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 put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified, into words.

- Identity conditions of the experience or sensation are not purely introspective but linked to external circumstances
- The difference but interrelation between first- and third-person cases must be respected
- Our grasp of others' sensations or experiences must not be represented as extrapolations from a purely introspective grasp of the concept