

K. Cahill, A. Pichler & S. Säätelä
FIL 217/317

9th lecture 25.10.2017:

The “private language
argument” continued

The temptation

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.

”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 tied 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 not descriptions, but manifestations (*Äusserungen*) of pain

Thus it is normally not meaningful to say "I know I am in pain" (contra Descartes)

Pain-language is essentially public:

665. Imagine someone pointing to his cheek with an expression of pain and saying "abracadabra!"—We ask "What do you mean?" And he answers "I meant toothache".—You at once think to yourself: How can one '*mean* toothache' by that word? Or what did to *mean* to pain by that word *amount to*? [...]

—can't I say "By 'abracadabra' I mean toothache"? Of course I can; but this is a definition; **not a description of what goes on in me when I utter the word.**

- But the interlocutor insist 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 behaviour) in all of us?
- In order to clarify the question Wittgenstein asks us to imagine an example of such essentially private use of language, where the reference of the words is knowable only to the speaker himself. This is the example 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 [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.

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'.

- On the orthodox reading the central question is :*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, 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 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 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 has to assume 'S' has meaning
- 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
- Sensations are not private "things" that we can privately 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.

- 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

What is the conclusion of the "private language argument"?

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

251. What does it mean when we say: "I can't imagine the opposite of this" or "What would it be like, if it were otherwise?"—For example, when someone has said that my images are private, or that only I myself can know whether I am feeling pain, and similar things.

Of course, here "I can't imagine the opposite" doesn't mean: my powers of imagination are unequal to the task. These words are a defence against something whose form makes it look like an empirical proposition, but which is really a grammatical one.

But why do we say: "I can't imagine the opposite"? Why not: "I can't imagine the thing itself"? [...]

252. "This body has extension." To this we might reply: "Nonsense!"—but are inclined to reply "Of course!"—Why is this?

Nonsense or falsehood?

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.)

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 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.

Conclusions of the pla

- 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.
- In so far we should say that the idea of a private language is nonsense.
- However, this does not preclude that some of the interlocutor's claims during the dialogue should 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 he has actually not claimed anything at all, but wants to continue using the words of 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.

§ 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 anything else you please.

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")

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 behaviour" and our pain-language grows out from this behaviour
- 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)

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.

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.

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."

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.

Does this make Wittgenstein a behaviourist?

- Ontological behaviourism:
psychological phenomena simply *are* behavioural phenomena

→physicalism

Does this make Wittgenstein a behaviourist?

- Logical behaviourism:
every psychological expression can be translated into a statement about behavioural occurrences without affecting the meaning of the expression at issue

→ Verificationism

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)

- Third person statements are descriptions, and ascription of for instance pain is dependent on observable behaviour
- But Wittgenstein's appeal to behaviour is non-reductive; behaviour is always behaviour 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; PPF 210; 358-360) are crucial for our use of psychological concepts

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 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

The human body is the best picture of the human soul.

(PI II, p. 178; PPF § 25)

Neither Cartesianism nor behaviourism gets this right

How general is this account of pain?

A similar account can be given of other "mental phenomena" (aspect perception, intention, belief, etc.)

Principles (Child 172):

- Meanings of these words should not be represented as resting on internal ostensive definitions

- 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