

The Private Language Argument and Phenomenological Perspective

Yukiko Okamoto, Tokyo, Japan

One may, first, suggest the Robinson Crusoe version of the private language argument that simulates the situation of the language spoken by an isolated person and understood solely by him. But this makes no crucial point.

Secondly, we must mention Kripke's celebrated interpretation of the private language argument. Kripke claims the section 201 of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* to be the conclusive thesis of his private language argument. One of Kripke's points is the emphasis on the linguistic community besides the following of rules. In my view, too strong an emphasis on the linguistic community may likely keep our focus on the issues of rules and justification and away from genuine problems concerning the relation between experience and language; particularly the question of the pre-linguistic. Further, pre-linguistic strata would be cut off as vicious mental entities.

Instead of the previous two, I will go along a third way by examining the examples Wittgenstein proposed concerning the question of the private language with regard to this pre-linguistic experience.

The three major results are as follows: first the impossibility of a private language. Secondly, the rejection of the ostensive explanation of the meaning of words entails from the first. Thirdly, concerning the issue of private experiences, there is no naive denial of the existence of such private sensory experiences in Wittgenstein. This consequence will also provide us with a clue to discussions of proto-phenomena and the flux of the lived time.

In the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein asks the reader to image a situation where a person invents a language to name his private inner experiences as follows: "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" (*PU*, §243). This language is invented in order to be used by only one person and therefore it is incommunicable in principle. The uncommunicability of this private language implies at least two presuppositions. One is that there are private objects we call sensations, which only the person who possesses them can have access to. Another is that the meanings of words are their referents (so-called ostensive definition of meaning, in other words, the bearer theory).¹

A crucial question follows from these presuppositions. If this sort of private language is impossible, are our sensations also denied? "What would it mean to deny the existence of pain?" (*NL*, p.314) Wittgenstein does not seem to deny the existence of our natural sensations, although they are beyond verbal expression. It appears that these two presuppositions correspond to the questions of the ostensive definition of meaning and the extent of the privacy of our sensory experiences respectively. The example of section 258 highlights the dilemma of the supposed private language use.²

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. 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 as it were, point to it inwardly (*PU*, §258).

In such a way the person creates a private language. The meaning of a word in this language is taken to be its referent. In so far as private sensations are supposed to be private entities within a private subjective realm, the language-user can point to private objects inwardly. Therefore, the definition of the private word that stands for a private sensation has to be realized by an act of pointing to. But what is the purpose of this definition? It merely serves him for his own usage. Wittgenstein continues as follows:

—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. —.....—But "I impress it on myself" can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion 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 right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right' (Id.).

As to the private sensation, we do not need any criteria. Because of its complete arbitrariness, "whatever is going to seem right to me is right", and he is never able to decide whether he is using the word correctly or not in the future. There is no end to his checking: "As if someone were to buy several copies of the morning paper in order to assure himself that what it said was true" (*PU*, §265). It is obvious here that the private language user falls into a dilemma. Either he has no criteria for correct use within the private language or he must appeal to a criterion from outside his private language. This is because the criterion must be something independent. The word has no use because it lacks any rule for its use. Thus, either it is not a language at all or it loses its privacy.

The gist of this example is to elucidate some presuppositions of that private ceremony. One of them is the assumed private objects within a private realm. That is, an invention of a word can be performed, giving meaning by a private ostensive definition. Another presupposition that falls under suspicion is "a conception of correctness," or "right." However, we cannot deny to recognize a relationship between the private word and ordinary language, such as "right", "correct", or even "sensation" (*PU*, §§261, 265). If this presupposition is rejected, then we cannot talk about the private language at all. We would even scarcely be permitted to say that "S" is a "name" of a "sensation." This very point undermines the entire project of creating a private language.

¹ Kenny, 1971, p.204.

² Ref., Kenny, 1971, p.216.

The question to what extent our sensations are private remains unanswered. Instead of consulting examples of color sensation, here we will focus on the issue of "pain."³

Wittgenstein's argument about 'pain' seems to be devoted to attack the very idea of "the private object model of sensation."⁴ A sensation such as 'pain' is never a private object and the ostensive definition is simply derived from a misunderstanding of language games surrounding the word "pain" (*PU*, §290). So long as we consider a sensation to be a private object, i.e., "if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation of the model of 'object and designation' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant" (*PU*, §294). This is from the celebrated simile of "a beetle in everyone's private box." "I am in pain" is not "a picture of a fact" which can be compared with reality as to whether it is true or false.⁵ I would like to call this misconception of sensations as objects a sort of ontological fallacy. In my view, the situation where the expression of sensations stands in need of criteria would be created by the strong inclination to identify or to describe sensations as objects to be known just like external things. This inclination tempts us to objectify what cannot be inherently objectified, i.e., our own living experiences. This inclination turns out to be a fallacy because it is absurd for me to know or doubt whether or not I have such and such sensations. This is a violation of the grammar of description of sensation, too. The fallacy may well result in the rejection of private experience itself. But on the contrary, Wittgenstein never rejects the experience of sensations, beyond their verbal expressions. A groaning patient, a wriggling fly or moaning, and other "natural expression (behaviors) of sensations reveal the "foothold" for us to talk about the real existence of sensations (*PU*, §284, II, p.179).

We then come to the following conclusions. Since ostensive definitions may be in certain circumstances "quite inessential to the language-game" (*PU*, §669), the bearer theory of meaning itself belongs to one of sophisticated language-games. However, we do not need to exclude inner experiences. Whereas private objects are said to be dropped out of the consideration just like "a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it" (*PU*, §271), inner experience, as being something pre-linguistic, is the indispensable part of the system of meaning. In the light of the thought of the latest Wittgenstein, groaning, moaning or wriggling remain ineffable but such primitive expressions (so-called pain-behaviors) reveal the basis of language games.

He puts it as follows: "Presumably that this sort of behaviour is pre-linguistic: that a language-game is based on it, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought" (*Z*, §541).⁶

In order to thematize this "prototype" or "the proto-phenomenon" (*PU*, §654), we have to let language games themselves narrate the sequence of possible events and practices. It is said that the enactment of a language-game itself is a proto-phenomenon. This idea of "proto-phenomena" makes an end to further explanations and thereby provides a cure for the immense anxiety for an absolute foundation. We needn't seek a further foundation in any private internal realm nor in the third realm of Platonic character. Every element of meaning will be found

within the scope of proto-phenomena. Investigations of meaning may be carried out internally (immanently in Husserl's sense) and logically within this framework. This is because this conception of phenomena has nothing to do with phenomenalism, sense-data theory or any kind of scientific naturalism. Furthermore, Wittgenstein is not denying a foundation for language-games. Ideas such as "an ungrounded way of acting" (*OC*, §110) and "pre-linguistic" or "primitive behavior" (*Z*, §545) may be manifested as solid grounds.

The concept of a "proto-phenomenon" is a genuine starting point to survey "depth grammar" (*PU*, §664),⁷ through just the seeing of language-games. In this sense, the "proto-phenomenon" is fundamental. However, what Wittgenstein sees are ordinary facts and everyday activities. What is therein surveyed is a "depth grammar" that is neither spatio-temporally nor causally determined. To attain a survey of the basis of language-games, then, means to arrive at the ultimate ground called "Form of Life."⁸ And even though the conception of "Form of Life" is understood as "natural conventions," the meaning of this word "natural" must neither be interpreted scientifically, nor culturally. Instead, by "natural" it is implied that there are natural as well as necessary restrictions any human being must obey, namely the a priori of Life-World in Husserl's sense. I think this may be one of appropriate destinations to which a route that starts from the private language argument leads.

As we have just seen, Wittgenstein's theory of meaning rejects anything hidden behind the proto-phenomena, i.e., private mental objects as referents of sensation words.

Sensations are not completely hidden processes inside a subjective, closed realm open only to privileged personal accesses.⁹ They are not described nor referred to, on the contrary, "the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it" (*PU* §244). This pain-experience is the lived proto-phenomena in Wittgenstein, and for Husserl the proto-I, as an anonymous flux of time may experience it. Wittgenstein never rejects such experience but he rejects the concept of the mental as hidden processes that take part in determining meaning. Husserl also declares his standpoint concerning his method to investigating the concept of meaning as follows:

The first thing, therefore, is to consult the experienced world, purely as experienced. Immersing myself wholly in the flow of my world-experiencing and ... I direct my regard to what is experienced (*Hua XVII*, §96 a).

... [T]here is nothing to 'postulate' or to 'interpret suitably', but only something to bring to light. Thus alone can that ultimate understanding of the world be attained, behind which, since it is ultimate, there is nothing more that can be sensefully inquired for, nothing more to understand. (Id.)

The concept of Life World in Husserl has something to do with Wittgenstein's Form of Life. But there appears to be a crucial gap between Wittgenstein's concept of world without "subjectivity" and Husserl's transcendental subjectivity. Wittgenstein's "expressionless point" of "I do –" has "a definite sense, separate from all experience" (*PU* §620). This remarkable awareness of the freedom of human activity will never be reduced to the temporal causal relations.

³ Ref., Strawson, 1971, pp.30-1. Strawson points out clearly that there are differences between the ways colors and pains are ascribed to persons.

⁴ Ref. Hanfling, 1985, pp.15f.

⁵ Kenny, 1971, p.222.

⁶ Ref., Wittgenstein *OC*, §599; *Z*, §545

⁷ Ishiguro, 1967, p.41.

⁸ Stueber, 1996, p.33.

⁹ See Kenny, 1971, p.211.

This seems to be contrasted with Husserl's proto-I that precedes every kind of experience.

Although everything is given to the experience of such subjectivity for Husserl, there is no outer meaningful world besides this subjective Life World. And the fundamental intersubjectivity underlies this Life World, this is in no way a private inner realm. The anonymity of flux of time consciousness may thus mean the proto-phenomena in some sense. I also believe that to objectify private objects as immediate experiences opposes Husserl's very thesis of Intentionality as well as his method.

Literature

Wittgenstein, L., 1968, *Philosophische Untersuchungen*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell. (PU)

Wittgenstein, L., 1969/79, *On Certainty*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell. (OC)

Wittgenstein, L., 1967, *Zettel*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967. (Z)

Wittgenstein, L., 1968, "Wittgenstein's Notes for Lectures on Private Experience and Sense Data," in *Philosophical Review*, July, pp.271-320. (NL)

Husserl, E., 1978, *Husserliana XVII*, Martinus Nijhoff (Hua), (English tr. by Cairns, Dorion, Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff.

Hunfling, O., 1985, "What does the Private Language Argument prove?," in *Philosophical Quarterly*, 34:137, pp.468-481

Ishiguro, H., 1967, "Symposium: "Imagination ,"" in *Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Vol. XLI*, pp.37-56.

Kenny, A., 1971, "The Verification Principle and the Private Language Argument," in Johnes, O.R., ed., *The Private Language Argument*, London: Macmillan, pp. 204-228.

Kripke, S. A., 1982, *Wittgenstein: On Following Rules and Private Language*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Strawson, P.F., 1971, "Exposition and criticism of Wittgenstein's Investigations," in Jones pp.27-33.

Stueber, K.R., 1994, "Practice, Indeterminacy and Private Language: Wittgenstein's Dissolution of Scepticism," in *Philosophical Investigations* 17:1, pp.14-36.

Yukiko Okamoto <czi05540@nifty.com>