

A. Pichler & S. Säätelä
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The “private language
argument” cont’d

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REMEMBER!

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“Deflationism”

Classic example: deflationism about truth

- (a) all that can be significantly said about truth is exhausted by an account of the role of the expression ‘true’ or of the concept of truth in our talk and thought
- (b) by contrast with what traditional views assume, this role is neither metaphysically substantive nor explanatory

Truth and assertability

Early W.: Truth - “What are the facts?”

(TLP 4.5: *The general form of proposition is: Such and such is the case.*)

Later W.: Assertability - “What are we entitled to say?”

(e.g. PI § 654: *This is the language-game that is being played.*)

Back to the PLA

What is a "private language" here?

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"?

"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.*

PI § 254

[...] What we 'are tempted to say' in such a case is, of course, not philosophy; but it is its raw material. [...]

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 moment is indubitable.

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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.

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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 ultimately 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)

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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)

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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: I am directly acquainted with myself and my experiences, but other can only refer to them 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 beginning of the 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.

...

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The temptation

PI § 243 [...]

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.

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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.

Ausdruck (expression) or *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?

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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, but manifestations (*Äußerungen*) of pain

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

Pain-language is essentially public

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- But the interlocutor insist there is a problem: how can I *know* that the same kind of event (being pricked by a needle) will actually cause the same kind of sensation (and not just the same kind of behaviour) in other people than me?
- In order to clarify the question Wittgenstein asks us to imagine an example of an essentially private use of language, where the reference of the words is knowable only to the speaker himself. This is the famous example of the "private diarist":

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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.

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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'.

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- *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)

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- 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"?

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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.

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- 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)

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- 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

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 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.

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“S” *could* have a use

§ 270 asks us to **imagine a use for the entry of the sign “S”**, and hints that it might have a use as an avowal, not a description of my inner state. The reason to call “S” a name of a sensation is **the kind of way this sign is employed in this language-game**.

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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: «In one way this is false, and in another nonsense.»)

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.)

§ 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, 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.

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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.

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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 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.