

The Private Language Argument

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Richard Floyd explains a notorious example of Wittgenstein's public thought.

Wittgenstein is certainly a special case. He is perhaps the only philosopher who could have produced an argument for which there can be serious debate about whether or not it is in fact an argument. The passage which has earned this dubious honour is commonly known as *the private language argument*. If we are going to apply strict logical criteria and say that an argument must have premises which lead to a conclusion via rules of inference, we would have to say that the private language argument is not an argument, given that it lacks any clear structure and any obvious conclusion. If however, we can accept that any piece of text whose main aim is to make a philosophical point can reasonably be called an argument, then we can indeed call the private language argument an argument. And that, for the purposes of this article, is what we are going to do. But on top of the debate about whether or not it deserves to be called an argument lies the considerably larger and more lively debate about the precise nature of its content.

The private language argument appears as part of Wittgenstein's posthumous epic *Philosophical Investigations*, part one of which consists of 693 numbered remarks, which were arranged by Wittgenstein himself, and few of which are more than a page in length. Part two was assembled after his death and is more loosely structured, with fourteen sections of various lengths. Wittgenstein first raises the idea of a private language in remark §243 of part one. He says:

“But could we also imagine a language in which a person could write down or give vocal expression to his inner experiences – his feeling, 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 last point at which he mentions private language is in §275, and the main attack that is considered to be 'the private language argument' occurs between these two remarks, although Wittgenstein continues to discuss related issues concerning sensations (pain in particular) until around §317.

Something that most commentators will agree on is that one of Wittgenstein's main aims is to show that such a private language is impossible, and that even if it were possible it would be completely useless. But this is just one strand of the argument. Intertwined with the remarks about private language is a separate but related discussion about the relationship between public language and private sensations. In fact, these two interwoven strands are so closely related that one could see them as two sides of the

same coin. But as suggested above, the range of possible interpretations is vast, and before we start thinking about what it could all mean, we should first take a look at what Wittgenstein actually said.

What Does Wittgenstein Say?

First, let's look at Wittgenstein's direct discussion of the concept of a private language. Having been introduced at §243, private language does not appear again until §256, where Wittgenstein questions what it means to associate a word/sign with a sensation. How does this association take place? How does the association of a name with a sensation lead to that name actually meaning the sensation?

This addresses an issue which has been simmering since Wittgenstein first defined a private language by saying "the individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations." Does this mean that the entire vocabulary of the language must consist of words referring to the speaker's private sensations? How then could such a language have any grammatical structure? There are other problems too. In §257 Wittgenstein claims that the private definition of words lacks the "stage-setting" necessary for language to be meaningful:

"When one says "He gave a name to his sensation" one forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense. And when we speak of someone's having given a name to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word pain; it shews the post where the new word is stationed."

What Wittgenstein is trying to say here is that in order for a word to name an object or sensation – in order for any word to *mean* anything – there has to be some system of rules which allow this – which "shew the post where the new word is stationed." He questions whether any such system could exist in the privacy of one's own mind. This line of thought appears again at §261, where Wittgenstein shows that it is extremely difficult to talk of a private sign 'S' having any linguistic role whatsoever that is not grounded in public rules.

§258 constitutes the main onslaught against a private language. This is where Wittgenstein attempts to demonstrate that the words/signs of a private language cannot be defined in any meaningful way. Firstly he remarks that "a definition of the sign cannot be formulated": a private language sign cannot be defined using any words the speaker already knows, as this would make it part of public language. But if a word is to be defined privately it must be by ostensive definition. We must 'point' to our sensations in the same way that we might point to a physical object in order to name it:

"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!"

This describes a private language speaker's attempt to establish a connection between a word or sign and a sensation. One problem that arises from the private nature of this definition is that it is impossible to tell whether one has remembered the connection correctly. Whatever seems to be right will be right. There is no difference between believing one is right and actually being right about the connection [because you are the deciding judge], and thus a mistake in the application of the private word is impossible: "And that only means that here we can't talk about right."

So how does one undertake to use a certain word in a certain way, which guarantees it will be used this way in the future? This is the question Wittgenstein raises and confronts in §262-5:

"I can (inwardly) undertake to call THIS 'pain' in the future" – "But is it certain that you have undertaken it? Are you sure that it was enough for this purpose to concentrate your attention on your feeling?" – A queer question. -"

Wittgenstein is reiterating the problem that arose at the end of §258; that there can be no "criterion of correctness" for private ostensive definition, as memory is the only way to determine the meaning of the sign and memory cannot be relied upon. It is "As if someone were to buy several copies of the morning newspaper to assure himself that what it said was true." (§265)

From §268-71 Wittgenstein argues that not only is private definition impossible, it is also pointless, and that whether I remember any such definition correctly or incorrectly "does not matter in the least" (§270). To the question "Why can I not define words privately?" Wittgenstein might answer "Why can't my right hand give my left hand money?" The suggestion is that such definitions would be of no practical consequence. The only conceivable purpose of associating a sign with a sensation would be to alert myself to the fact that I have the sensation, in the same way that public sensation words are *expressions* of sensations rather than descriptions (§244). Given that my private sign would only come to mind as a result of my having the sensation, there seem to be little point in expressing to myself that I have it: I know it already. As Wittgenstein says rather aptly: "a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves with it is not part of the mechanism" (§271).

Wittgenstein raises two key questions near the beginning of the private language argument. In §244 he asks "How do words *refer* to sensations?" and in §246 he asks "In what sense are my sensations *private*?" The discussion which takes place between §244 and §317, interwoven with the discussion about private definition, seems to be aimed at answering these two questions.

The first point he makes is that the word 'pain' is an expression of the sensation rather than a description of it, as we've seen. It's not a description of pain *behaviour* either: "the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it" (§244).

In §246 Wittgenstein discusses our knowledge of our sensations. He concludes that it is nonsense to say that “I know I am in pain” as it means nothing more than that “I am in pain.” It makes more sense to say that while other people can doubt that I am in pain, I cannot.

In the passage from §246-51, Wittgenstein concludes that sensations are private, and that this is an *a priori* proposition – that it logically could not be any other way: “The proposition “Sensations are private” is comparable to: “One plays patience by oneself”.”(§248) This is a clear rejection of behaviourism, which denies the existence of private thoughts and sensations.

At §272, in what appears to be a prelude to the ‘beetle-in-the-box’ parable, Wittgenstein states:

“The essential thing about private experience is really not that each person possesses his own exemplar, but that nobody knows whether 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.”

At §293 the ‘beetle-in-the-box’ argument itself suggests a similar but more general conclusion. Public words that refer to inner sensations do not get their meaning from the sensations themselves. All these words tell us is that there is a sensation, not what the sensation is. To Wittgenstein, linguistic meaning is the *use* of words, and as mentioned above, the *use* of the word ‘pain’ is to express rather than to describe the sensation:

“Suppose everyone has a box with something in it: we call it 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...The thing in the box has no place in the language game at all”

What Wittgenstein is saying is that the word ‘beetle’ cannot be referring to the beetle itself, because if it did then only I could know what I meant by the word ‘beetle’, as only I know what is in my box. In the same way, we can see that the word ‘pain’ cannot refer directly to the sensation, because only I could know what that sensation is: if the word did refer to the sensation, the word would mean nothing to anyone but me (as a word in a private language would). Clearly our sensation words have to tell us *something* about what kind of sensation they’re referring to, otherwise it would be difficult to see any difference between ‘pain’ and ‘pleasure’. But what Wittgenstein is trying to show is that what we actually feel – which no one else can really know – is irrelevant to the meaning of the word.

Wittgenstein’s position therefore seems to be that sensations definitely are private, and that sensation words do not have sensations themselves as their meaning, and in fact the exact nature of the sensation has no bearing on the meaning (use) of the word whatsoever. The word merely indicates that a certain kind of sensation is present.

Interpretations and Implications

Why does Wittgenstein put forward the concept of a private language and attempt to destroy it immediately? What service would I have done to biology if I were to propose a theory known as 'Gigantic Toad Theory', suggesting that some enormous toad existed at some point in prehistory – only to respond myself that there is absolutely no evidence for such an idea and that the entire theory appears to be unfounded nonsense?

There are many possible interpretations of Wittgenstein's motives, and I should be clear about the fact that my interpretation is not *the* correct one, just one of many possibilities.

One possibility is that he wished to either defend or attack behaviourism. The beetle-in-the-box, along with the discussion at §244 about the relationship between sensation words and behaviour suggest that words such as 'pain' get their meaning from the behaviour that they replace:

“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.”

One way to interpret this would be to say that Wittgenstein thinks that when I say “I am in pain,” I am really only saying that I am disposed to carry out pain behaviour. To say that I have a pain in my hand is to say that I am inclined to clutch my hand and scream or cry. But Wittgenstein's own comments undermine this interpretation. At the end of the same remark he says: “the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it,” and later on he says, “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?” Wittgenstein thus claims that the word 'pain' *does* make reference to a sensation, but does not describe it. So the actual sensation that you feel does not affect the meaning (ie public use) of the word, but whether or not there is a sensation being felt does.

Another possible interpretation is that Wittgenstein wished to tackle Comte's problem about the impossibility of introspection; the idea that I would need to somehow split my mind between feeling a sensation and observing myself feeling that sensation. However, according to Wittgenstein, I do not need to observe the fact that I am in pain; I know it perfectly well already, I couldn't not know it; and given that for Wittgenstein language cannot describe inner sensations, introspection would be useless anyway. It could not tell us anything we do not already know. But both of these implications seem to be side-effects rather than being the main inspiration for the argument.

Yet another view is that Wittgenstein was attacking private language from the point of view of memory scepticism. It has been claimed that this position would be self-defeating, as reliance on memory rules out correctness and consistency in public language as well. But this is based upon a misunderstanding. It attaches an importance to the inner mental connection between a word and its meaning which Wittgenstein does not grant. For

Wittgenstein, the meaning of a word is *its agreed use*. At §241, directly prior to the private language argument, he says, “So are you saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?” – It is what human beings say that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life.”

This leads us on to the true function of the private language argument and the associated discussion of sensations. I think that the most logical account is that the argument is a defence against a possible objection to the ‘community view’ of language rules and meaning. This is the view [also] favoured by Saul Kripke and Norman Malcolm, amongst others.

The community view states that a rule must form part of an *agreed practice* by a multiplicity of people forming a community. Colin McGinn objects to this conception, suggesting that Wittgenstein requires only that there be a multiplicity of instances of rule-following to constitute a practice. Malcolm objects in return that repetition of an action does not mean that the action follows a *rule*. If this were so there would be no difference between a practice governed by a rule and a habit. Malcolm then quotes Wittgenstein: “Could a solitary man calculate? Could a solitary man follow a rule? Are these questions somewhat similar to this one: ‘Can a solitary person carry on a trade?’” (*Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, p349.) Also, one reading of §240 and §241 gives us a strong suggestion that Wittgenstein believes that community agreement is necessary for rules to be followed and for words to have meaning. Even if Wittgenstein is incorrect here, it does not affect what I believe to be the purpose behind the private language argument.

Having stated that “it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’” (§202), given that rules are based on community agreement, two possible objections become apparent, particularly when Wittgenstein admits that sensation are private.

Firstly, if we have private sensations that we cannot be mistaken about, perhaps we could have words which refer to those private states. We could not be mistaken about the meanings of these words because we cannot be mistaken about our sensations. But this would amount to a word having a meaning, a rule of use being followed, without community agreement. Secondly, public language contains words which appear to refer to private sensations, but we cannot agree about our private sensations, so perhaps we cannot agree about the meanings of these public sensation words either. The conclusions of the private language argument, if they are correct, would effectively counter these objections.

It is difficult to test the soundness of Wittgenstein’s case because he does not argue in the conventional sense. He does not set out to defend a thesis, but to reduce our confusion through the clarification of language. He intends to “shew the fly the way out of the fly-bottle” (§309).

Wittgenstein’s observations leave a strong sense of doubt that a private language is possible, useful, or even conceivable. And his remarks about sensation language do an excellent job to clarify what we mean when we talk of ‘pain’ (apparently Wittgenstein’s

favourite example). In this sense he succeeds.

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