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**“Can We Have a Word in Private?”:
Wittgenstein on the Impossibility of Private
Languages¹**

Dan Walz-Chojnacki

The question of whether a private language is possible forms a crux of Ludwig Wittgenstein’s later philosophy of language. An understanding of this fundamental question is really the key to a full comprehension of Wittgenstein’s broader views on language. A “private language” can be considered on two primary definitions. The first is a language in which words refer to private mental experiences like ideas, sensations or mental images, which no one but the speaker can be directly aware of. Under the second definition, a private language is a language spoken by one speaker in the absence of any audience. I will, for the purposes of this paper, only consider the first definition of the privacy of language, as I feel the heart of Wittgenstein’s argument against private language in the *Investigations* deals with this type of private language. I will begin by clarifying exactly what Wittgenstein means by the term “private language,” and why he thinks that such a concept is impossible. I will then consider the question, can a theory in which meaning is only determined publicly, even for such seemingly private experiences as pain, be compatible with the acknowledgement of an internal subjective experience?

Wittgenstein’s denial of the feasibility of a private language is targeted at theories of meaning like the one John Locke presents in the section “Of Words,” from his work *An Essay Concerning Human*

¹ I would like to thank Prof. Joy Laine for her extremely helpful critiques of this paper’s various drafts.

*Understanding.*² In Locke's theory, language derives its meaning from the correspondence of words to "ideas" inside the mind of the speaker. He proceeds from the assumption that God endowed man with language to fulfill man's "necessity to have fellowship with those of his own kind."³ An essential aspect of this fellowship, to Locke, is the ability of one person to convey his or her thoughts to others. But, since these thoughts cannot be directly observed, being imperceptible to all the senses of others, some medium of expression is necessary. For Locke, this is the role of language.

Locke's theory is appealing to most people's intuitive belief that some private, mental entity precedes our verbal expressions. This belief seems to be experientially confirmed in cases where we state some proposition, but retrospectively feel it came short of expressing the "thought" that we had hoped to verbalize. I put "thought" in quotation marks because, as we will see, it is very difficult to name any intrinsic attributes of the sort of private cognitive experiences that are supposed by Locke to underlie all our linguistic expressions. Of course one may say, "I can give such an account. An "idea" is what I meant to say before I said it." But this is nothing more than a statement of the pre-formed supposition that the meaning of words resides in these still indeterminate "thoughts." This contestation of the ability to give a verifiable account of the underlying mental "germs" of language, especially regarding language that expresses sensations, forms a central pillar of Wittgenstein's denial of the possibility that language gains meaning from such private referents. Further, following Wittgenstein, if words really do gain their meanings based on reference to private "ideas,"

² All references to Locke's philosophy of language come from "Of Words" as excerpted in *The Philosophy of Language*. Ed. A.P. Martinich. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

³ *Ibid.* p. 509.

then it seems that Locke's ultimate goal of language, that it "be the great instrument and common tie of society," can never be attained.⁴

A concise formulation of this latter objection to Locke, upon which Wittgenstein elaborates greatly, is made by A.P. Martinich, regarding the notion of a privately determined meaning of the word "pain": "If the audience could never have access to the speaker's pain and the pain is the meaning of 'pain,' then the audience could never know the meaning of 'pain' and communication would necessarily fail."⁵ The fundamental problem is that we can never compare the inner "ideas" to which Locke has said words refer, in order to know whether we are using the words in the same way. Locke views all words, not just sensation language, as having their meaning based on objects (ideas) inside the mind. If we accept Locke's account, it seems that we have no way to access and compare the private referents of a speaker and his or her audience. If this is true, then we also have no way to know whether the idea that I produce in your mind by saying a word is the same as the one I had in mind when I spoke it. As we will see, in the eyes of Wittgenstein this theory of meaning dissolves into skepticism about knowledge of even the most mundane objects ("How do I know your idea of 'tree' is the same as mine?").

Proceeding from the Lockean view of language, Wittgenstein defines a private language, in paragraph 243 of the *Philosophical Investigations*⁶, as one in

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Martinich, A.P. "The Nature of Language" in *The Philosophy of Language*. 4th Ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001. p. 502.

⁶ All references to this text come from Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co, 1972. For ease of reference,

which “the individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations.” The section that follows begins by asking the question of what is meant by the notion of private sensations. Wittgenstein proposes that when we consider our sensations private, what we have in mind is that only we can know we are actually experiencing the sensation, while others can only guess whether we are or not. Wittgenstein sees this distinction as a contortion of the grammatical meaning of “to know” for two reasons.

First, to say, “I know I am in pain,” is to say nothing more than to say, “I am in pain.” This is because the expression of doubt about whether one is in pain is nonsensical. For Wittgenstein, we can only say “I know” of something that we could conceivably doubt. Since one cannot possibly doubt that he or she is in pain, it makes no sense to say, “I know I am in pain.” Secondly, he says, “If we are using the word “to know” as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?), then other people very often know when I am in pain.”⁷ This answer indicates Wittgenstein’s view that many philosophical questions are actually based on uses of terms like “to know” that do not reflect the grammatical meaning of these terms, as determined by common usage. Thus we become acquainted with Wittgenstein’s use theory of meaning, namely that it is the use of a term in accordance with the rules of common usage that grant the term its meaning. In the case of “to know” we see an illustration of this view. Wittgenstein denies that the sentence, “I *know* I am in pain,” is a valid example of the proper grammar of “to know.” He points out that what appeared to be a valid distinction between the

footnoted citations will refer to paragraphs rather than page numbers.

⁷ *PI*, 246.

doubt of an audience and certainty of a speaker regarding the speaker's sensation is actually just a fact of the grammar of "to know." This point introduces one of the central features of Wittgenstein's argument against private language: the inability of language even to discern such hypothetically "private" sensations.

The first step in this project is to show that, even to the extent that such private sensations could exist (my red, my pain), this private experience could not be expressed in words, and is therefore ultimately superfluous to the meaning of words like "pain" and "red." In paragraph 245, Wittgenstein poses the problem this way, "For how can I go so far as to try to use language to get between pain and its expression?" Wittgenstein points out that the development of words to describe pain actually occurs as a substitute for natural pain behavior (facial expressions, for example). When a child cries, it exhibits the primitive expressions that will prompt its parents to apply "pain language," such as, "Are you in pain?" or "Where does it hurt?" Through this interplay of facial expressions and gestures associated with the new pain language, a system of behaviors emerges which, argues Wittgenstein, is the real source of the meaning of pain language. We can see that the actions of the instructors (parents) of this language-game do not rely on any verification that, indeed, expressions of pain correspond to "actual pain" in the child, whatever that might mean. Rather, the publicly observable expressions of the child suffice in justifying the use of pain language.

Having established the public determination of pain language through learning is that is cued by outward bodily expressions, Wittgenstein investigates the claim that we believe our pains to be our own and no one else's. The problem with this statement, however, is that we can actually say nothing about our purportedly private pain that would distinguish it from

the “public” pain of others that consists in the exhibition of “pain-related” behavior. Wittgenstein is here introducing skepticism as to the existence of an entity about which no statements can be made as to its identity. He gives the example of a man striking his breast, proclaiming, “But surely another person can’t have THIS pain.”⁸ Here again, however, we can’t say anything about what exactly has been “picked out” by the expression “THIS pain.” It is a misleading question, because the alleged object of reference cannot be described except by describing the public circumstance that accompanies it. We can imagine someone making the same pronouncement (“my pain”) in the absence of any demonstrable source of pain—then we would really be baffled. This would be an ungrammatical use of the word “pain” because no one would consider it in accordance with the situations that the rules of pain language designate as appropriate.

In fact, this is Wittgenstein’s next step in showing that language cannot gain its meaning through reference to private contents of the speaker’s mind. As a demonstration, Wittgenstein imagines a scenario in which humans have no outward expressions of pain.⁹ In this scenario, a child has a toothache, but none of the outward signs of such a sensation. He points out that, even if the child were in severe pain from this toothache, if it exhibits no signals of his pain, like crying, grimacing or even pointing to his tooth, no one else will ever teach him the word. Wittgenstein then supposes that the child is nonetheless able to come up with an expression for the sensation. Some will then be tempted to say the child has named his pain. But this “naming” does not achieve what naming in the normal sense does. For how could anyone possibly understand

⁸ Ibid., 253.

⁹ Ibid., 257.

how the child is using the word “pain” if there are no outwardly accessible features of this pain to be identified with the word? Wittgenstein further argues that, even to arrive at the task of naming a “private” sensation, one must presuppose sensation language, a phenomenon that, apart from this imagined anomaly, relies on public referents. This example shows that publicly observable accompaniments to a sensation are necessary for a linguistic expression of that sensation, and further, that even the use of the term “sensation” only makes sense in the context of publicly established language. This point effectively boils down to a rejection of the notion that a Lockean “idea” in the mind of the speaker could be the referent of a word. If this were the case, all words (like the child’s “private toothache”) would be unusable, and therefore meaningless.

The preceding example shows why, even if we could privately come up with a word for pain, it would not constitute language since the private meaning of this word could not be conveyed without the public accompaniments. Since the meaning of words is determined by their regular use, some public arena is necessary to see whether a term is following a rule of usage or not. If we cannot separate correct from incorrect rule-following, then the practice of following regular usage breaks down, and our discourse becomes meaningless.

As we have seen, Wittgenstein denies that we can perform the act of naming privately. This is a very counterintuitive claim, and can be a rather unsettling one, at first glance. The claim is based on two assumptions: 1) that naming must create a consistent connection between the name and what is being named, and 2) that to verify such a consistency requires some objective standard. Wittgenstein presents the example of someone writing an S in a diary every time he feels

sensation S.¹⁰ This is meant to represent the act of naming a private sensation, which was assumed to be possible in the previous example of our toothache-afflicted child. Wittgenstein believes that this is a meaningless exercise, however, for how can one be sure that when he remembers the sensation that prompted him to write S last time, it was the same sensation as that which prompts him to write an S this time. What Wittgenstein is trying to express here is that there is simply no distinction between the claim that one feels the private sensation and evidence for that claim. The claim and its ostensible justification are really one and the same.

To further clarify this point, Wittgenstein employs the analogy of checking a mental picture of a train schedule to confirm a time of departure of which we are uncertain. But in order to act as a confirmation, and not just a reiteration of the previous intimation, this image would have to be correct. Again, Wittgenstein states that if the mental image to which we appeal cannot be tested for correctness, then it is not any sort of confirmation. The result of this for the inward identification of sensation is that there is no way to distinguish between correct and incorrect applications of this naming rule one attempts to construct relating the word “pain” to the private sensation of pain. Suppose someone believes they have felt pain in an instance not accompanied by any of the public features of this experience. To what authority can we appeal to verify the presence of this purely internal sensation? Of course, there is none.

Wittgenstein goes on to show that, because of this problem of identifying internal sensations, these private sensations cannot be the referents that give such words their meanings. He makes this point through a

¹⁰ Ibid., 258.

clever illustration, known as the “beetle in the box.” He imagines a group of people, each holding a box containing an object (or just empty space) that only he or she can look into. He further imagines that, in the linguistic community that these people form, whatever is inside the box is referred to as “beetle.” It is assumed that there are various or even changing objects in the box (or even nothing at all), and that everyone in the group thinks that whatever is in the box is the only way that he or she can know the meaning of the word, “beetle.” So far, this situation is perfectly analogous to the Lockean pain sensation. Now imagine that the word “beetle” has a use in the language, just as the word pain does, despite the probability that the private referent varies. Yet when we consider a use that would simultaneously accord with all the private “beetles,” we see that this use can ultimately have nothing to do with the specific character of the contents of the box. Thus, the contents are totally irrelevant to the use of the word “beetle” within that community. As Wittgenstein puts it, “The thing in the box has no place in 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.”¹¹

Though Wittgenstein’s central goal in his discussion of private languages is to deny the claim that language gains meaning through its expression of private thoughts, this project raises the question, “To what extent is this view incompatible with believing in the presence of unique internal experiences?” Wittgenstein addresses just this issue in paragraphs 307 and 308, where he introduces an interlocutor that accuses him of being a “behaviourist in disguise.” In fact, Wittgenstein sees the presence of an internal (mental) realm as crucial to our understanding of things

¹¹ Ibid., 293.

like sensations and thought. It is not the presence of this mental phenomenon that Wittgenstein here denies, but rather the belief that sensations are internal “processes” or “states” in a manner analogous to biological processes or physical states. In fact, he says, the behaviorist unfoundedly assumes that this is the nature of the question, and is then baffled when he cannot observe these processes and states, and concludes that this means they do not exist.¹² The problem with this approach is that one has not even bothered to ask whether such a mental process would be observable in this way. Wittgenstein says that his misidentification as a behaviorist results from others’ belief that he is engaging in the same enterprise as those who attempt to “observe” their inner processes. Wittgenstein, in fact, is merely denying that the inner processes are things to which the grammar of observation can be applied, because that which we seek to observe is fundamentally different from the proper objects of this type of observation.

Wittgenstein’s defense against behaviorism suggests the importance that he attaches to preserving some concept of internal subjectivity. In paragraphs 306, 308, and 310, Wittgenstein defends the presence of that elusive inner self, though, in these passages, we also see the vagueness that necessarily characterizes any account of what part of previously *presumed* internal life survives his theory of publicly determined linguistic meaning. However, if we accept Wittgenstein’s view that words cannot gain their meaning from private referents, then we cannot expect to capture the nature of our internal experience in words. Nor can we expect to inwardly observe this part of our lives, in any way analogous to visual observation, for this will simply be to project a verbal hypothesis into a

¹² Ibid., 308.

realm where no use of words can be justified. This may seem to diminish the role of the internal consciousness to a mere token allowance, but perhaps this speaks more to the amazing propensity of humans to verbalize our lives' experiences. If what remains of the notion of internal life seems marginal, it is only because we have realized how vast is the realm of our lives that is comprised of our participation in linguistic expression.