

Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* Lecture 10

1. Wittgenstein's argument at *PI* 248 and at 250-1 appears to be this: that it is either false or meaningless to say that you know whether you are in pain because that is a grammatical proposition—something that describes the 'grammar' of the words because 'I don't know I'm in pain' is senseless. But it is hardly clear why propositions that are 'grammatical' in this sense shouldn't for all that be *true*. After all it would make no sense to say 'It isn't raining' when you are standing in the middle of a thunderstorm: and yet it is still true to say 'It *is* raining' (though Wittgenstein might even dispute that: at least the remark at *PI* 278 suggests it—see also *On Certainty* 347-68).
2. What the discussion at *PI* 244-255 establishes is that we are not going to be able to argue for possible existence of a private language (i.e. one whose referents are knowable only to their owner) from the premise that our ordinary sensation-language is an actual example of it. For the terms of our ordinary do not refer to things that are knowable only to their owner. But this still leaves open the possibility of an idiosyncratic language that *did* behave in this way; Wittgenstein therefore directs the main part of his argument against that more abstract possibility.
3. He begins by reminding us that the terms of such a language could not be 'tied up with' your natural expressions of sensation. Why not?—because then it would not be private in the required sense. Somebody else could understand it, and hence—by the questionable argument at 243b—he could know what I was referring to. So we are thinking about a language for terms with *no* natural expressions. It is as if I have a certain indescribable feeling from time to time that has no discernible causes or effects. It certainly *seems* as though this could happen; it also seems that if it *did* happen then we could *name* that sensation. Wittgenstein argues first that no such language could ever be learnt or established.
4. He mentions immediately in this connection that it would be impossible to teach anyone else such a language; hence a child could not learn it from *others*. But even so, couldn't he set up the language for himself? That he could not is the burden of the argument from the second half of *PI* 257 to the end of 268.
5. *The Private Ostensive Definition*. The first point is that somebody who tried to set up the connection between a word and a private definition could not do so ostensively because ostensive definition itself is impossible in this setting. Recall the discussion at *PI* 34ff. (lecture 2 no. 8-11: 'the mythology of the spiritual mechanism'). How can you point inwardly at a sensation and *mean* 'that sensation'? It is the most natural thing in the world to think that one can do it off one's bat—but that is because you have assumed that successfully meaning something by a pointing gesture is a concurrent and distinctive mental process. But even if a distinctive process were present how would it help?
6. But why should the private linguist's means for introducing words be limited to isolated ostensive definitions? The supposition makes sense in a certain

context: if we think of them as names on the *Tractatus* model then presumably they *can* be so introduced: what the argument shows therefore is that a private language cannot be grafted on to the Tractarian conception of language (*TLP* 3.261). The same point might apply to a certain kind of empiricist atomism.

7. *S in the Diary*. The argument at *PI* 258 does not face these limitations. Here Wittgenstein seems to be showing that there is *no* way to introduce a name for a private sensation into a language. For to do that it is not enough to perform a ‘naming ceremony’ however elaborate: the ceremony has to have practical consequences if it is going to be a successful attempt at *naming* something. In particular it has to do this: it must make available to the speaker some means of telling whether or not he is applying the name correctly in the future. But how can it do that, if the language is private? The problem is that the ceremony will not place any constraints on my future applications of the word. Think of our ordinary criteria for saying that somebody introduces a word to name, say, a certain dog. And think of how we can tell whether his use of that word is correct by his own lights in subsequent cases. These surroundings are lacking in the present case.
8. *Moving the Hands of the Clock*. ‘But surely I *can* set up a private standard for using the word—for instance a table in my memory.’ That gets us no further, as Wittgenstein shows with two brilliant images (*PI* 265-6). If I am in doubt as to whether this is an occurrence of S, how will it help to look up an imaginary table? It would be like buying another copy of the morning paper to check the contents of the first or like trying to tell the time by moving the hands of the clock until it feels right. The point is that if I am already inclined to say that this *is* S then I will be equally inclined to imagine a table that tells me that; and if I am inclined to say that this is not S then I will be equally inclined to imagine a table that says *that*. Nothing in the initial ceremony will tell me what table to imagine; so the ceremony is idle. In short, the private linguist cannot introduce terms because nothing he does would count as establishing the means for an independent check. For nothing counts as recognizing the sensation right or wrong.
9. *The Manometer*. At *PI* 270 he attacks from another direction the idea that our sensations are independently recognizable as belonging to such and such type (independent, that is, of their external causes). The passage is enigmatic but its drift seems to be that the correct way to describe what happens is not to say that you recognize S but that you recognize *the rising of your blood pressure*. For whether or not S changes makes no difference at all to what you can be said to recognize—hence all that you can be said to recognize is the physical phenomenon that you see ‘through’ the sensation. The key lesson of this section is that the typical ‘external’ causes or effects of sensations are *essential* to our grasp of sensation-language. Wittgenstein sums up the whole line of thought much later as follows: ‘Always get rid of the idea of a private object in this way: assume that it constantly changes but that you do not notice the changes because your memory constantly deceives you’ (*PI* II p. 207).