Philosophical Investigations
Against Private Languages

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We saw Wittgenstein’s response to the rule-following paradox.
Following a rule is something instinctive/animal, rather than rational.
We then introduced Wittgenstein’s understanding of a private language.
It is not a Robinson Crusoe language, but one where we only name private states.
The arguments of §§244-55 attempted to show that our language is not a private language.
But could there be a private language?
Talk outline

The Private Diarist

The Beetle in the Box
Wittgenstein first sets up the situation:

Let’s 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 first want to observe that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. (258)

Why can a definition of the sign not be given?
But all the same, I can give one to myself as a kind of ostensive definition!

How? Can I point to a 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! A definition serves to lay down the meaning of a sign, doesn’t it?

Well, that is done precisely by concentrating my attention; for in this way I commit to memory the connection between the sign and the sensation. (258)
Ostensive definition of the usual kind can’t work: there’s nothing to point at.

The interlocutor considers naming paired with concentration.

But “I commit it to memory” 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 for 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’. (258)

Concentration must bring about the right connection.

But it isn’t clear what ‘correctness’ could be here.

So we have mere ceremony.
The argument seems to be something like:

1. It must be possible to be introduced to some terms of a language by ostension.
2. For the terms of a private language to be introduced by ostension, there must be standards of correctness.
3. There can be no such standards of correctness.

∴ 4. Private languages are not possible.

The argument seems valid.

In light of the early sections of PI, 2. seems reasonable.

How about 1?

Certainly, it is difficult to see how a language could function without any ostensive definition.
Correctness

- The most controversial premise, however, is 3: that there can be no standards of correctness.
- The literature contains various arguments for this premise.
- We’ll follow Ahmed (2010, §4.1.2) in distinguishing three:
  1. Verificationism
  2. The Meaning-Check
  3. Sortalism
Verificationism

- The verificationist holds that the private diarist cannot check whether uses of ‘S’ are faithful to the original definition.
- Here, ‘correctness’ means something like consistency with prior usage.
- Can the diarist really distinguish having sensation S from merely seeming to have it?
- It seems the diarist would be unable to tell.
- There is no external standard that can be applied.
- No verification of ‘S’ can confer meaning on the use. It too would need to be checked.
Verificationism

- There is a problem that this argument proves too much.
- If I have to trust my memory in the case of *private* language, I must also do so for *public* language.
- How can I check whether I apply ‘dog’ correctly?
- I check the object, and see that it’s a Labrador.
- But how can I check whether I apply ‘Labrador’ correctly?
- If we always demand independent verification, we are on a regress.
- See A.J. Ayer’s ‘Could there be a private language?’ (1954):
  
  
  \[U\]nless there is something that one is allowed to recognize, no test can ever be completed: there will be no justification for the use of any sign at all.
Recall the discussions of ostensive definition in Wittgenstein’s attacks on the Augustinian conception.

Concentrating on an object and offering a name is insufficient.

We could be concentrating on all sorts of unintended objects.

We also need external stage-setting to restrict possible interpretations.

There can be no such stage-setting in the case of a private language.

But why must the stage-setting here be public?

For the definition to be successful, it must simply be that the private diarist uses ‘S’ at the right times.

These are the times when they really do experience S.

As long as this happens, why ask for more?

And how he ‘takes’ the explanation shows itself in how he uses the word explained. (Pl 29)
Sortalism

- Look at the behaviour of the private diarist.
- There is nothing to distinguish their use of ‘S’ meaning:
  1. the sensation type that originally occurred
  2. their present memory image of that type
- The previous interpretations were *epistemological*.
- The sortalist argues that, even if we could see into the diarist’s mind, nothing could distinguish 1 from 2.
See e.g. Barry Stroud’s ‘Private objects, physical objects, and ostension’ (2001):

The point of there being no ‘criterion of correctness’ cannot be simply that there is no test that the speaker can rely on to tell him that his application of the sign is correct. There is so far nothing for any such test to be a test for. Nothing has been done to fix what being correct is or would be. (p. 154)
Sortalism

- This interpretation is offering a kind of underdetermination argument.
- Take all of my memories, etc., look into my mind, and it is still open which sensation I mean.
- Perhaps the diarist can imagine past experiences of $S$.
- Perhaps there are other sensations that go along with $S$.
- This is how we typically reduce the possibilities when faced with underdetermination.
Talk outline

The Private Diarist

The Beetle in the Box
We have seen three possible arguments for the conclusion that private languages are impossible. They all have problems. Let’s consider another argument against private language.

Here’s the setup:

*If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word “pain” means – must I not say that of other people too? And how can I generalize the one case so irresponsibly?* (293)
Well, everyone tells me he knows that pain is only from his own case! – Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a “beetle”. No one can ever 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. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. – But what if these people’s word “beetle” had a use nonetheless? – If so, it would not be as the name of a thing. The thing in the box doesn’t belong to 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. (293)
The Beetle in the Box

- The beetle represented the private idea associated with ‘beetle’.
- Public use of ‘beetle’ would proceed in the same way regardless of what anyone has in their box.
- Indeed, it would proceed in the same way if some boxes were empty.
- So my word ‘beetle’ does not refer to my beetle.
- And nor do my sensation-words.
The argument seems to work if there is no more to meaning than public use.

Frege allowed that we may attach different ‘ideas’ to expressions.

Insofar as our concern is with public usage, then reference to private objects gets cancelled out.

How striking is this conclusion?

That depends on what we mean by ‘public use’.
Public use

Let’s mean the following:

someone’s *public use* of a word is the total of their dispositions to utter sentences containing that word in response to given stimuli.

On this definition, the beetle in the box argument does establish that two people can agree on public use and have different private meanings.

But there is space for private meaning to do some work.

Imagine someone who paired the same private image with ‘red’ and ‘green’.

There would have to be *some* difference in their use and ours.
Quine

- Does Wittgenstein also prove too much here?
- He shows that two people could be alike in use but have different private states.
- We know from Quine that there will be reference-schemes that preserve the truth-value of all sentences.
- E.g. cosmic complements
- On this picture, there could be two people with all the same public use but radically different referents.
- In effect, Quine permutes outer objects as Wittgenstein does inner objects.
- Does this suggest that there is nothing special about privacy?
In Quine’s case, we have *semantic* behaviourism to rule out anything but behaviour.

And he certainly doesn’t limit the application to inner states.

It is easy now to think of Wittgenstein as a sort of behaviourist.

But Wittgenstein wants to say:

“But doesn’t what you say amount to this: that there is no pain, for example, without pain-behaviour?” – It amounts to this: that 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. (281)

But is this a stable position?
Wittgenstein wants to say that only beings with certain behaviour can be said to be in pain.

He also asks:

*What gives us so much as the idea that beings, things, can feel? (283)*

The question is how the feeling relates to the language game of pain.

That will shape the rest of the book.
Conclusion

- Wittgenstein has offered two arguments against the possibility of a private language.
- First, how could the private diarist introduce terms by ostension?
- We saw three versions of this argument and found issues with them all.
- Second, there is the *Beetle in the Box argument*.
- It works only on the assumption that there is no more to meaning than public use.
- And, even then, we may worry that it proves too much.