

(S)

Wittgenstein (W) says that a private language is not possible; I find that the following considerations provide a convincing argument to justify the claim in question;

“My words are tied up with natural expressions of sensation, in that case my language is not a private one, someone else would understand it as well as I.” (PI 256)

A private language is one that can only be known to its possessor, my mind is closed off to the outside, no one can gain access, the contents and ideas and therefore the meaning to the words of my private language are only known to me.

A private language is presupposed in certain philosophical theories and leads to scepticism about the external world and the existence of other minds. This is the subjective view that as only ‘I’ have direct experience of my own mental phenomena, only I know I have the pain sensation (S) and what it means to me. There is however no reliable method of inferring from another person’s words or behaviour, that another person has a pain like mine. Therefore I cannot know another person has pain.

“Words, in their primary or immediate signification, stand for nothing but the ideas in the mind of him that uses them” (John Locke 1690: Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Book III , Chapter II)

For Descartes and Locke, pain is not a piece of behaviour, to possess (S) is just to be conscious of the idea of (S) as it is applied in my inner sense. Although pain and behaviour may be related in certain ways (e.g causally), at best contingently, for Descartes between an immaterial soul and a corporeal body, pains and behaviour are therefore logically independent of each other.

So for these two gentlemen, the mind is a collection of private states, the contents of my mind, are private to me, only I can know them. Only I can have direct knowledge of my mental states, because it is only I that can directly experience them from the inside, they are transparent to me, my knowledge of them is therefore infallible, because I cannot be mistaken, nor doubt the nature of my own mental states.

Others only have indirect access to my mental states, they are therefore fallible in their judgements about me, all they have to go on in making judgements about me, is by viewing how I act and hearing what I utter, they can only believe but not know I am in pain.

I will move on to see how W attacks the notion of a private language, from two particular viewpoints, against Descartes and that of self-knowledge and against Locke’s idea of private ostensive definition.

Knowledge claims

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 (PI 246)

The expression of doubt has no place in the language game, but if we cut out human behaviour, which is the expression of sensation, it looks as if I might *legitimately* begin to doubt afresh. (PI 288)

For Wittgenstein it is meaningless to say, “I’m in pain”, that is unless there is a doubt that I am in pain and if so just how could I doubt such a thing?

This is W’s first line of attack on Descartes, for self-ascriptions of pain such knowledge claims make no sense, because doubt needs reason, if it is logically impossible to doubt how things are with us, so truth guarantees truth. Not because we are witnesses to an inner sense and own conscious feelings of (S), but because we are sincere speakers. Our first person psychological statements have privileged status to others, unless they have good reason to doubt our word.

“There is no pain without pain behaviour.” (PI 257)

For W, it is quite obvious when someone is in pain, it is usually etched all over their face, so to ascribe pain to oneself is only possible because, we ‘have it’, and such claims are made in accordance with publically available behavioural examples that function to us as a reference of appropriateness and correctness.

Private ostensive definition

“Such precise, naked appearances in the mind, without considering whence or with what others they came to be here, the understanding lays us (with names commonly annexed to them) as standards to rank real existences into sorts, as they agree with these patterns, and to denominate them accordingly” (Locke Essay 11)

“I keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation; I associate it, with the sign “S”. (PI 258)

So every time a sensation of pain occurs, I look inwards at my inner sense, I point inwardly (ostend with a mental finger) at the pain, to remember it for the next time, is it the same as before? If not I will have to label it

differently. Well, if something was difficult to define, like a sensation, which by its qualitative nature is ineffable, what else could I do but point inwardly to recognise it and give it the neologism (S)? That way I can remember it right in the future. But how can I remember it right in future if I have no criterion of correctness to compare it too?

How can I guarantee I can recall this instance of (S) accurately in the future, in the absence of any objective verification? "Justification consists in appealing to something independent." (PI 265) There are no inner samples of previous (S)'s I can call on to compare this (S), I may remember 'it hurt like hell' or 'it really aches', but they are expressions, not definitions.

If I point at an object and say "Horse" and the teacher says, no David "That is a cow", I can be corrected about my understanding and naming of public objects. But memory mistakes about private mental objects and sensations cannot be corrected. What happens if my internal property detectors are misfiring today? My judgements maybe aren't as crystal clear as they were, or so it seems anyway? W thinks the ostensive act is not without error anyway, certainly not without the requisite stage setting, when I was pointing at the horse, I may have been pointing at the shed (that was behind the horse and cow in question) instead.

"One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'right'." (PI 258)

Using pain words therefore involves being trained in practice, adults teach children new pain behaviour that rules out certain uses and allows others. The presupposition of sensations to Locke is that their 'naked and precise nature' is clear to me as self-identifying objects that force upon me the rules for their use. But in reality as a child I am shown how to behave, how to distinguish pain from hunger, tickles and itches. So for W rule following, which is what I am doing in learning from my Mum, is closer to following orders than to interpreting inner mental signs like (S).

#### Conclusion

A private language is impossible because we are social animals, one way humans distinguish themselves from other animals is by the use and creation of language, effective communication requires shared meaning. If meanings were inside people's minds, we would never be able to agree or disagree about anything.

There is no mental faculty of inner sense or inner perception that allows us to look inside and focus on (S).

What we have is 'pain', 'pain' is present to us and compels us to act in various ways, ways in which we learn by following society rules which includes how and when to use certain words.

There is a subjective realm but it cannot operate in isolation to the objective outside world.