

**TO Dr Geoffrey Klempner;**

**From G Hackett.**

**Fourth Essay for the Philosophy of Mind Pathways Course**

*“But in the present case I have no criteria of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right, and that only means we can’t talk about “right”. “*

*How effective in your view is Wittgensteins Private Language Argument in tackling the notion of a ‘quale’?”*

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Wittgenstein’s private language argument, as it has come to be called (I will call it PLA for short) has its origins in two areas of interest to the philosopher.

The PLA is, in part, an attack on Russell's assertion that normal linguistic behaviour is an articulation of mental concepts which are described in some sort of "mentalese"—the idea being that when we want to say something our mind finds the relevant concept, and then articulates it in natural language. This point of view was later picked up by some psycholinguists. Wittgenstein was highly critical of this approach to language.

However, the PLA is also connected with the nature of the Cartesian mind. Descartes held a particular view of knowledge which Wittgenstein wished to dispute. According to Descartes, the properties concerning what I know about my mind are transparency, indubitability and infallibility. What Descartes knew about his mind was that its contents were clear to him, could not be doubted. Additionally, we could add that only I know what is in my mind, although others might infer from my behaviour. Accepting Cartesianism would mean accepting that a private language is possible. We use a process to establish such a language to describe our mental world similar to the process of ostension used in the physical world.

In forming a language we ostensibly “point” to objects while using the word we wish to denote them. In a similar way, would it not be possible use a sign S for a mental sensation, and use an inward process similar to ostension to establish that S stands for this sensation

Introspection tells us the meaning of S.

So

1. Words mean sensations which are private and transparent to me
2. I fix and learn these words by private ostension, introspection
3. No one else can understand this language.

My mind has a direct, unmediated awareness of my qualia; my private language describes my qualia;—a quale being the unit of experience, and examples of qualia being a sensation of (say) a pain in my left foot, a smell of roasting coffee, or a brief flash of red before my eyes.

However, Wittgenstein argues that such a private language is impossible.

Firstly, is the above description of the formation of language correct? Wittgenstein argues that it is not. Languages are public; they are fixed by established rules, and it is possible to know whether one has used a word correctly by reference to established practice. Particularly, the process of ostension is highly suspect with sensation words. Do we really know our own sensations that well? The thought experiment of the beetle in the box vividly illustrates Wittgenstein's problems with private language. Even if Descartes is correct, and we clearly and undoubtedly know our own minds then this means that we can never be in doubt about what we feel. We are always right. But, we can only know if something is right by it being possible to misinterpret. Doubt knowledge and justification are all part of the process of establishing whether something is right. If it is impossible for us to be wrong then there is no special point to knowledge. A private language therefore, even if it were possible would be pointless.

The PLA therefore seems to point away from a separate world for the mental and towards functionalism. Wittgenstein would not have supported functionalism, as he was disinclined to lend his authority to any philosophical theory. Nevertheless, this seems to be a valid interpretation of the PLA. So, if the PLA is correct, then many have argued that the Cartesian superstructure of mind is incorrect; there is no separate mental world, qualia are a nonsense, as are zombies. Some might also argue that the PLA shows perhaps one could not even have a private concept, though this is rather an extreme interpretation.

Initially the PLA seems like a devastating attack on the existence of such mental phenomena as qualia. You do not have to be a physicalist to deny the mental; Wittgenstein supplies a convincing argument. All language is public, and the meanings of words emerge from conventional rehearsal of their use. "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world", as the philosopher himself said.

However, there are possible flaws in Wittgenstein's argument. Ned Block has used the notion of inverted colour spectra to construct an argument for the existence of qualia.

Wittgenstein himself recognised the existence of "non dangerous" inversions where a person sees red where he should see green and vice versa. The person is aware of this and makes adjustments so that no differences in his behaviour can be detected. However, there is also a "dangerous" inversion (meaning dangerous to the PLA) where the subject has some degree of spectrum inversion but this is regarded as part of human variation and occurs frequently in the population. If this is allowed, then there arises the situation where my red can be different from your red. Thus an argument for the existence of qualia emerges.

This argument can be summarised as follows;

- (a) If the spectrum inversion is unusual and behaviourally detectable as such, then it doesn't cause a problem.
- (b) If the spectrum inversion is completely undetectable, then it is irrelevant.
- (c) But if the spectrum inversion is widespread, considered "normal" and behaviourally detectable, we have a serious problem because it looks like we have a definition for qualia.

Ned Block has shown that empirical evidence appears to support (C).

Even without the kind of evidence suggested by Block, I think it is still possible to chip away at the PLA. Our language may certainly be a public one, but it does have words which purport to relate to the inner. It is true, of course, that our sensation words like pain, anger, remorse, etc are expressive of the existence of inner qualia rather than descriptive of them. Our sensation words can say that an inner emotion or feeling exists, but cannot adequately describe such feelings. However, we could argue that, in its own fumbling way, public language does try to build bridges to the inner world of qualia. For example, witness the attempts made by medical practitioners to connect with the meaning of pain "On a scale of 1 to 10, how intense would you describe this pain.". Doctors have a battery of such questions which could be interpreted as ways of trying to use our public language to connect with our inner world.

Also, it is enlightening to look at the artificial language Newspeak created by George Orwell for "1984". Although the instance is fictional, it provides some insights into language. Newspeak is created specifically to sever the links between our public life and the inner world considered dangerous to the ruling party (because uncontrollable). Widespread use of Newspeak would eventually make sensation words redundant. Everything would be described on a scale from "doubleplusgood" to "doubleplusbad"

In conclusion, I believe that the PLA does not make such mental phenomena as qualia impossible. It does however point out the difficulty (perhaps even the impossibility) of establishing links between the public and private.

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