

# The Private Language Argument

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## ABSTRACT

*'The Private Language Argument' was put forward by Wittgenstein to attack the traditional idea of self knowledge. The idea of self knowledge holds that sensations, feelings, or psychological expression can only be known by the owner possessing them and cannot be known by anyone else. This idea was strongly advocated by Rene Descartes. Wittgenstein main motive was to criticize this view of Descartes. According to Wittgenstein, private language is not possible because language is necessary social and private language is not possible in a social setting. Moreover, in private language there is no criterion of correctness. Wittgenstein provides various thought experiment like 'the diary argument', 'the beetle in the box argument' to prove that private language is not possible.*

**Keywords:** Language, Private language, self knowledge, privacy

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## INTRODUCTION

The idea of the “Private Language Argument” was put forward by Wittgenstein in order to attack the traditional idea of mind as something inner which can be known only by introspections. He also tried to challenge the idea of self knowledge. It is kind of knowledge which can only be known by oneself and cannot be known by anyone else. Wittgenstein main aim was to attack Cartesian view of the self which holds that psychological expressions are names of inner process or states. Wittgenstein tried to clarify these ideas and give us a proper understanding of their categorical differentiation and uses in language.

Wittgenstein does not regard the psychological expression to be the names of entities which are observable only by the subject or the avowals of the inner are not descriptions of something visible only to the subject privately. Wittgenstein advocated the private-language argument to show these misconceptions. The notion of privacy which is related to Cartesian and empiricist concept of the mind is also according to Wittgenstein misconceived. Wittgenstein through various examples and illustrations tried to figure out all these misconceptions.

## LANGUAGE

In the Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language has gone through many transformations. He no longer believes in the ultimate calculus of language or language has any hidden essence to be revealed. He believed that language is misinterpreted to be conceived as calculus of rules. It is instead a variety of language games. Language is governed by rules just like games are governed by rules. Using different sentences in language is similar to making moves in different games. Language can be compared to games because the use of language is connected with the lives, activities and practices of the user and it constitute a part in their form of life. In a language games all our actions are involved in using language therefore a language game embodies a form of activity or form of life. A form of language represents a form of behaviour. It also represents certain conventions which follow from certain behaviour. Language is nothing but motley of language games with multidimensional forms. Wittgenstein wrote,

“Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses”<sup>1</sup>

According to Wittgenstein, language consists to be in a continuous evolution. Language changes with time and therefore we do not have a fixed form of our language. New language games come into being in course of time and sometimes old language games gets obsolete. Thus, language, according to Wittgenstein, is a social phenomenon. It is concerned with life and activity of human beings. It is as natural as other activities like walking, eating, drinking etc. Wittgenstein wrote, “Commanding, questioning, recounting, chatting are as much as part of our natural history as walking, eating, drinking, playing.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, language is present in the very life of human beings just as other

activities. It the life of human beings, which stands as the ultimate ground that gives language its unity and significance.

### **PRIVATE LANGUAGE**

Wittgenstein tries to show that the mind is not a private entity. It is not something in which mental objects reside and can be known only through introspection. Wittgenstein has put forward the most celebrated private language argument in order to attack the traditional conception of the inner. The traditional concept goes back to Descartes, which holds that the identity conditions of every sensation are purely introspective. Every individual knows their sensation word only through their own experience. A person knows 'pain' by his own experience. Sensations are individuated in a way that is entirely independent of any links of external circumstances on behaviour. Sensation words get their meaning by introspection of owns own sensation therefore every person knows one's own sensation and not anyone else's sensation. However, Wittgenstein denies this view, he wrote;

"Such a language does not allow enough criteria for the meanings of its words and lack of such criteria results in that the words do not mean anything and can mean anything"<sup>3</sup>

The idea of essential privacy of sensation is an illusion. He persists private language argument and thereby rejects the whole idea that state of consciousness is essentially private There is a notion of private language in the sense that only the speaker can speak it, though the language could be taught to others in any of the various normal ways. We have of teaching a new language to someone who does not know it already example code language. Wittgenstein does not mean by private language, the code language. According to Wittgenstein,

"The individual words of this language refer to what can only be known by person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language"<sup>4</sup>

Wittgenstein tries to show the impossibility of such private language. It is believed that the view which he challenged goes back to Descartes and British empiricist philosophers. Sensations, feelings etc cause certain behaviour and are contingently connected with behaviour of the person who has those sensations, feeling etc. Therefore it is possible to believe that if the behaviour and circumstances which we normally associate with toothache are different our concept of toothache could remain the same.

Now in order to see what is meant by saying that there is only contingent connection between manifest behaviour of toothache and the actual toothache. We take an example given by OR Jones. According to Jones, it is a contingent fact that rats happen to occupy the particular position they do occupy at a particular time. But if we can imagine that they happen to occupy a different position, this would make no difference to our concepts of rat. Because of their change of position we would not stop calling them rats. 'Rat' is defined as rodent and rodent is defined as an animal having incisor teeth. Rat is defined as an animal having incisor teeth. Rat's incisor teeth are a public property and it can be observed by others. However the property that rats occupy a particular position at a particular time is not the essential feature of rat. Because, even if rats do not occupy that position at a particular time they will still be called rats. This property of rats is an accidental property. So it is a contingent fact that they happen to change their position in a process of time.

Likewise, according to Cartesian view, there are certain behaviour like inclined to giving a complaint of toothache is associate with toothache is only contingent no matter how the sufferer behaves at various time. Toothache or any other similar sensation or feeling need ever be associated with public feature. Manifestations of ache are purely contingent. Thus for Cartesianian everything that is essential to toothache, everything that makes a tooth a toothache is assumed to be private.

Wittgenstein has put forward the most celebrated "Private Language Argument" in order to attack this traditional conception of Descartes, which he holds that the identity conditions of every sensation are purely introspective. Every individual knows their sensation word only through their own experience. A person knows 'pain' by his own experience. Sensations are individuated in a way that is entirely independent of any links of external circumstances of behaviour. Sensation words get their meaning by introspection of one's own sensation therefore every person knows one's own sensation and not anyone else.

### **THE DIARY ARGUMENT**

Wittgenstein believes that private language fails to establish the genuine standard of correctness. In such language there is no question of correctness because whatever is right to me is right. Wittgenstein wrote,

"Let us imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with sign "S" and write this sign in a calendar every day...."<sup>5</sup>

Wittgenstein has given an example where we are to suppose that someone keeps a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation and associate it with a sign S. whenever there is the sensation he writes down on the calendar every day. He speaks or writes down the sensation and at the same time concentrates his attention inwardly. But how could he distinguish that sensation from other sensation; as he has no criterion for correctness. Whatever seems right to one is regarded to be right as it is non-accessible to others. This is the only mean and so we cannot talk about correctness. Wittgenstein states that it is not always possible to remember particular sensation and attending to the right sensation because memory often deceives us. Thus he states that it is better to get rid of private object as it is constantly changes as your memory deceives you.<sup>6</sup>

Wittgenstein came across the private language argument while discussing his concept of rule following. Wittgenstein tried to show that the concept of rule following only make sense to talk of following a rule in the context of practice- a behavioral regularity- informed by normative activities (e.g. as a standard of correctness, rectifying mistakes, justifying action by reference to a rule). According to Wittgenstein, such practices are learnt in social context although some may also be created for one's private use. Language is learnt mostly from other speakers and is an important fact regarding the origin of linguistic ability. But it does not enter into the grammatical characterization of ability. Ability is always characterized by what it is an ability to do. According to Wittgenstein, the criteria for speaking do not require the production of a school or a parental certificate but it may be said as a practice which is done in a social setting.

Wittgenstein does not aim to prove that rule following can only be possible in social group. But he believes that it is not possible to follow a rule privately. Wittgenstein wrote,

“And hence obeying a rule is a practice. And to think one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately’; otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be same thing as obeying it.”<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Wittgenstein also wanted to establish the point that one person alone independently of social setting and without previous training in a social group, could not talk of his own sensation and experiences. The view that different people cannot have identical sensation and that sensations are private is not accepted by Wittgenstein. It is not possible for a person to use a language to talk in solitude about his sensation unless he has acquired the language in a social setting. A language concerned with sensation is possible only if it is shared by a community. Wittgenstein's main concern in this argument is not that whether a person alone could or could not talk of his experiences in a language which is unsharable, but whether every person in a normal social setting can conceive to be following rules constituted by mental objects or private ostensive definitions. Private ostensive definitions, according to Wittgenstein, are like rules which are not accessible to other people. It is such rules which are the foundation of our common public language.

Wittgenstein tried to explain this point with example of the word pain. According to him, we have learned the uses of these types of words through certain instinctive types of behaviour. For example, a child hurt himself and cries and then the adults teach him exclamations and later on sentences to describe his sensations. They teach the child new pain behaviour. The child behaves in a particular way when it injures oneself and when it on the basis of this behaviour, taught to say that it is pain. Thus the verbal element is added to the behaviour and the settings out from his primary utterances like, “it hurts” to other more utterances are added later on in his life. However Wittgenstein does not accepted crude behaviourism. This becomes evident in his quotation,

“So you are saying that the word ‘pain’ really means crying?”- on the contrary: verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it.”<sup>8</sup>

### **THE BEETLE IN THE BOX ARGUMENT**

Thus, Wittgenstein does not regard the mind to be something mysterious. Whenever we talk of mind we claim of something which is inner. But, according to Wittgenstein, mind is not something hidden inside our body and contains objects like sensation which are private and inaccessible. He rejects the idea that one can know or learn sensation only from one's own case or I can know or learn what pain is, I know only from my own case which is regarded to be essentially private. Wittgenstein argues against this view by introducing a famous analogy ‘the beetle in the box’. Wittgenstein wrote,

“Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a “beetle no one can 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 such a thing constantly changing.- But suppose the word “beetle” had a use in these people's language?- if so it would not be used as the name of a thing. 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.”<sup>9</sup>

Wittgenstein asked us to suppose that everyone has box that only they can see into. No one can see into anyone else box. Each describes what he or she sees in the box as a 'beetle'. I know what a beetle is from my own examination of what is in my box, you from yours. Wittgenstein points out that while we all talk about our beetles, there might be different things in everyone's boxes, or perhaps nothing at all in some of them. The thing in the box could be changing all the time. Wittgenstein through this example tries to show that in our language game the thing inside the box is irrelevant. The thing inside the box has no part to play in our language game. Whatever it is, he maintains that it cannot have a part in the 'language game'. Likewise, it is to say that one knows what 'pain' means from one's own case which means in our language game of pain, the nature of sensation pain is irrelevant though we cannot feel another person's pain and can never experience it yet like the word 'beetle' we play language game with the word 'pain'. Wittgenstein tries to establish the point that even though we can never feel another person's pain yet we can play language game with the word 'pain'. What follows from this is that the sensation of pain is irrelevant in our language game of pain. He does not deny the sensation pain but holds that the way we feel pain hardly matters in language game of pain.

The gist is that since private language is not possible, therefore, the idea of essentially private entity which one can know from one's own introspection is not all meaningful.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the conclusion it may be said that, Wittgenstein put forward different arguments to proof that private language is impossible, however, Wittgenstein, never attempted to answer the mind body questions nor does he advance any thesis for the existence of the soul or meaning of consciousness. Wittgenstein's only aim is clarification. He seeks for better understanding of how our concepts work, by eliminating conceptual confusions. According to him, to avoid such confusion Language games must be played within the rules governed by grammar. He believed that the actual application of language is part of the projective connections between language and world. For even rule or ostension can perhaps be private but language games cannot be. If what one has to witness in order to understand a word is not merely its ostensive definition or a rule for its use, but the entire language game which is its logical home, hence, the language in which that word play a role cannot be private. He believed that language games are conceptually prior to their rules. For if language games were not prior conceptually to their rules, one could perfectly well define private languages by specifying their private rules. It is only when the entire language game, with the variety of different modes of behavior it involves, becomes the highest court of semantical appeal that the true basis of all semantic must be public.

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