

Philosophy 308
The Language Revolution
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Class #19 - The Private Language Argument
From Wittgenstein, Toward Kripke

The Traditional Private Language Argument

Mental States: Thick and Thin

- Locke and Augustine (and even Frege) believe that our mental states are the primary objects of knowledge.
 - ▶ Mental states are *robust*.
 - ▶ Words represent or express our mental states.
 - ▶ A private language, known only to one subject, is thus possible.
- Wittgenstein undermines this picture.
 - ▶ Language is learned publically.
 - ▶ Teaching children pain terms (244)
 - ▶ The private aspects are inessential.
 - ▶ Beetle in the box (293)
- Mental states are thin.
 - ▶ No criterion for correctness in identifying the states
 - ▶ The diary (258 et seq.)
- Wittgenstein: A private language is in principle impossible.
 - ▶ To know the meaning of words is to know how to use them.
 - ▶ We follow rules which are essentially public.

On Continuing a Series

Learning a Rule, PI 143

Let us now examine the following kind of language-game: when A gives an order B has to write down series of signs according to a certain formation rule.

The first of these series is meant to be that of the natural numbers in decimal notation. - How does he get to understand this notation? First of all series of numbers will be written down for him and he will be required to copy them... And here already there is a normal and an abnormal learner's reaction.- At first perhaps we guide his hand in writing out the series 0 to 9; but then the *possibility of getting him to understand* will depend on his going on to write it down independently. - And here we can imagine, e.g., that he does copy the figures independently, but not in the right order: he writes sometimes one sometimes another at random. And then communication stops at *that* point. - Or again, he makes '*mistakes*' in the order. - The difference between this and the first case will of course be one of frequency. - Or he makes a *systematic* mistake; for example, he copies every other number, or he copies the series 0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5,... like this: 1, 0, 3, 2, 5, 4,.... Here we shall almost be tempted to say that he has understood *wrong*.

Notice, however, that there is no sharp distinction between a random mistake and a systematic one. That is, between what you are inclined to call "random" and what "systematic".

Perhaps, it is possible to wean him from the systematic mistake (as from a bad habit). Or perhaps one accepts his way of copying and tries to teach him ours as an offshoot, a variant of his. - And here too our pupil's capacity to learn may come to an end.

Past 1000

PI 185

Now - judged by the usual criteria - the pupil has mastered the series of natural numbers. Next we teach him to write down other series of cardinal numbers and get him to the point of writing down series of the form

0, n, 2n, 3n, etc.

at an order of the form "+n"; so at the order "+ 1" he writes down the series of natural numbers.
- Let us suppose we have done exercises and given him tests up to 1000.

Now we get the pupil to continue a series (say +2) beyond 1000 and he writes 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012.

We say to him: "Look what you've done!" - He doesn't understand. We say: "You were meant to add *two*: look how you began the series!" - He answers: "Yes, isn't it right? I thought that was how I was *meant* to do it." - Or suppose he pointed to the series and said: "But I went on in the same way." - It would now be no use to say: "But can't you see ?" - and repeat the old examples and explanations. - In such a case we might say, perhaps: It comes natural to this person to understand our order with our explanations as we should understand the order: "Add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000 and so on."

Such a case would present similarities with one in which a person naturally reacted to the gesture of pointing with the hand by looking in the direction of the line from finger-tip to wrist, not from wrist to finger-tip.

Pointing?



- Number terms function differently from the Locke/Augustine account.
 - Like color terms
- Pointing can not settle any matter.
- The very act of pointing is already an action, with rules for use.
- We could point by tracing the line from the tip of our finger backwards (§185).
 - See p 29 of Permanent markers
 - Sandia report, see p 150 et seq. and p 262 et seq.
- For Wittgenstein, there could be no hope of communicating danger to a community completely disconnected from our own, since the meanings of our signs are connected to the practices for which we use them.



Wood sellers

How could I shew them that - as I should say - you don't really buy more wood if you buy a pile covering a bigger area? - I should, for instance, take a pile which was small by their ideas and, by laying the logs around, change it into a 'big' one. This *might* convince them - but perhaps they would say: "Yes, now it's a *lot* of wood and costs more" - and that would be the end of the matter...(Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics I §150)



Privacy and The Deviant Counter

How is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular stage? - “The right step is the one that accords with the order - as it was *meant*.” - So when you gave the order +2 you meant that he was to write 1002 after 1000 - and did you also mean that he should write 1868 after 1866, and 100036 after 1000034, and so on - an infinite number of such propositions?...It would almost be more correct to say, not that an intuition was needed at every stage, but that a new decision was needed at every stage. “But I already knew, at the time when I gave the order, that he ought to write 1002 after 1000.” - Certainly; and you can also say you *meant* it then; only you should not let yourself be misled by the grammar of the words “know” and “mean”. For you don’t want to say that you thought of the step... [Y]our idea was that that act of meaning the order had in its own way already traversed all those steps: that when you meant it your mind as it were flew ahead and took all the steps before you physically arrived at this or that one (*Philosophical Investigations* §186-§188).

Pippa on Kripkenstein