



Wittgenstein's Private Language
Argument in *Philosophical
Investigations*

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Central Question: Is a Private Language Possible?

- In § 243 of *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein poses the question regarding whether a private language is possible.
- A private language is a language in which a person can express their inner thoughts and feelings through writing or vocal expressions.
- Because such a language would refer to our inner sensations which are private, a private language can only be understood by the individual who uses it, and is therefore unable to be learned by others or translated.

Words Express Sensations Rather than Describe Them

-In the beginning of Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument, he first uses the example of pain to establish how words refer to our sensations.

-Wittgenstein states that "words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensations and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain behavior" (Philosophical Investigations §244)

Wittgenstein then asserts that "pain" does not mean crying, instead "the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it" (Philosophical Investigations § 244).



Wittgenstein on Private Sensations

- Although we have private sense experience, the criteria for describing private sensations relies solely upon the rules governing the language imposed upon us by society (not private), rather than the sensations themselves.
- Thus, if one were to describe private sensations, they would have to refrain from using words that belong to public language. Therefore, it could be presupposed that one could effectively describe private sensation through ostensive definition (Wittgenstein is highly skeptical of this).

Thought Experiment: The Sensation “S”

“Let us 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 will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated – But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition. – How? Can I point to the 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 surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign. Well that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation. – But “I impress it on myself” can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion right in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. 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’ ” (*Philosophical Investigations* § 258).

How the “S” Thought Experiment Displays That Using Ostensive Definitions for Private Language is Problematic?

- Every time we write “s” on the calendar to indicate that we felt that particular sensation, we are relying on our memory of the sensation.
- It is impossible to tell if the EXACT same sensation is being experienced every time we write “s” given that memory is faulty.
- Therefore, unlike true language, there is no “criterion for correctness... whatever is going to seem right for me is right for me. And that only means here we can’t talk about ‘right’” (*Philosophical Investigations* § 258).

Sensations Do Not Play Significant Roles in Our Language Use

- To demonstrate the confusion regarding that nature of sensation words, Wittgenstein poses the question, “What am I to say about the word “red”?-that it means something ‘confronting us all’ and that everyone should really have another word, besides this one, to mean his own sensations of red? Or is it like this: the word “red” means something known to everyone; and in addition for each person, it means something known only to him?” (Philosophical Investigations § 273).
- Wittgenstein believes this way of reasoning is flawed because “red” does not *mean* something known only to the individual but rather “*refers* something known only to him” (Philosophical Investigations § 273).

§ 293. The Beetle in a Box

“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 imagine 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” (*Philosophical Investigations* § 293).



Purpose of “Beetle in the Box”

- Beetle in box shows that introspection does not determine the meaning of our sensation language.
- Since no one can see into another person’s box likewise to how no one can see another person’s sense experience, the question of correctness can never come up.
- Thus the sensation itself is irrelevant to the meaning of the word but merely indicates that a particular sensation is present.

Main Points of Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument

- Language is governed by rules established by society . There is no way to effectively express one's inner sense experience with language outside of these constrictions.
- Sensations are private although sensation words do not have sensations themselves in their meanings. Instead, sensation words merely express that a particular sensation is present.
- Private language is not possible because it requires ostensive definitions which are meaningless due to lacking a "criteria for correctness" , as well as faulty, due to relying on memory.