

Classes 21-23 - The Private Language Argument

II. Locke, Augustine, and meaning as use

Locke argued that our words must refer to our sensations in order for us to use them to communicate. Otherwise, we would not know what we are communicating. Locke's picture of language takes communication to be like playing catch.

- B1. I hold the ball in my hands.
- B2. Then, I toss the ball.
- B3. Lastly, you catch and hold the ball

Analogously, when we communicate:

- C1. I have a sensation, which I label with a word: apple, ball, cat.
- C2. Then, I speak: The cat ate an apple.
- C3. Lastly, you associate my words with some inner sensations of your own.

The Lockean claim that our terms must refer to our ideas in order for communication to succeed appears again as Frege's claim that sense determines reference, that our inner grasp of the sense of an expression suffices to pick out its referent.

Wittgenstein's private language argument (PLA) is a direct response to the Lockean picture of communication.

There are profound disagreements about the nature, extent, and source of the PLA.

It is generally agreed that it is central to Wittgenstein's later work, the *Philosophical Investigations*. Traditional interpretations locate the argument between §243 and §315 or so, with some further remarks later on.

Saul Kripke, in his 1982 *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, locates the argument significantly earlier in the text.

On the traditional interpretation, the argument centrally concerns the nature of mental states.

On Kripke's interpretation, the argument centrally concerns the nature of rules and rule-following.

Kripke sees the discussion of mental states as an example of a more general claim.

To distinguish between the traditional interpretation of the PLA and Kripke's version, philosophers have taken to calling the author of the latter Kripkenstein.

I will avoid that term in these notes, but you might hear me use it.

Wittgenstein does not attribute the Lockean picture to Locke, but to Augustine, in the selection which begins the *Investigations*, and which I distributed (under the title "[Meaning as Use](#)") at the beginning of the term.

Let's look at §1-§7.

In §1, Wittgenstein considers a slip of paper with the words 'five red apples', used in a grocery.

We observe that while 'apple' works the way Augustine and Locke say it does, 'five' and 'red' seem different.

They do not represent objects.

They provide instructions for action.

We might, as Plato did, reify redness or the number five.
Nevertheless, the uses of those terms are different from the uses of 'apple'.

When we use a word, we follow conventional guidelines, like the grocer comparing the term 'red' with a patch of red, and counting.

Such terms require instructions for how to use them.

The same object, under different instructions, may have a different label.

Consider the way a child's stick can be a rocket, or a sword, or a pony.

Or, consider this old [Saturday Night Live skit](#).

In §6, Wittgenstein points out that a brake and lever can be anything or nothing, depending on the broader context in which they are placed.

Wittgenstein's claim is, in part, that terms of language have no meaning apart from their use in a larger theory.

On this interpretation, Wittgenstein anticipates Quine's semantic holism.

Wittgenstein also claims that the meanings of the terms 'brake' and 'lever' depend on the uses we make of the objects to which they refer.

I. Starting with Language

Now, let's jump to §304, where Wittgenstein is considering terms for our sensations.

He takes pain as a paradigmatic sensation, but you can think of your impression of a color, or an odor or taste just as well.

Wittgenstein says that sensations are neither a something nor a nothing.

Locke started his analysis of language with the presumption of the existence of sensations.

These are the sole things of which we are directly aware, as Descartes insisted.

From our sensations, we construct a language which refers to them.

For Locke, and Hume, and all empiricists, sensations are the basis on which all of our knowledge is built.

The claim that our sensations are the grounds for all of the rest of our language continues, in an obvious way, through positivism.

Even Quine argued that the boundary conditions on our theory construction are our sense experiences.

But, Wittgenstein works in the other direction.

Starting with language, and working backwards to its grounds, we begin to doubt the sensations which Locke and all the rest took for granted.

Thus, Wittgenstein starts the *Investigations* with an analysis of some simple languages, and some simple games, and tries to account for our more complicated, more complete, languages.

In the *Tractatus*, he had, like Augustine, been looking for a single account of the nature and application of language, like Russell's ideal, logically perfect language, or Frege's *Begriffsschrift*, one in which all of the truths could be written.

Wittgenstein was moved, one story goes, to abandon his earlier project by trying to analyze the logical structure of an obscene gesture.

The *Investigations* begins with the claim that there are lots of different kinds of uses of language, lots of different language games, §23, 65-§67.

If we can get clear about what the uses of our language are, and how we learn to use it, we can get clear about meaning and reference.

We can stop thinking of 'five' and 'red' as terms for objects, and start thinking of them according to the uses they prescribe.

IV. Language games and rules for use

In §1, Wittgenstein considered a language with (at least) three terms: ‘five’, ‘red’, and ‘apple’.

He conceded that ‘apple’ might work the Lockean way.

But ‘red’ and ‘five’ were directions for actions.

Let’s return to §8-§11, where Wittgenstein extends the activities of the tribe using the slab language, to include counting, and other functions.

The different functions are all related, as all tools are related: loosely.

That terms function differently does not preclude that they stand for objects.

One can say that the signs “a”, “b”, etc. signify numbers; when for example this removes the mistaken idea that “a”, “b”, “c”, play the part actually played in language by “block”, “slab”, “pillar”. And one can also say that “c” means this number and not that one; when for example this serves to explain that the letters are to be used in the order a, b, c, d, etc. and not in the order a, b, d, c (§10)

So, Wittgenstein is claiming that our number terms are primarily directions for how to proceed.

We use them for counting apples, for example.

In addition, there are directions for how to proceed using the number terms alone.

If we want to understand the number terms, then we have to analyze how these terms function.

In particular, we have to determine how we learn the rules for counting.

As far as we agree on the rules for counting, we have some common language, we can communicate.

If we were to disagree on the rules, we would not understand each other.

If a lion could talk, we could not understand him (*Investigations*, p 223).

The meanings of terms like ‘red’ and ‘five’ consist in the rules for playing the games with those terms, for using them.

III. Wittgenstein’s skeptical puzzle about counting

Consider the skeptical puzzles in §143 and §185.

In these cases, someone deviates from normal counting rules.

We want to say that the deviant counter has made a mistake.

Wittgenstein challenges us to justify our claim.

If number terms worked like object terms (e.g. ‘apple’), we could perhaps explain our use, against the deviant’s use, by pointing.

We have already seen, though, that number terms function differently from the Locke/Augustine account.

In addition, pointing itself can not settle any matter.

See §28: “an ostensive definition can be variously interpreted in *every* case.”

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).

(Here again, we see Wittgenstein’s rejection of the *Tractatus*, which depended on an unambiguous ability to point.)

Consider also the attempts to establish permanent markers of nuclear waste.

(I have links on the website; see p 29 of [Permanent markers](#); for the [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.

We might, alternatively, say that what grounds the correctness of one way of counting, over others, is something in our thoughts, §186.

If numbers are objects of thought (and thus work like apples) then we can apprehend, correctly or not, the next number in a series.

The series is already complete, §188.

But, if numbers are rules for proceeding, it's not obvious how to justify going on.

Wittgenstein argues that the rule is a result of a decision: "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" (§186).

The problem of distinguishing between the two ways of counting, ours and the deviant's, is not merely an artifact of the way in which we represent the situation.

Both we and the deviant can be depicted as following rules, since a rule with an exception is still a rule. We can not support our claim that the deviant is making a mistake by claiming that s/he is not following a rule.

The claim can only be that s/he is not following our rule.

The question then becomes how we can justify imposing our rule on the deviant.

We need a rule to guide the choice of rules.

See §201-2.

VI. Kripke's problem

These skeptical problems inspire Kripke's version of Wittgenstein's puzzle.

Kripke's version of the paradox takes the form of two competing rules for addition, plus and quus.

We all know plus; quus is symbolized \oplus , and is defined thus:

$$\begin{aligned}x \oplus y &= x + y, \text{ if } x, y < 57 \\ &= 5, \text{ otherwise}\end{aligned}$$

Who is to say that this is not the function I previously meant by '+'? (Kripke, 628)

Kripke points out that the skeptic's claim that we meant quus, when we used plus, is crazy.

The problem is to determine why it is crazy.

There must be some fact about our past usage that makes it crazy, some fact about how we already agreed to use the language, some decision we already made.

But, in Kripke's case, such possibilities are ruled out *ex hypothesi*, p 628.

There are pairs of numbers which I have never previously added.

For such pairs, no facts about my past use will determine how to proceed.

When asked for the answer to '68 + 57', I unhesitatingly and automatically produced '125', but it would seem that if previously I never performed this computation explicitly I might just as well have answered '5'. Nothing justifies a brute inclination to answer one way rather than another" (Kripke, 631).

The solution to the skeptical problems, says Kripke, leads to the PLA.

According to Kripke, Wittgenstein presents a skeptical solution to the puzzle, pp 632-3.

Kripke contrasts skeptical solutions with straight ones.

A straight solution rejects the skeptic's claims.

A skeptical solution accepts the skeptic's claims, but shows that they lack the force the skeptic thinks they have.

If the grounds for claiming that we mean plus, and not quus, by 'plus' were in my thinking of one rule over the other, there would be no way to defeat the skeptic.

For, there are no previous thoughts to justify one over the other.

On the other hand, if the grounds of our using plus are the ways in which we use language, then the skeptic is defeated.

This is simply what we do (§217).

The problem of my having never added a particular pair of numbers, never having thought of this particular sum, is deflated.

For, those were not the grounds for choosing plus over quus.

As a result, the grounds for my using a term like 'five' is not an internal mental state, a private thought, the way Locke and Augustine depicted.

Instead, the grounds for my using 'five' have to do with the way that number terms are used in public, by the community, as rules for counting.

It follows that mathematical rules are not absolute, in the way that they are traditionally conceived.

There is a fundamentally conventional aspect to all of mathematics.

Compare to the wood-sellers, in the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* (handout).

We can see the role of community in determining meaning also in §268, where Wittgenstein notes that his right hand can not give a gift to his left hand.

V. From rule-following to private language

The line from Kripke's argument about the grounds for my mathematical claims to the grounds for my sensation claims, to the PLA as it is traditionally conceived, goes through some general claims about language and rule-following.

The meaning of my terms are the rules for my uses of those terms.

Those rules are public rules; those meanings are public meanings.

So, even our terms for my sensations do not refer to anything privately available to introspection.

They instead refer to public criteria for meaning.

In §243 et seq. Wittgenstein makes his claim about a private language, one in which, "the individual words... are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language."

We have moved, now, from discussing 'five' to discussing 'red' in Wittgenstein's 'five red apples'.

The terms of the private language may be any terms for sensations, for things, or purported things, which are available to introspection.

It seems pretty obvious that we experience sensations.

We describe those sensations: a sharp pain, a bright yellow, a sweet and spicy tang. The question is whether we could have a language that consists only of private terms, or whether our ability to construct a language of these sensations is rooted solely in our connections to our community.

Wittgenstein considers, in §258, writing a name, 'S', for a sensation in his diary. He notes, first, that ostensive definition is inapplicable, literally, though we might metaphorically point, concentrating our attention to the sensation. Still, Wittgenstein argues, no language has been constructed.

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' (§258).

Don't consider it a matter of course that a person is making a note of something when he makes a mark - say in a calendar. For a note has a function and this 'S' so far has none (§260).

It is pretty clear that Wittgenstein's notion of a function, in §260, refers back to the problems with rules which Kripke discusses.

The sensation itself has whatever function that sensations have.

We can even assume that each time we write 'S' in a calendar we are feeling some sensation.

Wittgenstein's worry is that there is no way to determine whether the same sensation is being felt each time we write 'S'.

Language demands a kind of regularity, §207.

But, there is no ground for assuming regularity among the instances in which I write 'S', since they are all private.

Every action according to the rule is an interpretation...And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. 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 the same thing as obeying it (§201-2).

Wittgenstein's claim is that following a rule is an action, a practice, governed by public criteria, rather than a mental affirmation of a description of those actions.

Kripke thus thinks that the PLA is really a more general claim about rule following, and not the more specific claim about a language of sensations.

What is really denied is what might be called the 'private model' of rule following, that the notion of a person following a given rule is to be analyzed simply in terms of facts about the rule follower and the rule follower alone, without reference to his membership in a wider community... The impossibility of a private language...does indeed follow from the incorrectness of the private model for language and rules, since the rule following in a 'private language' could only be analyzed by a private model, but the incorrectness of the private model is more basic, since it applies to all rules (Kripke, 635).

VIII. Sensations: not somethings, not nothings

As Kripke says at the end of his essay, he neglects the application of his interpretation of the PLA to the material on sensations in the traditional sections.

One of the central questions arising from those sections concerns the distinction between Wittgenstein's methodological claims and any ontological claims that might follow from his argument.

Returning to §304, recall that Wittgenstein says that sensations are not somethings, but not nothings.

As Wittgenstein says in §261, if one has something, there must be some thing to have.

One can not avoid the commitment by mere semantics.

Thus, if we used terms which presumed sensations, as 'apple' presumes apples, we would be committed to taking sensations as objects.

But, our sensations do not play significant roles in our language use.

Note the confusion:

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* sensation 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? (§273)

Consider the beetle in the box, §293.

Since no one can see what is in another person's box, the question of whether they are correct or incorrect about the behavior or characteristics of the beetle can never come up.

We can divide through, or subtract out, the beetle itself, while continuing to talk about beetles.

Our language of beetles presupposes no beetles.

Similarly, Wittgenstein says, our language of sensations presupposes no sensations.

They lack criteria for identity, §377, §382.

This is an odd position, appropriately represented by Wittgenstein's paradoxical-sounding claim that sensations are not somethings and not nothing.

The oddity of the claim is that the sensation itself seems to play a significant role in my communication about my sensations, whereas I can come to see the beetle as irrelevant.

To settle the claim about whether sensations are real things, we must look at how we use the terms for them.

We find that we do talk about sensations in ways that at least seem to presume their reality.

It is not merely that we have introspective awareness of our sensations.

More significantly, we discuss and compare our sensations with those of other people.

We ask questions about whether we all feel the same kind of pain.

We wonder whether there are inverted spectra (§272).

Wittgenstein (§303) says that we make decisions to raise these questions, that they do not necessarily arise.

Once we decide to talk about sensations, we seem more committed to them than we should be, §308.

One might say that they are artifacts of the grammar we adopt, if one were adopting Wittgenstein's use of 'grammar'.

Consider the mocking §298.

If our talk of sensations as real things is an artifact of the grammar we adopt, it is no evidence of their transcendent reality.

It is evidence of them being not a something, even if, introspectively, they are not nothing.

VII. Robinson Crusoe

Robinson Crusoe, in the books by Daniel DeFoe, was shipwrecked, living alone.

Tom Hanks character in *Cast Away*, is a similar case.

Such persons, we think, would be able to create a language that no one else understands.

Thus, they seem to be counter-examples to Wittgenstein's claim that a private language is impossible.

First, note that these cases are not real counter-examples.

For, the private language that Wittgenstein considers is not one that no one else in fact understands.

It is a language that no one in principle could understand.

The individual words of this language are to refer to what *can only be known to the person speaking*; to his immediate private sensations. So another person *cannot* understand the language (§243, emphasis added).

Further, remember that Wittgenstein's claim is that the terms of our language are closely connected to their rules for use; meaning is use.

A private language would entail private rules for using that language.

Wittgenstein urges that a rule is essentially an artifact of a community.

It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood; and so on. - To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions) (§199).

Thus, Crusoe is no counter-example to the PLA.

X. Conventionality

Traditionally, we think of mathematics as completely independent of our interests or conventions.

Two and five are seven, independently of us, like the earth's revolution around the sun, and unlike the fact that we drive on the right-hand side of the road.

For Wittgenstein, mathematics is, controversially, conventional.

Kripke insists that Wittgenstein does not believe that the truth of a mathematical claim depends only on popular agreement.

He cites the following, from Wittgenstein, in support of his claim:

Certainly, the propositions "Human beings believe that twice two is four" and "Twice two is four" do not mean the same (Kripke 636, *Investigations* p 226).

This sentence seems to imply that mathematical claims are not the result of mere decisions.

But, see the rest of the original passage:

The latter is a mathematical proposition; the other, if it makes sense at all, may perhaps mean: human beings have *arrived* at the mathematical proposition. The two propositions have entirely different *uses*. - But what would *this* mean: "Even though everybody believed that twice two was

five it would still be four”? - For what would it be like for everybody to believe that?
(*Investigations* p 226)

It does look as if Wittgenstein thinks that there is something Moore-paradoxical about the traditional claim that mathematics is independent of us.

Moore’s so-called paradox is an assertion of the form:

p but I don’t believe that p

For example:

It is raining, but I do not believe that it is raining.

(The ‘I do not believe...’ is intended literally, and not as indicating that one is surprised.)

Moore-paradoxical sentences are self-refuting.

You can not both assert a sentence and sincerely not believe that sentence, on pain of contradiction.

Compare to §288, where Wittgenstein claims that we can’t know what ‘pain’ means and then be in doubt about whether we are in pain.

Wittgenstein clearly seems to be saying that mathematics depends on convention, on popular agreement. For more on the deep question of how to understand Wittgenstein’s mathematical conventionalism, see *On Certainty*, which I suspect will be taught in Prof. Doran’s Contemporary Philosophy class next term.

IX. Conclusion

It is an open question whether Kripke correctly interprets Wittgenstein, whether the PLA is essentially a corollary of the arguments about rule following, or if the claims about a language of sensations are essentially focused on that specific case.

Kripke’s case is certainly helped by Wittgenstein’s claim at the end of §304:

The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts - which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please.

Lastly, I’ll add, just for amusement, that recently my son, Izzy, did exactly what Wittgenstein says at §279: he put his hand on his head and said, “I’m this tall!”