



Wittgenstein on Privacy

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## WITTGENSTEIN ON PRIVACY

RECENT discussions of Wittgenstein's treatment of the idea of a private language have made it clear that the point of what Wittgenstein is doing has been widely misunderstood. I should here like to take one step toward remedying that situation. A chief complaint against Wittgenstein is that he does not make it sufficiently clear what the idea of a private language includes—what is meant by “a private language.”<sup>1</sup> It is this complaint that I mean to examine, and I will argue that there can be no such genuine complaint even though it is true that Wittgenstein does not say clearly what is meant by “a private language.” He does not try to make this clear because the idea under investigation turns out to be irremediably confused and hence can be only suggested, not clearly explained. Moreover, the philosophical idea of a private language is confused not merely in that it supposes a mistaken notion of language (or meaning) but in its very notion of the privacy of sensations. It is this last point which is generally missed and which I mean here to insist on.

### I

The philosophical idea of a private language is a consequence of the following argument (hereafter called *A*):

No one can know that another person is in pain or is dizzy or has any other sensation, for sensations are private in the sense

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<sup>1</sup> See, e. g., the papers by H.-N. Castañeda and J. F. Thomson in *Knowledge and Experience* (Pittsburgh, 1964), ed. by C. D. Rollins. Thomson (pp. 121-123) asks, “What kind of language is here being envisaged?” and concludes that Wittgenstein's account is “obscure.” The controversy over whether there can be a private language rages, he thinks, over “some unexplained sense of ‘private language,’” and so “the claim that Wittgenstein answered it [must be] obscure.” Castañeda (p. 129) says that “the idea of a private language is so obscure that there are many senses of ‘privacy,’” and he implies that “Wittgenstein's definition of a private language” is not “an honest effort at giving the idea of a private language a full run” (p. 90).

that no one can feel (experience, be acquainted with) another person's sensations.

The conclusion of argument *A* leads, in turn, to the further conclusion that no one can be taught the names of sensations; each of us must give these words their meanings independently of other people and of other people's use of sensation words. (The missing premise here is that in order to teach another person the name of a sensation, it would be necessary to check his use of the word, and this would require knowing from time to time what sensation the learner is having.) The result is the idea that anyone who says anything about his sensations is saying something which he alone can understand. Names of sensations, the word "sensation" itself, and the expression "same sensation" will have no genuine public use, only a private use.

It is this consequence of *A* that Wittgenstein refers to in Section 243 of the *Investigations*<sup>2</sup> when he asks whether we could imagine a language whose words "refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language." But having raised this question, he almost immediately (*Inv.* 246-254) launches attacks against both the premise and the conclusion of *A*. That is, he undertakes to show that the very notion of privacy on which the description of this language depends is a tangle of confusions. Hence, when he returns in Section 256 to the consideration of "the language which describes my inner experiences and which only I myself can understand," he points out that (contrary to argument *A*) our ordinary use of sensation words is not such a language. Thus, the temptation behind the idea of a private language has already been disposed of. What Wittgenstein goes on to do, then, in the ensuing discussion of this "language which only I myself can understand" is to "assume the abrogation of the normal language-game," that is, to consider what the result would be "if we cut out human behavior, which is the expression of sensation" (*Inv.* 288). He introduces the discussion as follows: "But suppose I didn't have my natural expression of sensation,

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<sup>2</sup> *Philosophical Investigations* (New York, 1953), hereafter abbreviated as *Inv.* Unless otherwise indicated, numbered references will refer to sections of Part I.

but only had the sensation? And now I simply *associate* names with sensations and use these names in descriptions" (*Inv.* 256). Here we have what might be an allusion to Descartes, who assumes that even if his philosophical doubts be justified, so that he has "no hands, no eyes, no flesh, no blood, nor any senses," still he can privately understand and inwardly speak a language. It is this picture of language as a phenomenon made possible by "some remarkable act of mind" (*Inv.* 38) that Wittgenstein means to investigate. In rejecting this idea of a private language, then, what he rejects is not our normal language game but a philosophically truncated version of it. Defenders of argument *A*, however, because they must regard sensations as only privately namable, must regard Wittgenstein's rejection of this either as a rejection of our normal language game or as committing him to an extremely odd account of our normal language game. Thus, on the one hand, Wittgenstein has been "refuted" on the grounds that since sensations are private, and since each of us does have names of sensations in his vocabulary, there could not be any real difficulty in the idea of a private language: "the ordinary language of pains is . . . a counter-example against Wittgenstein's thesis."<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, it has been argued that since sensations are private, and since Wittgenstein denies the possibility of naming private objects, he must be denying that ordinary language contains any genuine names of sensations: on Wittgenstein's view "private sensations do not enter into pain language games."<sup>4</sup>

In order to expose the errors of these two views, it is necessary to bring out the force of Wittgenstein's attack on argument *A*. I have given the argument in a form commonly found, but as it stands certain of its premises are suppressed. The premise

(*P*<sub>1</sub>) No one can feel (experience, be acquainted with) another person's sensations

does not entail the conclusion

(*C*) No one can know what sensations another person is having.

<sup>3</sup> Castañeda, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

<sup>4</sup> George Pitcher, *The Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (Englewood Cliffs, 1964), p. 299.

Argument *A*, as it stands, is really no better than (and I will show that it cannot be made to be better than) the following argument: "No one can have another person's shadow, and therefore no one can know anything about another person's shadow." This argument is unsatisfactory for the obvious reason that the premise has no bearing on how one gets to know something about another person's shadow. In the same way, the premise of *A* has no bearing on how one gets to know about another person's sensations. And yet it is just this bearing that ( $P_1$ ) is thought to have by those who advance argument *A*. What, then, are their suppressed premises? One of them must be this:

- ( $P_2$ ) The proper and necessary means of coming to know what sensation another person is having is to feel that person's sensation.

With this premise added, argument *A* purports to be denying that anyone can avail himself of the sole proper means of ascertaining what sensations another person is having. Hence, what the argument must also show, if it is to be at all plausible, is that the sole proper means of ascertaining whether another person is in pain, for example, is to feel his pain. This is usually thought to be shown as follows:

- ( $P_3$ ) Anyone who has a sensation *knows* that he has it because he feels it, and whatever can be known to exist by being felt cannot be known (in the same sense of "known") to exist in any other way.

With these two premises added, is argument *A* complete? In recent defenses of the argument it has been common to add to ( $P_1$ ) the qualification that the impossibility of experiencing another person's sensations is a *logical* impossibility. What bearing this qualification has on the form of the argument will depend on which of the several current interpretations is placed on "logical impossibility." I will examine these interpretations in Sections II and III and will show that they fail to make sense of the claim that no one can feel another person's sensations. Therefore, I will give no further attention here to the qualification that ( $P_1$ ) expresses a logical impossibility. In the remainder of this section I will try to bring out the force of Wittgenstein's

attack on the premises ( $P_2$ ) and ( $P_3$ ) which purport to state a necessary condition for knowing what sensation another person is having.

What these premises say is that I can *know* that I am in pain because I *feel* my pain and that if anyone else is to know that I am in pain, he too will have to feel my pain. What the argument presupposes, then, is that there is a genuine use of the verb "to know" as an expression of certainty with first-person present-tense sensation statements. This is essential to the argument, for what the conclusion ( $C$ ) states is that no one can know, in this sense of "to know" appropriate to first-person sensation statements, what sensations another person is having. Hence, if this presupposition of the argument should turn out to be indefensible, we must reject not only ( $P_2$ ) and ( $P_3$ ) but also the conclusion. For if the alleged use of "to know" is spurious, then all three are infected by the confusion.

Does it make sense, then, to say "I know that I am in pain"? Consider the following. A man has been complaining for several days that his stomach hurts dreadfully, though he has sought no relief for it. His wife has nagged him repeatedly, "You're in pain, so go to a doctor!" Might he not at last exclaim in exasperation, "I *know* I'm in pain, but we can't *afford* a doctor"? No one would want to maintain that this expression of exasperation was unintelligible. What argument  $A$  presupposes, however, is not that "I know I am in pain" be intelligible as an expression of exasperation but that it be intelligible as an expression of certainty. What, then, would be necessary for it to be an expression of certainty? Consider the following case. Someone asks you whether it is raining; you tell him that it is, and then he asks, "Are you certain?" Here one might reply, "Yes, I know it's raining; I'm looking out the window." (This might be a telephone conversation, for example.) Now, what is the function of "I know" here? To put it roughly and briefly, the function of these words is to indicate that in answering the question one is not merely guessing or taking someone's word for it or judging from what one saw ten minutes before or something else of the sort. Their function is to indicate that one is in as good a position as one could want for answering the question "Is it raining?" What makes it

possible to use "I know" here as an expression of certainty is that it would be intelligible for someone to suppose that the speaker is not, in the particular instance, in as good a position as one could want for correctly answering a certain question or making a certain statement. More generally, for "I know that . . ." to be an expression of certainty, it is at least necessary that the sense of the sentence filling the blank allow the speaker to be ignorant in some circumstances of the truth value of statements made by means of the sentence (or equivalents thereof). But now, it is just this, as Wittgenstein points out (*Inv.* 246 and pp. 221-222), that does *not* hold for "I am in pain."

It should be noticed that Wittgenstein is not saying that the addition of the words "I know" to "I am in pain" would be *pointless* and therefore senseless. That might be said of the following case. The two of us are seated in such a way that you cannot see out the window, although I can. As you notice that it is time for you to leave, you ask me whether it is still raining. I peer out the window, straining to see in the failing light, and then go to the window, open it, and put my hand out. As I close the window, wiping the drops from my hand, I say, "Yes, it is raining rather hard." Because you have watched me take the necessary pains to answer your question, you would have nothing to gain by asking, "Are you certain?" or "Do you *know* that it is?" For the same reason, I would not be telling you anything by adding to my answer the words "I know . . ." If I were to add them, you might cast about for an explanation: did he think I didn't see him put his hand out? Or: is adding those words some eccentricity of his, like the character in one of Dostoevsky's novels who is always adding "No, sir, you won't lead me by the nose"? If no explanation is found (and it would not be an explanation to say that I added those words because they were *true*), my utterance of them would have to be judged senseless. But for all that, in the situation we began by describing, if someone in the street had seen me put my hand out, he might have said of me, "He knows it's raining." Or had my wife called from the next room to ask whether I knew it was raining, I could have answered that I do know.

Now the point that Wittgenstein is making about "I am in

pain" can be made clear by the contrast with "It is raining." The sense of the latter sentence is such that, although in a given situation my *saying* to a particular person "I know it is raining" may be senseless, still in that same situation I could be said by some other person to know that it is raining. In that same situation I may be asked by someone whether I know it is raining and may sensibly answer the question. By contrast, the sense of "I am in pain" (or of any other first-person present-tense sensation statement) does not provide for *any* situation such that the addition of the words "I know" would be an expression of certainty. It would not be merely pointless to utter the sentence "I know I am in pain" (indeed, we have seen how its utterance might express exasperation); it is rather that no utterance of it could be sensibly taken to be an expression of certainty.<sup>5</sup>

Wittgenstein's point here is often missed because, instead of considering what function the words "I know" could have in "I know I'm in pain," one wants to say something like this: "Surely a man who is in pain could not be like the man who has a stone in his shoe but does not know it because he does not feel the stone. A man who has a pain *feels* it, and if he feels it, he must *know* he's in pain." But this is making a wrong assimilation of "I feel a pain in my knee" to "I feel a stone in my shoe," which will be discussed below. At any rate, what we are inclined to contrast is the case of a man in pain with the case of a man with a (possibly unnoticed) stone in his shoe, and we want to mark the contrast by saying that, invariably, the man in pain *knows* that he is in pain. But this is a wrong way of marking the contrast. The right

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<sup>5</sup> This point has been widely missed. Castañeda, for example, argues "it is odd, because pointless, to inform another person that one believes or thinks that one is in pain, or to insist that one knows that one is in pain. But this fact about ordinary *reporting* in no way shows that there are no facts that would be reported if one were to make pointless assertions. The pointlessness of the assertions is not only compatible with their intelligibility, but even presupposes it" (*op. cit.*, p. 94). I do not know what could be meant here by "pointless assertions," i.e., what would make them *assertions*. But it should be clear that Wittgenstein's point about "I know I'm in pain" is quite different from the point I have made about the sometimes senseless addition of "I know" to "It is raining," and this is the difference Castañeda has missed. The same mistake is made (in almost the same words) in Ayer's criticism of Wittgenstein in "Privacy," *Proceedings of the British Academy* (1959), p. 48.



way is to say that whereas it makes sense to speak of ignorance and knowledge, doubt and certainty, in the case of the stone in the shoe, it does not make sense to speak this way in the case of the man in pain. Or as I would prefer to put it (see Section III below): the moves that are part of the one language game are not part of the other.

I have not here argued for Wittgenstein's point; I have merely tried to clarify it. To argue for it, I should have to go some way toward showing the "in corrigibility" of first-person sensation statements. It is not clear to me, however, what "showing this" would involve. The most one could do, I should think, is to provide reminders as to how the names of sensations are taught, for example, that such teaching contains no counterpart of teaching a child to put a color sample under a better light or to move in closer for a better look. Also, one might show a person that where he thinks we can (or do) doubt or make mistakes about our sensations, he has merely oddly described something else. For instance, I have heard it objected against Wittgenstein that we sometimes exclaim "Ouch!" in anticipation of a pain which never comes, but it would be misleading, at best, to call this "a mistake about *being* in pain." There is also the fact that such words as "stomach-ache," "headache," and "dizziness" are partly diagnostic. Thus, a doctor might correct someone by saying, "It's not stomach-ache you have; it's appendicitis!" Or a man might correct himself by saying, "Never mind the aspirin; I didn't have a headache, after all. It was just this tight hat I've been wearing." These are corrections of mistaken diagnoses. Another objection that is raised is that victims of accidents sometimes hysterically scream that they are in dreadful pain, although they are scarcely injured. But it should be clear that the screamings of hysterical people are no more to be counted genuine uses of language than are the ravings of delirious people or the mumblings of sleep-walkers. It is not my intention here to answer all such objections; I have no idea how many an ingenious person might propose or how far he would go to defend them.

The preceding discussion has shown, in so far as showing this is possible, that the alleged use of "to know" presupposed by argument *A* is not a use at all but a confusion. Thus, an essential

presupposition of argument *A* has been defeated, and the argument will have to be abandoned. The possible criticisms of *A*, however, are by no means exhausted. In the remainder of this section I will deal with several points related to those already made. Sections II and III will present Wittgenstein's criticisms of (*P*<sub>1</sub>) and the claim that it states a logical impossibility.

There is a use of the verb "to feel" (as in "I feel a stone in my shoe") that is related to the verb "to know" in the following way. If I am asked how I know that there is a stone in my shoe or that the grass is wet or that a certain man has a pulse beat, there will be cases in which it will be correct to answer, "I know because I feel it." I will call this the *perceptual sense* of "to feel." Now it is clear that argument *A* presupposes that it makes sense to speak of feeling (in the perceptual sense) a pain or an itch or dizziness. (*P*<sub>3</sub>) says that I can *know* that I am in pain because I *feel* my pain. It no doubt contributes to the plausibility of this that we commonly say such things as "I feel a slight pain in my knee when I bend it." That this is not the perceptual sense of "to feel" should be clear from the fact that in all such sentences the words "I feel" may be replaced by either "I have" or "there is" without altering the sense of the sentence (cf. *Inv.* 246). Thus, "I feel a slight pain in my knee" comes to the same as "There is a slight pain in my knee." Such substitutions are not possible when "to feel" is used in the perceptual sense. "I feel a stone in my shoe" implies, but does not mean the same as, "There is a stone in my shoe." It will make sense to say, "There was a stone in my shoe, but I didn't feel it," whereas it will not make sense to say, as an admission of ignorance, "There was a pain in my knee, but I didn't feel it." Sensation words cannot be the objects of verbs of perception in first-person sentences. And once this is seen, the plausibility of argument *A* altogether disappears. For when it is recognized that it does not make sense to say "I know that I am in pain because I feel it," it will no longer be tempting to say, "Another person can know that I am in pain only if he feels it."

There remain difficulties with argument *A* which have gone generally unnoticed. (*P*<sub>2</sub>) purports to state the proper and necessary means of ascertaining what sensations another person is

having, and what it says is that one must feel his sensation. But even within the presuppositions of the argument this is inadequate: it ought to require not only that one feel the other person's sensation but also that one correctly identify it as being *his*. The plausibility of *A* depends on its seeming to be analogous to something like this: to ascertain whether my neighbor's crocuses are in bloom, as opposed to merely taking his word for it, I must see his crocuses. But I must also know which are his and which are mine, and I know this by knowing where the line runs between our gardens. I identify our respective crocuses by identifying our gardens, and this is presupposed in the sense of "I saw his crocuses" and "He saw my crocuses." But how am I supposed to distinguish between the case in which I am in pain (whether he is or not) and the case in which he is in pain and I feel it? How do I know whose pain I feel? I will postpone the discussion of this question until the next section, but it is worth noticing how far the analogy with seeing my neighbor's crocuses has been carried. Thus, Russell says that "we cannot *enter into the minds of others* to observe the thoughts and emotions which we infer from their behavior."<sup>6</sup> The italicized phrase seems to provide a criterion of identity of the same kind as in the case of the crocuses, but of course it does not. It merely raises the further question of how one is to identify whose mind one has "entered into." What that question should show is that one is being led on by an analogy that has no application. Why, in the first place, is one tempted to speak of "feeling another's sensations"? A part of the answer is that one thinks that just as such a sentence as "My neighbor's crocuses are in bloom" has a place in its grammar for both "I know because I *saw* them" and "I didn't see them but took his word for it," so the sentence "He is in pain" should have a place in its grammar for both "I know because I *felt* his pain" and "I didn't feel his pain but took his word for it." And now if we somehow exclude "I felt his pain," it will seem that we are left with "I only took his word for it." If, instead of seeing for myself, I ask my neighbor whether certain of his flowers are in bloom, this may be owing to a garden wall. It may seem that some com-

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<sup>6</sup> *Human Knowledge* (New York, 1948), p. 193 (my italics).

parable circumstance must account for the fact that we ask people what they feel. "Other people can tell us what they feel," says Russell, "but we cannot directly observe their feelings."<sup>7</sup> Thus is argument *A* born. It makes out the difference between first- and third-person sensation statements to rest on a matter of circumstance (like being unable to see my neighbor's crocuses), whereas Wittgenstein has made us realize that the difference resides in the language game itself. The difference does not rest on some circumstance, and therefore argument *A*, which purports to name such a circumstance with the words "being unable to feel another's sensations," is inherently confused.

There remains a difficulty with premise ( $P_3$ ) related to the above. ( $P_3$ ) states that I can know what sensations I am having because I feel them. Now if someone wants to defend argument *A*, he will have to show how it is supposed to account not only for what we have here called "sensation statements" but also for their negations: "I am not in pain" and "He is not in pain." This may not seem to pose a difficulty if one thinks he understands Russell's phrase about entering into the minds of others to observe their thoughts and emotions. For if one enters a room to observe what is there, one may also observe that nothing is there or that certain things are not there. But if one does not pretend to understand Russell's phrase, how (on the presuppositions of argument *A*) is one supposed to understand either "I am not in pain" or "He is not in pain"? The same difficulty may be raised about negative statements containing "dream" or "image" instead of "pain" (see *Inv.* 448). But if we stick to the case of bodily sensations, one might be tempted to substitute for the word "mind" in Russell's phrase the word "body." One would then suppose that if someone says, "I didn't feel any pain in my knee that time," he is reporting an observation: I felt around in my knee for a pain and found none. But what is the feeling in this case? Is it the same feeling as when feeling pain? But if not that, then what? There is such a thing as making oneself receptive to pain—and even to pain in a particular place. (Perhaps a doctor wants to know whether your injured knee still hurts when it is bent in a

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<sup>7</sup> *The Analysis of Mind* (London, 1951), p. 118.

certain way.) One relaxes, stops moving and talking, and then one feels pain—or one does not. But although there is no difficulty with the idea of being receptive to pain when there is no pain, it is not even *prima facie* plausible to speak of a feeling which might have disclosed a pain but did not. How, for instance, could one make out the difference between not feeling for pain and feeling for a pain but finding none? Here all talk about a kind of observation appropriate to sensations becomes obvious nonsense. On the presuppositions of argument *A*, then, no account of negative sensation statements can be even suggested. It was tempting to say: “I can know that I am in pain because I *feel* my pain, and that is what I cannot do in the case of another person.” But the plausibility of this is lost if one says, “I can know that I am not in pain because I can *feel* the absence of pain in myself, and that is what I cannot feel in the case of another person.” One would want to reply: perhaps you are feeling the absence of it right now!

## II

The one premise of argument *A* which we have so far neglected is in some respects the most pertinacious: “No one can feel (have) another person’s sensations.” I remarked in Section I that it is now commonplace to say that this premise expresses a “logical impossibility.” This is intended, no doubt, as an improvement over older ways of talking. Russell once said of our sensations and images that they “cannot, even theoretically, be observed by anyone else.”<sup>8</sup> But substituting “not even logically possible” for “not even theoretically possible” has proved to be an empty gesture, for the meaning of “logically impossible” has at best remained dubious. Two interpretations are current. (1) Some philosophers have held that to say that it is logically (or conceptually) impossible that *p* is to say no more and no less than that the sentence “*p*” is senseless. In the present case, this would amount to saying that such sentences as “I felt his pain” and “He feels my dizziness”

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

are senseless.<sup>9</sup> (2) Others seem to hold that to say that it is logically (or conceptually) impossible that *p* is to say, not that “*p*” is senseless, but that the negation of “*p*” is a necessary truth. In the present case, this would amount to saying that a sentence such as “I did not feel his pain” (or perhaps “Any pain I feel is my own pain”) expresses a necessary truth.<sup>10</sup> Both versions speak of sentences—one saying that certain sentences are senseless, the other saying that the negations of those sentences express necessary truths. This presents a difficulty.

Any sentence may, so far as logic can foresee, find its way into some nonphilosophical context. Thus, in the last section a context was imagined in which the sentence “I know I’m in pain” was uttered as an expression of exasperation. No one would want to say that in that context the person who exclaimed, “I know I’m in pain!” was uttering either nonsense or a necessary truth—any more than they would want to say this of “Business is business.” Now there are, no doubt, a great many philosophical propositions for which it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to provide a nonphilosophical context. But it should be clear that to specify merely a sentence is not to specify what (according to which view you take) is said to be senseless or to express a necessary truth. At this point it is tempting to say that, in the context I imagined for it, the sentence “I know I’m in pain” was not meant literally. Similarly, someone might insist that if we were ever to say, “I feel your pain,” this could not, at any rate, be *literally*

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<sup>9</sup> “The barriers that prevent us from enjoying one another’s experiences are not natural but logical. . . . It is not conceivable that there should be people who were capable of having one another’s pains, or feeling one another’s emotions. And the reason why this is inconceivable is *simply that we attach no meaning to such expressions* as ‘I am experiencing your headache,’ ‘She is feeling his remorse,’ ‘Your state of anger is numerically the same as mine.’” A. J. Ayer, *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge* (London, 1953), pp. 138-139 (my italics).

<sup>10</sup> For example, Castañeda, who regards it as a logical impossibility to experience another’s sensations (*op. cit.*, p. 90), seems to take this view of “logical impossibilities.” In his discussion of the sentence “I believed falsely at time *t* that I was in pain at *t*” (which he says would be regarded as meaningless by Wittgensteinians), he gives his own position as follows: “But obviously ‘I believed falsely at *t* that I was in pain at *t*’ is meaningful; it expresses a conceptual contradiction; its negation is a necessary truth” (*ibid.*, p. 93).

true. Thus, Ayer says that "it is logically impossible that one person should *literally* feel another's pain."<sup>11</sup> What is said to be logically impossible, then, is what is expressed by "I feel his pain" in its literal sense. But can we now apply either of the aforementioned versions of logical impossibility? Those who adopt version (1) would find themselves in the odd position of saying that it is the literal *sense* of a sentence which is senseless. (This is what Wittgenstein warns against in saying that "it is not the sense as it were that is senseless" [*Inv.* 500].) Those who adopt either (1) or (2) will somehow have to specify, for the particular sentence, what its alleged literal sense is. One way of attempting this is by presenting the parts of the sentence (either words or expressions) in some familiar context in which *they* have the desired meaning and then specifying that it is when the sentence in question combines the words or expressions as used in *these* contexts that it has its literal sense. But what could it mean to speak of transferring a word or expression *and its meaning* from a context in which it has a particular use to a sentence in which it has no use at all (except as a part of speech)—and certainly not the use it had in the context from which it was allegedly transferred? The most that would seem to be possible here is that one might be under the *impression* that he had combined the original meanings into the sentence. This, I think, is exactly the case with philosophers who declare either that certain sentences are senseless or that their negations are necessary truths.

To illustrate this point, I want to consider a fictitious philosophical argument designed both for its transparency and for its similarity to the case of someone's saying that no one can have another person's sensations. Here, then, is the argument of an imaginary philosopher:

We commonly speak of a child as having his father's build, but this is really absurd when you come to think of it. How *could* someone have another person's build? I know what it is for someone to have his father's watch or for someone to have another man's coat, but no one could literally have another

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<sup>11</sup> *The Problem of Knowledge* (Edinburgh, 1956), p. 202 (my italics).

person's build. A build is not something which, like a coat, can be removed and passed around from person to person. That is not even conceivable. And this is why no one can have another person's build. So when, ordinarily, we say of someone that he has another person's build, or when we say that two people have the *same* build, we are using these words, not in their literal sense, but in a sense that is arbitrary and does not fit the meaning of the words at all. We are saying only that the one person has a build that is *like* the other person's, not that he has the other person's build itself. It is the same when we say that a child has her mother's eyes. We don't mean this literally—that her mother's eyes have been transplanted into her head. Of course, this could theoretically be done. But having another's build, in the literal sense, is not even theoretically possible. No amount of surgical skill will enable doctors to transfer a build from one person to another. They may graft skin and bone, but each person will still have a build all his own, not someone else's. Builds, one might say, are among the most inviolable forms of private property.

Now what has happened in this argument? Our imaginary philosopher purports to have identified the "literal sense" of such sentences as "He has your build" and "You have your father's build" and to have discovered that these sentences, in their literal sense, mean something impossible. But what is being referred to here as the literal sense of "He has your build"? What I should like to suggest is that though this is no sense at all, what may strike one as being the literal sense—the real meaning—of "He has your build" is this sentence construed on analogy with such a sentence as "He has your coat." The temptation so to construe it lies, of course, in the surface similarity of the two sentences. Moreover, quite apart from these sentences, there is our familiar use of possessives in "my build," "your build," and so forth, and one may be tempted to construe this use of possessives on analogy with possessives of ownership. That this is a false analogy can be shown as follows. In order to use a possessive of ownership (as in "his coat") to make a true statement, we must correctly identify the owner of the article. It is this identification



that makes the difference between saying, "*His* coat is too large for him," and saying merely, "*That* coat is too large for him." If I should say, "His coat is too large for him," without having made the correct identification, I can be corrected by being told, for example, "That's not *his* coat; it's his father's." Now contrast this case with one in which I notice a child's build and comment, "His build is rather angular." Here the step of identifying an owner plays no part: I need only observe the child. And so my statement could not be challenged by someone saying, "The build is rather angular, but are you sure that it's *his*?" This question would be senseless because, intended as a particular kind of challenge to my statement, it wrongly presupposes that in the language game played with "his build" there is a move of the same kind as in the language game played with "his coat," that is, the identification of an owner. But now it is just this question that would have to make sense if the so-called "literal sense" of "He has his father's build" were to *be* a sense. Hence, the "literal sense" was no sense at all.

To put the matter in another way, what would not make sense would be to ask, as though requesting an identification, "Whose build does he have: his own or his father's?" But in its so-called "literal sense" the sentence "He has his father's build" was supposed to be a sentence of the kind used in answering that supposedly genuine identification question. So again, the "literal sense" was no sense at all. Here it is important to notice that in thus rejecting the "literal sense" of "He has his father's build" we must also reject its correlatives, "I have my own build" and "Everyone has his own build." For these sentences, too, in the context of the above argument, are supposed to be of the kind used in answering that supposedly genuine identification question. But as we have seen, there is no such genuine question, and so there are no answers either. The question and the answers we were made to believe in by the analogy with "He has his father's coat" are not moves in the language game played with the word "build." Hence, what we were to understand as involving some kind of impossibility—namely, "literally having another's build"—and also what we were to take as being necessarily true—namely, "I have my own build"—turn out to be illusions.

Therefore the statement "Builds are private" must be given up.

The points I have made here apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to the philosophical assertion "Sensations are private," where this is meant as "No one can have another person's sensations." I will not rehearse the arguments again. It is enough to say that in order to be in a position to use correctly the expression "his pain" (as in "His pain is worse, so you had better give him a hypo"), it is sufficient to know *who* is in pain. There is no further step required here comparable to that of identifying an owner as in the use of "his coat." (Hence in the first-person case, where there is no question of *who* is in pain [*Inv.* 404-408], there is no identification of any kind.) Or to put the point in still another way, when we say of someone, "His pain is quite severe," the word "his" is performing the same function (apart from surface grammar) as the word "he" in "He is in severe pain." It was this that Wittgenstein meant to bring out when, in reply to "Another person can't have my pains," he asked: "Which pains are my pains?" (*Inv.* 253). He did not intend that one should *answer* that question, saying something like "All the pains I have are mine." He intended, rather, that that "answer" and the "question" that prompts it should be recognized as spurious, as not belonging to the language game.<sup>12</sup> Hence, for the reasons adduced in the previous case, when it is said that no one can, literally, have another person's pain, the supposed literal sense is no sense at all.

Before leaving the topic of possessives, it will be well to notice a source of frequent confusion. It was briefly mentioned in Section I that such words as "stomach-ache" and "headache" are partly diagnostic. Thus, a man might say, "Never mind the aspirin; I didn't have a headache after all. It was only this tight hat I've been wearing." Now it is easy to imagine a use of possessives related to this in the following way. Philosophers have imagined wireless connections of some sort being set up between people such that when one of them is in pain the other is, too. In such

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<sup>12</sup> In another passage (*Inv.* 411) Wittgenstein asks us to consider a "practical (non-philosophical)" application for the question "Is this sensation *my* sensation?" Perhaps he was thinking that this form of words might be used in place of "Am I the *only* one having this sensation?" which would be like asking, "Am I the *only* one who is dizzy?"

cases, it is suggested, the question "Whose headache do I have?" would come to have the following use. It will be correct to answer that I have my own headache when, on detaching the wireless device, the pain continues unaffected, but if instead the pain immediately stops, it will be correct to say that I did not have my own headache, that I had Smith's headache, and so forth. Now granting all this, it is still important to be clear about two points. First, the sentence "I did not have my own headache" will not mean the same as "I was not in pain." The man who asks, "Whose headache do I have?" will be one of whom it will be true to say, "He is in pain" or even "He is in severe pain." Secondly, when we say of a person, "He is in severe pain," we also say indifferently, "His pain is severe." (As noted above, the words "he" and "his" in these two sentences perform the same function.) So the statement "His pain was severe" will be true even though it is also true that he did not have his own headache. Because "his pain" in the former statement is not an answer to an identification question, it does not compete with the new idiom. Moreover, this would remain true even if we should lapse into using the word "pain" in the same kind of way we have here imagined the word "headache" to be used. That is, even if we should superimpose on our present use of "pain" the question "Whose pain do I have?" with the possible answer "I have Smith's pain," it will still be possible to say of me "His pain is severe" in case I am in severe pain. It is thus as a comment on this use of possessives that one can say: any pain I feel will be mine. The mistakes one is inclined to make here are, first, to suppose that this is a truth about the nature of pains or of human beings, and secondly, to suppose that the word "mine" here is a possessive of ownership. Those who have sought to avoid the first mistake by resorting to talk about "logical impossibility" have nevertheless persisted in the second mistake, and thus they have reinforced the fundamental confusion by serving it up in a terminology that commands great respect. We can see more clearly what this amounts to if we return to the argument of our imaginary philosopher. Having concluded that no one can have another person's build, he might go on to argue that therefore we need never worry that the build someone has will not last out his lifetime

owing to its previous hard use by another person. Now if a more up-to-date philosopher were to offer further relief from this worry by maintaining that it is not even *logically* possible to have another's build, this would be merely a perpetuation of the original confusion. This is what happens when philosophers seek to strengthen argument *A* by adding that it is a *logical* impossibility to feel another's sensations.

If we can make any sense of the insistence that pains are private—that is, that any pain I feel is my own—this amounts to no more than a comment on the kind of possessive commonly used with the word “pain.” Of course, this is not what philosophers have supposed they were saying with the premise “No one can feel another's pain,” but since nothing but this can be intelligibly made of that premise, it can hardly do the job that philosophers have given it. There would not be even the semblance of plausibility in an argument running: no one can know what sensations another person has, because the possessives commonly used with names of sensations are not possessives of ownership.

### III

The preceding section began with two criticisms of the view that “No one can have another's pain” expresses a logical impossibility. The criticisms were these: (*a*) when something is said to be logically impossible it is necessary to specify more than a sentence, but what must be specified cannot be the sense of a sentence, for it is absurd to speak of the sense as being senseless; and (*b*) attempts at specifying such a sense must come to grief in requiring the parts of the sentence (either words or expressions) to retain their meaning though shorn of their use. Have my own arguments of the preceding section avoided these criticisms?

The chief difficulty with the views against which these criticisms were directed is that they propose to deal with sentences, and then in order to specify what is said to be logically impossible, they find themselves resorting to talk about the literal sense of a sentence. This is what Wittgenstein meant to oppose when he wrote: “When a sentence is called senseless, it is not as it were its sense that is senseless. But a combination of words is being

excluded from the language, withdrawn from circulation" (*Inv.* 500). But what does it mean to speak of "a combination of words being excluded from the language"? *What* is being excluded from *what*? When Wittgenstein says, for example, that "it can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I *know* I am in pain" (*Inv.* 246), he does not mean to exclude the joke. In fact, one can think of a variety of contexts for the sentence "Now he *knows* he's in pain." (Think of how a torturer might say it.) So again I ask: what is being excluded from what? The answer to this can be seen from the following segment of argument from Section II:

If I should say, "His coat is too large for him," without having made the correct identification, I can be corrected by being told, for example, "That's not *his* coat; it's his father's." Now contrast this case with one in which I notice a child's build and comment, "His build is rather angular." Here the step of identifying an owner plays no part: I need only observe the child. And so my statement could not be challenged by someone saying, "The build *is* rather angular, but are you sure it's *his*?" This question would be senseless because, *intended as a particular kind of challenge to my statement*, it wrongly presupposes that in the language game played with "his build" there is a move of the same kind as in the language game played with "his coat," that is, the identification of an owner.

What is appealed to here is the reader's familiarity with a pair of language games. What is said to be senseless is not merely a combination of words but rather an attempt, by means of a combination of words, to make in one language game a move that belongs only to the other language game. In other words, by showing that the apparent analogy between the language games is in fact a false one, the argument shows that if one tried making the moves suggested by the analogy, one would not be *saying* anything but would be merely under the impression that he was. It is this mistaken *impression* of saying something that the argument condemns as senseless, and therefore (to answer our original question) the argument cannot be accused of saying that the *sense* of some sentence is senseless. It should be evident, however, that an argument of this kind, unless it is carefully formulated, is peculiarly open to misunderstanding. For in order to specify what it is that one is

condemning as nonsense, one must repeat that nonsense in *some* form, and if a reader insists on taking one's words "straight" at this point and thus looks for or imagines a sense where none was intended, then one's argument will have the paradoxical air of trying to prove that the sense of something is senseless.

Since the point I have been making here is important to Wittgenstein's thought, it is worth noticing the following pair of passages. The first is from Moore's report of Wittgenstein's 1930-1933 lectures:

[Wittgenstein] then implied that where we say "This makes no sense" we always mean "This makes nonsense *in this particular game*"; and in answer to the question "Why do we call it 'nonsense'? what does it mean to call it so?" said that when we call a sentence "nonsense," it is "because of some similarity to sentences which have sense," and that "nonsense always arises from forming symbols analogous to certain uses, where they have no use."<sup>13</sup>

The second passage is from *The Blue Book*:

It is possible that, say in an accident, I should . . . see a broken arm at my side, and think it is mine when really it is my neighbor's. . . . On the other hand, there is no question of recognizing a person when I say I have a toothache. To ask "are you sure that it's *you* who have pains?" would be nonsensical. Now, when in this case no error is possible, it is because the move which we might be inclined to think of as an error, a "bad move," is *no move of the game at all*. (We distinguish in chess between good and bad moves, and we call it a mistake if we expose the queen to a bishop. But it is no mistake to promote a pawn to a king.)<sup>14</sup>

It is clear that Wittgenstein came to think that there is more than one kind of senselessness, but the description of the kind mentioned here is the description of "No one can feel another person's pain."<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> G. E. Moore, *Philosophical Papers* (London, 1959), pp. 273-274.

<sup>14</sup> Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford, 1958), p. 67 (the last italics are mine).

<sup>15</sup> Another kind of senselessness is that illustrated in Sec. I by the sometimes senseless addition of the words "I know" to "It is raining." Other examples are noticed in *Inv.* 117, 349, 514, 670, p. 221, and elsewhere.

Going back now, briefly, we can say one thing more about the so-called "literal sense" of "He has his father's build" or "I feel your pain." Seeming to see in such sentences a sense that is somehow impossible is a queer sort of illusion, produced by seeing one pattern of grammar on analogy with another and quite different pattern of grammar. This sort of illusion is not altogether peculiar to philosophy, however. Seeming to see in a sentence a meaning that is somehow impossible is the stuff of which grammatical jokes are made (cf. *Inv.* 111). Consider, for example, a cartoon by S. J. Perelman. It shows a distraught gentleman rushing into a doctor's office clutching a friend by the wrist and whimpering: "I've got Bright's disease, and he has mine." This is more than a play on the name "Bright's disease." The surface grammar reminds one of such a sentence as "I've got his hat, and he has mine," as used to report a mix-up in the coatroom. So the caption gives the illusion of making sense—of reporting an extraordinary mix-up, which the doctor is supposed to set straight. And yet "getting the joke" consists in feeling its senselessness. So there seems to be a sense that is somehow senseless. But what we understand here is not a *sense* but rather the two language games that have been (humorously) assimilated. When this is intentional and fairly obvious, it produces a laugh; when it is unintentional and unrecognized, it may seem to provide an original and penetrating insight into the nature of things. Thus, in the case of my imaginary philosopher, once he is captivated by the grammatical analogy suggested by "He has his father's build," he is led to treat the word "build" at every turn on analogy with the word "coat." The whole complex grammar of words for physical objects opens out before him as a new field for the word "build" to run in. A new range of sentences is thus opened up, suggesting what appear to be new "speculative possibilities"—builds being removed like coats, being passed around from person to person, becoming more worn and shabby with the years, and so forth. When we are captivated by such an analogy, we may succumb to temptation and play in these new fields. But we may also feel considerable resistance here, for the grammatical analogy behind it is a false one, and the signs of this may be too clear to be missed altogether. My imaginary

philosopher expresses this felt resistance by insisting that "no one can literally have another's build." This, of course, does not reject the analogy; it merely denies that the supposed "speculative possibilities" can ever be realized. Nor would it improve matters to say that the impossibility involved is a *logical* one. This would be merely a new jargon for calling a halt to the analogy in mid-course. One finds the same thing when David Pole, in his commentary on the *Investigations*, writes: "In some sense experience is clearly private; one person cannot be said literally to feel another's feelings," and this cannot be said, he thinks, because grammar "forbids us" to say it.<sup>16</sup> This talk of grammar "forbidding us" to say something is nothing but the most recent jargon for calling a halt to an analogy whose oddness has begun to dawn on one. Because Pole is still in the clutches of the analogy, he is under the impression that there is some "literal sense" of the phrase "feeling another's feelings" which grammar somehow forbids. Because in general he thinks that grammar forbids us at many points to express a sense that we fully understand, he vehemently opposes Wittgenstein's expressed intention to "bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (*Inv.* 116). Thus, he speaks of Wittgenstein's "characteristic anxiety to pin language down within the limits of its origins" and of Wittgenstein's insistence that "existing usage is to be accepted as we find it and never tampered with."<sup>17</sup> The result of this, Pole warns, is that "the advance of speculation may well be halted; thought may well be 'contained' within its existing frontiers."<sup>18</sup> What Pole fails to recognize is that the "metaphysical use" from which Wittgenstein wants to "bring words back" is not a *use* but the illusion of a use. Wittgenstein himself says that to reform language "for particular practical purposes . . . is perfectly possible. But these are not the cases we have to do with" (*Inv.* 132).

## IV

There is another expression for the idea that sensations are private. It is said that no two people can have (feel) the *same*

<sup>16</sup> *The Later Philosophy of Wittgenstein* (London, 1958), pp. 68-69.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91 and 94.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.



sensation. This has an analogue in the case of our imaginary philosopher, who argues that when we say of someone that he has his father's build or that they have the same build, "we only mean that the one person has a build that is *like* the other's, not that he has the other person's build itself." He means to say that, however alike they may be, there are two builds here, not one. This, of course, is a mistake as to how builds are counted, but it goes with his prior mistake of taking possessives as used with "build" to be possessives of ownership. He reasoned that if we say, "His build is rather angular, and so is mine," there must be two builds: his and mine. But this is wrong. If one wanted to count builds, one would proceed differently—as one would proceed to count diseases or habits or the gaits of horses. One counts in such cases in accordance with more or less detailed descriptions. A five-gaited horse is one that can ambulate in accordance with five descriptions of foot movements, and two horses are performing the same gait if their foot movements fit the same relevant description. What would not make sense (if one meant to be using "gait" in its present sense) would be to say, "They are performing different gaits which are exactly alike." To say that this makes no sense is to say that the identity of a gait is just given by a description of it. To count two gaits among those being performed, one must make out some difference in foot movement that would be relevant in describing (identifying) gaits. In the same way, a person has the same build he had before if he still fits the same (relevant) description; and if ten people fit that description, then all ten have the same build. Our imaginary philosopher's error lay in this: having confused the use of "his build" with that of "his coat," he inevitably repeated the mistake with "same build" and "same coat." Of course it does make sense to speak of two coats being exactly alike, for one may identify coats independently of descriptions of them. Now, no doubt we do say such things as "His build is exactly like mine," but this is not used in opposition to "He and I have the same build." It is rather that "same" and "exactly like" are used interchangeably here, as in the case of color we might say indifferently either "The color here is exactly like the color over there" or "This is the same color here as over there." Whichever we say,

there is but one color—red, for example—and it would be a mistake to say: there cannot be only *one* color, for there is *this* color *here* and also *that* color *there*.

The point is that there is no such thing as being just *the same*—no such thing as identity pure and simple. It would be a mistake to think that the same is the same whether we are speaking of builds or coats or gaits or sensations. “Same” must always be understood together with some general term, such as “build” or “coat,” and the criterion of identity in any particular case is determined by the general term involved. Or when we use the phrase “the same one,” it is determined by the general term that is understood in the context to have been replaced by “one.” Similarly, there is no such thing as being an individual pure and simple. It is always a matter of being one build or one coat, and the criterion for counting will vary with the general term. Now one consequence of failing to be clear on this point is that we may unwittingly take the criterion of identity determined by one kind of general term as showing us the meaning of “same” by itself, with the result that we construe the use of “same” with all general terms on this one model. Thus, my imaginary philosopher supposed that if someone were to have the *same* build as his father, he would be getting an already well-worn article. He was clearly taking as his paradigm the use of “same” with words for physical objects and supposing that *that* is what “same build” must mean. The same mistake is made by Ayer when he writes:

The question whether an object is public or private is fundamentally a question of . . . the conventions which we follow in making judgements of identity. Thus physical objects are public because it makes sense to say of different people that they are perceiving the same physical object; mental images are private because it does not make sense to say of different people that they are having the same mental image; they can be imagining the same thing, but it is impossible that their respective mental images should be literally the same.<sup>19</sup>

When Ayer speaks of “judgements of identity” and “being literally the same,” he is taking the use of “same” with words

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<sup>19</sup> *The Problem of Knowledge*, p. 200.

for physical objects as his paradigm for all uses of "same." So he thinks that if two people were to see the same mental image, they would be in a position to add to, correct, and corroborate one another's descriptions in the same kind of way as we do when two of us have seen the same house.

But we do, of course, constantly speak of two people having the same image or the same sensation. The identity of an image is given by the description of that of which it is an image (cf. *Inv.* 367), and thus we say, "There is one image that keeps coming back to me: that little boy standing there . . .," and someone else may remark, "I have that same image." Again, someone descending in an elevator for the first time may complain of the funny feeling in his stomach, and someone else tells him, "I get the same sensation; it will go away when the elevator stops." Nor would it be odd for someone to say, "We always get the same pain whenever it rains: an intense aching in the joints." Now we may also say, "He gets a pain exactly like mine," but nothing turns on the choice of idiom. We say indifferently either "Now I have the same pain in both knees" or "Now there is a pain in my left knee exactly like the one in my right knee." As Wittgenstein remarks: "In so far as it makes sense to say that my pain is the same as his, it is also possible for us both to have the same pain" (*Inv.* 253). His point is that where it is correct to say, "His pain is the same as mine," it is also correct to say, "We have the same pain." It would be a mistake to think that "same pain" here really means "two pains exactly alike." Ayer, for example, has said that though we speak of two people having the same pain or the same thought, "same" here does not have the meaning of "numerical identity."<sup>20</sup> Apparently he thinks that in all such cases we are comparing two pains or thoughts or images. But Ayer gives no defense of this, except by invoking the very doctrine he is trying to defend: that sensations and thoughts are private. But since Ayer wants to treat this doctrine as a thesis about language, it is begging the question to appeal to the doctrine to decide what *must* be the meaning of "same pain," "same image,"

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<sup>20</sup> *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, p. 139; and *The Problem of Knowledge*, p. 199.

and so on. If he were not captivated by the doctrine, he would see that if someone says, "He and I get the same pain in damp weather: an intense aching in the joints," then intense aching is counted as one pain. Another pain would be, for example, the searing sting of a pulled muscle.

The confusion about identity can show up in still another way, which Wittgenstein deals with as follows:

I have seen a person in a discussion on this subject strike himself on the breast and say: "But surely another person can't have THIS pain!"—The answer to this is that one does not define a criterion of identity by emphatic stressing of the word "this" [*Inv.* 253].

What Wittgenstein describes here would be exactly analogous to our imaginary philosopher gesturing toward his body and saying: "But surely another person can't have *this* build!" Although the mistake is more obvious here, it is the same: the word "this" can be used to refer to a particular pain or build only in accordance with the criterion of identity provided by the use of the general term. The word "this" does not itself carry a criterion of identity. As we have already seen, to speak of a particular pain would be, for example, to speak of intense aching in the joints, and *that* is something that many people have. How, then, could someone think that by stressing the word "this" he could refer to a pain that he alone can have? Wittgenstein remarks that "what the emphasis does is to suggest the case in which we are conversant with such a criterion of identity, but have to be reminded of it" (*Inv.* 253). That is, we might use the emphatic "*this*" to clear up a misunderstanding that has occurred because the general term involved is used at different times with different criteria of identity. To take the stock example, we might clear up in this way a misunderstanding resulting from the type-token ambiguity of the word "letter." ("No, I meant that you should count *this* letter, too.") This will succeed, of course, only if the alternative use of the general term is already well known to us, so that the emphatic "*this*" has only to remind us of it, for as Wittgenstein says, the emphasis "does not define" the kind of identity that is meant. Is there, then, a familiar use of sensation words with a criterion of identity that is reflected in "But surely another person can't have *this* pain!"?

There is a class of episode words that must be considered here. Such expressions as "dizzy spell," "toothache," and sometimes "pain" are used with a criterion of identity quite different from any described above. Although it makes sense to speak of having had the same sensation or image or dream on several occasions, it does not make sense to speak of having had the same dizzy spell on several occasions, unless this means that one was *still* having the dizzy spell. Similarly, there is a use of the word "toothache" such that if someone with a toothache should remark that he had one just like it two years ago, it could only be a joke or a confusion to suggest, "Perhaps it is the same one again." Toothaches are episodes of pain, just as dizzy spells are episodes of dizziness, so that answering the question, "How many toothaches have you had?" requires a reference to particular occasions. Moreover, the episodes are counted by reference to particular persons, so that if I were to count the number of toothaches my children had had, and on some date two of them had suffered from toothache, I should have to count two toothaches for that date. This would be like having to keep count of the number of tantrums they have or the number of somersaults they turn in a day. To refer to a particular tantrum or a particular somersault is to refer to what *one* person did at some time. Thus, if a mother has described one of her children's tantrums, someone else might remark that her child had had a tantrum "exactly like that"; he, too, threw himself on the floor and held his breath until he turned blue. "Exactly like" is used here in contrast, not with "same," but with "rather like," "rather different," and so forth. That is, it would not be asked: "Do you suppose they may have had the same one and not just two exactly alike?" This kind of identification question has no place in the grammar of "tantrum," and so neither do its two answers: "Yes, they did have the same one" and "No, they did not have the same one, only two exactly alike." Now this same point holds for the grammar of "toothache": the identification question "Did they have the same one?" has no place and so neither do its answers. That is, it would not make sense to say, as if in answer to that question, *either* "They had the same toothache" or "They did not have the same toothache." Now the relevance of this point can be seen

if we bear in mind the inclination to think of sensations as being objects of perception. If we think of first-person sensation statements on analogy with eyewitness reports, the question will arise whether our reports of sensations could be corroborated or denied by other "eyewitnesses." So the question becomes "Can two people feel the same toothache?" But as between answering that two people *can* feel the same toothache and answering that they *cannot*, we seem to be faced with a Hobson's choice. For the former alternative will seem to be excluded a priori—that is, we will want to say (without knowing quite why, perhaps): "It can't be the *same* toothache if there are *two* people in pain." This, of course, is the influence of the criterion of identity (described above) in the use of the word "toothache." But with one of the pair of "answers" thus excluded a priori, it will seem that the other one *must* be true, and thus "No two people can feel the same toothache" comes to be called "a necessary truth." From this one easily concludes that we cannot know anything about another person's toothaches.

This, then, is the complicated story behind the idea that in "Sensations are private" we have a "necessary truth" or that "No one can feel another's pain" expresses a "logical impossibility." The notion of "logical impossibility" was meant to be contrasted with "physical impossibility," but borrowing a remark of Wittgenstein's from another context, we might say: it made the difference "look *too slight*. . . . An unsuitable type of expression is a sure means of remaining in a state of confusion. It as it were bars the way out" (*Inv.* 339). The "state of confusion" in the present case is that of argument *A*—that of thinking that (as Wittgenstein once imagined it being expressed) "a man's thinking [or dream or toothache] goes on within his consciousness in a seclusion in comparison with which any physical seclusion is an exhibition to public view" (*Inv.* p. 222). It is worth remarking, perhaps, that there is an altogether unproblematic sense in which our sensations may be private: we can sometimes keep them to ourselves. In this sense we often speak of a man's thoughts on some subject being private. No doubt most of our sensations are private in this sense once we pass beyond childhood.

## V

In Section I it was mentioned that if argument *A* is taken to be sound, it will be seen to have the following consequence: no one can be taught the names of sensations; each of us must give these words their meanings independently of other people and their use of sensation words, and therefore no one can know what other people mean by them. With argument *A* now disposed of, we can also reject this consequence of it. We were taught the names of sensations by others—by others who knew what our sensations were. So we speak a common language. If one fails to see that Wittgenstein has already established this point before he takes up the question “Can there be a private language?” (*Inv.* 256 ff.), then one may suppose that what is in question is our actual use of sensation words. As was mentioned in Section I, it has been argued against Wittgenstein that since sensations are private, and since we do have names of sensations in our vocabularies, Wittgenstein could not have exposed any real difficulties in the idea of a private language. This argument has now been sufficiently disposed of in the preceding sections: the requisite notion of “privacy” is defective. There has recently been published, however, another version of this misunderstanding, which is likely to gain currency, and which I will therefore briefly discuss.

In his recent book on Wittgenstein, George Pitcher has taken the following view of the matter: (a) “Everyone acknowledges that sensations are private, that no one can experience another person’s sensations, so that the special felt quality of each person’s sensations is known to him alone,”<sup>21</sup> so (b) it must be acknowledged also that if there were to be genuine names of sensations, they would have to get their meanings by private ostensive definitions, but (c) since Wittgenstein rejects the possibility of any word acquiring meaning in this way, he must be taken to be denying that in ordinary language there are any genuine names of sensations.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, (d) on Wittgenstein’s view, in the language game we play with the word “pain,” for example, a

<sup>21</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 297.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 281-300.

person's "private sensations do not enter in."<sup>23</sup> This means that if we have just seen a man struck down by a car and find that "he is moaning, bleeding, crying out for help, and says he is in great pain," and if we "rush to help him, see that doctors are called, do everything we can to make him comfortable," still that wretched man's sensations "are completely unknown to us; we have no idea what he might be feeling—what the beetle in his box might be like. But this is no . . . stumbling block to the playing of the language-game, for they are not in the least needed. We proceed in exactly the same way no matter what his sensations may be like."<sup>24</sup>

If this reads like an attempted *reductio ad absurdum* of Wittgenstein, it was not intended as such. But one is not surprised to find Pitcher concluding that Wittgenstein's "ideas are obviously highly controversial" and open to "powerful objections."<sup>25</sup> In fact, Pitcher's "exposition" is altogether inaccurate. Wittgenstein, as we have seen, rejects the first step (*a*) in the argument. As for step (*b*), Wittgenstein not only rejects private ostensive definitions, as Pitcher sees, but also explicitly presents an alternative account of how names of sensations are possible (*Inv.* 244, 256). But since (*b*) is essential to reaching the conclusion (*d*), how does Pitcher manage to attribute this conclusion to Wittgenstein? The answer is that Pitcher has misunderstood certain passages in which Wittgenstein opposes the idea of "the private object." As can be seen from the above quotation, one of these is the passage in which Wittgenstein creates the analogy of the beetle in the box (*Inv.* 293). There are several other passages similarly misunderstood (for example, *Inv.* 297), but I will deal with only this one.

Pitcher quotes only the following lines from the beetle-in-the-box passage:

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

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.



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.—No, one can “divide through” by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is [*Inv.* 293].

Without quoting the final, crucial sentence, Pitcher remarks: “The analogy with pain is perfectly clear.”<sup>26</sup> By this he seems to mean at least that pains are, as it were, in a box and cut off from public view, so that they have (as Wittgenstein says of the thing in the box) “no place in the language-game at all.” But so far from this being Wittgenstein’s actual view, it is what he calls a “paradox” (*Inv.* 304). What the beetle-in-the-box passage is meant to bear an analogy to is not our use of sensation words but the philosophical picture of that use. Pitcher has reversed the sense of the passage, and he has done so because he takes Wittgenstein to agree that sensations are private objects. But the intention of the passage is clearly shown in the final sentence, which Pitcher does not quote: “That is to say: if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of ‘object and name’ the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant.” The word “if” here is crucial, for it is not Wittgenstein’s view but the one he opposes that construes the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of “object and name,” and therefore it is not Wittgenstein, as Pitcher thinks, who is committed to the paradoxical consequence that in the use of the word “pain,” for example, the sensation drops out as irrelevant. The point of the passage, then, is quite the opposite of what Pitcher supposes. Rather than showing that sensations cannot have names, it shows that since the view that sensations are private allows sensations to have “no place in the language-game” and thereby makes it impossible to give any account of the actual (that is, the “public”) use of sensation words, we must, if we are to give an account of that language game, reject the view that sensations are private. In Wittgenstein’s words, we must reject “the grammar

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 298.

which tries to force itself on us here" (*Inv.* 304). We have seen that the idea that sensations are private results from construing the grammar of sensation words on analogy with the grammar of words for physical objects. One consequence of this false grammatical analogy is that we are led to think that the names of sensations must get their meanings by private ostensive definitions. Wittgenstein, on the other hand, gives this account of learning the name of a sensation: "words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation 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" (*Inv.* 244). It is in this way that sensations get their place in the language game.

It is clear that Pitcher cannot have grasped this last point, for although he quotes he does not understand Wittgenstein's remark (*Inv.* 246) that it is either false or nonsensical to suppose that no one can know whether another person is in pain. He takes Wittgenstein to agree with him that I cannot "determine that another person feels the same sensation I do: to do that, I would have to be able to feel his pain . . . , and that is impossible."<sup>27</sup> It is not surprising, then, that Pitcher should fail to understand Wittgenstein's reminder of how names of sensations are taught. It is surprising, however, that he should think that the view of sensation words rejected by Wittgenstein is our "common-sensical attitude."<sup>28</sup> Whatever Pitcher may have meant by this phrase, it at least indicates that he has failed to see how very queer is the idea that sensations are essentially private. Could it be that the child who comes crying with a bumped head and who screams when it is touched is giving his peculiar expression to an itching scalp? Or that the giggling child who comes wriggling back for more tickling is really a grotesque creature coming back for more pain? Or that the person who staggers, gropes for support, blinks, and complains that the room is whirling is exhibiting, not dizziness, but a feeling of bodily exhilaration? No, the idea of the private object is not one that turns up in our

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 288.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 283.

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common thought and practice; it turns up only in those odd moments when we are under the influence of a false grammatical analogy.

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