



ISSN Print: 2394-7500  
ISSN Online: 2394-5869  
Impact Factor: 5.2  
IJAR 2019; 5(2): 327-330  
www.allresearchjournal.com  
Received: 05-12-2018  
Accepted: 07-01-2019

**Dr. Shambhu Dutt Jha**  
Professor, Department of  
Philosophy, Tilka Manjhi  
Bhagalpur University,  
Bhagalpur, Bihar, India

## Can there be a private language?

**Dr. Shambhu Dutt Jha**

### Abstract

The use of sensation words, like, for example 'pain' is not learnt, according to Wittgenstein, on the basis of because words are connected. With the primitive private language hypothesis. They are learnt because words are connected with the primitive the natural expressions of the sensation and are used in their place. Sensation words are used in place of the behaviour that is the natural expression of the sensations; they do not refer to it. The verbal expression of pain replaces crying and moaning; it does not describe them. A child, according to Wittgenstein, does not learn the use of 'pain' on the private language hypothesis - then in by fixing his attention on a certain sensation and calling it pain. He learns it when he hurts himself and cries and the adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and sentences. They teach the child new pain behaviour. Statements about pain in the first person, Wittgenstein says, are in fact extensions of natural pain behaviour, conventionalized alternatives to crying and moaning which we are trained to adopt. They are not descriptions of pain but manifestations of it.

**Keywords:** Pain, wittgenstein, sensation, behavior, crying

### 1. Introduction

The question of private language has been one of the most controversial and therefore perplexing questions since the days of Wittgenstein. It is said that thirty percent of all articles that have appeared so far in the literature about Wittgenstein have directed themselves to this subject of 'private language'. Wittgenstein brought this subject to limelight by attacking the idea of a private language and deducing its impossibility. He highlighted the importance of attacking this idea because this view, according to him, engenders tormenting and seemingly irremedial doubts which, queerly, are not consonant with the way we actually act when we are not thinking philosophically. This idea or view, Wittgenstein thinks, is a result of misunderstandings about language. But before we come to discuss it in details, it will be fitful if we describe the idea of private language itself in short and mention the import ways of Wittgenstein's attack on it.

The typical expressions of the idea of a private language are "I know what pains and mental images are only from my own case since I can't experience other peoples' thoughts and feelings"; "I can only believe that someone else is in pain, but I know it if I am"; "another person cannot have my pains"; "I can undertake to call this (Pointing inward) 'pain' in the future"; "When I say 'I am in pain' I as at any rate Justified before myself"; "I know only what I call that (sensations), not what anyone else does". All this means that the words of a private language refer to events in a secret mental life. They name immediate private sensations and cannot therefore be understood by anyone other than the speaker. They are understood and their referents are known only by the person speaking. The individual names or the descriptive words of this language refer solely to the sensations of the user of the language. A private language, in the sense we are considering here, can therefore best be described as a language which is used by exactly one person, is intelligible to him alone, and is used to refer to inner mental events. Such a language originates and develops by fixing one's attention on a sensation and establishing a connection between a word and the sensation. Words are associated with sensations and they are used in description. Here one gives himself, as it were, a private ostensive definition. One thing that follows necessarily is that a private language cannot be taught to others since the teacher would have no means of knowing that his pupil used or applied its words correctly to the private object *viz* the sensation.

**Correspondence Author:**  
**Dr. Shambhu Dutt Jha**  
Professor, Department of  
Philosophy, Tilka Manjhi  
Bhagalpur University,  
Bhagalpur, Bihar, India

The above, in brief, is what the skeptics or the traditionalists mean by 'private language'. The very idea of such a 'private language', Wittgenstein tries to show, is an unintelligible one. The argument that he takes recourse to for the purpose has mainly the form of reduction ad absurdum. That is, postulate a private language and then deduce that it is not language. The heart of the argument is that if we Postulate a private language, the hypothetical user of the language would have no check on, no criterion of, the correct of his use of it. Wittgenstein points out that a necessary condition for a language is that there must be rules governing the use of its expressions. A language uses names in accordance with an implicit or explicit rule and that is what distinguishes a language from mere noises or from marks on paper. The concept of a rule includes the possibility of checking whether the rules have been followed in a given case. But there is no possibility of a rule being followed and checked in a private language. We have no means of knowing that the names in my private language are used consistently. Suppose I resolve (i.e., I make a rule) to use a sign E for the sensation which I am having now. But the question is how shall I shat know that I am using the sign correctly on the next occasion i.e., I am living up to the rule? I can only compare the occurrent sensation with my memory of its predecessor but the memory may play false with me. So, it cannot play the role of a check and tell me if the sign is being used correctly. If I apply the sign on the ground that it seems correct to do so, then the distinction between 'seems correct' and to correct' vanishes; and as a result the word 'correct' ceases to have application.

But one may ask at this stage: Do we not sometimes check one memory impression by the other? e.g. When we check the impression of train's departure by visualizing the page of the time table. Wittgenstein's reply to this would be that a memory impression can corroborate another only if it itself is actually correct; and obviously there must be same means other than memory impressions of determining whether a particular impression is actually correct. For instance, the correctness of my impression of the train's departure can be determined by having a look at the time table or by telephoning the railway station, none of which itself is a memory impression. But in the case of the impression of a private sensation, no such other means as per hypothesis can be available. So, no memory impression can be shown to be true beyond doubt. Consequently, one that cannot corroborate the other. Wittgenstein thinks that the attempt to corroborate one by the other, is analogous to purchasing several copies of the morning paper to check the correctness of what one reads in the first copy that one buys. The point of this analogy is that the former is as absurd as the latter. What all this means is that, according to Wittgenstein, if one postulates a private realm of experience or sensation, one does not have any means of knowing whether one is having the same experience or sensation on subsequent occasions which one had named E on the first occasion. Since it is so, the application or use of the sign E becomes uncertain and therefore it makes no sense here to speak of the rules of word usage at all. The talk of adopting rules in a private language becomes idle and the idea of correct use becomes empty. A private language is, therefore, no language at all.

Another indirect onslaught on the idea of private language is made by Wittenstein when he argues that on the hypothesis of private language, we cannot sensibly speak of others' pain. If I were to learn what pain is by perceiving my own

pain then I should, necessarily, have learned that pain is something that exists only when I feel it. The property of existing only when I feel it' becomes essential and not accidental. Consequently, it would be nonsense to suppose that the pain I feel could exist when I did not feel it. (i.e., in the case of others).

The use of sensation words, like, for example 'pain' is not learnt, according to Wittenstein, on the basis of because Words are connected. With the primitive private language hypothesis. They are learnt because words are connected with the primitive the natural expressions of the sensation and are used in their place. Sensation Words are used in place of the behaviour that is the natural expression of the sensations; they do not refer to it. The verbal expression of pain replaces crying and moaning; it does not describe them. A child, according to Wittgenstein, does not learn the use of 'pain' on the private language hypo- then in by fixing his attention on a certain sensation and calling it pain. He learns it when he hurts himself and cries and the adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and sentences. They teach the child new pain behaviour. Statements about pain in the first person, Wittgenstein says, are in fact extensions of natural pain behaviour, conventionalized alter- natives to crying and moaning which we are trained to adopt. They are not descriptions of pain but manifestations of it.

**The above is the short account of how Wittgenstein establishes that there cannot be a private language at all We will now see if the idea can be dispensed with**

At the outset I feel inclined to agree with Straw son when he says, "Wittgenstein gives himself considerable trouble over the question of how a man would introduce a name for a sensation into his private language. But we need imagine no special ceremony. He might simply be struck by the recurrence of a certain sensation and get into the habit of making a certain mark in a different place every time it occurred. The making of the marks would help to impress the occurrence on his memory. One can easily imagine this procedure being elaborated into a system of dating" 1. Wittgenstein's difficulty in applying a certain sign or mark to a private sensation consistently is that our sensations or impressions are according to the sceptic's view fleeting and we cannot bring them back to compare them with our present experiences, so as to see whether they ought to be given the same name. But this difficulty, as it is, appears to be far fetched, for do we not have vivid memory impressions? Wittgenstein seems to depend too much on the unreliability of memory impressions. It is true that memory at times deceives us; we may in certain circumstances legitimately doubt the evidence of memory. But from the fact that it may deceive us, it is folie de doubt to conclude that we can never be certain. Wittgenstein himself argues in this vein when he meets the objection of critics that a man may fulfill behavioural criteria of pain and still be May not in pain. He may simply pretend or rehearse or be hypnotized. Wittgenstein is quite prepared to admit that we can easily imagine how one could be doubtful in such a case, but not the supposed consequence, that we can never be really sure. He thinks that there are situations of real life in which a question as to whether someone who groans is pretending rehearsing or is hypnotized simply does not exist. To a critic who may charge him of shutting his eyes in face of doubt, his uncompromising reply would be: 'They are shut' but this shows his clear bias in favour of the public

and against the private. Where publicly observable criteria are involved, he dismisses doubt forthwith; where private sensations are involved he keeps the doubt lingering.

**Norman Malcolm while replying to Strawson for his remark quoted earlier says that a sign or mark associated with an object does not by itself make a word standing for the object** <sup>[2]</sup>

In order that a sound 'cow should stand for the animal 'cow', it is necessary that the sound must play a part in various activities, (language-game) in calling, retoning, counting cows, distinguishing cows from other things and pictures of cows from pictures of other things. Similarly, if a mark or sound associated with a sensation is to be a word for the sensation, it too, must play a part in the activities like showing the location of the sensation, reacting differently to the different intensities of stimulus, seeking or avoiding causes of the sensation, indicating the duration of the sensation etc. This is to say that the mark in order to be meaningful must be connected with the outward criteria.

The above defence of Wittgenstein by Malcolm is true in so far as sensation-words form part of a common language. It is true that the words of a common language, including sensation-words, are necessarily in need of criteria in order to be used and understood. If we are to understand one another when we speak of our sensations, there must be criteria for the use of our sensation-words. It is on account of this that sensation-words, besides referring to our private sensations must, in addition, contain allusions to behaviour that can be perceived by all. It is by virtue of this publicly observable allusions that sensation words can be taught and misuses corrected. But this is only one aspect of their use *viz* the communicative. There is another aspect of their use, namely the referential, which cannot be taught. The sensation-words, therefore, have both a public and a private meaning.

Wittgenstein, however, is very much concerned with their public meaning because common language has to do a good deal of job in our inter personal relations. A perusal of *The Philosophical Investigation* gives an impression that he is most of the time driving at the conditions that are necessary for a common language. He appears to be anxious to show that certain condition must be satisfied if a common language to exist. But that does not effectively refute the conception of a private language. As a matter of fact, Wittgenstein does not even formally lay out the position he is attacking.

"J.F. Thomson in his paper asks, 'what kind of language is being here 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'. Castaneda 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 <sup>[3]</sup>?"

Wittgenstein's purpose would be served (if the purpose was to refute a private language) if it could follow that before the use of the language became a shared form of life, the words of the language had no meaning, no use at all. But Ayer's Robinson Crusoe left alone on his island 'could invent words to describe the flora and fauna of his island' and 'surely it is

not self-contradictory to suppose that someone, uninstructed in the use of any existing language, makes up a language for himself' <sup>[4]</sup>. It is true that inventing language for one's own self is very probably false but that is not impossible and unintelligible. We have no reason to deny a priori that such a thing could occur.

Wittgenstein's verdict against private language depends primarily on his assumption that a private sensation cannot be recognized and therefore the word for it cannot be consistently used. But, does not the same difficulty confront us in our public use of language? How do I know that I am using the word 'red correctly'? I cannot be said to recognize the visual sensation of red every time it occurs and use the word 'red' consistently for it since memory ex hypothesi cannot be trusted. The problem becomes acute by the introduction of the sense-datum theory. If everyone experiences his own sense data, then they are as private as the sensation of pain. If pain cannot be recognized to be called 'pain', how can the sense datum be recognized to be called 'red'? The only difference that appears between the use of the two words is that in one case the attention is to be directed 'outwards' towards a public world while in the other it is to be directed 'inwards' towards a private stage of one's own consciousness.

Wittgenstein, however, sees a remarkable difference between the two. He thinks that in the case of 'red' its consistent use may be ascertained with reference to public tests-e.g. The user may consult colour-atlas or other people. But that is not possible in the case of the sceptic's 'Pain'. But one thing that is important here to remember is that even such tests need to be recognized. I must be able to recognize the signs and samples which the colour atlas contains or recognize the noises that other people make while telling me of the red colour. Now, the question is: Do these recognitions also require tests? If they do, we cannot escape infinite regress and as such we can never identify anything at all. If they do not, then we admit that something can be recognized all at once and if so, why not admit that our feelings and sensations, which are so obvious to us, can be recognized immediately? They cannot be recognized, Wittgenstein believes, because they cannot be compared with the memory impressions of their predecessors (since memory may play also with us). But this is, to say again, an undeserved distrust of memory. Had memory been so unreliable, it would not been possible to make any statement about the past? Had memory been so unreliable, we would find ourselves misremembering the use of even simple words of our common language and would need to correct ourselves by attention to others' use. It is, indeed, hard to deny that the meaning of the words is a matter of the customary practice of the use and in each case the only check on this customary practice is memory. So, memory cannot be made a victim of the sort Wittgenstein has preferred to make it. It is true that there are mistakes of memory and memory impressions, if checked publicly, are to one's advantage. But that is not always necessary.

The protagonists of the public language theory argue as if language is cent percent a social phenomena. They think that it is a tool meant exclusively for our social intercourse. It is on this assumption that they base their logic of language and declare the hypothesis of private language untenable. It is in accordance with this notion that R. Rhees remarks: 'The language is not any one man's doing more than another's, and the rules, if they are rules of language, are not

one man's rules. This is essential for understanding' [5]. But had language been totally a social affair and had social practice been its essential or defining ingredient, the question about private language could not have been meaningfully posed. It would be utter nonsense to raise a meaningless question. But the fact that a question about it is raised, understood and discussed shows that a private language is not a logical impossibility. Strawson's well-meaning remark that "to deny that 'pain' is the name of a (type of) sensation is comparable with denying that 'red' is the name of a colour". 6 is worth considering.

### Conclusion

Wittgenstein's verdict against private language depends primarily on his assumption that a private sensation cannot be recognized and therefore the word for it cannot be consistently used. But, does not the same difficulty confront us in our public use of language? How do I know that I am using the word 'red' correctly? I cannot be said to recognize the visual sensation of red every time it occurs and use the word 'red' consistently for it since memory ex hypothesi cannot be trusted. The problem becomes acute by the introduction of the sense-datum theory. If everyone experiences his own sensedata, then they are as private as the sensation of pain. If pain cannot be recognized to be called 'pain', how can the sense datum be recognized to be called 'red'? The only difference that appears between the use of the two words is that in one case the attention is to be directed 'outwards' towards a public world while in the other it is to be directed 'inwards' towards a private stage of one's own consciousness.

### Reference

1. Strawson PF. Critical Notice of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations. Reprinted in Wittgenstein and the Problem of Private Language; ed, Harold Horlick; McGraw-Hill Inc; c1967. p. 24.
2. Norman Malcolm. Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigation- Home. Reprinted in Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigations Ed; George Pitcher, University of Notre Dame Press edition; c1968. p. 96.
3. Quoted from the footnote of John W. Cook's paper, Wittgenstein: on privacy. Printed In Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigation, ed. George Pitcher edition; c1966. p. 286.
4. Ayer AJ. Can there be a private language, Printed in Wittgenstein: The Philosophical Investigation; ed. George Pitcher, Edition; c1966. p. 259.
5. Rhees R. Can there be a private language? Printed in Wittgenstein. The Philosophical Investigation, ed., George Pitcher, University of Notre Dame Press; c1966. p. 277.
6. Strawson PF. Critical Notice of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigation.