

PRIVACY AND PRIVATE LANGUAGE

Traditionally, it is considered that the admission of 'private experience' logically entails the problem of 'private language'—the problem that has become the subject of voluminous discussion ever since Wittgenstein's remarks on the topic were published in the *Philosophical Investigations*. My purpose, in this paper, is to examine whether there should be a logical connection between private experience and private language. We shall examine the question by considering four possible combinations, as found in or implied by, the views of different philosophers, between objects and language, namely : (a) public object and public language, (b) private object and private language, (c) public object and private language, and (d) private object and public language. As the first possibility presents no difficulty, it is usual to accept it as *the* theory of linguistic meaning. We shall concentrate on the last three.

I. *Private Object and Private Language*

The philosophical notion of 'privacy' arises from considering questions of knowledge from a self-centred perspective. The Cartesian and the empiricist traditions in philosophy who take this perspective suppose that our knowledge of the mental is, logically speaking, independent of our knowledge of the physical, and that the correlations, if there are any, between them are purely contingent. They find it problematic that one can have knowledge about the external world and other minds, while they take it for granted that clearly a person can have knowledge of

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his own sensations, feelings and other psychological states that are necessarily private to him and to which he has direct or privileged access. These are called 'private' in the sense that only the person who has them can really know for certain that he has them, and what he has are unsharable and non-transferable. That is, they are called private in two senses of 'privacy' — epistemic privacy and privacy of ownership.

Philosophers of this tradition also take it for granted that our knowledge of our private experiences can be expressed in a language, and that the possibility of this expression does not presuppose any acquaintance with the external world or other minds. They find ordinary language imprecise and vague, and hanker after an ideally precise language. This leads philosophers to hold that there must be a 'private language' for each of us to express our experiences, at least to ourselves. So far as the meaning of the words is concerned, the relevant features, it is supposed, must all be private, observable only by the person who has the experiences in question. Wittgenstein characterizes the notion of such a private language thus: "The individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language" ¹.

II. *Public Object and Private Language*

Wittgenstein, as is well-known, attacks the possibility of a private language with a view to denying the notion of a necessarily private object, one the 'owner' of which alone can possibly know about. In this argument he goes openly against the existence of the Cartesian ego. He says, "The idea of the ego inhabiting a body (has) to be abolished" and "If whatever consciousness (there is) spreads over all human bodies, then there won't be any temptation to use the word 'ego'" ². But

Wittgenstein's remarks on the abolition of the ego, instead of being appreciated, have put him into a trap. They lead him to what Strawson describes as the 'no-ownership' or 'no-subject' theory of experiences³. Wittgenstein apparently thinks that if we accept the 'ownership' theory of experiences, i.e., the existence of an 'ego', then we have to accept in consequence the possibility of a private language. But, does Wittgenstein's 'no-ownership' theory fare any better than the 'ownership' theory of experiences, so far as the question of the possibility of a private language is concerned?

It is true that, as Wittgenstein points out, a private language, besides its so many other difficulties, makes communication or the common use of a word altogether impossible. In fact, if everyone learns the meaning of the word 'pain', for example, only from his own case or from his own experiences through an essentially private process, then this cannot provide for a common use of the word 'pain'⁴. The private object allegedly referred to plays no part at all in the mechanism of communication, and *if it does play any part*, Wittgenstein remarks, communication becomes altogether impossible. But, how is communication made possible in Wittgenstein's 'no-ownership' theory of experiences? How can I understand, on this theory, what one means when he says "I have pain"?

Hacker explains Wittgenstein's position in the following way⁵: One can construct many different languages in each of which the speaker is the 'centre'. In his language instead of saying "I am in pain", the centre would say "There is pain". Since everyone speaks the language of which he alone is the centre, someone *A* would express his pain by saying "*A* behaves as the centre when there is pain"; and when others are in pain this is expressed by saying "They behave as Centre behaves when there is pain". Wittgenstein argues that such a mono-

centred language is intelligible and univocal, and that such a language can have anyone as centre. Moreover, any two such languages are inter-translatable. The proposition in one language that there is pain is equivalent to the proposition in another language that the 'centre' of the former behaves as the 'centre' of the latter behaves when there is pain. In this way, Wittgenstein thinks, our language is composed of 'as many isomorphic, inter-translatable, mono-centred languages as there are speakers'.

But there is a great deal of implausibility with this philosophical account. As Hacker himself has pointed out, there are certain salient commitments of Wittgenstein's theory: Firstly, it is clear that despite appearances to the contrary there is no such thing as a shared public language. Each speaker possesses his own private language, although to be sure, they are conceived of as inter-translatable. Secondly, the assumption of inter-translatability requires psycho-physical parallelism. For, if the proposition in L_1 , 'There is pain' is to be extensionally equivalent to ' C_1 behaves as C_2 when there is pain' in L_2 , there must in general be a uniform correlation between behaviour and primary experience. Thirdly, in ordinary language one never legitimately ascribes a univocal experiential predicate both to oneself and to others. All experiential predicates in normal parlance are ambiguous. Finally, when A says 'I am in pain' (in ordinary language) I cannot, strictly speaking, understand his meaning. Rather I must take his utterance as a sign rather than a symbol, a symptom of ' A is in pain'".⁶

The meaning of the word 'pain', Wittgenstein thinks, logically depends on pain-behaviour rather than on any necessarily private object. Pain, so understood, is a public object. And it is quite natural to suppose that a public object can be expressed only in a public language. But by adopting the position of a

'no-ownership' theorist, Wittgenstein, as we have seen above, seems to fail in achieving the desired goal. The 'no-ownership' theory leads him to think of our public language as being composed of 'as many isomorphic, inter-translatable, mono-centred languages as there are speakers'; and this involves the commitment that each speaker expresses his pain which is, for Wittgenstein, a public object in a language that is basically a private language.

Thus even if we eliminate the 'ego' and accept Wittgenstein's 'no-ownership' theory of experiences, we cannot avoid the question of the possibility of a private language. In other words, the 'no-ownership' theory does not necessarily make inter-subjective communication possible. Wittgenstein's 'no-ownership' theory, in this respect, seems to fare no better than the 'ownership' theory of experiences. The elimination of the 'ownership' theory appears to be pointless, so far as the question of the possibility of a private language is concerned. That is, the question of the possibility of an ego as the owner of private experiences does not seem to be essentially connected with the question of the possibility of a private language.

III. *Private Object and Public Language*

We have considered above the views of both the supporters and critics of the private language theory. Now we consider a very different theory propounded by Frege. Like a private language theorist, Frege also admits that there are private experiences, such as ideas or mental images, which are, in principle, incommunicable and inalienable. But the belief in the privacy of experiences does not lead him to hold that there should be a private language in order to express them. On the contrary, Frege holds that *the words of public language* have an aspect of

meaning which is wholly *private* and these words can well *mean* our private experiences.

Frege distinguishes two elements in the meaning of a sentence or expression – one of which is called ‘sense’, and the other, ‘tone’ (‘illumination’ and ‘colouring’)⁷. He explains the difference between the two thus : The sense of a sentence is that part of its meaning which is relevant to determining its truth or falsity; and any feature of its meaning which cannot affect its truth or falsity is its tone. Similarly, the sense of an expression is that part of its meaning which is relevant to the determination of the truth or falsity of a sentence in which it may occur; and any element of its meaning which is not so relevant is part of its tone.

The celebrated example given by Frege is the difference in meaning between the connectives ‘and’ and ‘but’. The replacement of ‘and’ by ‘but’ will alter the meaning of a sentence, but it cannot alter the truth or falsity of what is said. The difference in meaning between ‘and’ and ‘but’, therefore, belongs to their tone, and not to their sense. Likewise, the word ‘dead’ and ‘deceased’ do not differ in sense – substitution of one for the other can change neither the meaningfulness nor the truth-value of any sentence. The same is also true of the words ‘sweat’ and ‘perspiration’. In so far as ‘dead’ and ‘deceased’, or ‘sweat’ and ‘perspiration’, differ in meaning at all, the difference lies in their tone.

In Frege’s account the difference between ‘sense’ and ‘tone’ is further drawn up by showing that while sense is wholly an objective element of the meaning of a sentence or expression, tone is purely a subjective element of its meaning. Tone, according to Frege, is a matter of the association with a word or expression of certain ‘ideas’, by which he means mental images.

It consists in a propensity which the use of a word has to call up certain mental images. The mental images, according to Frege, are incommunicable in principle. No two people can ever know that they have the same mental image. The specific character of the mental image a person connects with a word 'red', for example, is unconveyable.⁸ It thus follows that tone is a feature of meaning which is, in principle, subjective. I know what I mean by 'red' or 'white' when I use the words in their tone, but no one else can. Ideas or mental images, according to Frege, are not only epistemically private, they are also privately owned. "It seems absurd to us that a pain, a mood, a wish should rove about the world without a bearer, independently. An experience is impossible without an experient. The inner world presupposes the person whose inner world it is"⁹. Hence the ownership of ideas or mental images is strictly private, unsharable and inalienable. No other person has, or can have, my idea. No other person can have my pain. "Someone can have sympathy for me but still my pain always belongs to me and his sympathy to him. He does not have my pain and I do not have his sympathy"¹⁰. Thus tone as an element of the meaning of a word or expression has both epistemic privacy as well as privacy of ownership.

The sense of a word, on the other hand, has nothing to do with any propensity the word may have to call up mental images in the mind of the hearer, and is something wholly objective. It is identical for all men, awaiting discovery rather than being created. The sense of a word is definite and fixed, and the relation of the sense of one word to that of another word is determined by the laws of logic.

Frege thus finds that in the meaning of every word or expression, there are two elements – one is objective and the other is
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subjective. In other words, he holds that the words of public languages also have an element of meaning which is purely subjective and incommunicable in principle. Thus Frege's theory is radically different from the private language theories, as well as from the theories of (public) language formulated by others. Private language theorists try to show that a semantical relation between a private word and a private experience can be established – the word (name) then will *refer to* the experience. Critics of private language theory have tried to show that this is impossible. But Frege holds that the relation between a word of public language and private experience is altogether different from both *reference* and *sense* of the word. Thus a word of public language has (i) reference, (ii) sense, and (iii) tone. Reference of a word, as Dummett has argued, does not constitute its meaning according to Frege, so that only sense and tone are the two elements of meaning – objective and subjective. However, Frege's account of tone as the subjective element of meaning has been severely criticized by Dummett¹¹.

IV. Conclusion

We have seen above that there can be four possible combinations between objects and language. If so, should there be then any logical connection between private experience and private language as supposed traditionally? It is evident from the above considerations of the possible combinations between objects and language that just as the admission of private experience does not logically imply the possibility of a private language similarly the inadmission of private experience, too, does not logically imply the impossibility of a private language. To put it differently, neither the admission, nor the inadmission, of private experience logically entails anything concerning the possibility of a private language. There is, therefore, no logical connection between

private experience and private language. The admission of private experience, on the contrary, seems to be logically independent of the problem of private language.

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NOTES

1. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1968), sect. 243.
2. L. Wittgenstein, "Wittgenstein's Notes for Lectures on 'Private Experience' and 'Sense Data'" ed. R. Rhees, *The Philosophical Review*, LXXVII (1968) p. 282.
3. P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London : Methuen & Co., 1959), pp. 95ff.
4. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, *op. cit.*, sects, 293, 347.
5. P. M. S. Hacker, *Insight and Illusion* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 195.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 196.
7. M. Dummett, *Frege : Philosophy of Language* (London : Duckworth, 1973), pp. 2-3, 85ff.
8. G. Frege, *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, eds. P. Geach and M. Black (Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1960), p. 79; and *Foundations of Arithmetic*, transl. and ed. J. L. Austin (Oxford : Basil Blackwell, 1953), p. 36.
9. G. Frege, "The Thought : A Logical Inquiry", trans. by A. M. and M. Quinton, reprint in *Philosophical Logic*, ed. P. F. Strawson (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 27.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
11. M. Dummett, *op. cit.*, pp. 85ff.

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