

THE INFLUENCE OF EPISTEMOLOGICAL SKEPTICISM AND SOLIPSISM ON THE PRIVATE LANGUAGE ARGUMENT

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ABSTRACT

The private language argument constitutes one of the critical issues in the philosophy of language. It is basically concerned with the question of whether language is essentially private or public. The Later Wittgenstein, especially in his Philosophical Investigations, advances the view that language is necessarily public. His argument against private language leverages on his idea of language as a means of communication and expression of thoughts. While acknowledging that very laudable philosophical arguments have been advanced on both sides of the controversy, the present discourse aims at examining the private language argument as a basic concern in the philosophy of language. This is with a view to establishing the fact that arguments against private language largely correlate with arguments against skepticism and solipsism, and ultimately advance the course of human knowledge.

Key words: Private language, Public language, Skepticism, Solipsism.

INTRODUCTION

Language, conceived as a means of communication, often presupposes an attempt at reaching an understanding by its users. This is, especially, given that they share common values and judgments about reality as captured in the concepts of language. Yet, people sometimes have immediate experiences that seem difficult to express and be adequately understood in public language. This constitutes the basis of the private-public-language controversy. Indeed, some laudable philosophical arguments have been advanced on both sides of the divide. While some philosophers advance the view that there is a possibility of private language, others argue that human language is essentially public. Although Wittgenstein (PI §§ 88, 244) acknowledges the possibility of immediate experiences, he insists that if ever they can be communicated and understood, it must be in public language given the essential character of language; else, it will not be language. For him, the use of words in language makes it public. This is so because the words must have public meaning or agreed meaning. Since someone else might understand the words of language, it is no longer private but public.

As an investigation into the nature of human language, especially as expressed in the controversy between private and public conceptions of language, this philosophical discourse examines to what extent Wittgenstein's approach to this problem succeeded at providing satisfactory explanation. It primarily aims at exposing the basic tenets of Wittgenstein's arguments in favour of the public nature of language with a view to establishing how its

inherent merits can enhance the study of language in particular and human knowledge in general. From a practical point of view, it establishes that Wittgenstein's private language argument relates to common experience in human social interactions. Hence, the paper defends the thesis that as long as language is based on common agreement and common judgement over a common object, it is essentially public and not private. However, in as much as language embraces a wide range of human activities, as a “form of life”, the possibility of a private language cannot be completely ruled out.

SKEPTICISM AND THE PRIVATE LANGUAGE ARGUMENT

The concept of “Private language” in Wittgenstein's discourse on language, particularly in his *Philosophical Investigations*, borders on the impossibility of a language that is exclusively concerned with things only known to the user. Such language would deal only with the individual possessor's sensations and subjective experiences. A critical reading of the *Philosophical Investigations* reveals that the refutation of skepticism and solipsism is one of the basic preoccupations of the private language argument. The thesis of the present discourse is that the arguments against private language are largely founded on the social character of language and border on arguments against epistemological skepticism and solipsism.

Skepticism, understood as the philosophical viewpoint that certain knowledge can never be attained, is one of the primary concerns of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. To the extent that it places some measure of limitation on human knowledge, skepticism correlates with solipsism and both wield remarkable influence on the private language argument.

Prior to Wittgenstein, some philosophical discourses and insights express support for skepticism while some others refute it, thereby constituting attempts at saving human knowledge. For instance, from Heraclitus' idea that everything is in constant flux and that we cannot step into the same river twice, some elements of skepticism can be deduced as it subtly expresses man's inability to grasp fixed and immutable truth. Parmenides' and Zeno's efforts at proving that change and motion are illusions, in a sense, also border on skepticism. On the other hand, Socrates' advocacy for universal definitions expresses a quest for indubitable knowledge. Of course, for him, man has the capacity to attain this type of knowledge; hence, he rejects Gorgias' and Protagoras' relativism.

Plato's *Theory of Divided Line* also features very pronounced attempts at saving human knowledge from skepticism. Plato distinguished different levels of knowledge according to their respective objects, that is, imagining (image), belief (thing), thinking (mathematical object), and knowledge (the good). For Plato (See *The Republic of Plato*, Book VI, 509 – 513), skepticism mainly obtains at the level of “imagining” and “belief”, given that human knowledge on this level is mainly based on opinion, and that the objects of such knowledge are constantly changing. At the level of “thinking” human knowledge has high level of certainty and at the level of “knowledge”, man beholds reality as it is: unchanging, eternal, and one. In fact, at this level, there is no room for doubt since man knows “the Form”. According to him, man attains this knowledge by way of reason and not merely through the senses.

More still, St. Augustine's *Contra Academicos* features an attack on the Skeptical thoughts of the Academics in the Middle Ages. Academic skepticism, especially as articulated in Cicero's *De Natura Deorum* and *Academica*, advanced the view that nothing whatsoever can be known (See Rackham, 1933/1994). Augustine argued that there are propositions about which doubt is impossible (*Contra Academicos* 3.10.23). For Augustine (See Curley, 1996:155-162), human

reason is absolutely certain of the principle of contradiction. For instance, we know that a thing cannot be and not be at the same time, in the same place, and in the same manner. Human mind is, therefore, not hopelessly lost in uncertainty as the Skeptic would hold. For Augustine, too, the doubter is at least sure of his existence, given that he must exist in order to doubt. He also argues that if the Skeptic maintains that we cannot know anything for certain, it implies that he is certain of this; otherwise, he has no grounds for his arguments.

While a comprehensive assessment of Kant's perspective on knowledge may not justify branding him a skeptic, his insistence that the noumena, as contrasted with phenomena, are not immediately intelligible to us, could be interpreted as a form of skepticism. Very much like Plato's "world of forms", Kant's doctrine of "things-in-themselves" (i.e., things beyond our knowledge), gives some credence to skepticism, as it suggests that what we know are not the real things but appearances. However, Kant conceived human knowledge as possible and so considered extreme skepticism untenable. For him, apart from metaphysical and religious truths, which belong to the noumenal world and so not accessible to human reason, every other thing within space and time or the phenomenal world can be known (Kant, 1999: A256/B312). Thus, though he may not have adequately responded to Hume's skeptical stance, that is the dismissal of all forms of inductive reasoning as inconclusive on the basis of the uniformity of nature, Kant's thoughts constitute very laudable attempts at saving human knowledge.

Re-presenting Kant's idea of "phenomenon" as "sense-data", Bertrand Russell, articulating his "sense-data theory" writes: "if several people are looking at the table at the same moment, not two of them will see exactly the same distribution of colours because no two of them can see it from exactly the same point of view..." The epistemological import of this theory is that it narrows perception to a private experience. Given that whatever a person perceives is private to him, his language basically borders on private objects of perception or "sense data". This line of thought obviously lends credence to arguments in favour of the possibility of a private language.

In essence, Wittgenstein's private language argument is essentially founded on the presupposition that our objects of experience are in the public domain and are understood as such. He contends that common judgement over common objects, presupposes a common language. For him, therefore, "if language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definition but also in judgements." (PI §242)

SOLIPSIM AND THE PRIVATE LANGUAGE ARGUMENT

Solipsism, as philosophical viewpoint, is also closely allied to philosophical skepticism and constitutes one of the spurs of Wittgenstein's argument against private language. Solipsism, from the Latin words "solus" (alone) and "ipse" (self), is the view that "I alone exist" (See Russell, 1948: 191). From the epistemological viewpoint, it is the doctrine that only my existence and my experience can be known for certain. Solipsism, therefore, fosters the claim that every human experience is characteristically personal and can only be expressed in a language that is exclusively private.

A number of philosophical arguments have been advanced with a view to demonstrating how untenable solipsism is as a philosophical doctrine. For instance, from the point of view of reality solipsism, which holds that the self is the totality of existence, Russell (1940:196) criticizes solipsism as a dishonest and insincere hypothesis. Hence, he ridicules Mrs. Christine L. Franklin, who wrote to him claiming that she was a solipsist. If she sincerely, believed that only herself existed, then she would not have written to Russell who, by her belief, did not exist.

As already observed above, Wittgenstein's private language argument largely borders on the refutation of solipsism, which constitutes a major springboard for the arguments in favour of private language. Interpreting Wittgenstein's ideas, Gerd Brand (1979:62) identifies what could he conceives as the essential traits of a private language. According to him, three traits characterize it: its words are related to what only the speaker knows; they are related to the private sensations of the speaker; whence it follows that another person cannot understand this language. Here, one finds an obvious link between the problem of private language and the problem of solipsism. Hence, Wittgenstein's argument against private language invariably amounts to an attempt to disprove the pretensions of epistemological solipsism.

In accordance with Wittgenstein's thoughts, such Wittgensteinians as N. Malcolm, R. Rhees and W. Gallie insist that since the solipsist makes use of the public language in propounding solipsism, his hypothesis is self-defeated. If we have a common language with conventions and rules requiring that pronouns, for instance, be used in specific ways, and the solipsist uses them differently and in an incomprehensible way, then the language of the solipsist would be meaningless. In other words, for any language to be meaningful, it requires the connections of the persons of grammar (I, you, he, she, it, we, they). If they are recognized as such, solipsism collapses; if they are not recognized, then solipsism has no meaning (See Rollins, 1967:490). For Wittgenstein (PI §246) and Wittgensteinians, therefore, the possibility of talking about my sensations, my feelings or my "sense-data" in the language commonly known indicates that they are, to some extent, known to other people.

RULES AND PRIVATE LANGUAGE

Wittgenstein's concepts of 'rules' and 'forms of life' constitute a formidable anchorage for his thoughts on the impossibility of private language. Against the backdrop that meanings reflect norms of usage, Wittgenstein argues that the very idea of "private language" is absurd. This implies that it is impossible to have a language whose meanings are accessible to only one person, that is, the speaker of that language. According to him, a language intelligible to only one person would be impossible because it would be impossible for that speaker to establish the meanings of its putative signs. If a language were private, then the only way to establish meanings would be by some form of private ostension. But to establish a sign's meaning, something must impress upon the speaker a way of correctly using that sign in the future, or else the putative ostension is of no value (PI §258).

The central idea expressed in the private language argument is that for an utterance to be meaningful it must be possible in principle to subject it to public standards and criteria of correctness. Consequently, a private language, understood as that in which "words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations," is not a genuine, meaningful, rule-governed language (PI §243). In fact, for Wittgenstein (PI §261), the signs in language can only function when there is a possibility of judging the correctness of their use; "so the use of a word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands."

In the light of his epistemological stance that language is rule-based, Wittgenstein insists that it is completely public and not private. In his view, rules are public and in order to understand a word, sentence or proposition, one must understand the public rules which exist within any given language-game. Hence, any type of language considered to be a "private language" is actually determined by public rules and external reality. Indeed, the concept of "Private

language” in Wittgenstein's discourse on language, particularly in his *Philosophical Investigations*, borders on the impossibility of a language that is exclusively concerned with things only known to the user. Such language would deal only with the individual possessor's sensations and subjective experiences. Describing the public nature of rules vis-à-vis language, he writes that “'obeying a rule' is a practice. And to *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence, it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it.” (PI §202).

Wittgenstein's discourse on private language culminates in the conclusion that the notion of private language is incoherent for it is not really a language at all. Inasmuch as there is a common language generally understood by the people about what we perceive, such as colours and what we feel, like 'pain', such objects are not private because they belong to our public language. Common language signifies common agreement which in turn comes from common judgment over common objects of knowledge; hence, Wittgenstein (PI §242) argues that if language is to be a means of communication, there must be agreement not only in definition but also in judgments.

Against the backdrop of his thesis that language is a common form of life, Wittgenstein avers that the idea of a private language presupposes a common and public language. Presupposing that there is no single, coherent “sample” or “object” that we call meaning and that meaning is a social event that happens between language users, Wittgenstein maintains that it makes no sense to talk about a private language, with words that have common meanings. In fact, he argues that one could not possibly *use* the word of a private language since one could have no criteria of the correctness of one's use of such word, given that for a language to be used at all it must have some public criterion of identity. For Wittgenstein (PI §§261-264), therefore, if something is a language, it *cannot* be logically private; and if something *is* private, it is not and cannot be a language.

Wittgenstein's private language argument largely shaped the thoughts of many philosophers after him, as they argued either in favour or against the possibility of a private language. Hence, despite the merits of his private language argument, it has been criticized on a number of counts. The cognitive scientist, Jerry Fodor, for instance, was skeptical of Wittgenstein's private language argument which was adopted by the use theorists. In his “Language of thought hypothesis” otherwise referred to as “thought ordered mental expression,” Fodor (1975:214) opposes the claims of the use theorists on the non-existence of private language. He expresses the view that thoughts have language-like or compositional structure, and so the mental activities in the brain assume the form of language. Leveraging on the idea that thought or the mental activity in the brain is a form of language, therefore, he argues for the existence of a “private language’.

Obviously, one of the major grounds of the arguments in favour of public language is the conception of language as a means of communication, which is in turn based on common agreement, common judgements, as well as aims at reaching common understanding. However, the fact remains that there are some immediate and individual experiences that may not be sufficiently and adequately captured in public language. This suggests the possibility of having at least some private elements of language. Against this backdrop, C.N. Ogbozo (2013:14), in his attempt to establish the possibility of a mid-point in the Private-Public Language Controversy, writes: “it is arguable that, on the one hand, language can involve a private dimension. This is because being a free, unique and creative being, each human person

can construct language-symbols that can serve private purposes.” Thus, given that language expresses wide-range of possibilities with regard to man's creative abilities, it can be captured in both private and public human activities and experiences. Little wonder, Wittgenstein, highlighting the dynamic nature of language, insists that it is a “form of life.”

LANGUAGE: A FORM OF LIFE

As already observed above, Wittgenstein conceives language as a form of activity. He also emphasizes the fact that nonlinguistic factors are necessary for understanding the linguistic. With his assertion that “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (PI §19), he likens language to such behavioral and cognitive forms of life as giving orders and obeying them, describing the appearance of an object or giving its measurements, reporting an event, speculating about an event, as well as playing, acting, singing, making a joke, solving a problem, asking, thinking, cursing, greeting, praying, etc. (PI §23). In fact, by “a form of life”, Wittgenstein means the entirety of the practices of a linguistic community (See Schulte, 1992:108).

For Wittgenstein, forms of life, accepted as given, enable language to function. Notably, forms of life can be understood as changing and contingent, dependent on culture, context, and history. However, forms of life, approached from a more universal perspective, can also express activities common to humankind, or “shared human behavior”. Such activities constitute the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language. Wittgenstein (PI §206) explains this with an illustration thus:

Suppose you came as an explorer into an unknown country with a language quite strange to you. In what circumstances would you say that the people there gave orders, understood them, obeyed them, rebelled against them, and so on? The common behavior of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language.

The import of Wittgenstein's insight above is that by means of language, as an institutionalized activity, we make ourselves understood; we motivate one another reciprocally and engage in action. In Wittgenstein's view, there is no such thing as action alone; there is only action in common. He would, therefore insist that language is the communal life-praxis of men. According to Wittgenstein (PI §491), “without language we could not communicate with one another. – But for sure: without language we cannot influence other people in such-and-such ways; cannot build roads and machines, etc. And also: without the use of speech and writing people could not communicate”. The essence of linguistic communication, then, is not just the transmission of information but coming to understanding within the matrix of communal action (PI §363).

CONCLUSION

The present discourse identifies a special emphasis on the social character of language as one of the major imports of Wittgenstein's private language argument. With his private language argument, Wittgenstein also succeeded at exposing the absurdity of such philosophical views as skepticism and solipsism. In fact, the private language argument, like many aspects of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, basically aims at saving human knowledge, beliefs and actions from sheer meaninglessness.

While some elements or aspects of language present it as having some private dimensions, it is, for the most part, a public feature of man's cognitive capacity. Indeed, Wittgenstein's conception of language as 'a form of life' gives room for a wide range of possibilities with

regard to its uses and functions. Nevertheless, his private language argument is outstandingly meritorious. With his novel ideas about the relationship between rules and language, Wittgenstein deepens and fortifies the foundations of human knowledge and demonstrates the imperative of an objective standard for testing the correct use of linguistic expressions. In a word, the private language argument advances the course of human knowledge through its negation of the principles of epistemological skepticism and solipsism.

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