

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*
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Lecture XIII: §§243-246

We now enter the swath of text that begins with §243. Wittgenstein's concern with questions of privacy really continues for quite a long time. We will be treating at most the material up to §308. (For general orientation on Wittgenstein on privacy: Anthony Kenny's chapter 10 of his book on Wittgenstein; Norman Malcolm's review of the *PI*.)

In §243, we get the setting up of a notion of private language, or what we might call "the private language scenario". Wittgenstein says, "But could we also imagine a language in which a person could write down or give vocal expression to his inner experiences—his feelings, moods, and the rest—for his private use?" Then a question: "Can't we do so in our ordinary language?" Implicit answer: Of course we can. Clearly, we can keep a diary of our moods, sensations, feelings, and the rest; and we can intend the diary to be private. We can lock it up, make sure that our parents or spouses don't get to it, etc. Now Wittgenstein continues: "But that is not what I mean. 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."

It is not totally clear what exactly is being imagined, or what the force of this "cannot" is. And that it is not immediately clear is part of Wittgenstein's point. What he is doing is to look at the mass of things that philosophers have said, or might say, that can be put under the heading of "the privacy of mental life." The private language scenario is an attempt to begin to get at all of this, to elicit one way in which we might set up views about privacy.

The concern with the private language scenario extends to about §270, with the core passages being §§258, 259, and 260. Those three sections have become known as the private language argument proper; they give the impression that we have a readily separable argument. (It should come as no surprise that I don't believe there is a separable argument in the "core sections".) In any case, the private language argument, as found in the core passages, cannot be the be-all and end-all of what is on Wittgenstein's mind, since he continues about privacy for another 150 sections or so. Even if we take the private language argument as decisive for a specific point, there is more to what Wittgenstein is trying to do than would be captured in talk of a "private language" that only I can understand.

What is the notion of privacy? Loosely, it is the idea that my mental experiences are known only to me, or known in the best sense only by me. Whatever I can tell you about my mental experiences, there is something about what I feel, or sense, or have, to which I alone have access—some actually felt thing, or felt quality of the thing. Only I have this particular pain, or this particular sensation of blue. It is necessarily hidden from you. And where it is hidden from you, I have immediate access to it.

I hope everyone is familiar with ways of talking about mental life along those lines; those are very natural ways of thinking about our sensations. There is something about my pain, or my experience of blue, which is mine and mine alone. I can talk about my experiences, of course, but there is something that I just am not able to communicate (an actual phenomenal quality of it, say). And these sensations, with their qualities, make up an inner realm to which I alone have access, an inner theater, so to speak.—That picture is often called Cartesianism. Twentieth-century Cartesianism is the picture of the mental realm to which I alone have "privileged access." It is a picture fully alive in contemporary philosophy (cf. "qualia").

Now, it's not that there is a "thesis of privacy" with which Wittgenstein will either agree or disagree. As usual, it is up for grabs at each point what sense the notion of privacy or private objects is supposed to make. Wittgenstein wants to urge that philosophical talk of privacy leads us astray; what we say in a philosophical tone of voice fails to fit what is going on, it is the result of the crossing of pictures, and so on. But the question is always: When is it that what we say has this philosophical tone of voice? So I will try to interpret these sections in the way that I have interpreted Wittgenstein's procedures all along.

Wittgenstein wants to say that some notion of privacy, even some notion of "my private realm," has some kind of sense. Our talk of it can be grounded in facts of human experience. But one goes wrong in taking this to be a matter of "private objects." The work is to find out what it is to say that. What is it to take privacy on the model of private objects? Who does that? What does talk of private objects here stand for? That is what we must try to see, if we want to read Wittgenstein as recognizing the facts that we want to exploit—the facts of human experience that we must take seriously (more than "just behavior")—but as eliciting how distorting is the way that philosophy depicts our ordinary lives.

Roughly, Wittgenstein's point is that talk of the private mental realm does not do the job that we want it to. Such talk is neither accurate nor, in the end, coherent; though talk of my sensations is perfectly fine. It is not as if we reduce talk of sensations away in favor of behavior. But in talking generally of mental life, some

kind of gratuitous construal has been made. This is what Wittgenstein is expressing with his cryptic diagnoses (e.g., about the decisive move in the conjuring trick). If he can make this out in a plausible way, then he should be able to do away with any temptation to behaviorism as well as to Cartesianism. Behaviorism is in fact fueled by first thinking of sensations and the inner life as traditionally construed, and then reacting to the weirdness of that. For it does begin to look as though we are postulating gaseous processes in some gaseous medium. If you read Gilbert Ryle's *The Concept of Mind*, the great postwar document of logical behaviorism, you see that he proceeds by asserting that talk of sensations as anything *but* highly derived talk of behavior is tantamount to having a "ghost in the machine." If Wittgenstein is successful in maintaining that sensation talk is perfectly legitimate as it is (does not need to be "analyzed away" in terms of dispositions), and showing how one goes astray in a philosophical construal that makes one think that this is something like a ghost in the machine—then the push towards behaviorism will have no force.

But we should not think that this will all work easily. We require an investigation of what we say in a philosophical tone of voice that amounts to making the decisive move. What is the "philosophical sleight-of-hand" supposed to be? This point is of particular importance. For unlike some of the questions about meaning or understanding, there are many completely natural ways that we can feel compelled towards a notion of privacy. The Cartesian picture is intuitively natural, and it seems to go deep in our ordinary thinking. The work that Wittgenstein needs to do is to uncover why we feel compelled to some vision of the privacy of mental experience. And that is different from what we saw about the notion of the meaning of a word; for there it might seem that unless you are philosophically minded, you will not go on in the "bad" ways about that notion. We might say that it is the *push to systematic theorizing about language* that engenders the distortion in talk of meaning. But it seems much more natural in the arena of sensations and of occurrent mental life for distortions to arise without our being able to charge some kind of "craving for generality" as the guilty party. (That is what is meant by saying that the Cartesian picture seems to go deep in our ordinary thinking.) But as a result it becomes much more important to unmask precisely where the slippage comes in, where we do start making illicit construals of our ways of talking about mental life.

The first step might be to remind ourselves of the full-blown philosophical views that come out of the philosophical notion of the privacy of experience.

One nest of philosophical views that arises out of a picture of our sensations can be labelled "foundations of empirical knowledge." This is the idea that the private

realm forms the basis of all empirical knowledge; every other piece of empirical knowledge that we have is grounded on, or gets its force, its status as knowledge, from its connections with the private realm. Because in that realm our knowledge is so secure, it has exemplary status.

The second philosophical upshot worth mentioning is the question of other minds. This can be exhibited in skepticism. You might be perfectly happy with our knowledge of the external world and still have a problem about the existence of other minds. How do I know that there are other consciousnesses? I have privileged access to my sensations, and their existence is what constitutes my having a mind (consciousness); but I don't have access to yours, so I have only indirect evidence that you have them, and hence only indirect evidence that you have a mind (consciousness). So my claim to having knowledge that you have a mind looks very tenuous.

These two upshots correspond to two aspects of the notion of privacy of the inner realm. Just for the sake of having a label, let us call them the notion of *certainty* (corresponding to the foundations of empirical knowledge) and the notion of *separation* (corresponding to the problem of other minds). These can be expressed in the slogan: "When I am in pain I always know that I am in pain; but I can never truly know, about you, that you are in pain." The notion of certainty, then, is expressed in the idea that when I have a sensation, there is no question but that I am in the best possible position to judge that I am. In fact, I always have absolute certainty about whether I am in pain or am having a blue after-image. Privacy figures here in the sense that it is my inner realm and mine only. No one else can correct me about it. This is the idea, again, that I have privileged access to my inner realm. The flip-side is that of separation: you have no access to my inner realm, or I to yours. So the sense of an unbridgeable distance here is a matter of comparison between my state with respect to my sensations and yours. To put it the other way around: the distance becomes that between me and what may or may not be going on in your mind. It is the notion of the comparison of our relative positions vis-à-vis the internal realm that fuels the idea of separation. In reflective moments it is very easy to start feeling that there is something amiss in the ordinary idea of "my knowledge that you are in pain." What is amiss, or seems to be amiss, is the contrast between my state with respect to you as opposed to my state with respect to myself. I am in excellent shape in describing what is going on with respect to me. But that just points up in what lousy shape I find myself when I talk about you; all I have to go on, after all, is your behavior. So lousy is my shape with respect to you that it does not deserve the name of knowledge.

In my view, Wittgenstein is launching an attack on the idea of the certainty that we

are supposed to get from descriptions of our own internal realm, and an accommodation with the feeling of separation. The attack is on some idea that the private realm gives us a paradigm of absolute certainty, which then functions to make what I have — the given, my sensations — as that on which I must rest all empirical knowledge. In summary of the many things that Wittgenstein does, we might say that the model that gives us an idea of the mental realm as providing a paradigm of certainty, lies athwart what certainty and other epistemic talk really comes to. Wittgenstein is trying to show that what role certainty and knowledge play for us do not fit with taking the private realm as paradigmatic of our epistemic notions. Our position with respect to our mental life — our experiences, our sensations, etc.—is not an epistemic one.

Wittgenstein's attack will be waged on many different fronts. He challenges every way into that picture of the certainty of our knowledge of the internal realm. And there is no conclusive move. But that this is the sort of challenge that he is entering, lies in back of why his challenges take on, rhetorically, an ontological ring. He says that sensations, pains, and so on, are not objects, not "somethings." Bad views of the internal realm construe our sensations on the model of beetles in boxes (§293). It is the picture of objects that leads to the idea that what we are doing when we are avowing sensations or pains is describing things in the same way that I can describe the position of these chairs. In that case, if we are just describing objects, then our relation to them would be an epistemic one. If you take first-person avowals on the model of descriptions of relations to various objects, then it would be a question of knowledge; and if you combine this with the idea that I always know and am not correctable on these matters, then you get the idea of certainty, that this is a paradigm of knowledge at its best. That is what Wittgenstein wants to undo the picture of the private object.

The picture of the private object also leads to the idea of possession: that I own these pains and sensations in a way that you could not possibly. That then leads to the picture of separation. This is all intended to suggest what Wittgenstein is aiming at when he rails against the picture of private objects. The sense of that is fleshed out by describing a certain kind of epistemic model.

Aside. Why does Wittgenstein focus on pains? He talks occasionally of visual images. But when he wants to talk about the philosophical problems he always speaks of avowals of pain. In a certain sense, pain is not relevant to, say, phenomenalism. After all, nobody thought that the world was a construct out of his pains. Philosophers have taken the world to be a construct out of perceptual sensations, with visual sensations being the model. So why does Wittgenstein focus on pain? He

does so because it seems to be the best case for one who believes that our relation to our mental lives is an epistemic one. Pains are, after all, quite definite things. And pains are not subject to the sorts of attacks on sense-data (or the "given") that were launched by Austin, Sellars, and others. So they do provide a best case for Cartesianism; pains certainly seem like definite "somethings." So Wittgenstein undertakes to show how we go astray when we take pain talk in a certain way. He is attacking a view at its strongest. Also this fascination with pain is connected to the problem of other minds. For that problem does not arise just over the question whether others think, but also with respect to whether others suffer, and how I can know if they do. *End of Aside.*

Let us now go to the text. Wittgenstein proposes the private language scenario of §243. But the core sections occur starting at §258. There is a fifteen-section stretch between the two. What is the point of that space? It seems that, at least for the first eleven of those sections, there is a point, viz., that although we might be inclined to take the words that set up the scenario of §243 as setting forward a clear and straightforward case, Wittgenstein is trying to get us to see, in those eleven sections, how unclear and unnatural it is. He wants to show how the very words that we try to use to set up the scenario are hard to relate to the data that we actually have in talking of sensations. The point of these next sections is that there is no clear scenario being adumbrated.

The private language scenario is meant to shut out the background of our talk of mental events at the start. That is, it presupposes that we have a conception that pins on the inner realm itself, with no context of human interaction, what it is to explain talk of mental items. Wittgenstein's battle is to try to show that the scenario is ill-founded, that we really lack the conception that is rather breezily expressed in the scenario of §243. For this reason, we should not think that we are simply to accept the characterization of §243: "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." To accept that characterization would be to accept that we do have a conception already given inside what we ordinarily say, and which gets us to the realm of private sensations. It is Wittgenstein's purpose in §§243-55 to show that the words that the Interlocutor is using to set up the case in §243 do not in fact set up a case (not the sort of case that the Interlocutor imagines).

Most of the secondary literature takes it for granted that the scenario set up in §243 is readily intelligible, and that it is merely a question of its possibility (which Wittgenstein is taken as answering negatively). But my claim (Cavell, Stroud say

similar things) is that this is not the case; the words in §243 are meant, rather, to be de-familiarized. Those words are meant to distinguish the private language scenario from the ordinary case. The question is: Do they do so? And how do they do so?

What are the words that are meant to set up the scenario? There are three phrases on which we should concentrate: 'refer to', 'known to', and 'immediate private sensation'. Wittgenstein takes these up in turn: he begins with referring to, then moves to knowing, and then turns to the items themselves.

To begin with 'refer to': how can this serve to set up the scenario of the private language? The problem arises because we cannot simply fall back on the idea that we do this every day. In the ordinary sense of 'refer to', in which I do refer to my pains, we have ordinary sensation talk. We might even be said to name our sensations. But that is not the private language scenario. The Interlocutor wants to set up the scenario in a way that has the consequence that another person cannot understand the language. If we just use 'refer to' in the ordinary sense, then we are not doing that. We must give content to the distinction. It looks as though we want to keep the idea of naming constant, but to use it to get at the private, non-public matter. The question then arises: What is the connection between our ordinary sensation talk and the sensation? How does that notion operate?

Wittgenstein asks in response to this line of thinking: How do we come to use words to talk about sensations? That is the subject matter of §244. There he suggests a model that exploits our common practices. It fully relies on what we might call the "publicity" of our ordinary sensation talk, the fact that it occurs within a community. This is his idea that words like 'I am in pain' replace the natural expressions for sensation: the words are connected with the primitive, natural expressions for sensation and are used in their place. So, for example, I am taught the use of the expression 'I am in pain' as a replacement for, say, crying.

Now it is unclear how seriously we should take Wittgenstein's suggestion here. He does not mean to assert it in anything like a confident tone of voice. He does not say, "This is how it works: sentences like 'I am in pain' operate because they have been drummed into our heads as a replacement for crying." He says, "Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensation and used in their place." The tone does not suggest that he is putting this forward as a real theory. Moreover, we do not want to take this as an expression of any kind of general idea about how words about inner life get their sense, for it is not clear what kind of idea it is. What kind of claim would one be making in saying that reports of sensations function as replacements for natural expressions? Would it be

an empirical claim? A theoretical claim? It is simply unclear what kind of claim it could possibly be. And it seems, in addition, as if pain is too good a case for making this look plausible. Suppose that I want to talk about the report "I am seeing a red afterimage." It seems a bit of a strain to talk about the "natural expression" of seeing a red afterimage, which somehow gets replaced by these words. (Kripke makes an attempt at this in his last chapter, but it seems to me to fall flat.) So it does not seem as though Wittgenstein could be proposing any general theory. What is he doing? The basic point is that he is going against the idea of description: that we should automatically take "I am in pain" on the model of describing an inner world. In a way, Wittgenstein is suggesting a kind of therapy for getting us away from that. One should also compare this with what he says in Part II, end of section 9, where he talks about reports of mental life:

A cry is not a description. But there are transitions. And the words "I am afraid" may approximate more, or less, to being a cry. They may come quite close to this and also be *far* removed from it. But if "I am afraid" is not always something like a cry of complaint and yet sometimes is, then why should it *always* be a description of a state of mind?

These remarks are somewhat more modulated. They are meant to point up the therapeutic aim of talking about natural expressions. The consideration is meant, more particularly, to begin to indicate, that you cannot use words like "referring to" in "referring to your immediate private sensations" to set up the private language scenario. So how does this section work to do that? Well, I think that it works not by proposing a theory about how first person ascription operates. Rather, it is meant simply to raise a mere counter possibility. It is meant to show us how we have very little idea of what is going on when we talk about sensations. You can call it referring. But you can equally well call your first person reports pain behavior. They are a form of pain behavior. What that is meant to do is to get you to see that you cannot take the talk of referring for granted. In particular, you cannot take it for granted in the way that the person who is claiming to have a conception of the private language that they have handed to us has to claim. Don't think that talk of referring settles anything.

Wittgenstein concludes this thought with the cryptic §245: "For how can I go so far as to try to use language to get between pain and its expression?" (More literally: "How can I wish with language to step between the manifestation of pain and the pain?" If you take the manifestation of pain before the pain, the direction seems to be trying to go in from the manifestation of the pain to the pain rather than trying to go out.) What sense does it make to think of "stepping between the manifestation of pain

and the pain?" What could Wittgenstein possibly mean by that? Perhaps we can say this. If we look at the language as used in reporting pain, without philosophical preconceptions, it is just a manifestation of pain. It is not that language serves as some intermediary between the pain and the expression of pain. Rather, language itself functions as an expression of pain.

That is clearly on Wittgenstein's mind. What might also be on his mind is this: If you have the philosophical picture—the descriptive model of bits floating around in a private mental realm that are described, in the same sense in which you can describe a chair, except that the private bits are things to which only you have access—then when you say "I am in pain," it is as if you have to make a judgment about what is going on there before you can express the pain. And it is odd to reach such a conclusion—that one must somehow judge something about this realm before one can even express pain. That would be the picture of language getting between the pain and its manifestations. So the moral of §§244-5 is that one cannot simply help oneself to talk of "referring to" when trying to set up the private language scenario.

Now, one might say that it is not the referring that gets us to this scenario but the particular relation of knowing that we have to our sensations. In §246 Wittgenstein picks up on the next place where the words of §243 are meant to be doing something in setting up the scenario. Here he picks up on common philosophical way of talking: something that can be known *only* to the subject. Every philosopher wants to go on from this to give sense and weight to the notion of privacy.

The Interlocutor says, "Only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it." For 'surmise' we could equally well read 'conjecture'. That is what is supposed to flesh out the notion of immediate private sensations; and it is a natural way of speaking. Now, note first that "Another can only surmise it" is contrary to ordinary usage. In the usual sense of 'know', others can know that I am in pain, and often they do. But of course, that is not the end of the story. It is not enough for Wittgenstein to say, "Look, in ordinary practice we do say this." The Interlocutor has the obvious rejoinder: "Yes, maybe other people can be said to know, but all the same not with the certainty with which I know it myself!" It is not a question of it being ordinarily the case that we do not talk in a certain way. That does not block the move. When we say, "Only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it," the second clause can be taken to be capturing something of great importance. It can be seen as getting some justifiable content in spite of its lack of fit with ordinary practice, *because of* the first clause. The first clause has a kind of paradigmatic quality: the first-person case shows you what certainty is. In comparison to it, the claims to knowledge in the third-person case, about another,

hardly look like knowledge at all. "Sure, for practical purposes we say that others know. But when you compare that with the paradigmatic certainty that I have in my own case, we can see what a sloppy way of talking that is." Here, there is a feature of ordinary usage that the Interlocutor, or philosopher wants to override. "No, you don't really have knowledge of other people's sensations." And the way that it is overridden is by comparing the first person with the third person, where the former is the paradigm of certainty. That is what has force against the ordinary usage.

The way into the realm of privacy is given here through a contrast between our epistemic relations with respect to my and others' sensations. Wittgenstein asks: What is this paradigmatic nature? He ends up turning the claim on its head. His point is that exactly what drives the Interlocutor to say this — that he has paradigmatic knowledge of his own pain — is what robs the notions of knowledge and certainty of their content. It is the incorrigibility of the first-person report, or avowal, which undermines the applicability of notions like certainty and knowledge. That is the claim when Wittgenstein says, "It can't be said of me at all (except perhaps as a joke) that I know I am in pain." How do we flesh out what Wittgenstein means here?

What gives notions of knowledge and certainty and justification their point? We might say that what makes them into knowledge, certainty, and justification, is a *structure*. They are connected with the ways we have of going on: with double-checking, with doubts, with what stills those doubts, with what counts as evidence, with how we weigh evidence; with inquiry, learning, conviction, degrees of conviction.

All of this goes on in our use of cognitive notions. And Wittgenstein will want to suggest this is intrinsic. So if you say that we can forget all of these relations to the other concepts, then in speaking of knowledge you are speaking emptily, with no content. It is the connections with all of these other notions that gives content to our talk of knowledge. But then in the case of first-person avowals, these other notions have no application. There is just the fact that, ordinarily, there is no correcting me. How do I learn that I am in pain? I do not learn it at all. I weigh no evidence. It is not as though I am a tribunal of last resort, or the highest authority. I am no tribunal at all. There is no room for challenges. One thing that ordinary talk of knowledge does is to enable us to go on in the face of certain kinds of challenges that might arise. But in the first-person case I am not staking myself to going on in the face of challenges. That has no application. If I say that I know that I am in pain, there is no further work that the words 'I know' are doing beyond what is done in expressing pain.

To have a rubric for Wittgenstein's ideas: the whole structure that surrounds our ordinary talk of knowledge (or, possibly, the "grammar of knowledge") is absent in the case of first-person avowals. Now, I think we can even claim that insofar as we are drawn to trying to express my position with respect to my pain as one of knowledge, we are in the grip of certain philosophical pictures. First, there is the idea that epistemic notions like knowledge and certainty amount to a fact *here* and our relation to that fact *there*. The idea is that there is something about the nature of that relationship that makes for certainty or knowledge. Second, there is the presumption that what we are doing in avowing pain is describing a fact in an internal configuration. That is what may be behind using knowledge-talk in first-person avowals. But if that is what is behind it, then that is begging the question .

That is, the use of the cognitive talk (e.g., "only can be known") was meant to give us a way of *entry* into the idea of the private realm. We are trying to get into the position of being able to talk as if the mental items were actual things on which we could base a private language. Talk of "Only I can know" is supposed to give us a basis for the private language. But here, if I am right about the presumptions in back of using knowledge talk, then that is simply a circle. That is how we are meant to see that there has been a philosophical construal. We already need to have the picture before we can use the notions that are supposed to give us the picture. We start thinking about what knowledge claims come to, and if we try to use epistemic notions like knowledge in this case, we see that it misfires.

In this one must be careful about where Wittgenstein is operating. As always, we are meant to be operating on the way *into* the picture of mental life. From a sophisticated stance, like that of a sophisticated mentalist, all of this looks simply as if Wittgenstein is denying certain obvious things. The advocate of a mentalist stance will claim that there are these inner items, and that a person stands in a certain epistemic relationship to them. Of course, the relationship is rather curious, since there are no questions of weighing evidence, or of learning. But that is only because we have privileged access to the inner realm. The mentalist says that there is a relation of knowing to these things, and Wittgenstein says that there is not; so they are at a standoff, it seems.

That it is not a standoff is a result only of the place we are operating here; we are trying to attend to the ways in which one even *begins* to get into the picture that will lead to this full-blown framework. The importance lies in where we start when we are scrutinizing this. We are operating on the way in; we are trying to characterize what is supposed to *support* this way of characterizing mental life. Wittgenstein is trying to show that we are using empty notions. The emptiness is shown by how

little connection these notions of knowledge bear to the notions of knowledge that actually play a role in our lives. That is the sense in which Wittgenstein is an ordinary language philosopher. It is not that he simply says, "We ordinarily say 'I know you are in pain', and we accept that."

The bottom line is this. If I ask how you know that you are in pain, the answer is, "Because I feel the pain." But, of course, to say "I feel the pain", is just to say "I am in pain". So, the only sense that we can make of the question: "How do you know that you are in pain?" is "Because I am in pain". And that is not an answer. It is not an answer if you think that you are asking about an epistemic notion. If I ask you how you know that that is a goldfinch, and you say "Because it is a goldfinch", that is not an answer. That is not how we employ the notion of knowledge. That, in epitome, is what Wittgenstein is saying about the inapplicability of notions like knowledge to my own sensations.