

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*

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Lecture XIV: §§247-264

In §§247-8 Wittgenstein reflects on the work of §246. He has not gotten the sense of privacy from any presumed contrast in epistemic relations. He tries to give a cleaned up version of what we are trying to say when we say "Only I can know I am in pain," an accurate rendition of what is going on. He wants to be responsive to what leads us to those words without falling into the philosophical picture of the private realm. He says that certain remarks about privacy are grammatical: they tell us what is allowable, what is a sensible move in the language of sensations. At §248, he says, "The proposition 'Sensations are private' is comparable to: 'One plays patience by oneself.'" We are simply making a certain remark about how the word is used. It is not, after all, as if we have a game called "patience," and then we *discover* that it is played by oneself. It is part of the meaning of 'patience', one wants to say.

Why is this comparable to 'Sensations are private'? This latter could perhaps be short for 'When I am in pain, it is I who am in pain', or 'Only I have my pains'. Those are empty remarks. One could say that we can make perfectly good sense of the denial of 'Only I have my pains'; one could imagine circumstances in which one could say "I feel your pain." We do, after all, say things like "I have that very pain too, right in the small of my back." But one feels that when I am drawn to saying things like "Only I have my pains," I am using 'my' in a different sense from that when I say "My pain is just like his." That is what makes it grammatical: it is an exhibition of how one uses the expression "have my pain." Wittgenstein wants to say that there is a perfectly unobjectionable sense of privacy that is reflected in those empty things that one says. And he suggests that the whole sense of privacy, insofar as we can truly talk of private sensations, is displayed in remarks like "When I am in pain, I am the one who expresses it (or doesn't)." That is to say, these sorts of characterizations exhibit the whole sense of privacy insofar as we can make sense of it in talk of sensations at all. And if we take talk of privacy to be grounded in grammatical remarks like that, it may well be perfectly acceptable. If talk of privacy is grounded in remarks like that, then it is not as if these remarks represent "facts;" one does not discover that I am the one who expresses my pain. That is what Wittgenstein has in mind in §248. It is not as if one first has some notion of sensation and then discovers that no one else expresses it. These grammatical remarks have no factual content.

In his earlier writings, e.g., the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein does accuse the philosopher who goes on in bad ways about the mental realm of mistaking such a grammatical

remark for a factual remark. Wittgenstein claims that this philosopher is imagining just such the discovery discussed above. But Wittgenstein wants to oppose that, by saying that there is no opposite of this remark, no fact whose contrary is imaginable. But is not particularly believable to say, "What is wrong with traditional philosophers of mind is that they believe themselves to have discovered facts about sensations." But then there may be a way in which it can be sharpened into a better diagnosis. When one says "I can't feel your pain," meaning this in the way that fuels the traditional picture of privacy, it is as if one is thinking that there is something that one cannot do, viz., feel another's pain. But that is what is misleading. As Wittgenstein says at §374, "The great difficulty here is not to represent the matter as if there were something one couldn't do." As if there is a task that we are somehow unable to accomplish. This comes out in §134 of *Zettel*:

Do not say "one cannot", but say instead: "it doesn't exist in this game". Not: "one can't castle in draughts" but —"there is no castling in draughts"; and instead of "I can't exhibit my sensation"—"in the use of the word 'sensation', there is no such thing as exhibiting what one has got"; instead of "one cannot enumerate all the cardinal numbers" —"there is no such thing here as enumerating all the members".

There is something to this, I feel. It can be systematically misleading to think as if when I say "When I am in pain, I am the only one who can express it," I am exhibiting a task that you cannot fulfill. And there is something like this that funds traditional views of privacy.

The question for the Wittgensteinian is: If one can avoid stating things as if there is something we cannot do, then does that snap off the temptation to move to a philosophical picture of privacy? In §247 there is the suggestion that if I can find the right words to depict my situation without distorting it, then I will simply lose the temptation to move to a philosophical picture of privacy.

Why does §249 follow §248? Let us imagine the Interlocutor responding, "Even if we jettison the talk about paradigmatic certainty, is there not something to be exploited in the asymmetry of position between me with respect to my pain and you with respect to my pain? After all, Wittgenstein grants that, in a sense, sensations are private; we can think of that as a grammatical remark. It exhibits how sensation talk operates. So it may not show us some *fact* about special items called "sensations," but it does show us *something*. Given what Wittgenstein is prepared to grant, do we not still have the following worry: I could always be deceiving you; the asymmetry in position between us with respect to my pain is reflected in the fact

that I can always deceive you. It will always be up to me whether I deceive you or not." It is that kind of worry that can animate the idea that we have some private object arising from the asymmetry in position just described. That idea of asymmetry can fund some idea that is not reflected simply in talk of privacy as definitionally implied in talk of sensations. The nest of issues about deceiving another about mental life will be yet another continual issue in all of the privacy sections. The reason why these considerations arise is that one is operating very close to what one might call the "human background" of skepticism about other minds. This talk of deception is a philosophical rendition of something that we might feel in everyday life (of people being guarded or deceitful or unknowable). Wittgenstein wants to suggest in §§249—that the possibility that arises in ordinary life is *distorted* by giving skeptical voice to it. That possibility does *not* fund a view of private objects. Wittgenstein does this by pointing to the surroundings that must be in place for there to be cases of deception or simulation at all.

So if I am in pain, and if I give no expression to it, then others will not know that I am in pain. That's undeniable. The question is: Can you go from there to the types of characterizations of it that the Interlocutor seems to want? Here we might interpolate a remark of Cavell's: "To characterize asymmetries between the first-person and the third-person"—the obvious ones to which we can give undistorted voice in these unobjectionable ways — "as ones of in-principle knowledge, is to take the question of privacy to be a question of secrecy." Though it is not quite clear what we should do with this remark, it nicely points out that there is a gulf between the asymmetries that we can undistortedly express and those that we want to characterize as in-principle knowledge. Wittgenstein is certainly not denying that things about me may go unnoticed by others, nor is he denying that I can take steps to make them thus go unnoticed, unknown, hidden from others. And of course it may well be that when one is moved to characterize the differences philosophically, one is psychologically moved by how others' mental lives can be hidden — others can be guarded, or one can oneself be obtuse in figuring out what is going on with others.

These certainly seem to be psychological factors that can compel one to talk about privacy. But the point is that the philosophical notion of privacy is not that one. What the philosophical notion of privacy needs to support this epistemic distinction is the claim that in principle one could have no justifiable way of judging about another. It is not simply that some people are no good at judging about others, or that on occasion I can mislead others, and on many occasions I do misread others. This idea of misleading others is something that Wittgenstein picks up on. For talk of deception can be another important psychological background to our wanting to frame matters about privacy in the philosophical way. Wittgenstein suggests in

§§249-250 that the possibility of deception about our inner lives is distorted by giving a skeptical voice to it, in the form of "I can never know about another." He does this by pointing to the surroundings that are necessary for there to be cases of deception or simulation at all. In doing that, he is pointing to the way in which what is at stake has to be identified common to all: what I am doing in deceiving you about my pain has to be known by you and me as pain-behavior, as behavior normally expressive of pain. Identification is at issue here, and hence our shared basis for knowing what this comes to is at issue as well. In general, the point is that the amount of surroundings that one needs in talk of simulation is what Wittgenstein is trying to point out in his question of §250: "Why can't a dog simulate pain? Is he too honest?"

Now one might be tempted to go on and respond to this question by saying "Why not? We must teach the dog to do this and that, and it might be too complicated for a dog to do." But of course Wittgenstein is saying that this is not the way to go on. Even giving us a scenario in which a dog is taught to howl on a particular occasion as if he were in pain when he is not, is not providing a case of simulation, for there is an enormous amount of other things in simulation. The point of this is just to try to get us to see that it is distorting to give voice to the actual facts about people's possible "hiddenness" by the private language scenario as fixed in epistemic terms.

In §253, the Interlocutor attempts to give yet another gloss on how to set up the private language scenario. Epistemic language is no longer being used here. The attempt goes by way of trying to lodge matters in the things themselves. The idea is to lodge in the words 'immediate private sensations' of §243 the distinction between the private language scenario and our ordinary talk of sensations. We might say that the Interlocutor is moving from the commonplace "When I am in pain it is I who have the pain," but taking seriously "the pain" as an item. But "taking seriously" here is what is supposed to be in question. The whole point was to try to get some notion of the private thing, the private object, off the ground. So one suspects that there is a kind of circle in what the Interlocutor is trying to do here. "Another person cannot have my pain" may be perfectly acceptable as something to say; it can be a grammatical remark, having something to do with the use of possessive terminology like 'my'. If you like, it distinguishes the sense in which we use 'my' here from the sense in which we use 'my' when we allow that, of course, another person can have my pain. If I say that I have a particular sort of headache, then another person can certainly have that kind of headache too. In the sense in which we can support the remark "Another person cannot have my pain" it will be at best a grammatical remark. But that is not the way in which the Interlocutor of §253 is acting. The Interlocutor seems to be exploiting the commonplace as if there is something that

the other person cannot have — some object that I own and that no one else can own.

We can as a grammatical remark say "Only I can have my weight". But of course moving to there being some sort of object called "my weight," which I have and which we somehow discover you cannot have, is clearly illicit. And Wittgenstein is trying to put us in a position from which we will take the case of pain as analogous. It is not as if we have an independent way of saying when "pains" are identical or not. It is not as if we are confronted with such objects that we learn to identify and discriminate, and that then when we apply those ways of identifying and discriminating we discover that yours are not identical to mine. We are not applying a criterion of identity to pains and thence discovering that no two people can share the same pains. But it is that kind of picture that seems to be infused in the Interlocutor's wanting to use the idea that another person cannot have my pain as a way of supporting the idea of immediate private sensations. We examine the actual notion of identity of pains, and insofar as its content comes from what is ordinarily involved in speaking of things as identical, we find that such a notion will not do the job.

In §253b LW says, "In so far as it makes sense to say that my pain is the same as his, it is also possible for us both to have the same pain." Two things are going on here: the Interlocutor has not given anything that goes beyond the ordinary use, in which we do talk about your having the same pains as I do. There is a standard sense in which you and I can have the same pains, and Wittgenstein is charging that the Interlocutor has not given anything that goes against that sense. Again, just as in the case of using epistemic terminology with respect to mental life, Wittgenstein is not committed to the idea that ordinary language outweighs everything. He is only committed to the claim that *something* is needed to outweigh it, and he is pointing out the fact that nothing has yet been provided that does this. The Interlocutor has not given any sense to what it is to talk of identical pains other than what we can make of it ordinarily; and in that sense it is perfectly unobjectionable to say that two people can have the same pains. But otherwise, all we have is the grammatical remark that my pains are my pains; that is, there is no so thing as your having my pains, so that it does not even make sense to talk of our having the same pain. Again, the task is to try to reconstruct what the Interlocutor is trying to do. What are you imagining in talking of identical pains in the Interlocutor's way? Wittgenstein wants to point to the unclarity of what could be in our minds — what picture we were using in insisting that "Only I can have my pains" is not a grammatical remark.

Of course, one does want to say, "Only I have this." One might say this with a particularly emphatic gesture. But what do you mean by that? If you mean by "Only

I have this" that you are in pain when you are in pain, and that when you are in pain then (perhaps) no one else is, then we will certainly agree. The problem is that the Interlocutor is trying to use "Only I have this" in some special way, with some special sense of "having" and some special sense of "this" built in.

At §398 Wittgenstein adverts to the same remark again ("Only I have this"); this is a section well-worth reading, in which Wittgenstein criticizes the sort of language one wishes to use. The same point seems to at issue in §253.. The point is that there is a harmless use of "Only I have got this." But those harmless uses do not support the uses that the Interlocutor wants to make of it. It may not be misleading to put it this way: the object-like character of pain is funded by ordinary criteria of identity, i.e., our ordinary ways of saying when someone has or lacks the same pains I do. The Interlocutor is trying to take these ordinary criteria away--not to talk about that sense of "same pain" — but still retain the objecthood of those pains.

The sections up through §257 are meant to show how little of an idea we have of what the private language scenario amounts to. At every turn we want to say things that are licensed only by ordinary notions. But those are precisely the notions that have to be pared away if the private language scenario is to do the work that it is meant to do. After all, I can write 'S' in my diary whenever I have a sensation of a particular sort. There is no question but that that sign can name my sensations. (Some readers of Wittgenstein have denied that, but that just seems silly.) "There's that pain again; let me call it 'S' and mark down its occurrence in my pain-diary." I can re-identify the sensation, and there is a right or wrong answer to the question whether I am having it again or not. But the unobjectionableness of that scenario furnishes no support for taking my sensation as the kind of base needed by someone urging a philosophical notion of privacy (e.g., the locus of a certain sort of certainty, or the provision of world to which I and only I have access). Once again, the Interlocutor is supposed to be distinguishing the unobjectionable scenario from the private language scenario. But Wittgenstein wants to say that there is an inversion going on in making sensations into that kind of base; what our ordinary practices in sensation-talk do not do is to point to that kind of base.

The idea is that one must snap off every part of the background and surroundings, or the natural expressions of sensation, in order to get to the private language scenario. The sense in which this private language could be characterized--as naming my sensations, say--becomes entirely unclear. That is what is said in §§256-7: the point is that the words that one might want to use to flesh out the case are unavailable. That makes vivid what we owe if the private language scenario is to be distinct from my flagging my sensations in the ordinary way. What Wittgenstein has done, in

these sections leading up to §258, is to show how much has to be fully internal to the scenario. You cannot take it that notions of identity or even of sensation can simply be brought to bear as if they had sense. That is why in §§258 when Wittgenstein talks about associating names with sensations, he does not help himself to a notion of "referring to." He is trying to make it all internal. He speaks of noting the recurrence of a certain sensation by *associating* with it the sign 'S'.

We arrive at §258, having just been told that we cannot use any of our ordinary notions, since those will not work to set up the private language scenario. §258 is the core section, which has been held to contain the private language argument proper. What does he say? [quote]

The idea is that because there will be no coherent distinction between what is right and what seems to me to be right, hence the notion of correctness, and therewith the notion of a language, falls apart. This is, of course, a reminiscence of §202, where Wittgenstein talks about following a rule "privately," and the distinction between obeying a rule and thinking that one was obeying a rule.

There is a common reading of this passage that is to be avoided: Wittgenstein is taken as arguing that after the first occasion on which I have concentrated my attention on the sensation and associated 'S' with it, I will be left with *no way of telling* whether my saying or writing 'S' in the future is correct. That is, on this interpretation, when Wittgenstein says that "I have no criterion of correctness," it means that I have no usable *test* for whether this application is correct. And without a test, without a criterion of correctness in that sense, I cannot tell whether it is correct. What does it mean to say I lack a test? Presumably, it means that I would not be in a position to distinguish what only seems to me to be correct and what is in fact correct. Without any method of drawing this distinction in particular cases, we cannot talk of correctness; there is no such thing as being right in my application of 'S' as opposed to being wrong, hence no sense in which the sign has meaning, hence no sense in which there is a language here, hence no sense in which there is a language of one's inner experiences that only one person can understand.

That was the usual interpretation, early on. (Malcolm, Donagan, recently Wright). The crucial step is that from saying that I have no way of telling whether my application of 'S' is correct to the conclusion that there can be no such thing as correctness or incorrectness at all. If that is the move, then Wittgenstein is relying on a kind of verificationist principle: if there is no test, then there is no fact of the matter. The principle would be that a state of affairs is intelligible as a state of affairs only if it is ascertainable, by means of a test, whether it obtains or not.

Wittgenstein has been accused of being a verificationist, and such accusations are not completely out of the ballpark, since he often asks you how you *tell* things, as a way of finding out what those things are. (Think of the discussions of the criteria for ascribing understanding.) But on this reading we do seem to require a strong general principle verificationist principle to back up the argument, which is not the sort of thing that Wittgenstein is ever going to accept.

Another problem with this interpretation is that it proves too much: if you accept the argument, then you must accept certain variations on it, and some of these variations seem to show that you cannot in the *ordinary* sense have a diary in which you flag your sensations. For even in the ordinary case you are in no better position to test whether something is in fact the same sensation as occurred before. It may seem to you that the same sensation is recurring, but it is just a "seeming-to-you." In the ordinary sense, it looks like you have no better way of operating. So it looks as though this form of the argument should apply equally well to the ordinary case of flagging sensations.

If one takes the private language argument on the model just described, then it is a bad argument, first, because it seems to be relying on a rather crude form of verificationism, and second, because variations on that argument would establish too much.

The standard reading takes the remark that "I have no criterion of correctness" to mean simply "I have no usable test of correctness; I am not in a position to ascertain whether my subsequent use is correct." But it seems that to take the remark in that way is to miss what Wittgenstein is trying to point to. This reading starts by taking for granted that there is a notion of correctness, a notion of what would be the correct occasions of the use of 'S', and finds fault in our access to that notion of correctness. You think that there is a notion of correctness and then to discover that we can never find out whether what we are doing is in accord with it; then you apply the verificationist principle to undermine that what you have is a language. So we are undermining the idea that there is a notion of correctness by way of faulting our *access* to a notion of correctness.

But one point of all of the sections leading up to §258, i.e., the point of urging how much of our ordinary notions we must pare away to get to the private language scenario, is to show that you cannot take the notion of correctness for granted. That is, it is not that you have a notion of correctness, and that your aim is to see how it is applied; it is that there is no such notion to be taken for granted at the start.

Without the background behind our ordinary talk of sensations, any notion of correctness--of what counts as the occasions on which 'S' is correctly used--would have to be worked up entirely internally. But when nothing is taken for granted, that idea is incoherent. Concentrating one's attention on the sensation, or closing one's eyes and intoning in a deep internal voice, "S," while one has a certain sensation, does *nothing*. It does not serve to determine anything as correct; it does not establish a notion of correctness. It is not a question of the absence of a test, or of the fallibility of memory. It is that there is nothing even for an infallible memory to remember that would do the job of establishing a notion of counting as the correct use. That is what Wittgenstein means when he says that I have no criterion of correctness.

We want to say, perhaps, after the initial episode of concentrating our attention and intoning "S," that what is correct in a future application is something similar to what I concentrated my attention on. But the question is: How similar? In what way must it be similar? Any two things are, after all, similar in some respect or other. No standard of similarity is given in the concentrating of our attention. Now the Interlocutor might say, "I don't mean 'similar', since no standard of similarity has yet been given. I mean the same sensation." But that should immediately call to mind that we have just read through a section about criteria of identity for sensations; and the ordinary criteria of identity for sensations is something from which we just prescinded. We cannot use this in claiming that this is a private language scenario. So what is this talk of same sensations going to do? We are invoking just what we have already pared away: the ordinary-language use of sensation talk. Wittgenstein is saying that you are using the ordinary notion of "same thing," yet you have waived the right to talk about it as private in the philosopher's sense. You cannot invoke this notion of sameness and still have the private language scenario you wanted. But then you are left with an unexplained sense of "sameness." There really is nothing more than similarity, to which you have not succeeded in giving sense by concentrating your attention on just one sensation.

This idea that sameness is not something that you can take for granted arises differently here from the case of rule-following. But it is parallel to what was said there: that the same continuation is not something given by the rule itself, but is given only with the surroundings, practices, etc.. (At §215 Wittgenstein has the Interlocutor asking "But isn't *the same* at least the same?" Obviously a cry of desparation.)

In short, we are not talking about the fallibility of memory. Suppose that I want to use 'S' again. Imagine even that I can summon up, infallibly, the first sensation. So I

have the two sensations side by side, the occurrent one and the one I summoned from memory. Nothing tells me whether it was meant that 'S' applies to *this* one because I concentrated my attention on *that* one. Without invoking some notion of likeness, we cannot get a notion of what the original act determines as future correctness. Wittgenstein's point is that there is no pre-given notion of likeness.

The lack of distinguishability between my thinking I am doing the same and my doing the same is not a question of having a notion of what counts as being correct, but lacking the means to verify that a particular thing falls under that notion. Rather it is a question of the lack of any conception of correctness at all. To make the private language coherent, one has to import from outside a criterion of correctness, or of sameness of sensations, or of appropriate similarity of sensations. But we are given no means to do that. For the ordinary senses of those expressions are just what must be cut off in order to frame the private language scenario. That is the point of these sections.

Let us put the same point a different way. The question is, What gives 'S' meaning? What fixes the meaning of the word in the private language? The point is that nothing occurring on the first occasion of the use of 'S' can do the job. It is just an occurrence, a ceremony. Suppose that you say not just "S" when the sensation occurs, but "I use 'S' to flag these things." Well, can you give an independent sense of what counts as one of these without invoking public language? It does not seem that you can. You have only the sense dependent on you. "When I use it correctly, it is these things for which I use it." But what fixes the correctness of any use of the word is supposed to in accordance with its meaning; but we cannot independently fix its meaning. All that we can do is just to decide that something counts as a correct usage when we use it. The only resources on which we can draw to give it meaning is that I use it. But this is not a standard -- there is no control of me over this -- and that is why the idea that this is a language seems to fall apart.

The point of this core passage, then, is that the notions that go hand in glove with the idea that this is a language, become empty in the imagined case. You cannot get the notion of fixing the meaning of the sign off the ground. For something is needed to give us the notions of what counts as correct and as incorrect applications of the sign. The obvious answer, of course, is that the application is correct if the same sensation is present. But what we have to abjure in order to get it to be a private language includes the setting that gives us any notion of sameness at all. Hence we cannot use it to fix the meaning of the private sign.

So the difficulty in understanding the private language argument is to appreciate

fully how much we have to jettison in setting up the scenario. If we think that §243 works automatically to set up a recognizable and coherent scenario, then that will make the conclusion of the private language argument shocking and outrageous. That is indeed the way that the argument was taken. And that it turns out to be impossible is then a shocking conclusion, and something for which we then seek the philosophical argument.

But if we read it along the lines I've been suggesting, in paying attention to how much has to go on in setting it up, it does not seem to be such an outrageous conclusion. What may be shocking, rather, is the exhibition of how much you do have to give up — how much you must pare away to try to get the traditional conception of privacy. If you pay attention to that, it should forestall the feeling that Wittgenstein is denying something that is clear-cut and makes perfect sense. He is not denying that sensations have properties. What he is doing is pointing out that the imagined scenario cannot take advantage of the notion of properties, or sameness of properties, of sensations. But properties of sensations are supported only given the language in which we talk about them. And that is what we must pare away, or prescind from, in setting up the scenario. So all of this makes the core section of the private language argument much less glamorous. But that is precisely the point. This is not as surprising an argument as it is sometimes made out to be. But it has a greater chance of actually being a cogent argument than it is sometimes made out to be. Of course, it does not exhaust all of the ways of going philosophically astray about sensations; it is one thing that someone who is tied to a traditional view of sensations might suppose to be possible. Wittgenstein is urging that such a person does not have an adequate conception, but his argument is hardly conclusive against all ways of thinking about the privacy of mental life.

The Interlocutor desperately cries out in §264, "Once you know what the word stands for, you understand it, you know its whole use." And Wittgenstein does not express any reaction. But he is forcing the Interlocutor to say something like that; and we have learned, from the very start of the *Investigations*, that the idea that the Interlocutor is expressing is quite philosophically puffed up. We have read the first part of the *Investigations* when we reach §264, and the philosophical misconstrual evinced in this latter section should thus be apparent. Wittgenstein is simply painting the Interlocutor into that corner. The Interlocutor wants to insist that there is a hard fact there; our sign 'S' can just connect with it, the something. And Wittgenstein just want us to repeat what we have learned before. We do explain words, in ordinary life, by pointing to their bearers; but to make this into an explanatory picture is to do just the same, but without the dog.

If the question is "Can we imagine a language in which a person could write down, or give vocal expression to, his inner experiences in such a way that another person cannot understand the language?", the response is "You cannot really imagine that," or "There is nothing of that sort to imagine." Again, the important thing is to avoid making it look as if there is something we cannot do. There is no task that we cannot perform here. As Cavell sometimes puts it, if we try to imagine the private language scenario, we end up imagining something other than what we thought we were going to imagine.