

WITTGENSTEIN, CIRCUMSTANCE, AND PRIVACY

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The present paper is confined to one aspect of what has come to be known as Wittgenstein's argument that there can be no private language. I will first summarize this aspect, or line of thought, regarding the nature of language insofar as it is central to the issue of privacy. Then I will present a case consistent with this particular view of Wittgenstein's for the existence of private language when privacy is understood as inaccessibility, in principle, to the understanding of others.

The aspect of Wittgenstein's discussion of language with which this paper deals is that regarding the decisive role in determining meaning of the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the usage of a language-segment, especially in contrast with what goes on consciously in the mind at, or about, the time of this usage. The material from *Philosophical Investigations* (*PI*) that will be discussed is from roughly the first half of Part I.

In his remarks on following a rule, primarily *PI* 143-201, Wittgenstein shows, among other things, that a rule by itself is insufficient to produce the result that the rule is intended to have. What more is needed, which is of concern to Wittgenstein in this part of *PI*, are the customs and the general way of life within which an instance of a rule finds its natural home. And further, Wittgenstein shows that meaning itself is embedded in its particular situation, in its surrounding "customs and institutions" (*PI* 337). Meaning thus appears to be more a function of the effective use of signs than a function of the tacit mental accompaniment of signs. It is primarily this dependence of meaning upon the circumstances of its occurrence that weighs against the possibility of someone's using language privately. The circumstances in which an expression is offered establish what it is possible for the expression to mean, despite our attempts to manipulate meaning simply through our mental efforts and despite our feeling of having something particular

in mind that goes beyond the mere expression.

I cannot ". . . say 'bububu' and mean 'If it doesn't rain I shall go for a walk'" (*PI*, p. 18). In order to say one thing and mean another, one must prepare the circumstances, or see that they are prepared, so that the desired meaning can be read from what is said. But then, in effect, the function, or use, of what is said becomes altered to accord with its new meaning.

Early in *PI*, Wittgenstein gives examples of the diversity of uses to which a single word or concept can be put. This diversity constitutes a cluster of family resemblances, or a thread that has no single fiber running its entire length. To further show the public, context dependent nature of meaning, Wittgenstein argues that the determination of how a rule is to be applied is not contained unambiguously in the statement of the rule alone. For example, suppose one, say a student, is given the series 0, n, 2n, 3n, etc., and told to continue this series at the command "+n," "so at the order '+1' he writes down the series of natural numbers" (*PI* 185). At the order "+2" he is expected to write "0, 2, 4, 6," and so on. But, Wittgenstein suggests, the rule upon which this order is based is open to many different possible readings. The student may even proceed correctly for awhile and then shift to another reading, another way of understanding the rule. For example, he may "add 2 up to 1000, 4 up to 2000, 6 up to 3000 and so on" (*PI* 185). The point is that, although such misreading does not normally occur, this is not because the rule alone effectively rules out any such misreading. It does not. In order for the student even to attempt to continue the desired series on the basis of the rule, he must already be immersed in the way of life for which it is possible for this rule to serve as the last arbiter to which he may appeal in deciding how to continue the series. Thus, as Wittgenstein claims in *PI* 199, "it is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule." A rule is a custom, or institution, or practice, and thus cannot occur only once. It is at this point that Wittgenstein introduces the notion of privacy.

As with understanding a rule, so with obeying a rule. "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). Insofar as a rule in its context or natural circumstances prescribes a behavior, one must exhibit that behavior in order for one to obey the rule. And behaviors, as public, are judged by the relevant social authorities, not simply by the acting party. It is in this sense that one cannot obey a rule privately, that is, in such a way that the obeying of the rule will be adequate and yet inaccessible in its adequacy to the understanding of others.

Before proceeding to the question of the possibility of privacy of language, I would like to develop another line of thought that Wittgenstein weaves into his remarks on rule-following. In addition to the decisiveness of the role of the details of a way of life to understanding meaning, Wittgenstein brings various observations to bear against the import, in this regard, of what goes on more or less consciously in the mind. First, just as with any intentional accompaniment of an expression, as something that seems to be behind the sign, a mental image is itself just another sign and stands just as much, or just as little, in need of an intentional correlate as the original overt expression.

But also, meaning, as intentional, seems to be instantaneous and to reach beyond all possible examples and illustrations; whereas, use is stretched out in time (*PI* 191, 209). However, this instantaneous understanding does not contain, as it appears to, the entire use of a word (just as when the entire series of numbers indicated by an algebraic formula is not contained in an understanding of the formula). Clearly, most of what someone will claim to have meant by some expression will not have been consciously in mind when the expression was employed. What goes on consciously in the mind does not, according to Wittgenstein, determine meaning.

Wittgenstein does not himself indulge in offering a possible explanation for the feeling of understanding. But explanations are certainly imaginable. The feeling of understanding, for example, how to continue a given number series, may arise upon the basis of having performed such activities

successfully in the past and thus being confident of dealing successfully with whatever contingency may arise in the course of continuing the series at hand. And this feeling may persist even in the face of certain setbacks and disappointments.

I would now like to offer a description of a language in which privacy does play a role—privacy understood in Wittgenstein's sense, as inaccessibility to the understanding of others, not only in fact but in principle.

My main contention is: any segment of language may include, and some—perhaps all—segments of language do include an aspect of privacy, but this private aspect cannot be identified as such, cannot be adequately brought into contrast with the public aspect of language. In this paper, I will discuss only the first half of this contention, regarding the existence of private language. The language to be described I will refer to as language X, but the description is meant to fit, at least provisionally, our own language.

As with language as Wittgenstein sees it, language X is embedded in the customs and institutions of a way of life. Also, the meanings of segments of language X are a function of the uses of those segments insofar as these uses appear to serve the purposes for which they are intended.

Interwoven, perhaps inextricably, with the relevant public customs and institutions in which this language is embedded are also various memories and other residues of the effects, of events, perceptions, feelings, and so on (see *PI* 55-57), that are unique when taken in their unanalyzed form to each individual who participates in language X. This latter aspect I will refer to as the inaccessible, or private, stratum of the background, or of the way of life, in which language X is embedded. The privacy of this stratum is reflected in part publicly in the ultimate failure of exact definability, except by more or less arbitrary convention.

In agreement with Wittgenstein's views on language, the expressions of language X are not primarily representative, but rather effective. The speakers of this language do not normally worry about accuracy of representation beyond what is necessary successfully to produce a desired result. The signs

of language X do not primarily somehow capture things, experiences, and so on, but are used and serve to produce behaviors, experiences, and viewpoints relative to more or less specific purposes. There is no ultimate, stable, stratum of simples that the segments of language X may represent. Rather, what are treated as simples vary with the purpose at hand (*PI* 47-48).

Although language X originated in public use, and this continues to be its primary function, the participants in this language sometimes speak to themselves alone for the purpose of clarifying for themselves their own views, beliefs, desires, and so on. They do not, in this latter use, intend to employ language in a way that would be inaccessible to the understanding of others, but in this use they do extend language to its most extreme capabilities. And often this involves a reliance on background sufficiently private enough that such language use is actually inaccessible to others. Here it is not so much what is referred to that makes this use of language private as it is the means by which such reference is made or the uniqueness of the individual way of life in which this use of language is embedded. What makes this private use of language possible is the fact that, in this case, language is employed for strictly personal purposes together with the fact that meaning is use and not some ideal to which use must conform, and that, as use, meaning is embedded in the total circumstance of its effective use.

Privacy, or inaccessibility to others, cuts with variable thickness across all of language X. Since this thickness is a function not so much of the referent of a language segment as of the degree of idiosyncrasy or private background experience in which the language segment is embedded, language referring to inner experience is not necessarily more private than that referring to some external object of perception.

Wittgenstein's description of linguistic meaning as being determined largely by the circumstances leading up to and surrounding the instance of use rather than by ideal standards or conscious content shows that stable simple, atomic objects of reference, whether private or public, are not necessary. But it

does not rule out linguistic privacy. It only confines such privacy to the aspect of language that is grounded in individual uniqueness of experience and thus to linguistic uses insofar as they do not hook up with public criteria.