

## CAN THERE BE A PRIVATE LANGUAGE ?\*

In a philosophical dispute of this sort, which Wittgenstein prominently raised, it would be always better to be clear as to who are his opponents. Wittgenstein hardly ever mentions them explicitly in his entire philosophical disquisition. From the comments which are now available in the several articles written on this subject, it is however quite clear that Wittgenstein is here arguing against the skeptics who deny the possibility of the knowledge of other minds. These skeptics are not ordinary ones. Their skepticism is firmly rooted in the Cartesian doctrine of the substantival dualism of Mind and Body. Descartes, Abbe de Lanion, Malebranche and Johans Clauberg are its representatives. This kind of skepticism can be generated even in the system like that of Spinoza which, inspite of its not being overtly dualistic, very much covertly subscribes to the Psychophysical parallelism. It can be as well shown to be the logical upshot of the Leibnizian monadology. I do not think that Wittgenstein had such a large battery of opponents before him when he presented his argument against the possibility of a private language. No doubt, the argument fixes the nails very firmly in the coffin of the Cartesian dualism but it also does, as I shall argue, much more than that.

None of the Cartesians had ever espoused any such a distinction such as the distinction between private language and public language or had ever raised any question about the meaningfulness of language we use to speak about things in the world. In fact, for Descartes and his followers the very fact that human beings use language (Descartes uses the expression '*la parole*') was a clear (?) evidence of the presence of soul-substance in other human beings. Animals, just for want of this evidence, were conceived by him as bereft of souls, they were machines. (Descartes in his **Discours de**

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**la methode** has an argument to that effect.) Descartes did not conceive the distinction between private language and public language. The distinction belongs to the 20th Century philosophical sophistication. If, however, Descartes's substantival dualism is mapped rigourously on our language, the distinction—or what may be termed as linguistic dualism will have to be accepted as its consequence and then it would follow that the denial of that distinction (which Wittgenstein aims at) necessarily would imply the denial of the substantival dualism. I am, however, inclined to think that Wittgenstein's argument can be followed better if we take it as directed not so much against the Cartesian dualism as against the Positivistic programme of setting up Protocol Language as distinguished from Physical Language. Among the Logical Positivists, Rudolf Carnap, in particular had contributed a great deal to this programme but had incidently held a rather odd view that protocol sentences refer to physical events and not to private experiences. He gave an argument (with which I shall begin the first part of this paper), which had the plausible consequence that since the protocol sentences do not refer to the private experiences, there is no such thing as a private language. A. J. Ayer mentions Carnap's argument thinking that Carnap joins his hands with Wittgenstein on this issue. I shall try to maintain that the resemblance in the positions of Carnap and Wittgenstein is only superficial and that Wittgenstein's argument makes a deeper incision into the presuppositions of Carnap's argument. These presuppositions are mainly with regard to the nature of language. Wittgenstein has thereby opened up a large vista of philosophical inquiries concerning use and logic of mental concepts; the inquiries would not appear to be sharp enough, were Wittgenstein to be taken to argue merely against Cartesian Dualism rather than against the new programme of the Logical Positivists. Let us therefore take a close look at Carnap's argument.

# I

It may be noted that Carnap's argument is a **reductio ad absurdum** of his opponent's view that the sentences in the

protocol language of any individual (private language) describe only the private experiences to which the individual alone has privileged access. For the sake of argument, Carnap assumes that ...

".....by 'thirst of  $S_1$ ' we understand not the physical state of  $S_1$ 's body but his sensation of thirst, i.e. something non-material, then  $S_1$ 's thirst is fundamentally beyond the reach of  $S_2$ 's recognition because all  $S_2$  can verify when he asserts ' $S_1$  is thirsty' is that  $S_1$ 's body is in such and such state, and a statement asserts no more than can be verified." (Carnap, **The Unity of Science**, p. 79)

Carnap points out that his opponent must accept that protocol language "could be applied only solipsistically; there would be no intersubjective protocol language." (p. 80) At the same time the opponent must accept that the physical language is inter-subjective, not only verifiable but publicly verifiable. If this is so, the opponent must accept, says Carnap, that there are inferential relations between statements belonging to Physical language (P-stts) and statements belonging to Protocol Language (p-stts), as only such sentences which assert or imply something about experience are verifiable. It would then follow that physical language statements must also describe private experiences since "one statement can be deduced from another, if and only if, the fact described by the first is contained in the fact described by the second." (p. 87) But this is impossible "for the realms of experience of two persons do not overlap. There is no solution free from contradiction in this direction." (p. 82) In order to see the full implication of Carnap's argument let us formalise it.<sup>+</sup>

(P-statement : Physical language statement)

(p-statement : Private language statement)

1. p-statements describe private experience. (assumption)
2. P-statements are intersubjective and verifiable.

Pr, 1

<sup>+</sup> I am greatly indebted to Prof. James Cornman of the University of Rochester in helping me to construct the formal lay-out of the argument.

3. A statement is verifiable if and only if it is logically related to some statement describing private experiences. Pr. 2

Therefore,

4. P-statements are logically related to statements describing private experiences. (2 and 3)

Therefore,

5. P-statements are logically related to p-statements. (1 and 4)  
6. A statement describing private experiences describes private experiences of one person. Pr. 3

Therefore,

7. A p-statement describes only the private experiences of one person. (1 and 6)  
8. Statements which are logically related describe the same facts. Pr. 4

Therefore,

9. A P-statement describes only the private experiences of one person. (5, 7, 8)

Therefore,

10. P-statements are not intersubjective. (9)

10 contradicts 2, and since 2, 3, 6, and 8 are taken by Carnap as true, 1 must be false. If 1 is false, then p-statements do not describe private experiences but describe, the only other possibility, the physical events. Consequently **P**-statements also describe physical events and the translatability of p-statements into P-statements stands, according to Carnap, established and the Private-language view stands refuted.

But unfortunately this argument of a physicalist has to face one serious difficulty. The crucial step in getting the contradiction in the above argument is obviously the step No. 5. Carnap is able to get this step only if he establishes 4, and he does that by accepting the truth of 2 and 3. If one pays close attention to what 2 and 3 say one will realise that the two contain a view of language—the Logical Positivist's theory

of Meaning and the implicit assumption that the P-statements have only descriptive and referential function to perform. It is because of this view that Carnap was able to reach the contradiction needed for showing the impossibility of Private Language. Indeed the question is how can the falsity of 1, go with the truth of 2 and 3 ? From the falsity of one, it follows that there are no statements describing private experiences in which case, it is difficult to see how P-statements can be verified. Carnap's refutation of Private Language is thus internally vitiated by incoherence between what he proposes to establish and what he assumes in establishing it. Urmson, therefore very rightly points out in his **Philosophical Analysis** (pp. 122-26)-that Carnap must **either** give up falsity of the claim that private language statements describe private experiences **or** merely assert the logical relatedness of P-statements and p-statements **dogmatically** without giving any reason whatsoever. In either case the argument is doomed to fail. As it is, the argument solely depends upon the verifiability criterion of meaning. But this view of the Logical Positivists is by no means defensible. It faces innumerable problems which are well-known and they no doubt deprive Carnap's argument of its soundness. It is true that Carnap in the later development of his thought, became aware of some of the crucial difficulties which his physicalism had to face and that he came to acknowledge the failure of the translatability programme. It is interesting however to note that while on the one hand Carnap recommended translatability programme, on the other, he came to realise, "that the protocol languages of various persons are mutually exclusive is still true in a certain definite sense : they are respectively, non-overlapping sub-sections of the physical language". (**The Unity of Science**, p. 88). In other words, the scruples about solipsistic ring around the p-statements had not left Carnap's thinking and the sole reason for this is to be found in the view of language—especially the theory of meaning that he advocated at that time. What was, therefore, necessary, to get out of this solipsistic riddle, was to examine threadbare the entire problem of meaning and to determine the logical status of the so-called private-language-

statements. Carnap's argument underscores the view of language that was held by Wittgenstein himself in the **Tractatus**. The Translatability programme was a philosophical gloss over it. In the **Philosophical Investigations**, Wittgenstein rejects this earlier view and implicitly thereby, Carnap's argument against the private language. Wittgenstein's rejection of the possibility of private language is based on a complete new vision of the nature of language and its meaningfulness. Carnap argues that the first-person psychological utterances—p-statements describe physical events—they have a descriptive role to perform : they are translatable into physical language : therefore, there is no private language. He assumes that such sentences are the **part of our language** and that **they are meaningful**. Wittgenstein raises the more basic and fundamental question as to whether they can form the part of our language, whether they can be said to be meaningful utterances at all. One can now see as to why Rush Rhees remarks at the outset of his reply to Ayer that "the problem about private languages is the problem of how words mean. This is much the same as the question of what a rule of language is." (**Proceedings of The Aristotelian Society**, Supp. Vol. XXVIII (1954), p. 77.) Carnap's argument, I suppose, throws the entire private language issue into its proper perspective.

## II

What is a private language according to Wittgenstein? Not the one used by an individual for his private use. "Individual words of this (private) 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." (**Philo. Inv.** : 243). Is this explanation an obscure one? Since the idea of private language is denounced in the end by Wittgenstein as notoriously confused one, there is no question of giving examples of sentences or words belonging to it. In fact, Wittgenstein wonders what such sentences and words can be. It is therefore difficult to see any substance in the complaints made by J. F. Thompson and H. N. Castaneda that Wittgenstein's notion of a private

language is obscure one. (Refer: **Knowledge and Experience**, ed. C. D. Rollins, pp. 90,121-23). But if anyone indeed wants to know what this notion of private language is like, he is simply called upon to see what Carnap is setting up as a protocol language. Words and sentences of the protocol language are believed to refer to immediate sensations and the individual using them alone understands them. Even though, according to Carnap, they must refer to physical events, they are not deprived of the privacy which is built into them by the fact that they are protocol sentences. Such a language can only be a philosophical presupposition giving rise to muddles we have if we consider skeptic's argument denying the knowledge of other minds.

Let us suppose that Ayer's Crusoe has Carnap's protocol language as an explicit philosophical presupposition of his programme. He is introduced into a Society of human beings who experience pain but who can control it to such an extent that there is no expression of pain-behaviour. With regard to pain-sensations, let us suppose further that Crusoe evinces enough philosophical sophistication to construct the following argument. Since the words of his private language refer to his own immediate sensations, viz. pain, and since he alone can verify it in his own experience and further since the realm of his experience can never overlap with that of another person, he will set the following premise:

I cannot feel another person's sensations, in this case,  
pain. (pr. 1)

From this premise he would straightaway go on to argue that:

Therefore, I cannot know the pain-sensations another  
person is having. (C)

It is obvious that in order to make the argument valid, Ayer's Crusoe, who now poses himself as a skeptic about the knowledge of other minds, will have to admit certain other premises, such as

The only appropriate way of knowing another  
person's pain-sensations is to feel that person's  
sensations. (pr. 2)



or again,

To feel one's own sensations is also to know one's  
own sensations. (pr. 3.)

One can see that this is the usual skeptical argument given to assert that while I alone have the privileged access to my own sensations I can never make any knowledge-claim with regard to the sensations of others. After raising the question of the possibility of private language, Wittgenstein immediately attacks the premises of the skeptical Crusoe. But the attack has to go through certain stages.

Firstly he clarifies that the sensation-words which we use in ordinary language to speak about my sensations or the sensations of others, such as e.g., 'I am in pain' and 'he is in pain' do not form the part of the private language to which he is referring. Some thinkers have gone to the extent of maintaining that since sensations are private and since all of us have names of sensations in our vocabulary, such utterances as 'I am in pain,' 'He is in pain', etc. constitute private language and that that itself constitutes a counter-example to Wittgenstein's thesis. It is very necessary to note that the ordinary sensation-words do not perplex Wittgenstein at all. These words are learnt by us by reference to the natural expressions of sensations with which they are, so to say, tied up. These words thereby satisfy the needs which Wittgenstein sets up for the normal language-games. (I shall assume here a fair knowledge of Wittgenstein's notion of language-game and of his remarks in earlier sections, about what is involved in understanding language,) These words have a regular use in our language. As Rush Rhees argues, the case of the knowledge of sensations is not indeed different from the case of knowing the colours (though there might be some important differences in the two.)

"I cannot learn the colour unless I can see it;  
but I cannot learn it without language either.

I know it because I know the language. And it is similar with sensations. I know a headache, when I feel it, and I know I felt giddy yesterday afternoon, because I know



what giddiness is. I can remember the sensation I had, just as I can remember the colour I saw. I feel the same sensation and that is the same colour. But the identity—the sameness—comes from the language."

The language of pain becomes meaningful, or it makes sense to say '**I am in pain again**' or '**he is in pain again**' mainly because the word 'pain' has a **regular use** and because **we know this use** when we know what pain is. The conclusion of the skeptic is therefore based on the erroneously conceived grammar of the sensation-words. The conclusion therefore loses all its credibility. "If we are using the word 'to know' as it is normally used (and how else are we to use it?) then other people very often know when I am in pain." (PI : 246). Wittgenstein questions the very use of the expression 'I know' when some one says, 'I know that I am in pain'. (While Wittgenstein rejects this cartesian 'I know' in respect of sensations, he also rejects the behavioristic interpretation of our knowledge of sensation-words.)

He has not as yet touched the philosopher's private language. Since the various premises are based upon skeptic's wrongly conceived grammar of sensation-words or again of the concept of knowledge, he could have dismissed those premises without much ado. But since he suspects that the trouble is deeper, he felt it necessary to probe further into the nature of the so-called private language and to show exactly where the trouble lies. He wanted to exercise the ghost of private language which has haunted even some of the present-day-philosophers. He conceives of an imaginative experiment of constructing signs or words for the sensations which one feels but which are cut off from the human behaviour or the expression which normally accompanies them. The natural behavioral expression of the sensations has got to be cut off in order to render the language strictly private in the sense that the individual alone has the access to their understanding. In PI: 257, Wittgenstein contends that it is impossible for the individual to name the sensations in a circumstance in which Ayer places his Crusoe. No one can indeed claim that Ayer's Crusoe **knows** his sensations, unless he has named them.

Because in order to name any sensation, "a great deal of stage setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense. And when we speak of someone's having given a name to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word 'pain'; it shows the post where the new word is stationed." (PI : 257) The diary argument, with its grave doubts on the role which concentration and memory can perform in the naming ceremony, leading upto the questions of criteria of identity of sensations, is brought in by Wittgenstein to reinforce this very point made in PI : 257. Ayer's Crusoe indeed cannot overcome all these obstacles and name a single sensation. The reason is that he cannot play the normal language-game. He does not have rules to follow, but if he does not have rules to follow, he does not have language either. Wittgenstein's remark that "the proposition 'Sensations are private' is comparable to 'one plays patience by oneself' (PI : 248) has this significance that setting up of a private language would involve abrogation of a normal language game. How can one obtain a criterion of identity of sensations? Even if one gets how can one avoid the possibility of error? In spite of all this, if one still persists in holding that he knows what pain is only from his own case, Wittgenstein's beetle-in-the-box-argument would be able to give him final disillusionment in so far as it shows that if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and designation,' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant. (PI :293). The only way for the skeptic to get to the knowledge of the sensations is also thus blocked.

Wittgenstein's attack against skeptic's argument is indeed manifold and complex. I have dealt with it in so far as it involves the idea of a private language. In view of Wittgenstein's pointed attack, I do not think that the idea is likely to raise its head any longer. There are many things which Wittgenstein says on the question of ownership of experience, the concept of a criterion (here as also elsewhere) and the use of 'know' in the Skeptic's argument. I cannot obviously deal with all of them especially when I have confined this short paper to the exploration of Wittgenstein's strategy in rejecting the possi-

bility of private language. Wittgenstein has tried to remove all the temptation to indulge in the philosophical enterprise of setting up anything like private language. If philosophers have fallen victim to it, the reason is that they have taken a very simple view of language—especially the language of sensations. Wittgenstein asks us to "make a radical break with the idea that language functions in one way, always serves same purpose: to convey thoughts — which may be about houses, pains, good and evil or anything else you please." (PI : 304)

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