PRIVATE LANGUAGE AND AYER'S CRUSOE

I

In his *Philosophical Investigations*,[1] Wittgenstein characterises a private language as follows: "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" (243). In Malcolm's words, it is a language "that not merely is not but *cannot* be understood by anyone other than the speaker."[2] Malcolm further says that 'cannot' here is to be a logical 'cannot'; so a private language is one of which it is not merely the case that it is not understood by anyone other than the speaker, but more that it is logically impossible that it should be understood by anyone other than the speaker.

Having characterised a private language thus, Wittgenstein asks: In what sense are the sensations to which this language is supposed to refer 'private'? (PI, 246.). According to him, sensations are private in the sense that only the speaker of the language can know about them and that only the speaker can have them: "Only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it" (PI, 246); "Another person can't have my pains" (PI, 253). In other words, sensations are called 'private' if only the person who has the sensations can really know for certain that he has them, and what he has are unsharable and non-transferable. So the sensations to which a private language is supposed to refer must have no 'natural expressions', since if the words used are 'tied up' with such expressions, someone else might understand them, and in that case the language would not be called 'private' in the sense required.

Now, is it possible to have, or imagine the possibility of a language in which names of sensations, feelings etc. occur when these are supposed to be entirely 'private' in the sense just specified? "Let us", says Wittgenstein,

"imagine the following case. I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign "S" and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. — I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated. — But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition. — How? Can I point to the sensation? Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation — and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. — But what is this ceremony for? for that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign. — Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation. — But "I impress it on myself" can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: Whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about "right" " (PI, 258).

This argument is followed by Wittgenstein's claim that the diarist here cannot even be permitted to associate his sensation with the sign 'S'. "What reason have we for calling "S" the sign for a *sensation?* For "sensation" is a word of our common language, not of one intelligible to me alone. So the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands" (PI, 261). Hence the diarist would have no reason for calling 'S' the 'sign for a sensation'. It would not also help to say that when he uses the sign 'S', he has something, since the words 'has' and 'something' also belong to our common language. Wittgenstein's point is that in calling 'S' the sign for a sensation we presuppose it to be intelligible in our common language, whereas 'S' is supposed to be intelligible only to the diarist, that is, to the speaker of a private language. The import of this argument is that no knowledge of the common language must be presupposed if one is to construct a private lan-

guage and Wittgenstein seems to be suggesting that. That is, a private language must not be based in any way on the knowledge of a common language. So, in the end, the attempt to use a private language would mean that one would be reduced to uttering merely inarticulate sounds. This means that a private language is not a language at all.

II

Since Wittgenstein seems to be suggesting that a private language must not be based on any knowledge of a common language, the problem of private language is sometimes taken by philosophers as involving the question whether a person who had been completely isolated from other people since early infancy could invent a language of his own. So, in order to maintain the possibility of a private language Ayer is supposed to be on the right lines in considering the case of a Robinson Crusoe left alone on an island while still an infant unable to speak. We shall now see whether such an attempt as made by Ayer[3] can really solve the problem of a private language — a language which is absolutely 'private' in the required sense.

Ayer thinks that as Crusoe grows to manhood in his island, he would be able to recognise many things he sees around him, in the sense that he adapts his behaviour to them. It is then not self-contradictory to think that Crusoe might conceivably develop names for them. As Crusoe has only his memory to rely on whether he is trying to identify objective things or subjective sensations, his position is also not any worse when it comes to inventing certain signs or words as names of his sensations. On the whole, Ayer maintains that there is nothing wrong with the supposition that Crusoe might come to develop a private language of his own and that his language is as rule-governed as ours. Assuming that Crusoe can develop a language of his own, Ayer argues that on the arrival of Man Friday it achieves much significance. He considers the possibility that Man Friday might be so mentally and emotionally attuned to Crusoe that whenever one of them experienced a certain sensation, the other experienced it also — whenever one of

them described what he was feeling, the other might very well follow the description, even though he had no external evidence to guide him. Ayer even admits the extreme difficulty of mutual understanding of each other's private experiences by asserting that Man Friday might conceivably 'see into Crusoe's soul' and understand his language although his own experiences were unlike Crusoe's. Ayer appears to think that if Crusoe could use the names of his sensations consistently when Man Friday was present he could surely have done it when he was still alone.

But because of the very nature of our language it seems very doubtful whether an individual like Ayer's Crusoe who is isolated on an island from infancy could ever come to form a language of his own 'privately'. The characteristic of a language is that the meanings of words and the rules of their use are something which have to be learned; they are something which have to be kept. As because they are kept, we can call an object by a name and identify it to be the same. The naming and identifying of objects already presuppose a language; they are something which belong to the language we already know. We can invent names for our sensations because we speak language in which there are names of sensations. We can say that we are in pain again, because the word 'pain' has a regular use in our language, and because we know it, we know what pain is. Thus, as Wittgenstein says, we cannot talk about our sensations unless we already know a language. This means that our learning to talk about publicly observable objects is logically and temporarily prior to our learning to talk about our sensations. As Wittgenstein remarks, if human beings showed no outward signs of pain, it would be impossible to teach a child the use of the word 'toothache' (PI, 257). Hence, all the things done by Ayer's Crusoe — e.g., inventing names, calling things by a certain name, recognising a sensation etc. — already presuppose a language. In other words, all these cannot be done by Crusoe 'privately', i.e. independently of having learned a public language.

Again, even if Ayer's Crusoe might conceivably develop a language for his 'private use', yet his language, as Ayer tries to maintain it, cannot be called 'private' in the sense required. Although Crusoe is completely isolated from other people and his language is in fact unshared, yet it is sharable as Ayer conceives. Even if there may be no one to agree with Crusoe's judgments, but if there were some one (e.g., when Man Friday was present), the agreement might conceivably take place. In this respect Crusoe's language may be considered analogously with soliloquist's language. The soliloquist's language also is designed not for communication, but for 'private use'. His language also is rule-governed, like ours. But even if the soliloquist is quite solitary, his language too, though not shared, is sharable. There may be none to agree with what he says, but if somebody were there, he could agree. This point of the 'possibility of agreement', that is, the possibility of being understood by others is important here — because of this it makes sense to say that the soliloquist has a language. The necessity of agreement in language as emphasized by Wittgenstein[5] concerns only what must be possible, not what must be actual. Agreement determines the method of measurement, and a method of measurement is conceived of as a possible state of affairs which the world either satisfies or does not. So our agreement in 'methods of measurement' does not make our sentences determine the world, but only the possibilities which the world must satisfy. Similarly, the necessary conditions involved in the existence of language imply only 'possible sociality', only the 'possibility of inter-personal discourse', not its actuality.[6] The language of Ayer's Crusoe is grounded on such possible sociality or inter-personal discourse. Hence his language would not be called 'private' in the required sense, but it would be a public language in principle, in the sense that it could possibly be learned by others; only, it could not, in practice be understood by others unless its inventor were in a position to explain it or provide clues for understanding it. What is ruled out in Wittgenstein's attack on the possibility of a private langu-

age is not the imaginary soliloquist or Ayer's Crusoe, but one whose concepts, rules and opinions are essentially unsharable, rather than contingently unshared. What is difficult to understand is the private understanding of something, whose sense is given by private reference, and whose sence cannot be given in a language which anyone can understand.

Moreover, the very idea of one's inventing a language is absurd. "No one could invent just language. Language goes with a way of living. An invented language would be a wall-paper pattern; nothing more".[7] Language, as Wittgenstein suggests, should be thought of as something that is essentially a social institution, that it is a part of human behaviour. When we talk of something, our words do not refer to it unless there is a 'way' in which the language is spoken, or the expressions are used. This 'way' goes with the way people live, or with what Wittgenstein calls 'a form of life' — a common way of conceptualising experience together with the accompanying kinds of behaviour. Therefore, the meaning of words presupposes the idea of people meaning things; it consists in the function of human practices and human institutions.

But although it is true that language is first and foremost a social affair, which is developed as a means of communication between individuals and not as a means whereby a man communicates with himself, yet, it is interesting to note, as Ayer does,[8] that some particular human being must have been the first to use a symbol. The whole notion of a man completely isolated from early infancy, so as to develop a way of thinking and talking is, indeed, the one which needs a great deal of critical philosophical attention. But what should be noticed is that these are all beside the point of the problem of private language and must not be confused with it. Therefore, Ayer does not succeed in maintaining the possibility of a private language by bringing in the example of a Robinson Crusoe.

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NOTES

1. Translated by Anscombe, G. E. M., Third Edition, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1968 (hereafter to be referred to as 'PI').
2. Malcolm, N., *"Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations"*, reprinted in *Wittgenstein, The Philosophical Investigations,* ed. G. Pitcher, Macmillan, 1968, p. 66.
3. Ayer, A. J., *"Can There be a Private Language?"* reprinted in, *Wittgenstein, The Philosophical Investigations,* ed. G. Pitcher, Macmillan, 1968, pp. 251-266.
4. cf. Rhees, R., *"Can There be a Private Language?"* reprinted in *Wittgenstein, The Philosophical Investigations,* ed. G. Pitcher, Macmillan, 1968, pp. 267-285.
5. 'If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (queer as this may sound) in judgments. This seems to abolish logic, but does not do so. — It is one thing to describe methods of measurement, and another to obtain and state results of measurement. But what we call "measuring" is partly determined by a certain constancy in results of measurement' (PI, 242).
6. cf. Hacker, P.M.S., *Insight and Illusion,* Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, p. 222.
7. Rhees, R., op. cit., p. 278.
8. Ayer, A. J., op. cit., p. 259.