

*Philosophical Investigations* §§ 243-315

Some notes from lectures 9 & 10 the argument against a private language and the inner/outer distinction

For background reading on the PLA, see the chapters on private language and inner/out in McGinn, also the chapter on private language in Stern. Child is good too.

**1 calibration in subjectivity – private ostension**

The question left last time was this:

Q21 Can sensation talk be calibrated in subjectivity?

Wittgenstein claims (258) that the private linguist has no calibration for his private words: there is no correct/seems correct distinction in the PL. And if no distinction between correct/seems correct, no real content to 'correct', so no distinction between correct/incorrect. So no meaning.

Why does the PL lack the correct/incorrect distinction?

A popular answer to that last question (Hacker, Budd, Grayling and many others) is that the notion of correctness is essentially public. If so, why doesn't that just beg the question against the PL?

McGinn is subtly different (and Stern is similar to McGinn). McGinn gives prominence to what she calls Wittgenstein's 'grammatical investigation'. This is the close examination of the grammar of our talk about sensations and it is this examination that reveals that the correct/incorrect distinction requires a notion of the use of sensation words in a 'surround', the context of the structure of activities that make up a life. That surround is not private. (Although why not private? Why not a private surround?) But if the grammatical investigation reveals that that is how sensation talk gets to be meaningful (in a surround that, in including a life, is not thereby private), then what the private linguist attempts is impossible. But the impossibility is not shown by a direct argument that sets out a problem for the PL; rather, it arises from the investigation that reveals that what the PL tries to do in 258 is utterly detached from the circumstances that the grammatical investigation reveals to be the basis for having a correct/incorrect distinction. (Stern puts the matter in a similar way.) They both emphasise that the problem for the PL in 258 is not about memory, or how an 'inner pointing' might fail to establish a meaning that can be carried to future uses. The problem is the total lack of meaning at all in the attempt at the 'inner pointing'. Note, the point that the problem concerns establishing a meaning 'in the first place' seems exactly right. That is what Wittgenstein says. But now, two observations on this approach (McGinn and Stern): (i) everything hangs on the status of the grammatical investigation. It appears to be a description of ordinary use, but it has to bear the weight of showing that establishing meaning in the PL case is impossible. Still not obvious that a Cartesian should be impressed by this argument structure. Why does an examination of how we ordinarily use words show that a purported theoretical idea (the idea of a PL) cannot make sense? (ii) In so far as there is a specific argument in 258 aside from the grammatical investigation that goes right from there to §315 and later, then the argument in 258 is just about the impossibility of establishing a meaning by inner acts of ostension.

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So, if Q21 is taken to mean "Can sensation talk be calibrated in subjectivity by inner acts of ostension", the answer in 258, on the McGinn/Stern reading is 'No.'

Also, both McGinn and Stern emphasise that what is going on in 258 is a re-run of the argument in the opening sections against ostensive definition as a fundamental

method of assigning meaning to words. See especially Stern's discussion of this. He takes 258 to be offering the 'paradox of private ostensive definition' akin to what was mentioned in §28 as the 'paradox of ostensive definition'. So both McGinn and Stern see 258 as continuing a line of argument that I have suggested is simply missing from the opening sections. Put another way: if the suggestion that Wittgenstein is not critiquing ostension in the opening sections is right, why couldn't ostension be used by the PL in the sort of scenario envisaged in §258? I think that point is well made, but then I think there is more going on in §258 than a critique of inner acts of ostension. If that is right, there is more argument to be unpacked to see what the force is of the impossibility claim in §258 (not possible to have the correct/incorrect distinction) and the general investigation of the relationship between the inner and outer. And if there is more argument to be unpacked, then Wittgenstein's view on the inner/outer issue is not just a summary of the examination of ordinary usage; it involves substantive philosophical theorising of the sort that might change our self understanding.

Note also, the idea that inner acts of ostension are problematic does seem to one that Wittgenstein voices, e.g. the beetle in the box example, §293, the concern about a something where a nothing would do just as well, §304. But perhaps that concern is not so much about the ostension as the notion of the 'object' that is experienced when awareness focuses on subjectivity. This point, call it the oddity of the 'inner talisman' as an item that explains or constitutes what it is to be in various psychological states, is a common thread in Wittgenstein. (Pears, *False Prison* vol 2 introduced the notion of the mental talisman).

#### Oddity of the mental talisman

E.g., McGinn pp.114-15 on the phrase 'Now I understand':

'...use of the words, "Now I understand..." does not connect with an inner process that occurs inside the speaker, but with the structure of the life into which the person has been acculturated and which gives his current actions their particular significance.'

Five observations on this:

- (a) The rejection of 'inner process' is the rejection of the mental talisman. It does seem a Witt target in many places.
- (b) 'structure of life' what does this mean and how does a descriptive investigation of ordinary grammar connect the phrase 'Now I understand' with the structure of life? If we just say that only of subjects who behave a certain way can we say of them that they have an inner life (cp. §281), so unless the behaviour is such-and-such we cannot say that they have an inner life – then why isn't that behaviourism?
- (c) Obviously, if the description of the behaviour is psychologically rich, that avoids reductionist behaviourism, but then the account of behaviour is then 'merely' (?) descriptive. It provides a log of our ordinary ways of talking. Doesn't this mean that the putative private linguist then faces the charge that they are talking in ways at odds with our ordinary ways? To which they might simply agree! And it's again not clear what the force is of the thought that being at odds with ordinary ways of talking amounts to failing to say anything at all!
- (d) 'acculturation' we should be very wary of this. This is not Wittgenstein's word for training. It is a mistake to take the loose English concept of training and read into it the notion of acculturation or *bildung* (for a close German equivalent). Wittgenstein's word for training is the crude concept of *abrichtung*. The use of 'acculturation' signals the descriptive status of McGinn's notion of 'structure of life'. Not clear that Wittgenstein has the same idea in mind.
- (e) 'current actions gets significance form structure' How? Presumably not causally, that would be odd. But if the answer is 'grammatically', then again we're being offered a description of how sensation words are used when we're not doing

philosophy. But the PL might say, 'So what! I'm doing philosophy and I need a different more precise use.' And to say that the grammatical investigation shows the impossibility of doing philosophy you would need to show, rather than just repeat, the claim that anything other than the ordinary use is incoherent.

Upshot: I suggest we still need an argument that shows the PL is incoherent.

### **Back to private ostension again**

McGinn at pp.121-22:

'...the connection is secured by the grammar of the concept, by virtue of the fact that it is used as a new means<sup>a\*</sup> to express what is felt. The connection between 'pain' and what a subject feels is achieved, not by where the child looks<sup>b\*</sup> when he learns a word, but by the grammar<sup>c\*</sup> of the concept that is being taught.'

Point \*a: 'new means' seem right, but then the word replaces the natural expression.

The 'natural expression' suggests already a structure of behaviour that expresses/reveals/makes manifest that one is in pain

Point \*b: 'achieved not by where the child looks' seems right if anti the idea of pointing at an inner object, but what about 'awareness of sensation' where the sensation is part of how things are for me?

Point \*c: achieved by grammar – but that stands at odds with the point about 'new means' for the idea of 'replacing' the natural expression suggests a structure already available in behaviour for expressing pain, so why is the connection 'achieved' by grammar instead of the connection between word and sensation merely inheriting the connection between natural expression and sensation? And we still talk straightforwardly of sensation as an element of subjectivity. No need to worry that we've got outer behaviour in its place. We've got sensation, 'cos it's always been there on display in the natural structure of the natural expression.

### **Calibration in subjectivity**

The model of 'inner pointing' is odd and really misleading if it suggests we look for objects of a special status, a spooky mental talisman, or a private inner sensation. But if our model allowed the idea of 'awareness of sensation', 'awareness of how things are in subjectivity', then not clear what's wrong with it.

So the line to pursue in answering Q21 in the affirmative is to say that calibration can be achieved in subjectivity by one's awareness of how things are in subjectivity. If that's okay, why can't the PL use it? What really disables the PL from giving an account of that? Why, if they go for that approach, do they fail to get a correct/seems correct distinction?

If introspection is just:

awareness of sensation

then why can't that provide calibration? Why can't grammar be answerable to this awareness of sensation? I suspect the short answer to this is that calibration in subjectivity along these lines is fine just so long as we endorse the following:

Subjectivity ('inner') interpenetrates with the 'outer' – the world

or,

How things are for me is part of how things are.

Call this the dissolution thesis (DT) – dissolution of the inner/outer distinction.

Arguing for the dissolution thesis

Cf MCDowell 'Singular thoughts and the extent of inner space', esp §5. (Hint: the bit

about 'extent of inner space' is the idea that inner space is, as it were, 'far out'. It reaches into and intermingles with outer space. They are not fundamentally disjoint.) This flows from McD's analysis of what's really wrong with Cartesian. McD suggests that what is distinctive of the Cartesian conception of the inner requires two claims. The first is instructive but innocent; i.e. not incompatible with having a correct/incorrect distinction for sensation talk. The second claim is the one that provides the disjoint between inner and outer and does so in a way that renders problematic, if not incoherent, the idea that sensation talk is answerable to the correct/incorrect distinction. That is to say, it is the second claim that disables the private linguist from establishing meaning.

The first claim is:

(a) subjectivity is a realm of truth

All this means is that how things are for me constitutes bona fide facts about the world. There are things to be spoken of and spoken about re how things are for me and our speaking about them are candidates for truth/falsity. So talk of how things are for me is talk that has the correct/incorrectness distinction.

Note, to ascribe this claim to Wittgenstein is potentially at odds with some of the things he says, e.g. the §246 claim that, in one sense, it cannot be said of me that I know that I am in pain. On one interpretation of that remark, the point is that 'I am in pain' is not an object of cognition for me, for it's not a genuine saying (has a proper propositional content).

McD says (a) marks an important difference between Descartes' response to scepticism compared to the response to scepticism in ancient philosophy. But (a) is, with regard to what interests us, innocent.

It is the second claim of Cartesianism that is problematic. It is,

(b) subjectivity is transparent

This means that my knowledge of how things are for me is infallible. I can know my subjectivity through and through with utter transparency. It is impossible for me to be mistaken about subjectivity. There is no possibility of error. How things seem to me regarding subjectivity = how things are.

But that means, on the conception of subjectivity that has both (a) and (b), there is no gap between how things seem and how things are. It is impossible to get the inner world wrong. That is what cuts off the inner from the outer. But the point is not just the familiar Cartesian thought that this makes the inner non-physical in contrast to the outer. The point is much more problematic than that. The point is that on this conception of subjectivity the entitlement to call the inner an 'inner world' is problematic, if not incoherent. The notion of the world just is the notion of how things are, where 'how things are' is independent of will or, to put it another way, independent of how things seem. But on assumption (b), the Cartesian has no distinction between how things are and how things seem for the inner world. But that means it's not a real conception of a world. It's a fantasy. It's like an imagined world. It lacks the requisite independence required to have the correct/seems correct distinction. Lacking that distinction, talk that purports to be about such a realm lacks a correctness/incorrectness distinction. Such talk therefore lacks meaning.

If Cartesianism = (a) + (b), the Cartesian has no notion of truth, as independent of will, so he does not really have (a). The idea that the inner is a realm apt for truth is undermined by (b). The combination is incoherent. There is no criterion for truth, because no model or metaphysic for the correct/incorrect distinction.

Lack of a criterion here does not = lack of something public and does not = lack of something physical or outer, or external, or behavioural. Lack of a criterion just means there is lack of a model or metaphysic of that structure that provides the notion of things independent of will.

Ordinary public talk about sensations is truth apt not because it is public, but because it does not have (b).

How do we get by with (a) without (b)?

Answer: by accepting that, having allowed (a) and the idea that subjectivity is real, there are such things as sensations and we can have awareness of them (indeed, perhaps even that our awareness of them provides us with the means to calibrate our talk about them), then all we need is to acknowledge the dissolution thesis (DT):

DT how things are for me is part of how things are.

And that, although it can sound like a platitude, is the result of taking seriously an idea mentioned a couple of lectures back re McDowell on rule-following – the idea that knowledge of truth-conditions can be commonplace. It can be (note, not always, just ‘can be’) that our epistemic access to how things are for another is as unproblematic as our epistemic access to trees and stones, for how it is with them is just part of how things are. A price one pays for (DT) is to accept that this means, in one’s own case, that if how things are for me is on a par with how things are, then just as I can (and sometimes do) get the latter wrong, then so too must it be possible to get the former wrong. So, epistemically, my grip on my subjectivity is like my grip on the physical world and on how things are with others. In all cases, I am prone to get things wrong from time to time. But the prize that comes from accepting that is to have a conception of subjectivity as not over and above or utterly disjoint from how things are, it is to have our mindedness as part of the world. That is what you get from denying (b). You deny the fracture between mindedness and the world. But then, with the loss of transparency - (b), there is nothing to stand in the way of the thought that

Sensation talk can be calibrated in subjectivity

for the ‘in subjectivity’ locution does not signal another place, something disjoint from everything else; it merely signals that calibration can be achieved in one’s awareness of one’s sensations, for one’s sensations are just a part of the ongoing history of happenings in the world.

Two closing quick thoughts:

(1) Descartes might not have been bothered by the above if the metaphysics of subjectivity were provided not by being intergrated with the rest of things but by being integrated with how God sees things. God as underwriter for the structure of objectivity. That might be a coherent position for Descartes, although unless the ontological argument works, it’s not a response that’s going anywhere fast.

(2) McGinn’s emphasis, in her chapter on the inner/outer, on the indeterminacy of our psychological self-awareness makes sense on the assumption that subjectivity is not transparent.

And one last issue.....

McGinn and Stern (and many others besides) present Wittgenstein as not so much arguing against the PL as pointing out that, in the light of a grammatical investigation, no content can be given to the idea of a PL. This sits best with the sort of quietist reading of Wittgenstein, see also Fogelin’s (2009) chapter on private language for a similar approach. On this approach, the problem with the PL is, at the end of the day, the urge to do philosophy rather than accept our ordinary usage as okay as it is. But the argument sketched above using McDowell’s diagnosis of what’s wrong with Cartesianism does not look like mere reminders of ordinary usage. For sure it offers claims that appear platitudinous – (DT) – but these are claims that also shake up and re-arrange our self-understanding. Furthermore, they are claims that get supported by quite a lot of detailed philosophical argument. It feels like philosophical theorising is going on. There is an argument against the private linguist. Pears took the PLA as the ‘big argument’ at the heart of the *Philosophical Investigations*. On the reading I am suggesting, Pears is right. See Luntley (2015, *appendix*) for defence of Pears’ reading against critique from Stroud (2002) who pursues a line not dissimilar to McGinn’s.

It looks like some very basic intuitions about truth are being worked out. So is Wittgenstein doing philosophy, not ending it? Isn't he offering theorising and explanation and not merely describing?  
In the last week of term we'll return to consider in more detail some of these methodological issues re what Wittgenstein is doing.

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