Chapter 5. THE PRIVATE LANGUAGE

The question of private language has wide philosophical implications. It not only touches on the nature of language and meaning, but also on the question of an independent self, the status of sensations and ownership of these experiences. It also directly touches upon the broad field of communication. The question of private language and the manner in which Wittgenstein grappled with it reflects the completely novel approach he had developed in his later philosophy.

Private language in a sense is a contradiction in terms. Language as we know it is shared and used in common. It is bequeathed to us as part of our social and cultural heritage. To this phenomenon of a common system of rules and expressions we normally use the word language. From this point of view it does not make sense to talk of a private language, where 'private' is meant to convey a total isolation and independence from the normal set up of language function. If, however, 'private' is used in a relative sense as a secret code of an individual, which he uses, let us say, to maintain his diary then it is not objectionable. But the point we must emphasise here is that however secret such a code may be, it is in principle possible to translate it into another language, and teach it to another person. Thus, it is not private in an absolute sense. Wittgenstein's criticisms against private language were not directed to the above variety. What he has conceived to show was that it was impossible to talk of an absolutely private language, which is completely and totally inaccessible to anybody
except the owner.

We shall discuss on the basis of his approach to language and sensations how he showed the impossibility of a private language.

What are private languages? They are not very clearly defined: However, Wittgenstein gives the following definition:

"... The individual words or 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"

(P I 243).

To Rush Rhees, this question of private languages can be understood if we know how words mean:

"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".

Our words make a difference to our behaviour. They rouse reactions and they are part of reactions. Words are not empty sounds or marks on the paper. They have a definite function. This function is governed by certain broad regularities. That is how we are in a position to learn languages. These broad regularities of language are determined by regularities in non-verbal contexts. There are certain 'relatively invariant' features of our experience which are reflected by the way in which language indicate that there are 'rules' which reflect the basic agreement of people who use language. At least at certain specifiable levels words used, produce similar
reactions. Unless and until, we have such a stock of similar reactions and a basic agreement, words used will fail to have any significance. When we talk of knowing what a word means, it actually means that we are acquainted with its use. Now use implies a regularity. If I agree to use a word like 'red' to refer to a certain patch of colour, then I am bound to use that word whenever that patch of colour is to be referred. I might decide to change it, but when I must stick to the new usage. If I keep changing indiscriminately and without a regularity or pattern in the change, there will be a breakdown in communication. Thus, the word is incorporated into a preconceived system of behaviour and that is how it acquires meaning. It is not by bare ostensive definition that the meaning of the word is acquired. Language learning presupposes a kind of stage setting.

In discussing private language, we have to distinguish two parts of it. One about language and the other about experience. According to Wittgenstein, private language is a result of mistake committed both in connection with experience and language. In connection with experience the mistake lies in supposing that is was private (ownership), and in language the mistake lies in supposing that meaning can be acquired by bare ostensive definition. We have seen earlier that the mistake about language was because of the idea that the bare ostensive definition could teach meaning without any training.
The primary question is how do words refer to sensations. Sensations are private, in the sense my toothache is experienced by me and not by someone else. In this sense sensations are private but the language which is used to refer to them is public because it is learnt in course of time. For example giving the sensations a name like pain, we have already pointed out, presupposes stage setting. One cannot learn the use of the word pain, without relating it to pain behaviour. It is in a sense a substitute to the cries and groans that normally are considered the natural expressions of pain. Thus, the word pain is learnt to be used along with pain-behaviour. Normally such a suggestion produces a sceptical reaction. After all we are habituated to think that we know the meaning and use of the word pain, without having pain. We can also be in pain without saying it or showing it. In this sense it is sometimes argued that pain and the pain expressions are not connected necessarily. However Wittgenstein's argument would be that expression cannot be dis-associated from behaviour.

"It is essential to the language-game with the word 'pain' that the people who play it both behave in the particular way we call expressing pain and sometimes more or less entirely conceal their pain."

The main thrust of Wittgenstein's argument is that, the word pain is not merely a description of the behaviour of a human being undergoing a certain sensation, but rather it takes its place.
"Thus Wittgenstein's position differs from behaviourism. If pain is identified with pain behaviour, then 'A is in pain' means 'A is behaving in such and such way'. But Wittgenstein rejects this interpretation of his theory that pain language is connected with pain behaviour. 'Pain' does not mean crying: the verbal expression of pain does not describe the natural expression of pain, but takes its place (P.I. I 244)."5

The connection that exists between the word and the sensation is a learned one. Thus, it presupposes training in certain circumstances and contexts. The word 'pain' is learnt in relation to the various circumstances that go under pain behaviour. So we see that 'connections' between words and the sensations they refer to do not come about through some secret process. It is not determined by some innate knowledge but rather is an outcome of a process common to all of us, in relation to circumstances.

On the Notion of Private:

According to Wittgenstein the statement 'sensations are private' could have two different meanings. Firstly it could be private in the sense that only I can know that my sensations occur and secondly in the sense only I can own them. In the first sense of privacy it tandem amounts to saying "Only I can know whether I am really in pain; another person can only surmise it" (P. I 246). And the second sense means "Another person cannot have my pain" (P I 253).

The first thesis that 'private' means that only I can know that I am in pain implies also that other people cannot know that
I am in pain. In the normal sense of the word 'know' such a conclusion is totally unwarranted, because it is a fact that other people do know when I am in pain (for e.g., when I cut my finger and cry out of pain). Any other sense of the word 'know', for Wittgenstein is totally irrelevant and nonsense.6. One of the reasons why people believe that one can never know that the other man is in pain is the possibility of pretence. To this Wittgenstein has an adequate answer. He argues that even 'pretence' 'lying' etc. are learnt like any other behav-

"Are we perhaps over hasty in our assumption that
the smile of an unweaned infant is not a pretence?—
And on what experience is our assumption based?
(Lying is a language game that needs to be learned
like any other one)" (P I 249).

Sometimes it is objected that it is not possible to know another man's pain, because to know it would be to have it. Thus, it makes no sense to say that A knows B's pain. To this Wittgen-
stein's reply is that it is equally senseless to say A does not know B's pain. It is analogous to saying "There is no goal in an endurance race" (Blue Book 54). What we are doing here is to give certain meanings to our words in the language games, and then to forget their application as we begin to use them.

Wittgenstein is equally critical about the statement "I can know that I am in pain". He thinks it sounds more like a joke. It is senseless to say that "I can know when I am in pain". I do not have to learn about my pain, the way others do about my pain.
since I am experiencing the pain myself. The senselessness of it comes out when we contrast such a statement as above with 'I doubt if I am in pain'. Both knowing and doubting about my pain are irrelevant. What is involved when I have pain, is not the recogni-
tion of it, but the feeling of it. Someoneelse may recognise it, in which case he has knowledge about my pain. So it makes no sense to say "I can know that I am in pain".

One of the fundamental problems connected with private language is one of ownership. Traditionally it is customary to suppose that when somebody says 'I have pain', what is meant is that pain belongs to that person in the same sense as an object can belong to him. Similarity of language-structure gives rise to the feeling that they have a similar meaning. Wittgenstein was quite concerned with this question. In what sense is 'having' used here. Can anyone have my pain the way my wife can share my bank account? For Wittgenstein, the possessor of pain is one who expresses it:

"Pain-behaviour can point to a painful place but the subject of pain is the person who gives it expression" (P I 302).

Wittgenstein argues that it is not impossible to conceive of me feeling pain in someone else's body. For example, if I feel pain, whenever someone else cuts his finger, this would mean that I can feel the pain in someone else's body. It is not possible to use the criterion of body to identify pain. Pain, is my pain only if I express it.

One of the issues connected with the 'identity of pain is the use of the word 'I'. Wittgenstein thinks that 'I' creates lot of
confusion in our thinking. The important thing is to realize that 'I' is a mode of representation and does not have content which is the owner. He points out that in feeling pain, we do not experience the 'I'

"The experience of feeling pain is not that a person 'I' has something. I distinguish an intensity, a location etc. in the pain, but not an owner" (P.R. 94).

The question of ownership arises when we try to distinguish another persons' toothache and mine. Now, toothache is distinguished by intensity and by location. It need not be referred to the 'owner' to be recognised. By bringing in the 'owner' as the defining mark, nothing is achieved. Some people might want to bring in the owner, when they find that the toothache of two persons have the same intensity and characteristics. Then, according to them the different owners will be the differentiating agents. Wittgenstein, as discussed above, does not believe that that the owner can make any difference, because the 'owner' refers to no particular content:

"But if it is objected that the distinction is simply that in one case I have it, in the other he; then the owner is a defining mark of the toothache itself; but then what does the proposition 'I have toothache' (or someone else does) ascertain? Nothing at all". (P. R. 61).

The fact is that there is toothache, it speaks for itself, it stands distinguished. When I say 'I have pain', I have verbalised
independent source to check. If we did when it would not remain a private language any more.

The larger question, can one communicate with oneself? is also equally dubious. If by communication we mean a process that takes place between two individuals or a group of individuals, then communication with oneself is not possible at all. As in the case of those who maintain a diary, can it not be said they are communicating with themselves? In a sense yes, because, the records in a diary are meant to be informative at some later date for the same person. But then, here communication is not totally and completely with oneself in so far as we can say in principle the diary could be read and understood by others as well as oneself. Thus, it is impossible to talk of a private language in an absolute sense.

Cartesianism and Behaviourism 6

Historically and traditionally most philosophical problems were tackled either in terms of rationalism or empiricism. Descartes made a fundamental separation between mind and body and mind was seen as an entity qualitatively different from the body but residing in it. All knowledge emanated from the mind whereas for empiricism knowledge resulted from experience.

Indeed, the controversy between the rationalists and empiricists shows itself even in the private language argument. The 'Cartesian' position would be according to Alan Danagan, "The position I shall call 'Cartesian' is that each man has, in Rylean phrase, 'privileged access' to his own sensations. Not only does he and only he,
have them but he, and only, directly knows that
he has them".

We have discussed the Cartesian doctrine that nobody can know
that I am in pain as untenable. Equally, untenable is the be-
aviourist position that a man learns that he is in pain, more
by his behaviour and the circumstances he is in. In the words
of wittgenstein; 'I cannot be said to learn of (my sensations).
i have them" (E. i. 246).

To Wittgenstein both Cartesians and behaviourists were com-
mitting the same fundamental mistake, though superficially they
might be stressing different aspects of a situation. Now accord-
ing to Wittgenstein it would be wrong to stress the Cartesian
thesis that names are given to processes observed inwardly. This
means that we are neglecting the observable aspects of naming a
sensation. Similarly we would be at fault if we think like the
behaviourists and say that a person knows he is in pain by
observing his behaviour. I am in pain and I do not learn this by
my behaviour, it is self evident. Thus, the behaviourists like the
Cartesians stress only a partial aspect of the total situation to
the exclusion of the others. Wittgenstein hence rejected both
Cartesians and behaviourists as wrong and false.

The problem of private language arises primarily due to the
assumption of an independent self, which is in a dualistic
relation with the body or the world. As we saw, this also gives
rise to two possible interpretations of the private language problem, i.e., Cartesianism and behaviourism. Wittgenstein was not keen on giving a third interpretation, he saw the futility and irrelevance of this whole issue of private language. It was a result of misuse of language.
REFERENCES

1. "A chief complaint against Wittgenstein is that he does not make it sufficiently clear that the idea of a private language includes - what is meant by 'a private language'. It is this complaint that I mean to examine, and I will argue that there can be no such genuine complaint even though it is true that Wittgenstein does not say clearly what is meant by 'a private language'."


3. "The consensus of reactions is in this sense prior to language, but the reactions themselves are not languages, nor are they language. Neither does the agreement in reactions come first or anticipate language. It appears as the language does, it is common way of taking the expressions of the language. They are common reactions within the course of language not to anything there might have been before language or apart from it".

ibid. p.269.


5. ibid. p.184