"Wittgenstein on Private Language"

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ABSTRACT

Language is a social phenomenon and man is inherently a social being. We use language as a medium of communication of our thoughts to others. But if anyone uses a language which is known only to his own private self, not to others then it will hardly be accepted as language. This type of language is called private language in Wittgensteinian sense which is not possible because it cannot be learned and translated to others. The argument against the private language is one of the key parts of Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations. The main purpose of this work is to present his understanding of private language and to outline a number of problems associated with it within Philosophical Investigations.

There can be no doubt that Wittgenstein's 'private language argument' is a most significant contribution to the philosophy of mind in his later phase, especially in the Philosophical Investigations and it is also known that he was against the possibility of private language. His argument against the possibility of private language is an attempt to show that the conception of the mind, the conception of self-consciousness, the conception of the knowledge of other mind and also the conception of perceptual experience, is deeply incoherent. The main reason behind this incoherence is the misconception about language, meaning and understanding. And the misconception is the pre-theoretical assumption that the essential function of words is to name and for sentences is to describe. In this paper we will highlight on why private language is impossible according to Wittgenstein where he clearly emphasizes the essentially public character of language instead of the private in dealing with such issues.

At first, we need to get clear about Wittgenstein's remarks on private language

what he has in his mind when he talks of private language. He defines it in his Philosophical Investigations that "the individual words of 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" (PI 243). Here Wittgenstein raises the question regarding this matter that whether we imagine such language or not. To answer of this question, it is also needed to focus on the background where it is rooted.

From the beginning with Descartes, the tradition of philosophy believed that the starting point for all knowledge and explanation relies on our own direct acquaintance with our own experience and states of mind. For the empiricists, all knowledge and explanation are sensory experience and our reflection upon it which provides the basis for our believes about the existence of external things and other minds. These views prove that a private language is highly possible. Those who believe in private language think that we construct a language by means of private, inner ostensive definitions which links words with experience. Our language expressions are private to us. No one else can have access to such states like our own pains, moods, feelings, and the rest unless their predecessors give expression to them in language or behavior. No one else can experience my moods or pains if I do not wish it. From this it follows that we 'name' our sensations by means of an inner ostention and this suggests that an individual could construct a language for speaking to himself about his sensations and inner life.

We can give a perfect example of a 'private language' which is described by Locke in his work, An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. According to him, the meaning of a word is the mental image in the head or the ideas in the mind and that ideas are private object that exist within the bodies of language speakers. As ideas are invisible or hidden from others, there must be an external way to communicate with one another. For example, if I have an idea of a cat in my mind and since my mind is not accessible directly for others, then how would I share the content of my mind with others. The procedure for sharing the contents of my mind to others is the use of words as a signification of the ideas of my mind. That means, one can match their ideas to a word in a common language and then speak the word to another and after that hearer can match the word to a idea in their mind. Similarly, in Wittgenstein's imaginary private language the meaning of a word refers to the speaker's immediate private sensations. But although here I have mentioned Locke, but it is a question that whether Wittgenstein had Locke in his mind or not because there is no evidence that he had ever read Locke. But Locke's conception is a useful example of private language to compare.

Now let's come to our main discussion Wittgenstein was not interested to teach another person the meaning of the terms of one's private language. He made it clear from the beginning that this type of language is neither teachable, nor intelligible to others. Here Wittgenstein's emphasis is on the public character of language and his denial of private language, however, does not mean that there could not be private experiences of any whatsoever. What Wittgenstein denied was the expressibility of a private experience, not its existence or its possibility. According to Wittgenstein, to speak and understand language is to have a capacity to employ signs in accordance with rules for their use and applying those rules in a

regular technique which reveals the internal relation between a rule and its application. But the private linguists envisaged that understanding the expression of a language is a matter of associating expressions with ideas, sense-impressions or other mental objects. Wittgenstein in Philosophical Investigations puts a question and then gives answer to it: "what would it be like if human beings shewed no outward signs of pain (did not groan, grimace, etc.)? Then it would impossible to teach a child the use of the word 'toothache'" (PI 257).

It suggests that if we think we can derive independently our idea of what pain is or we can name it for talking about pain on the basis of our inner ostention then the fact that we cannot teach others the use of these words is same as what they think because 'pain' is not attached with the pertinent kind of sensation by ostention. Ostensive definition is something that works only in the context of a previously understood convention by pointing or uttering a sound, and so on. As 'pain' does not denote at all, so 'pain' is not a label. Then how is it related with the sensations when we use it to talk about? Wittgenstein says that our 'pain' is a learned substitute for the groaning and winching which is the natural expression of 'pain'. "A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences" (PI 244).

To explicate above things Wittgenstein gives a thought experiment that suppose someone associates a particular sensation with a sign 'S' and then everyday writes this sign in a dairy for its recurrence when the sensation occurs. It is essentially presupposed that no definition of this sign can be given in terms of our public language but he/she can only give himself/herself a kind of ostensive definition. Therefore, Wittgenstein seems that we cannot point to the sensation in the ordinary sense unless we give a clear definition referring to its use. So, the only thing I can do is "when I speak, or write the sign down, at the same time I concentrate my attention on sensation – and so , as it were, point to it inwardly…for in this way I impress it 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 connexion right in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of correctness'' (PI 258).

What Wittgenstein says is that the user of the private language fails to give a meaning to 'S'. The private linguist introduces 'S' by associating it with a sensation, but given that the original sensation is no longer available when he comes to use 'S' in the future. There is nothing that can serve as sample by reference to which this future use of 'S' can be justified. Therefore 'S' has no meaning because there is no way to fix that a future use of 'S' is correct. It is only possible to give a meaning to 'S' if we link its use with public criteria of application.

Wittgenstein introduces another famous thought experiment which is called as a beetle-in-a- box. In this experiment he says that "suppose everyone has a box with something in it. We call it a 'beetle'. No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. – Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box…The thing in the box has no place in the language game at all'' (PI 293).

Here it means that the word 'beetle' cannot refer to the beetle itself, because as, I only know what is in my box, so it is only possible for me to know what I meant

by the word 'beetle'. This experiment indicates us, in the same way, that the word 'pain' cannot refer immediately to the sensation, because I could only know about what sensation is. If 'pain' refers to the sensation then it is not possible for the word 'pain' to mean anything to others except me. What Wittgenstein suggests here is that what we really experience which is really unknown to others is not connected with the meaning of the word.

The meaning of an expression is not an 'entity' which is correlated with it. The meaning of a name is not its bearer; meanings are not entities in the physical world to which expressions are 'attached' but nor are they mental entities; they are not abstract entities. The whole venerable tradition that conceived of meaning of words as entities correlated with words is refused by latter Wittgenstein. To understand the meaning of an expression is to know the expression's use across the variety of language games in which it occurs. Knowing its use is having an ability to follow the rules for its use in those language-games. Rule-following is not an inner process rather it is a practice embedded in the customs and agreements of a community and this rule-following is essentially public. A person's understanding of an expression is manifest in his use of it and his giving correct explanations of it on appropriate occasions. And also, of course, in his responding appropriately to the use of the expression by others. It seems to us, in our reflections upon our experiences and upon our understanding of words, that ''Once you know what the word stands for, you understand it, you know its whole use'' (PI 264).

In conclusion we can say according to Wittgenstein that to possess a concept is to have mastered the technique of the use of a word. It is a skill, not an experience. But this is not possible for a private linguist, since it has the danger of entering into a solipsistic tendency where whatever one chooses to be correct will be correct for him, i.e., whatever he thinks to be right is right only for him. If we see language in that perspective, then teaching, learning and practice are possible only in a society. So, in order to say something is right, we need training in what Wittgenstein calls a 'technique', and the exercise of technique is practice. But in the case of private practice, one cannot distinguish between having a rule and actually obeying it. As 'obeying rule' is a practice, therefore, thinking that one is obeying a rule is not obeying a rule. It is the society which provides the context of all linguistic practices. Meaning, like rule-following, is not a private mental process. Therefore, the idea of a private meaning is unintelligible.

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