

**INALIENABLE PRIVATE OWNERSHIP
OF SENSATION AND SENSATION
VOCABULARY IN PUBLIC LANGUAGE
Wittgenstein's Criticism of Traditional
Picture of Privacy of Sensation**

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Privacy of sensations is a commonly accepted view implying that sensations are objects owned by and known to the first person—the one who is experiencing them. Another person cannot own the same sensation. Hence another person cannot know it. The problem arising here is that how can sensation vocabulary be a part of our every day shared language when they are used in conjunction with the objects belonging to first person's private realm that cannot be shared by any one else. There is an inherent inconsistency involved here which is pointed out and eliminated by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*. The purpose of this paper is to work out Wittgenstein's criticism of privacy of sensation. Issues relating to the formation, retention and identification of sensation concepts will also be discussed here.

The problem of privacy of sensations is ultimately rooted in, what has been referred to as, the Augustinian picture of language, according to which 'naming and describing form the essence of human language'.¹ Wittgenstein writes in his *Philosophical Investigations*:² "individual words in language

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name objects — sentences are combination of names.” (PI 1) Names refer to objects while sentences describe facts-configuration of objects. Thus naming and describing constitute the essence of language.³ Wittgenstein further writes: “... In this picture of language we find the roots of the following idea: Every word has a meaning. Meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.” (PI 1)

There are a host of false theses connected with this picture. However, we shall focus on ‘naming’ — the most central one. Naming involves establishing a link between a sign in language and an object in the world which is brought about by ostensive definition. This ostensive definition, according to this picture, is the foundation of language. Moreover, it is held that ostensive definitions are immune to errors. Every word in language is ultimately grounded in ostensive definitions.⁴

This, according to Wittgenstein, is a mistaken and an over simplified picture of language in which language is supposed to mirror a fixed structure. Language, for Wittgenstein, is a rule-governed activity embedded in our ways of living and is capable of modifications (PI 23). Wittgenstein holds that in order to understand the nature of language one must look at the ways in which it actually functions rather than propounding theories of language on the basis of speculations. He uses the notion of “language-game” to show that use of symbols or words etc is connected with human actions or ways of living. Language-games, for Wittgenstein, though capable of change, are complete units of language no matter if they are real or imaginary. Wittgenstein’s use of language-games suggests that language is a human institution which is not answerable to any physical, psychological or metaphysical structure. Language-game links constancy in meaning with regularity in human actions or human ways of living. The using of language is a kind of doing as Wittgenstein says: ‘[T]o imagine a language is to imagine a form of life’ (PI 19).

It must be clear from the above discussion that there is no such thing as the essence of language nor is ostensive definition the foundation of language. Ostensive definitions, on the

contrary, presuppose a background provided by language. David G. Stern notes that "Wittgenstein tries to show us that ostension in particular, and language as a whole, always depends on a practical context; so that ostensive definitions, whether it concerns inner or outer objects, always depends on a prior context of practices and institutions."⁵ Sensation words are not formed by ostensive definition. There is no analogy between naming physical objects and the so-called private objects. The following analysis will clarify this point.

There are two issues connected with this inalienable privacy of sensations namely (a) private ownership and (b) criterion of Identity.⁶ As far as the first is concerned it is a logical condition that sensation (pain etc.,) are objects in one's private realm and are experienced by that person. Another person cannot have that very sensation. Connected with ownership is the correct identification of sensations. What amounts to be the criterion of identity of sensation? Feeling is supposed to be the only criterion on the basis of which sensations (pains etc.) are supposed to be identified. Felt experience is the sole source of formation of the so-called private sensation concepts. The sole criterion for retaining the concepts thus formed is the memory of the first person. A person may say to himself that the sensation he is having is the *same* as he had say a month back if he remembers the same. However, it cannot be said that the sensation Mr. X is having is the *same* as that of Mrs. Y, because, according to this view, two persons cannot have and feel the *same* sensation.

There are three major issues involved here. A critical examination of each is given below:

1. Sensation words are formed by felt experience

We have seen above that concept formation is not the same as labeling a thing. A whole context is needed before defining a word. In the case of Private mental object (sensation) the context is missing. The very nature of the so-called private object makes it impossible not only to have common vocabulary but also to define it privately for one self. Wittgenstein refers to this in *Philosophical Investigations* (PI 293).

... Suppose everyone had 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. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. — But suppose the word "beetle" had a use in these people's language? — If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a *something*: for the box might even be empty. — No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.

That is to say: 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)

It is to be concluded from the above that not only an inalienable private object cannot play a part in our language but cannot even be named by the first person for his private use. Since sensation concepts are formed in our common language, sensations cannot be termed as inalienable private objects belonging to the mental realm of the first person.

The issue regarding the ownership of sensations and the naming of sensations with felt experience are corollary to inalienable privacy of sensations. Both these views are mistaken for the following reasons:

The correct identification of the owner and the thing owned is a necessary condition to understand sentences that employ ownership. The sentences 'These are my pair of shoes,' and 'These are his pair of shoes' are sentences which describe the ownership of 'the pair of shoes'. In such sentences the words 'my' and 'his' show the owner of the thing. Moreover, in such sentences, in the case of third person, words such as 'he' and 'his' perform different functions. Ashok Vohra writes, 'He' shows the person, whereas 'his' shows the owner, 'the

possessor'.⁷ The case is, however, different in the case of first person sensation utterances. The words 'I' and 'my' in 'I am in a bad pain' and 'my pain is really bad' mean exactly the same thing. This implies that 'sensations such as pains' are not objects that are owned by the first person, for in that case, the words 'I' and 'my' must be doing different functions. Wittgenstein writes *Blue and the Brown Books*:⁸

To ask 'are you sure that it's *you* who have pains?' would be nonsensical. Now, when in this case no error is possible, it is because the move which we might be inclined to think of as an error, a 'bad move' is no move of the game at all. (We distinguish in chess between good and bad moves, and we call it a mistake if we expose the queen to a bishop. But it is no mistake to promote a pawn to a king.) (BB 67)

2. Retention of sensation concept

Concepts/words once formed in language may be used in future. Concepts are logically related to their employment. How can the inalienable private object defined by felt experience be used in future? The only way here is that a concept defined by feeling can only be retained as the remembrance of the feeling. This, however, according to Wittgenstein is not logically possible. Memory cannot be said to retain the so-called 'concepts' defined privately. There is a difference between correct and incorrect memory which must be absolutely essential. In order to remember, there must be something given independently which could function as the criterion of correctness. This is not possible in privately named inalienable objects since there is no criterion of correctness and no distinction between thinking that one remembers correctly and actually remembering correctly. It would not be unwise to quote the celebrated section PI 258 where he rejects private language.

Let us 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 connexion *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)

3. **Ownership of sensation: Can two persons have the same sensation?**

The line of argument here, as noted above, is that since feeling (concentrating one's attention) is the only way in knowing one's sensations and that two persons cannot feel the same sensation, they cannot know and cannot have the *same* sensation. This argument rests on two mistakes which are:

- (a) Taking sensation as inalienable private object. This has already been rejected above.
- (b) Taking feeling as a source of knowing. The grammar of knowing involves the possibility of doubts, mistakes and considers questions regarding the source of knowledge as a meaningful question. This cannot be applied on feeling. Feeling and knowing belong to two different language-games.

Two persons can feel the same pain. The case of Siamese twins is a good example here. Moreover, we do feel sympathy

for people in pain and often use language to communicate others to others. We shall return to the issue of sameness of pain after going through the correct way of forming sensation concepts.

THE GRAMMAR OF SENSATION VOCABULARY

As language is embedded in human ways of living, any concept formed, mental or otherwise, must be rooted in regularities in human ways of acting or living. Sensation words are linked to human primitive ways of reaction. Wittgenstein explains this with the help of pain vocabulary. The word pain, Wittgenstein holds, simply replaces natural expression. "EXPRESSION", as Joachim Schulte writes, "is a central concept of the language of psychology as well as some of its theories [which] in Wittgenstein's considerations plays a decisive role ..."⁹

Pain, a type of sensation, is defined not by location but by the outward characteristic expression or manifestation. One might not give a vocal or other expression of pain yet the word is linked with the natural ways of reacting. This natural ways of reacting is replaced by linguistic sign and this linguistic replacement also varies from culture to culture. It is relevant here to point out that one can attempt to prove that sensations are private by hitting oneself on the chest and saying 'but this is private'. This case is absolutely perfect, yet it does not prove that sensations are private, since this is not the way in which words are defined in language. It takes a whole form of life to define any concept in language. In case of sensation word like pain characteristic natural expression is absolutely necessary to define a concept. According to Ashok Vohra, 'the criterion of the ownership of the pain, therefore, is not given by the location of the pain in the body, but by the pain behaviour of the person who gives it expression. *He who manifests pain is its owner.* And, the pain which I manifest may single out a place outside my body.'¹⁰

As far as the question of sameness of pain or any other sensation is concerned, the type of language-game being played must be kept in mind. Since sensation words replace characteristic natural expressions, therefore, their identity must

be determined by taking into account the characteristic human natural expressions in concrete contexts. If two persons manifest same natural expressions, then they are not having two sensations that look *similar*, rather, we should say, that they have the same sensation, since sensation words are ultimately linked with the manifestation of natural expression.

It can be concluded from the above:

- (a) Language is, in principle, inter-subjective and is embedded in human ways of living, and so is all discourse.
- (b) It takes more than a mere occurrence event in one's consciousness to form a concept. A whole form of life is needed to form a concept.
- (c) The traditional picture of inalienable privacy of sensation is mistaken.

ENDNOTES

- 1 G. Baker and P. Hacker (1980), *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning: An Analytical Commentary on Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, Volume I. Oxford: Basil Blakwell, p. 33.
- 2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1963. This work has been cited here as PI. References are to sections.
- 3 G. Baker and P. Hacker (1980), *Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning: An Analytical Commentary on Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations*, Volume I. Oxford: Basil Blakwell, p. 33.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 David G. Stern (1995), *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*. New York: Oxford, p. 182.
- 6 Ashok Vohra (1986), *Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mind*. Kent, Croom Helm Ltd., p. 46.
- 7 *Ibid*, p. 47.
- 8 Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958), *The Blue and Brown Books*. Oxford: Blackwell. This work has been cited here as BB. References are to page numbers.
- 9 Joachim Schulte (1987), *Erlebnis und Ausdruck: Wittgenstein's Philosophie der Psychologie*. Munchen, Philosophie Verlag GmbH. Tr. by Joachim Schulte (1993), *Experience and Expression: Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 37.
- 10 Ashok Vohra (1986), *Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Mind*. Kent, Croom Helm Ltd., p. 47.

