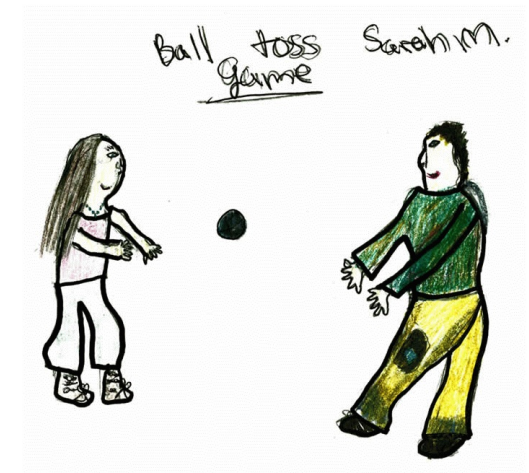


Philosophy 208
The Language Revolution
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Fall 2011

Class 20 - The Private Language Argument
Wittgenstein and Kripke

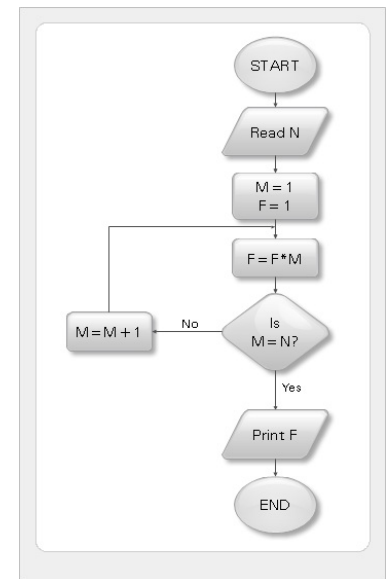
Locke and Augustine on communication

- Locke argued that our words must refer to our sensations.
- Otherwise, we would not know what we are communicating.
- Locke's picture of language takes communication to be like playing catch.
 - B1. I hold the ball in my hands.
 - B2. Then, I toss the ball.
 - B3. Lastly, you catch and hold the ball
- Analogously, when we communicate:
 - C1. I have a sensation, which I label with a word: apple, ball, cat.
 - C2. Then, I speak: The cat ate an apple.
 - C3. Lastly, you associate my words with some inner sensations of your own.
- Frege's claim that sense determines reference is an heir.
- Wittgenstein's private language argument (PLA) is a direct response.



What is the PLA?

- *Philosophical Investigations*.
 - Traditional interpretations locate the argument between §243 and §315 or so, with some further remarks later on.
 - Saul Kripke, in his 1982 *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, locates the argument significantly earlier in the text.
- On the traditional interpretation, the argument centrally concerns the nature of mental states.
- On Kripke's interpretation, the argument centrally concerns the nature of rules and rule-following.
- Kripke sees the discussion of mental states as an example of a more general claim.
- We looked at the Kripkenstein version.
- Today, we look at the traditional version.



Not a Something Not a Nothing

“But you will surely admit that there is a difference between pain-behavior accompanied by pain and pain-behavior without any pain?” - Admit it? What greater difference could there be? - “And yet you again and again reach the conclusion that the sensation itself is a *nothing*.” - Not at all. It is not a *something*, but not a *nothing* either! The conclusion was only that a nothing would serve just as well as a something about which nothing could be said (*Philosophical Investigations* §304).

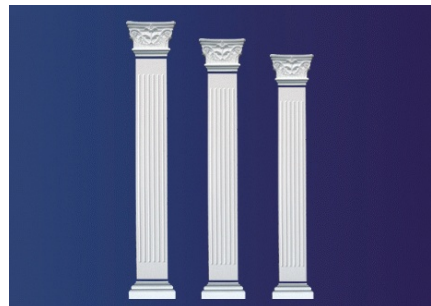
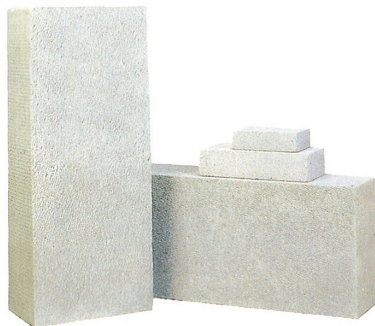
Starting with Language

- Wittgenstein says that sensations are neither a something nor a nothing.
 - ▶ pain
 - ▶ your impression of a color, or an odor or taste
- Locke started his analysis of language with the presumption of the existence of sensations.
 - ▶ Direct awareness
- We construct a language which refers to them.
 - ▶ Empiricism: sensations are the basis on which all of our knowledge is built.
 - ▶ Even Quine argued that the boundary conditions on our theory construction are our sense experiences.
- Wittgenstein works in the other direction.
 - ▶ Starting with language
 - ▶ Working backwards to its grounds
 - ▶ We begin to doubt the sensations which Locke and all the rest took for granted.

Meaning and Use

Investigations §1-§7

- While 'apple' works the way Augustine and Locke say it does, 'five' and 'red' seem different.
 - ▶ They do not represent objects.
 - ▶ They provide instructions for action.
 - ▶ We might, as Plato did, reify redness or the number five.
 - ▶ Nevertheless, the uses of those terms are different from the uses of 'apple'.
- When we use a word, we follow conventional guidelines.
 - ▶ The grocer compares the term 'red' with a patch of red, and counts.
 - ▶ Such terms require instructions for how to use them.



Same Objects, Different Labels

- The same object, under different instructions, may have a different label.
- Consider the way a child's stick can be a rocket, or a sword, or a pony.
- Or, consider the old Saturday Night Live skit: Shimmer.
- §6: A brake and lever can be anything or nothing.
- Terms of language have no meaning apart from their use in a larger theory.
 - Compare to Quine's semantic holism.
- Meanings of the terms 'brake' and 'lever' depend on the uses we make of those objects.



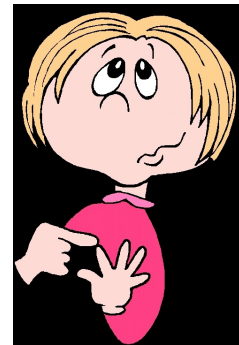
The Community

- Number terms are directions for how to proceed.
- We use them for counting apples, for example.
- In addition, there are directions for how to proceed using the number terms alone.
- If we want to understand the number terms, then we have to analyze how these terms function.
- In particular, we have to determine how we learn the rules for counting.
- As far as we agree on the rules for counting, we have some common language, we can communicate.
- If we were to disagree on the rules, we would not understand each other.
- “If a lion could talk, we could not understand him” (*Investigations*, p 223).



Wittgenstein's Skeptical Puzzles

- 2, 4, 6, 8, ..., 996, 998, 1000, 1004, 1008, 1012...
- We want to say that the deviant counter has made a mistake.
- Wittgenstein challenges us to justify our claim.



Woodsellors

How could I shew them that - as I should say - you don't really buy more wood if you buy a pile covering a bigger area? - I should, for instance, take a pile which was small by their ideas and, by laying the logs around, change it into a 'big' one. This *might* convince them -but perhaps they would say: "Yes, now it's a *lot* of wood and costs more" - and that would be the end of the matter...(Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics I §150)



Pointing?



- Number terms function differently from the Locke/Augustine account.
- Pointing can not settle any matter.
- The very act of pointing is already an action, with rules for use.
- We could point by tracing the line from the tip of our finger backwards (§185).
- See p 29 of Permanent markers
- Sandia report, see p 150 et seq. and p 262 et seq.
- For Wittgenstein, there could be no hope of communicating danger to a community completely disconnected from our own, since the meanings of our signs are connected to the practices for which we use them.



Privacy and The Deviant Counter

How is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular stage? - “The right step is the one that accords with the order -as it was *meant*.” - So when you gave the order +2 you meant that he was to write 1002 after 1000 - and did you also mean that he should write 1868 after 1866, and 100036 after 1000034, and so on - an infinite number of such propositions?...It would almost be more correct to say, not that an intuition was needed at every stage, but that a new decision was needed at every stage. “But I already knew, at the time when I gave the order, that he ought to write 1002 after 1000.” - Certainly; and you can also say you *meant* it then; only you should not let yourself be misled by the grammar of the words “know” and “mean”. For you don’t want to say that you thought of the step... [Y]our idea was that that act of meaning the order had in its own way already traversed all those steps: that when you meant it your mind as it were flew ahead and took all the steps before you physically arrived at this or that one (*Philosophical Investigations* §186-§188).

Rule-Following and Private Language

- The grounds for my using a term like 'five' is not an internal mental state, a private thought, the way Locke and Augustine depicted.
- The grounds for my using 'five' in the way that we do have to do with the way that number terms are used in public, by the community.
- It follows that mathematical rules are not categorical, in the way that they are traditionally conceived.
- There is a fundamentally conventional aspect to all of mathematics, and by extension to all of language.
- Private acts are, in a sense, without the force of public acts.
- They lack real grounds.

Privacy and Groundlessness

Why can't my right hand give my left hand money? - My right hand can put it into my left hand. My right hand can write a deed of gift and my left hand a receipt. - But the further practical consequences would not be those of a gift. When the left hand has taken the money from the right, etc., we shall ask, "Well, and what of it?" And the same could be asked if a person had given himself a private definition of a word; I mean, if he has said the word to himself and at the same time has directed his attention to a sensation (*Philosophical Investigations* §268).



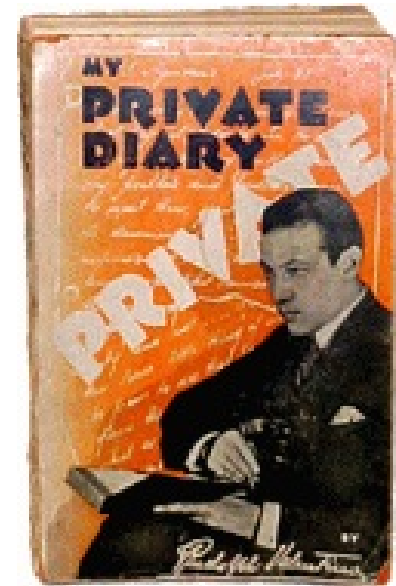
From Rule-Following to Private Language

- Kripke: Wittgenstein argued that the meanings of my terms are the rules for my uses of those terms.
- Those rules are public rules; those meanings are public meanings.
- So, even our terms for my sensations do not refer to anything privately available to introspection.
- They instead refer to public criteria for meaning.

What is a Private Language?

- “The individual words... 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.”
- We have moved from discussing ‘five’ to discussing ‘red’ in Wittgenstein’s ‘five red apples’.
- The terms of the private language may be any terms for sensations, for things, or purported things, which are available to introspection.
- It seems pretty obvious that we experience sensations.
- We describe those sensations: a sharp pain, a bright yellow, a sweet and spicy tang.
- The question is whether we could have a language that consists only of private terms, or whether our ability to construct a language of these sensations is rooted necessarily in our connections to our community.

The Diary



- Writing a name, 'S', for a sensation in his diary.
- Ostensive definition is inapplicable, literally.
- We might concentrate our attention to the sensation.
- Still no language has been constructed.
 - ▶ “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' (*Philosophical Investigations* §258).
 - ▶ “Don't consider it a matter of course that a person is making a note of something when he makes a mark - say in a calendar. For a note has a function and this 'S' so far has none (*Philosophical Investigations* §260).
- There is no way to determine whether the same sensation is being felt each time we write 'S'.

Regularity

- Language demands a kind of regularity, §207.
- But, there is no ground for assuming regularity among the instances in which I write 'S', since they are all private.
- “Every action according to the rule is an interpretation...And hence also 'obeying a rule' is a practice. To *think* one is obeying a rule is not to obey a rule. Hence it is not possible to obey a rule 'privately': otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same thing as obeying it” (*Philosophical Investigations* §§201-2).
- Following a rule is an action, a practice, governed by public criteria, rather than a mental affirmation of a description of those actions.

Sensations: Not Somethings, Not Nothings

- “What am I to say about the word “red”? - that it means something ‘confronting us all’ and that everyone should really have another word, besides this one, to mean his *own* sensation of red? Or is it like this: the word “red” means something known to everyone; and in addition, for each person, it means something known only to him?” (*Philosophical Investigations* §273)
- The beetle in the box, §293.
 - ▶ We can divide through, or subtract out, the beetle itself, while continuing to talk about beetles.
 - ▶ The language-game of beetles presupposes no beetles.
 - ▶ Our language of sensations presupposes no (private) sensations.



Identity and Sensation

- What is the criterion for the sameness of two images? - What is the criterion for the redness of an image? For me, when it is someone else's image: what he says and does. For myself, when it is my image: nothing. And what goes for "red" also goes for "same" (*Philosophical Investigations* §377).
- At these words I form this image. How can I *justify* this?
- Has anyone shown me the image of the colour blue and told me that *this* is the image of blue?
- What is the meaning of the words: "*This* image"? How does one point to an image? How does one point twice to the same image? (*Philosophical Investigations* §382).

Robinson Crusoe

- Robinson Crusoe was shipwrecked, living alone.
 - ▶ *Cast Away*
 - ▶ Such persons, we think, would be able to create a language that no one else understands.
 - ▶ Thus, they seem to be counter-examples to Wittgenstein's claim that a private language is impossible.
- But these cases are not real counter-examples.
 - ▶ The private language that Wittgenstein considers is not one that no one else in fact understands.
 - ▶ It is a language that no one in principle could understand.
 - ▶ "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" (*Philosophical Investigations* §243).



Rules and Communities

- Wittgenstein's claim is that the terms of our language are closely connected to their rules for use; meaning is use.
- A private language would entail private rules for using that language.
- But a rule is essentially an artifact of a community.
- “It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which someone obeyed a rule. It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which a report was made, an order given or understood; and so on. - To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs* (uses, institutions)” (*Philosophical Investigations* §199).
- Crusoe and *Cast Away* are isolated physically, but not apart from our conventions.

Conventionality and Mathematics

- Traditionally, we think of mathematics as completely independent of our interests or conventions.
- Two and five are seven, independently of us.
- Mathematical facts are like transcendent physical facts, like the earth's revolution around the sun and unlike the fact that we drive on the right-hand side of the road.
- For Wittgenstein, controversially, mathematics is conventional.

Kripke on Wittgenstein's Conventionalism

- Kripke insists that Wittgenstein does not believe that the truth of a mathematical claim depends only on popular agreement.
- He cites Wittgenstein in support of his claim:
 - ▶ “Certainly, the propositions “Human beings believe that twice two is four” and “Twice two is four” do not mean the same” (Kripke 636, *Philosophical Investigations* p 226).
- But, see the rest of the original passage:
 - ▶ “The latter is a mathematical proposition; the other, if it makes sense at all, may perhaps mean: human beings have *arrived* at the mathematical proposition. The two propositions have entirely different *uses*. - But what would *this* mean: “Even though everybody believed that twice two was five it would still be four”? - For what would it be like for everybody to believe that?” (*Philosophical Investigations* p 226)
- It looks, I think, as if Wittgenstein thinks that there is something Moore-paradoxical about the traditional claim that mathematics is independent of us.

Moore-Paradoxicality

- Moore's so-called paradox is an assertion of the form:
 - p but I don't believe that p
 - It is raining, but I do not believe that it is raining.
- Moore-paradoxical sentences are self-refuting.
- You can not both assert a sentence and sincerely not believe that sentence, on pain of contradiction.
- Wittgenstein claims that we can't know what 'pain' means and then be in doubt about whether we are in pain (§288)
- Similarly, we can't believe (as a convention) one claim in mathematics while it is really false.

Conventionalism in *On Certainty*

- The apparent transcendence of mathematical claims is something like a logical fact about those sentences.
- The logic is a kind of limit on our language game.
 - ▶ “I did not get my picture of the world by satisfying myself of its correctness; nor do I have it because I am satisfied of its correctness. No: it is the inherited background against which I distinguish between true and false. The propositions describing this world-picture might be part of a kind of mythology. And their role is like that of rules of a game; and the game can be learned purely practically, without learning any explicit rules” (*On Certainty* §94-§95).
- Logical propositions include Moore’s ‘I know that here is a hand’.
- They serve as a river bed on which ordinary empirical propositions flow.
- We can use them to teach the use of certain terms.
- We can say that sentences like ‘There are physical objects’ are senseless as a way of teaching the term physical objects.
- Similarly, we can say ‘ $5+7=12$ ’ as a way of teaching the rules of arithmetic, but not to say anything about objects like 5, 7, and 12.



Learning Rules

- The ordinary understanding of conventional rules is that they are learned by induction over experience.
- We see a few examples and then come to a general (inductive) rule.
- Wittgenstein believes that we do not so much derive the general rule from the few instances, but use the rule as a way of organizing the instances.
- We don't learn propositions one at a time; we take on a system as a whole.
- How could you convince some one that you knew that $5+7=12$?
 - You would have to convince them that you knew something much wider than that one proposition.
- When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions. (Light dawns gradually over the whole.) It is not single axioms that strike me as obvious, it is a system in which consequences and premises give one another *mutual* support (*On Certainty*, §141 - §142)

Wittgenstein and Quine

- We can see Wittgenstein's anticipation of Quinean holism.
- Still, the picture that Wittgenstein provides is one in which there are basic truths, which are almost empty in that they have little use or value.
 - ▶ People don't fly off into space.
 - ▶ The sun is not a hole in the vault of heaven.
 - ▶ $2+2=4$
 - ▶ There is a material world.
- Denying these is like denying the rules of the game, changing the subject.
- Sometimes, what looks like an empirical proposition turns out not to be so.
- We can change our views about which sentences are like the river bed, and which ones are like the river.

Impermanence

- Wittgenstein has come very close, in asserting the continuity of river and riverbed, to abandoning all hope for firm and permanent claims about the world.
- For, if any proposition can be taken as bedrock, and any can be part of the river, it seems conventional whether we hold logic or mathematics steady, or whether we hold religious, or moral, or just crazy views as bedrock.
- We might even hold idealist claims as bedrock, or skeptical ones.

Conclusion

Does Kripke Get Wittgenstein Right?

- An open question
- Is the PLA essentially a corollary of the arguments about rule following?
- Are the claims about a language of sensations essentially focused on that specific case?
- Kripke's case is certainly helped by Wittgenstein's claim at the end of §304:
 - ▶ The paradox disappears only if we make a radical break with the idea that language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts - which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please.

The Kripkenstein Skeptical Solution

- Wittgenstein appeals, if Kripke is right, to the community's values.
- It followed from Wittgenstein's solution both that there are serious questions about the status of our conscious states, and that the community which sets the standards which fix the meanings of our terms has freedom to choose alternate rules.
- The freedom to use alternate rules was evinced by Wittgenstein's examples of the wood-sellers.
- Wittgenstein imagines lots of different ways that a community could measure wood, and fails to justify one method over the others.

An Alternative Straight Solution

- Ruth Millikan proposes an evolutionary explanation of rule-following.
- We follow the rules that we do because we are hard-wired as a result of natural selection to do so.
- We are justified in using plus, rather than quus, or for counting in the standard manner, by the rules which are grounded in our biology.
- “Whether this biological purposing is innate... or whether it is derived via learning, mechanisms of concept formation, etc., it must *ultimately* derive its content from the details of our evolutionary history. So, unless doing arithmetic results from a total breakdown of the cognitive systems... then *whatever* you mean to do when you encounter “plus,” that content has been determined by your experience coupled with evolutionary design” (648-9).

Deriving an Ought from an Is

- Millikan derives a normative conclusion from her evolutionary biological solution.
- She says that it provides a standard, how one ought to add or count, and which predicates one ought to use (or see as justified in using).
- While we might defend an economy of free wood, or even of selling wood by the strength of the woodcutter, it seems that there are no real alternatives for measuring the wood.
- We ought to multiply in particular ways, add in particular ways, and count in particular ways.
- Biological purposiveness only supports rules which are conducive to survival.
- Mathematical facts and rules may be, and are traditionally, seen as independent of evolutionary imperatives.
- Of course, we might give up the traditional interpretation.