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Evaluation of Ayer's "Symposium: 'Can There Be a Private Language?'"

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A. J. Ayer offers an empiricist response to Wittgenstein's private language argument. He maintains that Wittgenstein's conclusion is mistaken and that it is possible for a necessarily-private language to exist. Wittgenstein's error, according to Ayer, is his failure to adhere to the strong empiricist principle that all objects are reducible to sense experience. Ayer maintains that there is no such thing as a publicly observable object because observation takes place in the mind, which is a private Cartesian space. However, this position leads to solipsism and idealism. My objective is to show that Ayer's argument fails because it rests on a mistaken interpretation of Wittgenstein's private language argument, which is that of believing Wittgenstein's argument is one over verification. I will also attempt to show that Ayer's argument is not an attractive solution to the private language argument because it leads to the undesirable conclusion of solipsism.

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues against the ontological possibility of a necessarily-private language. Such a language is defined by Wittgenstein as one whose terms "refer to what only the speaker can know – to his immediate private sensations" (Wittgenstein 95). Wittgenstein's assertion that no such language can exist has been the subject of much debate. A.J. Ayer argues in his essay, "Symposium: 'Can There be a Private Language?'" that private language not only exists but is necessary to our conception of human language. I will show that Ayer's argument fails because it rests on a mistaken interpretation of Wittgenstein's private language argument, which is the interpretation that Wittgenstein's argument is one over the verification of a sign. I will also show that Ayer's argument raises more problems than it solves due to its seemingly unavoidable conclusion of solipsism.

Ayer's "Symposium" is one of the best-known challenges to Wittgenstein's private language argument. Even today, half a century after the publication of these two pieces, there is no clear consensus among philosophers on whether a necessarily-private language may indeed exist. Ayer's piece is an excellent example of a hard-nosed empiricist approach, which is distinctly absent from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In this essay, Ayer's interpretation of Wittgenstein is taken to be the traditional approach, which was later aggregated in McGinn's *Wittgenstein on Meaning*. It is certain that Ayer is not interpreting Wittgenstein how Kripke later does in *Wittgenstein on*

Rules and Private Language, because Ayer does not mention the skeptical paradox for which Kripke's interpretation is primarily known. Hence, Ayer's arguments focus on privacy in a Cartesian sense rather than in the sense of social privacy.

Ayer begins his piece by defining private language. He quickly rules out a definition consisting of a language that is understood only by a small group of people: "By this criterion, thieves' slang and family jargons are private languages. Such languages are not strictly private, in the sense that only one person uses and understands them..." (Ayer 63). He then uses the example of dead languages to show that even a language understood by only one person is not necessarily private, but only contingently so. Ayer writes, "There is, however, no reason, in principle, why it should not come alive" (63). He concludes that in order for a language to be truly (or necessarily) private, it must refer directly to the experiences of the speaker, which cannot be known to anyone else, and not merely the result of a complex code or the disappearance of the other speakers. Such logistical obstacles could in theory be overcome, but the barrier between the subjective experiences of two separate people cannot. This aligns well with Wittgenstein's definition of private language: "The words of this language [a necessarily-private language] are to refer to what only the speaker can know – to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language" (Wittgenstein 95).

It may be useful to further clarify the distinction between objects that are commonly held to be public and those that are held to be private in a Cartesian way. A private object may be one of two things. First, it may be the qualitative characteristics of any physical sensation, for instance the sensations of hot, cold, the prick of a needle and the tickle in the nose just before a sneeze. Because it is generally held that no one except the one who experiences physical sensation can know the exact qualitative characteristics of that sensation (in other words, how the person experiencing the sensation "really feels"), it is said to be private in a Cartesian sense. Second, a private object may be a specific thought. All thoughts are commonly held to be private objects, from propositional thoughts like "It may rain tomorrow" to more abstract thoughts that are impossible to describe but that everyone is familiar with, such as a sudden realization that seems to materialize from nowhere and does not seem to take the form of either words or images. In the same way that the exact subjective qualities of physical sensations are generally considered unknowable by anyone but their subject, a specific thought cannot be had by more than one person. Now we have a working definition of an object that is private in a Cartesian sense.

Before developing his arguments in detail, Ayer gives his thesis and an outline of his overarching argument for why a necessarily-private language is possible. A summary of his thesis, a prototypical empiricist argument, is as follows: Regarding the meaning of a linguistic sign, verification in the "public" domain is no better than verification in the private domain. He states:

> A point to which Wittgenstein constantly recurs is that the ascription of meaning to a sign is something that needs to be justified: the justification consists in there being some independent test for determining that the sign

is being used correctly; independent, that is, of the subject's recognition, or supposed recognition, of the object which he intends the sign to signify. (Ayer 67)

Ayer maintains that for Wittgenstein, this justification that the sign is being used correctly is done in the public domain, by observing how the sign is actually used in the speech community. However, Ayer takes issue with Wittgenstein's approach by claiming that Wittgenstein's method of justification is unsatisfactory because it leads to an infinite regress of verification. For no matter how well the particular application of a sign may be justified in the public domain, our perception of this justification is just that, perception, or observation, which is private. Therefore, at some point verification must move beyond the public domain and into the private, for it is only in the private (in one's own mind) that one can verify public justification of use.

We see here that Ayer's claim is rooted in an extremely strong iteration of empiricism. His claim that all language is inherently private seems to emerge from the belief that all we can know is our sense experience, and so we can never know anything for certain about the external world, or even that an external world exists. If we take Ayer at his word here, it seems he is on a dangerous track to solipsism and idealism, for if sense experiences are all that can be known, and if these experiences are known in the mind, then there is no way to prove the existence of a world beyond one's own mind. This deep skepticism would not be confined to the private language argument; it would devastate commonly held conceptions of what constitutes reality to the point where nothing outside of one's own mind could be known to exist. Naturally, a theory with such intuitively unlikely and potentially destructive implications[1] should be adopted only if the truth of it can be shown beyond a reasonable doubt. So Ayer's task in this piece is to allow for the possibility of the existence of private language while retaining the ability to reconstruct an external world.

Now I examine the details of Ayer's argument against Wittgenstein's claim that a private language is impossible. Ayer identifies two false assumptions that he believes led Wittgenstein to conclude:

One is that in a case of this sort it is impossible, logically impossible, to understand a sign unless one can either observe the object which it signifies, or at least observe something with which this object is naturally associated. And the other is that for a person to be able to attach meaning to a sign it is necessary that other people should be capable of understanding it too. (Ayer 69-70)

He first turns his attention to the second of these supposed false assumptions. He implies that they can be better understood if the second assumption is approached first. In order to stay true to Ayer's argument as much as possible, I will examine these suspected false assumptions in the order that Ayer does.

Ayer brings up the example of Robinson Crusoe, stranded on an island before he began to learn to speak, to show that it is not necessary for other people to be able to understand a sign for someone to "attach meaning" to the sign. He says that although it is empirically and statistically unlikely, it is logically possible for Crusoe to develop a language of his own. So, as with any

language, there must be a method of verification in order for Crusoe to know that he is using his signs consistently. Since for Crusoe there cannot possibly be a public domain distinct from private (because any "public" domain would be identical to his private domain), he has nothing to rely on for verification but his memory. (Of course, according to Ayer, this is true of everyone all the time. Crusoe in Ayer's piece serves as a representation of the lack of public domain in all linguistic communities.) And, since it is clear that the holistic Wittgenstein would grant that it is at least possible for a physically isolated individual like Crusoe to develop his or her own language, it seems that memory is a valid method of verification of the use of a sign. Here we see the beginnings of Ayer's attempt to eliminate the distinction between the public and private, which seems to lead eventually to idealism and solipsism.

Now Ayer claims that since Crusoe has created a language with terms for his surroundings, there is no reason why he could not add terms for his sensations. As we have seen, it is no obstacle to the creation of such terms that he has to rely on his memory to verify which sign he associates with which sensation. The signs for his sensations are not understandable by anyone else because the signs refer to his private sensations. As Ayer points out, it is merely a contingent (coincidental) fact that Crusoe is alone on the island. If someone else were to appear, he or she would be incapable of comprehending the signs that Crusoe has invented to signify his own private sensations, even if he or she were able to learn the sounds and structure of his language, because the referents of these signs are private in a Cartesian way. As Ayer explains, "But from the fact that he cannot teach this part of his language to Man Friday it by no means follows that he has no use for it himself. In a context of this sort, one can teach only what one already understands. The ability to teach, or rather the ability of someone else to learn, cannot therefore be a prerequisite for understanding" (Ayer 72).

Peter Asaro takes issue with the view held by both Ayer and Wittgenstein that it is possible for a physically-isolated individual to develop his or her own language. Asaro attempts to present a counterexample to Ayer's claim that memory is sufficient for verifying the meaning of a sign. In his essay, "A Case for Private Language," Asaro claims that memory alone is not sufficient for Crusoe to justify to himself that he uses his linguistic signs consistently. He explicitly rejects the premise that any physically-isolated individual could develop a language.

Asaro uses the thought experiment of Crusoe putting a linguistic mark on a tree after eating fruit from it and finding that the fruit was good to eat, i.e. did not make him sick (Asaro 4). Asaro has us imagine that Crusoe later returns to the tree, interprets the mark as meaning the fruit is edible, and eats the fruit, which now makes him sick. Asaro says Crusoe's "linguistic mistake" was either marking the tree with the wrong sign or interpreting the sign wrongly upon his return. "How is Crusoe to decide which mistake he made? He will have to depend on his memories about the meaning he wished the mark to have when he made it" (Asaro 4). Asaro implies that this is a paradox for Crusoe, that he will not be able to make the determination based on his memories and hence will never discover his linguistic mistake, thus showing that it is impossible for

a physically-isolated individual to develop a language.

However, Asaro's thought experiment does not work. It does not account for the development of writing being a custom like the development of spoken language and therefore requiring much iteration. In order to develop a system of writing complex enough that one sign could reasonably be mistaken for another, Crusoe would have to mark many trees. And even if he did, this is no different from having a community consensus. He would determine that the majority of the time, this mark means "edible" or this other mark means "inedible." In effect, the multitude of trees he would have marked would act as a linguistic community. This verification of a sign based on the behavior of the majority is the same type of verification as having a community consensus. To be sure, Crusoe will have to rely on his memory for keeping track of which signs seem to correspond to edible and inedible fruit; however, as Ayer has shown, this is not an obstacle to the development of a language. It is a fact of human physiology that we must rely on our memories constantly. This is true for language, of course, regardless of whether there is a physical speech community present.

Asaro's argument has failed for two reasons. The first is that he has failed to take into account the iterative nature of developing a writing system, which is likely to lead to the development of what constitutes in effect a linguistic community. However, while it seems very likely that this would happen, it is possible both logically and causally that Crusoe could develop a writing system without creating a linguistic community, perhaps by cutting down every tree he marked due to some superstition or similar non-rational belief. The second, and ironclad, reason is that he has overlooked the fact that a speech community beyond the individual is useless if we do not put some trust in memory as the causal enabler of language. Thus, have we established not only that it is possible for Crusoe to develop his own language, but also that it is unnecessary, and indeed incorrect, to say that memory, which is something of Ayer's bailiwick, plays no role at all in the private language argument. However, as we will see, memory cannot be the whole story.

The driving force behind much of Ayer's argument is summed up in his assertion: "But verification must stop somewhere" (Ayer 71). It is already clear from his focus on the validity of memory as a method of verification of the use of a sign that Ayer has interpreted Wittgenstein's private language argument as an argument over verification. In other words, Ayer seems to believe that the reason Wittgenstein claims that a necessarily-private language is impossible is that, in a language understood only by its speaker, it would be impossible for that speaker to know if they were using the signs (words, terms) of the language consistently. This is evidenced by his comments on Wittgenstein's thought experiment of a "man who buys several copies of the morning paper to assure himself that what it says is true" (Ayer 71). This example occurs in section 265 of *Investigations*, in which Wittgenstein describes the hopelessness of the endeavor of someone purchasing multiple copies of the same newspaper, all of which presumably contain the same thing, in order to be entirely sure of what the paper says. (This is pointless because all the copies are identical.) Ayer points out what he believes to be a flaw in the thought ex-

periment. He says it is not necessarily absurd to buy multiple copies of the same paper because if the paper "was so produced that misprints might occur in one copy without occurring in all, it would be perfectly sensible to buy several copies and check them against each other" (Ayer 71). The fact that Ayer makes this point at all is evidence that he interprets Wittgenstein's private language argument as revolving around the verification of the use of a sign.

Ayer also attacks Wittgenstein's example of the diary keeper (introduced in section 258 of *Investigations*), for not convincingly showing that memory is an insufficient method of verification. In this thought experiment, Wittgenstein has us imagine that "I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To that end I associate it with the sign "S" and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation" (Wittgenstein 98). Wittgenstein arrives at the conclusion that this is not possible because "a definition of the sign cannot be formulated" (Wittgenstein 98); in other words, it is impossible to define S. And if S cannot be defined, the occurrences of S cannot be tracked. Again, Ayer interprets the example as attempting to show that there is no valid method of verification for a sensation, this time by stating that there may be ways of empirically evidencing whether the person is experiencing the same sensation as they did when they first decided to track the occurrences of S, namely by checking blood pressure or other physiological indicators that would correspond to the subject experiencing S. So it is clear that Ayer sees the private language argument as revolving around verification of the sign.

Thus far we have seen that Ayer is attempting to refute the principal on which he believes Wittgenstein's diary keeper thought experiment is founded, which is that one's memory in isolation is not sufficient to ensure that a sign will be used consistently throughout a multiplicity of applications. If Ayer were correct, this would reveal a great irony in Wittgenstein: his skepticism of an isolated individual's ability to trust his or her sense experiences. The irony would stem from Wittgenstein's categorical insistence that skepticism is the result of a mistake. So it would seem that Wittgenstein has made the mistake of underestimating the reliability of the memory of the average person. However, I maintain that Ayer has not looked deeply enough into Wittgenstein's argument.

This interpretation of Wittgenstein's private language argument is supported by Jack Temkin in his essay, "A Private Language Argument." He begins by making a point that is familiar from both Ayer and Wittgenstein, which is that in order for language to function, there must be rules and it must be possible to distinguish between actions that follow the rule and actions that don't. So when a speech community consists of only an individual, it is not possible for a rule to be followed because of the problem of subjective relativism (Temkin 113). He explicitly rejects Ayer's interpretation by saying that "The argument we have been considering depends neither on a verifiability criterion nor on doubts about the reliability of memory" (Temkin 114). So Temkin at least would agree that Ayer has fundamentally misinterpreted Wittgenstein's private language argument by taking it to be an argument over verification.

Ayer's interpretation of Wittgenstein's thought experiments and his private language argument in general as revolving around verification is mistak-

en. In section 258 of *Investigations*, Wittgenstein seems to be making the point that a sign S, understood as standing for some private sensation, cannot have meaning not because it cannot be accurately remembered, but because there is no established custom through which to verify the meaning of the sign. Wittgenstein's point is that to identify a sign with its meaning is an instance of following a rule. The rule would read, approximately: There is a rule such that a sign S means a particular sensation, for instance pain. It is one of Wittgenstein's basic points in *Investigations* that a rule cannot be followed privately, because then "...thinking one was following a rule would be the same thing as following it" (Wittgenstein 88). Since using language amounts to following a set of rules (otherwise known as a grammar), and since a rule cannot be followed privately, there can be no private language. It is not the fallibility of memory or any other causal problem of verification of a sign that causes a necessarily-private language to be ontologically impossible; it is the fact (or assertion) that the very essence of language, the rules on which it is based, cannot exist within an isolated belief system. In other words, it is not a matter of failure to verify the sign, but a matter of verification becoming impossible because there is no way of attaching meaning to a sign without a rule or custom. (This is not to say that there necessarily needs to be a physical community of other people in the vicinity as a basis of comparison, for then Crusoe could never develop a language. Rather, it is the conceptual framework of a custom that must be in place.)

On a first reading of section 258, it is perhaps understandable that the private language argument should be interpreted as resting on verification. The way Wittgenstein gets to his point is rather roundabout and would be easy to misunderstand if one had not studied *Investigations* in its entirety. Take, for instance, the following passage: "I have no criterion for correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem correct to me is correct. And that only means that here we can't talk about 'correct'" (Wittgenstein 99). If one were to approach this passage with the mentality that Wittgenstein were addressing valid methods of verification, it seems that it could be read without any red flags being raised; if Wittgenstein were determined to reject memory as such a method, then 258 could be read as a sort of solidification of his point that memory is insufficient. And indeed, Ayer seems to have successfully shown that memory is sufficient to keep the use of a linguistic sign consistent, provided the presence of the underlying framework of custom. However, as we have seen, Wittgenstein attacks a more fundamental level of the possibility of private language: the fact that a private language cannot have a framework of custom.

To understand why this conceptual framework of custom is necessary for language, we must first examine what rule-following means to Wittgenstein. Both Wittgenstein and Ayer are in agreement that rules and the ability to distinguish between actions that follow the rule and those that do not are essential to language in any form. The very grammar of a language is, after all, nothing but a set of rules. And it is only because of rules that a sign means what it does in any given context; speakers of the language, if they wish to be understood, must follow the rule that states that a certain sign means such and such if used

in such and such a way. Without rules, there would be no language of any kind but only a jumble of unintelligible noises. And for Wittgenstein, following a rule is an instance of following a custom, as has already been hinted at: "A rule stands there like a signpost...I have further indicated that a person goes by a signpost only in so far as there is an established usage, a custom" (Wittgenstein 44, 86). So a rule cannot be followed if there is no custom, because to follow a rule is to adhere to a custom. And, because it is logically impossible for language to exist without rules, it is also logically impossible for language of any kind to exist without custom.

The comparison of a rule to a signpost illustrates why custom is necessary for following a rule. As Wittgenstein has it, "...the signpost does after all leave room for doubt...Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule – say a signpost – got to do with my actions? What sort of connection obtains here? – Well, this one, for example: I have been trained to react in a particular way to this sign, and now I do so react to it" (Wittgenstein 44, 86). The rule itself, its linguistic structure, is not sufficient for telling us what course of action we must take if we are to comply with the rule, for there can be multiple interpretations of any given linguistic construction. For Wittgenstein, a rule serves merely as the indicator of which custom to follow at any given time.

I will attempt to formulate an example using Wittgenstein's terminology that shows that a rule in isolation is insufficient for determining a course of action. Imagine you were out for a walk in the woods and you came across a signpost at the intersection of several paths. Now imagine the writing on the sign has been worn off, or that the sign merely says something like "Go this way," regardless of the direction in which the sign may be pointing. In any case, it is not clear based solely on the sign which direction you ought to take. Now you may take any of the diverging paths, or even go back along the path you have just come down. However, whichever you choose will be done without reference to the sign, because the sign "leaves[s] room for doubt" (Wittgenstein 44). There would be doubt even if the sign were not obscure and said something apparently quite explicit like, "If you desire to exit the forest at the parking lot located precisely here (at some specific location), then take the trail the first few feet of which have been painted bright green," because there is always the possibility that you have misunderstood the sign, or even that the correspondence between the writing on the sign and the green paint on one of the paths is a coincidence. No matter which path you choose, you are not basing your actions on the sign, at least not completely.

And it is clear that for Wittgenstein, a "rule" that can be understood with equal validity to call for various courses of action at once is not meaningful. He explains:

> This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule. The answer was: if every course of action can be brought into accord with the rule, then it can also be brought into conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here. (87)

In order for a rule to have meaning, it must be normative. It must clearly demarcate a course of action while rejecting others. And no sign (no linguistic

utterance) is capable of doing so because by the nature of such utterances, which is that they consist of signs, which can be substituted infinitely for other signs, they can be made out to call for or reject a multiplicity of courses of action. The only way for a rule to have meaning (to single out a course of action beyond a reasonable doubt), then, is through custom; as Wittgenstein has it in section 198, "I have been trained to react in a particular way to this sign, and now I do so react to it" (Wittgenstein 86).

It is this requirement that a rule be able to dictate definitively a course of action that is at the core of Wittgenstein's private language argument. As we have seen, he claims that "...it's not possible to follow a rule 'privately;' otherwise, thinking one was following a rule would be the same thing as following it" (Wittgenstein 88). He says that if a "rule" is known only to one person, then it can't have meaning because there is no definite right or wrong defined by the rule. Wittgenstein is claiming that there can be no subjective rules because without an objective way of demarcating whether a course of action is in accord with the rule, any course of action winds up being in accord with the rule, which he claims in section 201 is paradoxical. If any course of action is (or can be made out to be) in accord with a rule, the rule has no meaning because there is no way for it to function as we generally think of rules as functioning, that is, of stating that course of action A is desirable and that course of action B is undesirable. Simply put, if a "rule" can't state that to perform action A is to follow the rule and to perform action B is not to follow the rule, then it is no rule at all. And if there is only one person who knows the rule, and so only one person who can say whether an action is in accord with the rule, then whatever that person says is following the rule, is.

Again, at first glance this definition of rule-following could easily be seen as revolving around verification; however, after a thorough reading of Wittgenstein, it is clear that the reason a rule cannot be followed privately is not because the course of action that accords with the rule cannot be *verified*, but rather because *there is no such course of action*. By Wittgenstein's definition of a rule, there must be a definite distinction in the consequences or effects of following or failing to follow the rule. If whatever you think is right, is right, then there is no possibility of being wrong, which is necessary for a rule. So because of the problem of subjective relativism, or the inability of the sole knower of a rule to distinguish between following and not following it, a rule cannot be followed privately. And if no rule can be followed privately, then no language can be private, because rules are necessary for language, and the rules of a private language would by definition need to be private.

Interpretation, or substituting signs for other signs, is the method of rule-following that Wittgenstein is arguing against. To follow a rule, it is not sufficient to examine the wording of the rule and act in such a way that the wording is satisfied. Because of the variety of ways that any rule, or indeed any set of words, can be interpreted, if following a rule were merely to act in such a way that one "version" of the rule, your interpretation, were satisfied, then the rule would cease to be meaningful, as we see above. Wittgenstein appeals to the problem of infinite regress to show this. He claims that interpreting, or rephrasing, a linguistic utterance such as a written or spoken rule does not in fact

get one any closer to understanding its meaning, because every interpretation can in turn be interpreted. As he puts it in section 198, "...every interpretation hangs in the air together with what it interprets, and cannot give it any support. Interpretations by themselves do not determine meaning" (Wittgenstein 86). In other words, there is a never-ending chain of interpretations, and so we encounter an infinite regress of interpretations, or re-wordings, if we try to understand a rule (or any linguistic utterance) by substituting signs for signs. To follow a rule, one must move beyond the realm of linguistic interpretation and ground the meaning of the rule in the actions it dictates.

It should be noted that Ayer is in agreement with Wittgenstein in the belief that interpreting a sign with another sign is not a valid method of verification: "Nor can I define it [a sign] in terms of other words, for how are they to be defined?" (Ayer 69). So there is agreement between the two philosophers that the meaning of a sign cannot consist in a rephrasing, or a mere interpretation through words. My interpretation of Ayer is that he believes himself to be undermining Wittgenstein's claim that the conceptual framework of custom is what allows users of language to follow rules. I see him to be attempting to show that if we put enough faith in memory, then the custom is not necessary. Of course, in making this claim, Ayer is placing himself irrevocably in the position of taking a verificationist stance on the private language argument. He is claiming that Wittgenstein's insistence on the necessity of custom is unfounded and unnecessary. Ayer seems to believe that it is a flaw in Wittgenstein that he places so much emphasis on custom as the basis for language and leaves out memory. Perhaps Ayer truly believes that he has found the aforementioned irony in Wittgenstein, which is that such a holistic philosopher, and one who looks so unfavorably on skepticism, is so skeptical of the functionality of memory in terms of serving as verification that a sign is being used consistently through a multiplicity of applications.

Ayer seems to be suggesting that Wittgenstein has drawn a false dichotomy, that between custom and memory. In fact, Wittgenstein has done no such thing, since for him custom and memory are on two separate levels of importance in terms of language. Customs, or rules, constitute the framework that allows language to exist and to function at all, while memory serves merely as a causal enabler. To be sure, Wittgenstein does not fall prey to the inconsistency that Ayer seems to ascribe to him (that of underestimating the memory of the average user of language); it seems unlikely that Wittgenstein would deny that memory does serve as a vital component of language use, and that it might even be useable in a private language, if we imagine for a moment that a private language could exist. Wittgenstein's arguments strike the heart of the concept of private language, spilling its lifeblood by showing it to be logically impossible, while Ayer's arguments merely prick the extremities by attempting to pick apart the details of contingent causal properties.

So Ayer is wrong when he claims Wittgenstein assumes that another person must be able to understand a sign in order for it to have meaning. He has failed to grasp that the reason a rule cannot be followed privately is because then the distinction between right and wrong (following and not following) ceases to exist. We have seen how Ayer attempts to circumnavigate Wittgen-

stein's claim that custom is necessary for language by insisting (rather petulantly) that memory is a valid method of verification and in so doing misses entirely the point of Wittgenstein's argument, which is that in the domain of private language there are no rules which can be followed, and so right and wrong do not exist. In fact, Wittgenstein is not presupposing, but rather showing, that a sign can have meaning only if more than one person can understand it. It is a consequence of, rather than a necessary condition for, private language. If he made the assumption Ayer claims he does, then his argument would be circular, an error which Wittgenstein could hardly have failed to notice.

Wittgenstein's view on the necessity of consequences in rule-following is further shown by his famous thought experiment of the right hand giving the left hand money, introduced in section 268 of *Investigations*: "Why can't my right hand give my left hand money? – My right hand can put it into my left hand...But the further practical consequences would not be those of a gift. When the left hand has taken the money from the right, and so forth, one will ask, 'Well, and now what?'" (Wittgenstein 101). Although the money has been transferred between the hands, no one would say seriously that there has been the exchange of a gift, because the exchange of money does not cause the reactions that we associate with gift-giving. Just as in order for a rule to be followed there must be some "practical consequences" that occur if the rule is followed and that don't occur if the rule is not followed, in order for a gift to be given and received there must be some sign that this has happened, such as expressions of joy or gratitude. Wittgenstein's point is that if, regardless of whether the "gift" was "given," the general conditions of the situation remain the same, then it cannot really be said that any gift was given at all. Likewise, if the following of a "rule" and the lack of following it produce identical consequences, then it is not a rule.

A brief outline of Wittgenstein's argument for why a rule cannot be privately followed may be useful here. Essentially, he maintains that a rule cannot be followed in private because then there would be no consequences when the rule is followed or is not followed. This emphasis on consequences in determining whether something is a rule stems from his fundamental philosophy of language, which is that the meaning of a term *is* its use within the linguistic community. When we talk of rules, there is a clear connotation of gravity, of consequence. As members of a linguistic community, we would probably not call something a rule if nothing happened to us (or to anyone) as a result of not complying with it.

So a rule cannot be followed privately, because it would not have consequences. At this point, the verificationist might offer a counterargument that goes something like this: "A privately-followed rule does not necessarily have consequences, but it may. I may take advantage of the easy availability of subjective relativism and convince myself that what I do is in accord with a rule that only I know of, but I need not. I may be equally likely to judge my actions unflinchingly by this rule, without altering my interpretation of it. Am I not able in some way to view myself from an external perspective, to determine (more or less) objectively whether my actions are in accord with the rule?"

This argument, however, does not work. The verificationist is still left with the problem that no definite consequences seem to turn on their "rule." Like Ayer does throughout his piece, the verificationist is thoroughly missing the point here. I allow that it may be possible to determine whether their actions comply with *their interpretation* of the "rule," and only their interpretation. As we have already seen, one's interpretation of a rule "cannot give it [the rule] any support" (Wittgenstein 86), as discussed above. And since interpretation cannot give us a rule, we must look to consequences, which separate rules from non-rules beyond a reasonable doubt. Clearly, if one can knowingly comply with or refuse to comply with a "rule" at will, with no definite consequences, then it is not a rule in the way we normally use the term, which by definition is also Wittgenstein's way. A renaming of the thing the verificationist calls a rule is now in order. In essence, Wittgenstein's argument is that a rule cannot be followed privately because it would not have consequences, and if it does not have consequences, it cannot be a rule. This interpretation seems dangerously close to circular, but it stands.

Now Ayer attempts to refute the first of what he calls Wittgenstein's false assumptions, which is that "it is impossible, logically impossible, to understand a sign unless one can either observe the object which it signifies, or at least observe something with which this object is naturally associated" (Ayer 69). Examples of natural expression are crying from pain, smiling from pleasure, etc. Ayer uses the example of false memories to attempt to show that it is possible to understand a sign for a sensation without having had the experience that gives rise to the sensation. He abandons the idea of a physically-isolated Crusoe and has us imagine that there is now another person on the island, and that Crusoe and this other person will in time develop a common language. Ayer claims that by means of this new *lingua franca* and the natural expressions of the two people for sensations, they could each come to learn what the other means by their sign for a certain sensation. This seems entirely plausible; no one, Wittgenstein included, would doubt that words like "hungry" and "pain" are likely to be in such a *lingua franca*, perhaps even among the first words added to the lexicon. However, Ayer's argument loses steam with the introduction of false memories. He defines a false memory as "someone's imagining, or seeming to remember, an experience which was unlike any that he had ever actually had" (Ayer 74). Ayer's claim is that if you have a memory, false or not, of having the same experience as your interlocutor, then you can understand their word for that sensation.

This argument fails. His claim rests on the assumption that everyone's sensation experiences are identical. For his argument to be convincing, it would need to be true that when someone stubs their toe, this sensation is precisely the same as the sensation everyone else gets when they stub a toe. This does not seem plausible; the qualitative characteristics of the sensation are bound to differ from person to person. Moreover, Wittgenstein would argue that even if the sensation of stubbing one's toe were universally, qualitatively identical in its instantiations, this would not matter because the fact that the sensations originated in different events (different instances of stubbing) fundamentally bars the sensations from being the same. For Wittgenstein, the sen-

sation and the event that produces it are intrinsically linked, and inseparable. Ayer has failed to show that it is possible to understand a sign for a sensation without having had that sensation. Hence, he has failed to show that it is possible for a person to understand a sign in the private language of another person, if we briefly accepted that a private language were possible.

Like with what he calls Wittgenstein's first false assumption, here again Ayer does not seem to be correct that Wittgenstein actually makes the assumption that it is impossible to understand a sign without observing the object it signifies. In fact, Ayer's attempt to show that the terms of a private language can be designated with a name ironically sets his argument up to be destroyed by Wittgenstein's thought experiment of the beetle in the box, introduced in section 293 of *Investigations*: "Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a "beetle." No one can ever look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle" (Wittgenstein 106). The prevalent use of the word 'beetle' in the language attests to the fact that everyone believes they know what it means. However, no one has any idea what the word "beetle" signifies to anyone but themselves, because no one has ever seen a "beetle" other than his or her own, and everyone's "beetle" presumably has entirely different properties. As Wittgenstein notes, these properties do not even have to be fixed but may be "constantly changing." Because the "beetle" is private, nothing in the language can be named "beetle" (with accommodations made for the common linguistic phenomenon of homonymy), because no one would know what the name stood for: "The thing in the box doesn't belong to the language-game [of naming] 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" (Wittgenstein 106). This shows that in the case of attempting to put a name to private sensations, the model of object and designation (Ayer's model) does not work, because no matter what name the sensation is given, this name cannot carry the information that a name for something in the public domain can carry. Even if one were to develop a name for a sensation, this name would fail to communicate the essence of the sensation, because that essence is private. In attempting to bring a private object into the public domain by giving it a name, Ayer negates the importance of the private object; he gives it a name only to find that the role the name plays in the language is not the role of naming the private object. In Wittgenstein's words, "That is to say, if we construe the grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and name,' the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant" (Wittgenstein 107). This thought experiment, like that of the right hand giving the left hand money, illustrates Wittgenstein's view that definite consequences are necessary in order for a rule to have been followed.

The beetle in the box thought experiment shows that for Wittgenstein, a sensation cannot be separated from its natural expressions. In other words, the sensation and the language (or "grammar") of that sensation are inseparable. Since "natural expressions" occur naturally with sensations, Wittgenstein is saying that it is a mistake to attempt to separate them. If you were to stub your toe, it would be absurd for me to categorize your utterance as something sepa-

rate from your hopping up and down on one foot grimacing. The sensation and the sensation language are clearly connected at a deep, intrinsic level. This view fits well with the holism prevalent in Wittgenstein's work. Ayer, by failing to recognize that these are inseparable for Wittgenstein, has resigned himself to the hopeless task of trying to show that it is causally possible for private sensations to be signified by words. Once again, he has missed Wittgenstein's point that the impossibility of private language does not rest on a causal or contingent contradiction but on a logical or necessary one, in this case, the separation of sensations from sensation language.

Now that we have seen how Ayer's arguments for the possibility of a necessarily-private language have failed, let us return to the problem that was noted near the beginning of this essay. Ayer has held fast to his claim that all objects are knowable only through their sense impressions and yet has not addressed the looming conclusion of solipsism and idealism. This inescapable conclusion is, of course, an inherent drawback of strong empiricism; if all that can be known is sense experience, and if sense experience exists only in the mind, then it is impossible to know for certain that anything but one's mind exists. There is no way to prove that any physical object is in fact real in the sense that it is composed of matter and is not merely a sense impression. And any theory that requires us to dispense with our knowledge of physical objects is highly suspect. So it seems that, like in his argument against Wittgenstein's conclusion on the impossibility of private language, Ayer has failed in his task to retain the ability to reconstruct an external reality.

This problem is well known in philosophy. Descartes, one of the foremost modern philosophers and a critic of empiricism, famously wrote on the subject in his *Meditations on First Philosophy: In which are demonstrated the existence of God and the distinction between the human soul and body*[2]. He explains in the first meditation, "Whatever I have accepted until now as most true has come to me through my senses. But occasionally I have found that they have deceived me, and it is unwise to trust completely those who have deceived us even once" (1). Descartes realized that although much of what we know comes from sense experience, our senses can trick us, like seeing a large object at a distance and mistaking it for something small. Hence we cannot always trust our senses.

Descartes shows this again in his famous dream thought experiment, writing "Often in my dreams I am convinced of (just such) familiar events – that I am sitting by the fire in my dressing-gown – when in fact I am lying undressed in bed!" (1). He uses the example of dreams that are indistinguishable from waking life to show that we can never be certain we are not asleep. And since it is our senses that ought to tell us whether we are asleep, we can't always trust them. He goes on to argue that it is possible that there is a "supremely powerful and cunning deceiver who deliberately deceives me all the time," and so that it is impossible to know anything at all about the external world, or even that there is an external world, with certainty (Descartes 4). He does not endorse complete skepticism, as shown by his often-quoted conclusion "Let him [the deceiver] deceive me all he can, he will never bring it about that *I am nothing* while *I think I am something*. So after thoroughly thinking the matter

through I conclude that this proposition, *I am, I exist*, must be true whenever I assert it or think it" (Descartes 4). But by the end of the second meditation, Descartes has not shown for certain that anything except his own mind exists.[3]

So Ayer is making an extremely strong claim in his attempt to eliminate the distinction between the public and the private. It seems that for him, the empiricist and naturalist, all objects exist only in the mind because the only way we know about objects is through sense experience, which is contained and interpreted within the mind. This amounts to the reduction of society and indeed all of humanity to the contents of one's own mind, hence, a solipsistic worldview. However, nowhere in his piece does Ayer make reference to the solipsism entailed by this interpretation of his argument, and his overall philosophical position does not seem to be that of the skeptic; much of his argument focuses on showing that there *are* facts that are certainly verifiable by memory. Moreover, he obliquely accuses Wittgenstein of giving the memory of the average person far too little credit. Therefore, it seems safe to assume that he wishes to avoid this conclusion of solipsism while still maintaining that a necessarily-private language is possible. Since he does not address this problem, it may be fair to conclude that he has no better solution than Descartes does.

Ayer has failed to refute Wittgenstein's argument for the impossibility of a necessarily-private language. By failing to recognize that, according to Wittgenstein, language is not possible without the framework of custom and that custom is not merely a method of verification of the use of a sign, Ayer has consigned himself to a verificationist interpretation of Wittgenstein's argument and consequently missed the point. Furthermore, by adopting a strong empiricist perspective and claiming that all objects are really private objects, he has opened a gulf of skepticism about the existence of an external world and in particular the minds of other people. His reduction of the public domain to private sensations seems to lead inexorably to solipsism and idealism, which do not seem to be views Ayer would wish to adopt, and yet he does not address this conclusion in his essay. It seems that if we accept Ayer's claim that to talk of any object is really to talk of a private object, then we have taken a step backwards. Ayer, it would seem, has failed in his attempt "to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle" (Wittgenstein 110).

Notes

1.) Imagine if you became convinced that the universe did not extend beyond your own consciousness. You might be strongly tempted to live a life of extreme egoism, causing great injury to others, concerned only with your happiness because you don't believe there are any others. Such a life would clearly be harmful and morally repugnant.

2.) It should be noted that despite finding himself unable to maneuver out of solipsism (or at best out of the problem of other human minds), Descartes does not address in depth the problems entailed by solipsism. Rather than interpreting this as Descartes not thinking that such issues are not worthy of discussion (which seems uncharitable), I believe we should take for granted that Descartes recognizes and appreciates the problems posed by solipsism and is primarily concerned, at least here, with accepting or rejecting the possibility of solipsism.

3.) It should be noted that in the following meditations Descartes does seem to succeed in showing that god, as well as an external world, exist (as implied by the full title of his book); however, he never proves the existence of the minds of other people, which is the primary issue of solipsism dealt with in this essay.

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