

U. T. Place
UNDERSTANDING THE LANGUAGE OF SENSATIONS

In a well known passage in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein,¹ argues that a private language the component words of which refer to the speaker's private experiences could not be understood by or explained to another person. This argument has been taken by some philosophers, notably by Kenny² as showing that there cannot be such a thing as a private experience or a private mental event.

My concern in this paper is to defend the view that there are such things as private experiences and that we can and do describe them. Consequently I am not concerned with the question as to whether or not this is a correct interpretation of Wittgenstein's view at the time when he wrote Part I of the *Philosophical Investigations*. It is sufficient for my purpose that at least some reputable philosophers should have thought that this argument of Wittgenstein's, together with other arguments to be found in the sections that follow it, show either that private experiences, as traditionally understood, do not exist, or, if they do, that nothing intelligible can be said about them.

Kenny summarises the argument which he attributes to Wittgenstein as follows:

'Any word purporting to be the name of something observable only by introspection, and merely causally connected with publicly observable phenomena, would have to acquire its meaning by a purely private and uncheckable performance. But no word could acquire a meaning by such a performance; for a word only has meaning as part of a language; and a language is something essentially public and shareable'.³

The conclusion that Kenny quite properly draws from these premisses is that there is no way in which a word purported to refer to 'something observable only by introspection' could acquire such a meaning; and hence that meaningful words like 'pain' which have been traditionally interpreted in this way, have been misunderstood. Since I believe that there are such things as private experiences 'observable by introspection and merely causally connected with publicly observable phenomena' and that words like 'pain', 'itch', 'throb' and 'tingle' are the names of such experiences, it is clear that I do not accept the conclusion that Kenny draws from the argument he attributes to Wittgenstein. But since I accept that the conclusion follows logically from the premisses of the argument, it follows that I am committed to rejecting either one or both of the premisses from which the conclusion is derived.

I have no wish, however, to dispute the thesis which appears as the second premiss in the argument as stated by Kenny, where he maintains that a word purporting to refer to a private experience cannot be supposed to acquire its meaning by virtue of a private decision to use the word to refer to a particular feature or aspect of the private experience of the individual concerned. For to hold that words like 'pain' can and do acquire their meaning in this way would contradict the account I have given elsewhere⁴ of the way in which we learn to describe our own private experiences. In attempting to refute what I called the 'phenomenological fallacy', I argued that

'it is only after we have learnt to describe the things in our environment that we can learn to describe our consciousness of them. We describe our consciousness experience [...] by reference to the actual physical properties of the concrete physical objects, events and processes which normally, though not perhaps in the present instance, give rise to the sort of consciousness experience which we are trying to describe.'

¹ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford, 1953 § § 243-258.

² A. Kenny, *Action, Emotion and Will*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963.

³ Kenny, *op. cit.*, p. 13

⁴ U. T. Place, 'Is consciousness a brain process?' *British Journal of Psychology*, *xlvii* (1956), 44-50. The reference is to p. 49.

As will be apparent from this quotation, my quarrel is with the first premiss of the argument of the argument that Kenny attributes to Wittgenstein, the thesis that any word 'purporting to be the name of something observable only by introspection [...] would have to acquire its meaning by a purely private and uncheckable performance.' My contention is that because the meaning of a word can only be explained by pointing or referring to publicly observable features of the common physical environment in which we all find ourselves, it does not follow that the word in question can only be understood as referring to those publicly observable phenomena by reference to which its meaning is explained. In my view there is no contradiction involved in holding *both* that words like 'pain' refer to a private experience *and* that the meaning of the word 'pain' can only be explained by reference to the publicly observable concomitants of pain.

On Kenny's interpretation of his argument Wittgenstein is apparently committed to a view which, on the evidence of other things he says in the *Philosophical Investigations*, it is difficult to believe he would seriously held, namely, the view that the only way to explain the meaning of a word or expression is to point at the object or phenomenon to which it refers. In fact there is no word or expression whose meaning is explained in this way. It is sometimes possible to explain to someone to what or to whom one is referring when using a proper name or what Strawson⁵ has called a 'singular referring expression' by pointing to the object or person in question; but in neither case would it be natural to describe this as explaining the meaning of the proper name of the expression. In the case of the proper name this is because proper names are not words to which the concept of 'meaning' applies. Singular referring expressions such as 'the hat I wore yesterday' do have meaning; but their meaning is not the same thing as the object to which they refer. The meaning of an expression like 'the hat I wore yesterday' is the same regardless of who says it or the occasion on which it is said. Its referent on the other hand, if it has one, will change from day to day and from speaker to speaker.

Learning the meaning of a word or expression, as Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasises in the *Philosophical Investigation*, is a matter of learning a rule for the use of a word or expression in question. In the case of a referring word or expression the rules with which we are concerned are the rules governing the use of the word or expression in question as a means of referring or drawing attention to some recurring feature of the world that can appear in a wide variety different contexts.

The meaning of a referring word or expression can be taught in a number of different ways. One way is to give the kind of definition which spells out in terms of a number of other words the criteria used in deciding whether or not the term in question applies in a given case. For example the term 'bowler hat' might be defined as 'a hard hat with a brim and rounded dome-like top'. In this case it makes sense to say that the definition states the meaning of the word.

Another way of explaining the meaning is by giving synonyms as in a typical dictionary definition. In this case the synonyms can be said to have the same or approximately the same meaning as the word defined, though they do not state the meaning as in the previous example. In both these cases the definition can only succeed as an explanation of the meaning of the word or expression in so far as the individual who is trying to learn the meaning already knows the meaning of the words of which the definition is composed. It follows from this that definitions of either kind are of limited application in the acquisition of word meanings and can only be used once the individual has acquired a substantial vocabulary which must have been learned in some other way. One procedure whereby a child can be taught this basic vocabulary is the procedure that has been somewhat misleadingly referred to by philosophers as 'ostensive definition'. This is the procedure in which the child is taught the rule for using a word as a means of referring to something by repeatedly pointing at instances to which it applies or to which it can be used to refer. To call this 'ostensive definition' is misleading because it suggests that the object or phenomenon to which the teacher points is part of the meaning of the word in the way that 'being a hard hat' is part of the meaning of the term 'bowler hat' in a formal verbal definition. That this is not the case is shown by the fact that if instead of pointing physically at an instance, we explain the meaning of word by giving an instance referred to by a singular referring expression, the singular referring expression that refers to the instant will not be part of the meaning

⁵ P. F. Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory*. London, Methuen 1952, p. 188.

of the word whose meaning it is used to explain. Thus if instead of pointing at a bowler hat, we explain the meaning of the term to a child by saying that it is the sort of hat that Uncle George wears when he goes to the office, it is clearly a matter of contingent fact and not a necessary truth that the hat Uncle George habitually wears when he goes to the office is a bowler, from which it follows that being the sort of hat Uncle George habitually wears to the office is not part of the meaning of 'bowler hat'.

There are two morals that I wish to draw from this example. The first is that no conclusions about the meaning of a word or expression can be drawn from a single instance to which attention is drawn in explaining its meaning. Thus if Uncle George's bowler happened to be black, a child could as readily conclude from this example that the word 'bowler' was synonym of 'black' as that it meant a hat of certain shape and solidity. My second moral is that the function of the so-called ostensive definition is simply to draw the pupil's attention to an instance of something which the word in question applies, it is only by repeatedly drawing the pupil's attention to a number of such instances in a variety of different settings that the pupil can, by the learning processes known to the psychologists as generalisation and discrimination, gradually learn to understand what the word means, at least to the extent of being able to identify what it is that someone else is referring to when he uses the word in question.

What are the implications of these conclusions for the case with which Wittgenstein is concerned where a child learns the meaning of a sensation word like 'toothache'? In § 257 of *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein argues that 'if human beings showed no outward signs of pain (did not groan, grimace, etc.) [...] it would be impossible to teach the child the meaning of the word 'toothache''. He then goes on to consider the possibility that a child might teach itself the meaning of such a word by a process of private ostensive definition, and he concludes that this idea is a logical non-starter, because neither the child nor anyone else could ever know whether or not he (the child) was using the word correctly. Now in the light of the above considerations we can probably agree that a word like 'toothache' or, if not 'toothache' then certainly the more fundamental concept of an 'ache' or 'pain' is the sort of basic word whose meaning could not be explained by some kind of ostensive procedure. If, however, pain is a private experience which is 'observable only by introspection' it follows that the teacher cannot in any literal sense point at an instance to which the word 'pain' applies, whether it be an instance of his own or of his pupil's pain. Furthermore we can readily agree with Wittgenstein in holding that it makes nonsense to talk of a child's teaching himself the meaning of the word 'pain' by private ostensive definition.

Clearly if someone wants to teach a child the meaning of a word that refers to a private experience the best he can do if he cannot explain its meaning by definition is to draw the child's attention to instances of that experience by pointing to its publicly observable concomitants. Now one, though by no means the only publicly observable concomitant of pain is the characteristic behaviour (groans, grimaces, etc.) that it is said to evoke. Consequently one way of explaining the meaning of 'pain' by the ostensive method would be to point to someone, preferably the child who is learning the word, when he is displaying this sort of behaviour. Moreover, if it were the case, which it is not, that the behaviour it evokes were the only publicly observable concomitant of pain, I think we can agree with Wittgenstein that if people ceased to exhibit this behaviour, it would no longer be possible to explain to a child the meaning of the word 'pain' by the ostensive method, since on this hypothesis there would no longer be anything to point to.

There is nothing, however, in this argument that requires us to accept the contention that Kenny attributes to Wittgenstein to the effect that private ostensive definition is the only form of the ostensive method that could conceivably be used in explaining the meaning of a word that refers to a kind of private experience. This conclusion follows only if you suppose either that there has to be some logically necessary connection between the meaning of the word and the object or phenomenon to which the teacher points in explaining its meaning or that the object or phenomenon that is actually and literally pointed at must always be of something to which the word applies. In fact, as we have seen, there is no reason why we should accept either of these assumptions. We have seen in the case of Uncle George and his bowler hat that, in so far as one can make sense of the notion of a logical connection between the meaning and an instance to which it applies, there need be no such logical

connection between the meaning of the word and the instance used to explain it. We have also noted that the function of the pointing is merely to draw the pupil's attention to one of a number of instances to which the word applies, from which follows that any device that will serve to call the pupil's attention simultaneously to the word and instance to which it applies will satisfy the requirements. In the case of private experiences, of course, the only device that the teacher can use in order to draw the pupil's attention to the relevant private experience is to draw attention to its publicly observable concomitants in the pupil's own case; but the fact that this procedure is necessarily indirect does not mean that it is necessarily ineffective.

In § 270 of *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein argues that if there is a publicly observable phenomenon such as a rise in blood pressure recorded on a manometer which is invariably correlated with a private experience of the individual which he designates by means of the letter E, this sign (the letter E) would serve a useful function in the language game only in so far as it serves to draw attention to the outward concomitant with which the experience is correlated (the rise in blood pressure recorded by the manometer). This suggests that Wittgenstein would argue that if the only way to draw an individual's attention to a private experience of his is to draw his attention to a publicly observable concomitant of that experience, it would be impossible to draw his attention to the experience without at the same time drawing his attention to the publicly observable concomitant. He would, therefore, have no way of knowing that the word in question referred to the experience rather than the concomitant of that experience, and thus no way of learning to use E as a sign for the occurrence of the experience rather than as a sign meaning a rise in blood pressure on the manometer. What Wittgenstein does not seem to have appreciated, in formulating this example, however, is that this situation would only arise in a case such as he envisages, where the occurrence of a particular private experience is correlated and, moreover, invariably correlated with only one publicly observable concomitant. In fact sensations are correlated rather loosely with an appreciable number of different publicly observable concomitants. Pains, for example, are correlated not only with a number of different behaviours such as groans, grimaces and more complex forms of escape and avoidance behaviour to which the pain stands in the relationship of cause to the behaviour as effect; they are also correlated with publicly observable events such as various kinds of tissue injury which are the causes of which the pain is the effect. By associating the word 'pain' with all these different concomitants, each of which has its own separate and peculiar designation, it is not difficult to see how an individual can soon learn to eliminate all possible alternative constructions and thus come to use the word 'pain' as the name of the only feature common to these multifarious situations as they apply to himself, namely a particular variety of private experience that he has on such occasions. He can only acquire this ability, of course, if he does in fact have a distinctive experience which is correlated with the standard concomitants of pain, both its causes and its effects, in the standard way that pains are correlated with their publicly observable concomitants in all members of the human species who are normal in this respect.

At this point in the argument, however, Wittgenstein introduces another objection aimed at discrediting or, perhaps one should rather say, undermining our confidence in the belief that sensation words are or would be the names of private experiences. In § 271 he argues that if pain is a particular kind of private experience, it is logically possible that someone might use the word 'pain' 'in a way fitting in with usual symptoms and presuppositions of pain' and yet be referring to a quite different experience each time; and in § 272 he argues that it is logically possible – 'though unverifiable – that one section of mankind had one sensation of red and another section another'. The implication here is that there is no means of knowing whether the private experiences that is supposedly referred to by a given word or expression is like or unlike the experience referred to by that word by different people or by the same individual on different occasions. There is therefore no means of knowing whether or not the word is being used in the same or in a different sense on different occasions; and a word, such as this whose meaning can change from one occasion to another without one being any the wiser can

perform no useful linguistic function; it cannot serve to communicate anything. As Wittgenstein puts it 'a wheel that can be turned though nothing else moves, is not part of the mechanism'⁶.

In examining this argument we need to consider separately the two cases that Wittgenstein gives the one in which the word 'pain' refers to something different when used by the same individual on different occasions and the one in which the word refers to something different when used by different people. The case which Wittgenstein discusses in § 271 where someone uses the word 'pain' 'in a way fitting in with the usual symptoms and presuppositions of pain', but, nevertheless, uses it to refer to a different experience every time, begs the question. For if it is the case, as I for one believe it is, that the word 'pain' refers to a particular variety of private experience, it follows that one of the 'presuppositions of pain' is the presupposition that pain is a private experience in all instances of which as they are experienced by a given individual have that distinctive quality characteristic of pain; and if this is one of the presuppositions of pain, it follows that someone who uses 'pain' to refer to a set of experiences that do not have any such distinctive quality in common is not using 'pain' in a way fitting with its usual presuppositions.

Nevertheless it is not sufficient simply to assert as a matter of individual opinion that being a private experience with the distinctive quality characteristic of pain is one of the presuppositions of pain. Some evidence is required to show that this is how the word is ordinarily used. Wittgenstein implies that the word 'pain' is ordinarily used in such a way that it can be just as easily construed as referring to the publicly observable concomitants of pain as to any supposed private experience underlying them. But if this were so, every occurrence of the standard concomitants of pain ought to be pain and there should be no differences between different kinds of pain that cannot be accounted for in terms of differences in its publicly observable concomitants.

In fact it is not difficult to produce examples where these principles do not hold. Groaning and grimacing, for example, can occur just as readily and without any element of pretence in response to a sensation like nausea which can be just as unpleasant as any pain, but it is not itself a form of pain. Nausea, of course, makes us want to vomit which pains do not; but this is hardly a reason for refusing to call it a pain. The reason why we do not call nausea a pain is simply that it feels different; and it is just this business of things feeling different, looking different, sounding different, tasting different and smelling different that we are talking about when we use expressions like 'immediate' or 'private' experience. Similarly its being located in one's teeth is not the only or even the essential difference between toothache and other sorts of pain. It makes sense to say of someone that he felt a hot smarting pain in his tooth instead of the usual cold bony feeling of toothache.

Thus in the first of Wittgenstein's two cases where someone uses the word 'pain' to refer to a different experience each time, someone who uses the word in this way would not be using it in the way we ordinarily use it, because the possibility of comparing one pain with another and with other experiences that are not pains with respect to the way they feel to the person who has them is built into our ordinary concept of 'pain'.

But can we say in the second case that Wittgenstein discusses in § 272, where it is suggested that everyone might have a different experience which he calls 'his pain' or 'his sensation of red', that the possibility of comparing one person's pain or sensation of red with another's is also built into the presuppositions of concepts like 'pain' or 'the sensation of red'? I think we can.

As I see it we know perfectly well that different people have similar experiences under similar circumstances; and when they do not, we usually know that they do not. The argument that we cannot know whether other people's experiences are like or unlike our own rests on the fallacious assumption that the only way to compare two experiences is to have both of them. We certainly cannot compare two experiences had by different individuals in the way we compare the appearances of two things we are looking at simultaneously. Nor can we compare them as we compare the appearance of something we are looking at now with the appearance of something we looked at on a previous occasion. But these are not the only ways in which we can compare things. We can compare the experiences of two different people, I suggest, in the sort of way that we might compare two towns with respect to their

⁶ *op. cit.* § 271.

position in the economy of their respective countries, or two individuals with respect to the positions they occupy in different organisations. We can compare them, (a) with respect to the environmental conditions that normally prevail when the individual has an experience of the kind in question and which serve to characterise it, and (b) with respect to its likeness to and difference from other experiences of the same individual.

My toothache is like your toothache and unlike all other experiences of yours in that it is a sensation produced in bad cases of tooth decay and in the course of dental operations. You may say that in this respect it is only by definition that my toothache is like your toothache; but what is the force of 'only' here. In any case my toothache need not be like yours only by definition. It is true of my toothache that it is more like the aches that I feel in my muscles and joints and in my head, than the smarts and stings that I feel on the surface of my skin. It also bears a strong resemblance to the sensation of cold that I get. It may or may not be true of your toothache that it is related to other sensations of yours in this way. I should have to ask you to find out. But if it is, this is a respect in which it is not analytic to say that my toothache is like your toothache.

It may be objected that all we know from this is that two experiences had by different people when their sense organs are stimulated in the same way stand in the same sort of relationship of likeness and difference to other experiences that the same individuals have under other conditions of stimulation; it tells us nothing about the intrinsic likeness or difference of the two experiences. But what is this 'intrinsic' likeness and difference? Does it make sense to talk in this way? If two things are alike or unlike, they must be alike or unlike in some respect. In what other respect can an experience of mine be like or unlike an experience of yours? Similar to mine as mine is like other experiences of mine? But my experiences are like and unlike one another with respect to the way they feel to me. How can an experience of yours be like an experience of mine with respect to the way it feels to me, since I cannot feel it?

Let us suppose, however, that there is such a thing as this intrinsic likeness and difference between the experiences of different people, and that we just do not have any means of discovering whether two experiences of different people are similar in this respect. Does it matter for the purposes of the argument we are considering that we do not know whether or not two experiences are alike in this respect? The argument is that if we have no means of knowing whether or not two experiences are alike, there is no means of knowing whether the word used to refer to both of them refers to the same sort of thing. If we knew nothing about these two experiences except that they were experiences that someone was having at some time, this argument would carry weight. But, as we have seen, we can usually specify at least two respects in which the experiences are alike or different; and if two things are alike in the only respects in which they can be known to be alike, what is the point of saying, that the word or phrase that is used to refer to them may refer to something quite different in the two cases? We can understand the word 'chair', and understand it in the same sense, when it is used to refer to items of furniture that we know differ in a great many respects. What, then, is the point of saying that words that refer to experiences cannot be understood, because things to which they refer may differ in a respect in which it is logically impossible for us to know whether they differ or not?

To conclude, Wittgenstein's 'beetle' in the box (§ 293) has no place in the language game, because there is nothing that each person can say about his own 'beetle', except that it is a 'beetle'. 'It would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box'. Sensations are not like this. In ordinary speech there are various things we can say about them, and thus compare our own with other people's with respect to those features that we can specify. At first sight the situation in which we refer to sensations by a name given to that kind of sensation instead of by description, seems parallel to Wittgenstein's example; but in his example there is only one 'beetle' in each box, which stays there all the time, whereas each of us has innumerable sensations that appear, disappear and reappear in a lawful and predictable relation to one another and the circumstances outside the box, and the principles governing this appearance, disappearance and reappearance are very much the same for all of us. It is this lawful and predictable relation of sensations to their publicly observable concomitants that make the communication of private experience possible.