

## DISCUSSIONS

## EMPIRICISM AND THE PRIVATE LANGUAGE ARGUMENT

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One claim made for Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of a private language is that it shows the incoherence of the kind of radical empiricism which emerges from the Cartesian emphasis on the *cogitatio* as that which is undubitably given.<sup>1</sup> In considering Anthony Kenny's article "Cartesian Privacy" I want to show that such an empiricism — which holds that there can be certainty only of the experience of the present moment — is not refuted by the PLA.<sup>2</sup> This is not because the PLA is itself invalid, but because such an empiricism need not be committed to the use of a language which is private in the relevant sense. For present purposes, then, we can put aside the question of the validity of the PLA, and the historical point that Descartes himself was committed to the possibility of a private language. We shall concentrate on the more ambitious claim mentioned above.

Kenny clearly feels that a Cartesian enquirer is committed to the use of a private language, arguing that "the referents of the words of Wittgenstein's private language correspond to Descartes' *cogitationes*" (p. 361). Why should he think this?

If the language contains words for sensations, then the connection between the words and the sensations must be set up without the intermediary of the natural expression of sensation in bodily behaviour; for the words of the language are supposed to have meaning at a stage at which it is doubtful whether there are any bodies at all. (p. 362)

This deals explicitly only with words for sensations, which I shall consider later. First, let us look at words for ordinary public objects, like cats. How does the Cartesian doubt affect them? Take a thought like 'There is a cat'. We must suspend judgement on such a claim, according to the Method of Doubt, since we cannot be sure that any material objects exist, let alone this particular purported cat. We must restrict ourselves to a claim like 'It seems that there is a cat': *this* is indubitable. Now what has happened to the meaning of 'cat' here? Has it changed, so that the word no longer refers to an ordinary public object, but to a private one — a certain complex of sense data, or a Lockean idea, say? This may have been the classical empiricists' view, and indeed that of Descartes himself, but is it the only view open to an empiricist? For one self-styled radical empiricist, Edmund Husserl, the answer is no.

This answer is based on the contention that the philosophically radical description of the object of the *cogitatio* is that which describes it exactly as it is experienced; or, as Husserl would also say, as it is "intended" in the experience. Such description of the "intentional objects" of experience can

<sup>1</sup>'Private Language Argument' is henceforth abbreviated to PLA.

<sup>2</sup>See *Wittgenstein*, ed. G. Pitcher (London, 1968), 352-70.

be undertaken under suspension of judgement as to the actual existence of the object in question, and plays a central role in Husserlian phenomenology. Consider, for example, my looking at a cat. Let us suspend judgement as to whether the cat actually exists or not. Nevertheless, the object of the experience is given, at least implicitly, as something which is alive and furry, which eats, drinks and so on: in short, it is given as a cat — my experience is, intentionally, of a cat. Now if someone convinces me that it is, in fact, a cardboard replica of a cat, then, according to Husserl, my experience may undergo a gestalt switch. Even though nothing in the field of vision alters, my experience is now intentionally, not of a cat, but of a cardboard cut-out; it is given, at least implicitly, as inanimate and non-furry, requiring neither food nor drink, and so on. If I realise that I am enjoying the effects of an hallucinatory drug, and I am told that nothing but a blank wall stands before me, then again, though my visual field remains the same, the *cogitatio* may change; its intentional object is no longer given as a public object at all, but as a private hallucinatory image. Finally, if I attend purely to the sense qualities of the visual field, the experience is now, intentionally, of something stripped of all other meaning (either as public or private object); that is, of a spatial arrangement of patches of colour of different shade, intensity and so on.

Here the classical empiricist may claim that only this last description is philosophically radical, because it describes the basic experiential data, devoid of interpretation. Since all interpretations are essentially contestable constructions, only with this last attempt do we get the hard stuff of experience, the data which are given. Husserl denies this: for him the phenomenological mode of description is primary; and we can get to the supposedly neutral description, free of interpretation, only by a process of abstraction, stripping off the meanings given in experience and articulated in the phenomenological description.

Certain considerations seem to support Husserl here — for example, the way A. J. Ayer introduces his “percepts” by means, ultimately, of a locution like ‘it seems that there is a cat’.<sup>3</sup> However, all we need at present is the weaker claim that the phenomenological description does not presuppose the “sense data” description as a condition of its meaningfulness. If this is the case (and I shall consider it again later), we can view the Cartesian doubt as suspending judgement about the actual existence of the intentional objects of our *cogitationes* (at least of those which are given as existing independently of the experience) while the *cogitatio* retains its phenomenological meaning. Nothing, as far as experiences goes, changes.

As for the language in which the description of the *cogitatio* is undertaken, the phenomenological standpoint gives us an important alternative. Instead of the Cartesian doubt forcing a change in our view of the meaning of words, such that they are taken to refer to immediate sensations, sense data and so forth, we can keep the meaning of the words unchanged, so that if they successfully refer, they refer to public objects like cats. The effect of the Doubt is to suspend judgement on the actual existence of these purported referents. Rather than change the meaning and secure successful reference, one leaves the meaning as it is, and suspends judgement on referential success. Now this surely removes one reason for thinking that a private language must be used here, for its words refer not to immediate private sensations, known only to the speaker, but (purportedly at least) to

<sup>3</sup>E.g., in *The Problem of Knowledge* (Harmondsworth, 1956), 95-8.

public objects which can be met with by others.<sup>4</sup> But the Doubt is to suspend judgement on the actual existence not only of the purported referents of the words of the language, but also of the whole public context within which the publicity of meaning is attained. Does this not force us back onto a private language? No. The meaning of the words is still not private; it rests not on bare ostensive association with private sensations or ideas, but on a context of communication about a public world. If judgement as to the existence of this context is suspended, so as to treat it as the intentional correlate of pure experience *within* which the public/private distinction is drawn, the language remains public; it is in principle comprehensible to others, and its use is in principle open to their checking, whether or not such others actually exist. Thus for the radical empiricist it is possible that there actually exists only a series of experiences, among which are experiences intentionally of people communicating about material objects, responding positively or negatively to utterances, teaching the meanings of words, and so on; providing, in short, the necessary context for the emergence of a public language. The publicity of meaning is thus adequately founded on the intentional character of such experiences, irrespective of the actual existence of such people and objects.

As long as we distinguish sense from reference, as any adequate theory of language must (although perhaps the theory of the classical empiricists does not), we can interpret the Doubt as above. Indeed, once the phenomenological alternative to classical empiricism is considered, this seems to me by far the most natural way of construing the effects of the Doubt, and if so, it secures for the reconstructed Cartesian an immunity to the PLA, which would apply only to less sophisticated forms of radical empiricism.<sup>5</sup> Before discussing further the viability of this option, let us ask why it is not considered by Kenny (and, for that matter, Wittgenstein).

One reason, hinted at above, is that Descartes and the classical empiricists seem to have held that a word must refer to something if it is to be meaningful, so that if we suspend judgement as to the existence of ordinary material objects we must turn elsewhere, to sense data and private sensations, to account for the meaningfulness of language. But it would be wrong to saddle radical empiricism in general with such an inadequate theory of language: Husserl, for one, having studied Frege, would reject it.

There is another reason, which is that the focus on the example of pain stops Kenny from seeing the alternative to classical empiricism. He quotes from Descartes' Sixth Meditation:

[I found error] not only in [judgements] founded on the external senses, but even in those founded on the internal as well; for is there anything more intimate or internal than pain? And yet I have learned from some persons whose arms or legs have been cut off, that they sometimes seemed to feel pain in the part which had been amputated, which made me think that I could not be quite certain that it was a certain member which pained me, even though I felt pain in it.<sup>6</sup>

Kenny continues: "In pain, as in sight, we must distinguish what is strictly *cogitatio*. The indubitable *cogitatio* will be the "immediate private

<sup>4</sup>Cf. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford, 1956), §243, and the discussion of Kenny below.

<sup>5</sup>Cf. Hacker's discussion of Locke, in *Insight and Illusion* (Oxford, 1972), Ch. VIII.

<sup>6</sup>*Oeuvres de Descartes*, ed. Ch. Adam and P. Tannery (Paris, 1897-1910), vol. VII, p. 71.

sensation" (p. 362). Consider this further. Kenny clearly takes the application of Cartesian doubt to a claim like 'There is a pain in the foot' to work like this: since we cannot be sure of the existence of the foot, all we are entitled to claim is 'There is a pain', where 'pain' now refers to a private sensation, independent of any actual foot, or body, at all — and so, of course, of any behavioural manifestation of sensation. 'Pain' must on this view be part of a private language, its meaning based on association with the private sensation, and so this interpretation of Cartesian doubt — which seems admittedly to be Descartes' own — falls prey to the PLA.

Our reconstructed Cartesian, however, has an alternative. Instead of 'There is a pain', the application of the Doubt could as well give us 'It seems that there is a pain in the foot', in line with its application to claims like 'There is a cat'. Here, 'pain' remains part of a public language: a pain is the sort of feeling you get when someone, say, stamps on your foot, and which is manifest in screams, writhings, withdrawal of the foot and so on. So the pain is experienced as being in the foot, even though we suspend judgement as to the actual existence of that foot. The Doubt says that maybe there is no pain in the foot, it just seems that there is.

The temptation here is to say that there is more to it. Not only does it *seem* that there is a pain in the foot, there *is* a sensation, whether in an actual foot or not. So this might seem to be a more exact description of the case: 'There is a pain, which seems to be in the foot'. Certainly it seems to fit the amputated limb example. But must 'pain' here be part of a private language? Only if it supposedly gets its meaning through association with the bare sensation, independent of connections with the body and with behaviour. But this need not be the case. The empiricist has the option of saying that 'pain' is part of a public language, in that it has public meaning *via* the normal connections with body and behaviour. Within this setting, we can allow talk of pains which do not in fact have the location they seem to have; but such talk must be understood as parasitic on the normal situation. On this view, Cartesian doubt is taken not to change the meaning of words, so that 'pain' gets only a private sense, tied only to the bare, disconnected sensation, but to suspend judgement on the existence of the public objects in connection with which the word for pain gets its public meaning.

Again, this seems to me the most natural interpretation of the workings of the Doubt, and to rescue the radical empiricist from the claws of the PLA. Nevertheless, two objections must be discussed, which put in question the coherence of this variant of empiricism. The first concerns the possibility of the universal application of the distinction between how things are experienced as being and how things are, and so between successful and unsuccessful attempts at referring. It is said that the distinction works within the context of a generally "realist" framework — "realist" in that it assumes the existence of a reality independent of experience — but makes no sense when applied to that context itself, so as to suspend judgement on the existence of the material world *in toto*. For, the argument goes, there is no empirical cash-value at stake here, nothing in experience could count for or against either alternative, and so there is no meaningful distinction to be made. This can also be expressed by saying that, while we learn the distinction in situations where we recognise that what was experienced as being the case was not in fact the case, we cannot, in principle, get ourselves into such a situation with respect to the whole material world, and so the distinction is no longer meaningful.

Two points can be made in reply. First: this argument, which rests on

a strongly verificationist criterion of meaningfulness, is separate from the PLA, and very controversial. It is, for example, a matter of contention whether the criterion escapes its own strictures, or rules itself out as meaningless. Secondly: if such an argument were to succeed, to ensure the PLA's hold on radical empiricism, it would render the PLA superfluous, since the argument would rule out radical empiricism on its own account.

The second objection goes deeper. The claim that a public language in which to describe experience can be retained, whilst commitment to the existence of a public world is suspended, rests on the meaningfulness of talk about pure experience. For to have meaning at all a language must have some semantic relationship with an extra-linguistic realm, and for the radical empiricist this realm has the status of an intentional correlate of pure experience. But what of 'experience' itself? Its meaning cannot be explained lexically, for example, in terms of people having certain mental states, for this would involve a direct commitment to the existence of such people, and such commitment is to be suspended. Some kind of ostensive explanation — perhaps as that which is present and reflected upon, here and now — is required, as the price for rescuing the publicity of the language in which experience is described; and it is here, in trying to give an adequate ostensive explanation of 'experience', without commitment to the existence of a public, objective world, that the empiricist may meet an insuperable difficulty. It is not my aim here to show the insuperability of this difficulty.<sup>7</sup> Rather I hope to have shown that the crucial arguments concern not the language in which the world as experienced is described — as Kenny and Wittgenstein himself hold to be the case — but must push further towards the core of empiricism, the possibility of an adequate account of its own central term: 'experience'.

The PLA's victim is classical empiricism; if we are to demonstrate convincingly that empiricism generally is not viable, we must take into account developments since the time of Descartes, Locke and Hume.

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<sup>7</sup>For an argument of this kind directed at Husserl, see my "Phenomenological Inquiry and Philosophical Self-reflection", *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 10 (1979).