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# Husserl's Alleged Private Language

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Does phenomenological reduction — the methodological device with which Husserl begins philosophical analysis — require some sort of private language? If so, is not Husserl's phenomenology incoherent? But what is a private language? And how could it be established that Husserl's phenomenological reduction commits him to one?

It has been said that Husserl's post-reduction language is private in at least one way. It has been alleged that it is at least

(L<sub>3</sub>) a language that is, as a matter of contingent fact, understood by only one speaker.<sup>1</sup>

But can it be established that Husserl's post-reduction language is (L<sub>3</sub>)? Husserl characterizes that phenomenological reduction as "bracketing" the [thesis of the] natural standpoint, which requires neutrality about whether there is (or is not) an external world, and about whether there are (or are not) other minds, etc. Now Husserl does not say anything further about the reduction that even suggests any modification of this neutrality. For this reason it is impossible to establish that Husserl's post-reduction language is private (or not public, for that matter). The argument can be put this way:

1. A public language is a language that is understood, in fact, by a number of speakers.
2. Husserl's reduction requires neutrality about whether there are, in fact, other speakers of his language.

Now (1) and (2) imply:

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<sup>1</sup> Suzanne Cunningham, "Husserl and Private Languages: A Response to Hutcheson," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 44 (September, 1983): 103-11. Hereafter: RH. The article is a reply to Peter Hutcheson, "Husserl and Private Languages," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 42 (September, 1981): 111-18. Hereafter: HPL.

3. Husserl's reduction requires neutrality about whether his language is, in fact, a public language.

But it does not follow that:

4. Husserl's post-reduction language is *not* a public language; it is a private one, namely, (L<sub>3</sub>).

Yet a recent criticism of Husserl's phenomenology is predicated on the erroneous inference from (1) and (2) to (4). If phenomenological reduction ". . . must leave one with a language devoid of all ties to other egos, to sociality and culture" (RH, p. 103), all this means is that the reduction requires neutrality about whether there are in fact "other egos, sociality, and culture." Thus, it does not mean that post-reduction language is private. It means that other egos must be treated as phenomena, rather than as factually existing. Given Husserl's depiction of the reduction, his post-reduction language might be private; then again, it might be public. He simply must remain neutral on that issue.

However, Husserl's critic might object that neutrality is insufficient to establish the coherence of his post-reduction language. It might be claimed that any coherent language, being rule-governed, must provide for verification of consistency of use, which can only be done by other egos. For if such verification of consistent use were done by the "solitary" phenomenologist himself, then what he believes to be correct would be deemed correct, which would amount to no rule of consistent use at all. Thus, the only alternative to a public language is an incoherent one in which it is impossible to verify whether a rule is followed.

Even if this argument were sound, it would not establish that Husserl's post-reduction language is understood by only one speaker. It would only show that Husserl's inability to say that his language is, in fact, understood by actually existing other speakers means that his language is incoherent. The argument, if sound, proves the impossibility of neutrality about actually existing other speakers. If so, then it also establishes the impossibility of skepticism about other speakers (and thus of other minds).

But is neutrality about whether there are other speakers (understanding hearers) of one's language incoherent? Although other speakers must actually exist in order for verification of consistent use to occur *in fact*, such verification need not in fact occur in order for one's language to be coherent. Rather, Husserl must provide for the *possibility* of being understood. However, this merely commits Husserl to the thesis that *if* there are other speakers of the language of phenomenology, they can understand the language. This does not imply that there are other speakers, but only

that it is possible for there to be other speakers. Incoherence (logical impossibility) is a stronger notion than physical impossibility; and the actual existence of other speakers is only a necessary condition for the physical possibility of actual verification of consistency of use. Husserl, on the other hand, must merely provide for the logical possibility of the (logically) possible occurrence of verification of consistency. But from this it only follows that it must be possible for there to be other speakers.

If the objection to Husserl's phenomenological reduction were sound, it would also prove that skepticism about other speakers (and thus other minds) cannot be stated coherently. But skepticism regarding other speakers can be stated coherently. Chris Swoyer argues:

We can imagine the skeptic to grant most of the steps in the private language argument. Having done so, he might conclude that while the argument is seductive and, in most places, sound, *apparent* or *seeming* regularities in the ways words are used will suffice to give them a use. A strong skeptical position, Ss, agrees that although I cannot give 'S' a use or function in a flash (simply by asserting that I will take it to be the name of my sensation), still, merely apparent customs, institutions, and forms of life are as good as *real* ones for allowing us to go on and apply 'S' in new situations. Wittgenstein's argument, the skeptic continues, is verificationistic because it depends on the assumption that we must know (be able to verify) that customs and institutions are real before we can use the framework they provide in order to see that we are really following rules. But how can we distinguish real regularities from fakes, genuine institutions and forms of life from spurious ones? In short, the private language argument defeats skepticism only by assuming its falsity.<sup>2</sup>

Now this may seem to be the case of allowing what I believe is right to determine what is right, which is precisely what Wittgenstein's argument is supposed to disprove. But that impression would be mistaken. The skeptic's rejoinder is that things *could appear* exactly as they ordinarily do — with institutions, forms of life, syntactic and semantic errors — and yet those things may be illusory. "And here mistakes, or better, apparent mistakes, are possible, for we make them all the time. Indeed, here we can seem to make mistakes and, the skeptic continues, the possibility of apparent mistakes is all that is needed for us to use a word or follow a rule" (PLS, p. 49). All the regularities involved in usage *could* be apparent. For all I know, the skeptic says, the language I speak could, as a matter of contingent fact, be private. The choice is not limited to no forms of life, customs, regularities, etc., or real ones. Systematic, harmonious appearances of such regularities will suffice.

Although Husserl is far from advocating skepticism, this argument does show the coherence of Husserl's neutrality regarding other speakers. It is noteworthy that Swoyer's skeptic does not deny that there are other

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Swoyer, "Private Languages and Skepticism," *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 8 (Summer, 1977), p. 47. Hereafter: PLS.

speakers of his language. The argument can be linked to Husserl's description of the reduction in *Ideas*, chapter 3, where he speaks of the conceivability of the nonexistence of the world (and thus of other "mundane" matters). The skeptic's talk of apparent customs and institutions also fits well with Husserl's depiction of the phenomenological reduction as treating such matters as phenomena of being rather than things that are.

The thesis that any coherent language must in fact be spoken or understood by a number of speakers is false.