

# Wittgenstein's "Private Language Argument" and the Limits of Language

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## Abstract:

After explaining the "private language argument" (PLA) centered in para. 258 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, the paper first clarifies Wittgenstein's notion of criteria. The paper then discusses the irony in Wittgenstein's apparent objection to putative private languages that they have no criteria for the private use of words. It is then argued that PLA, viewed from a logical perspective, is fallacious. The paper then shows how there could be scientific *standards* (not *criteria* in Wittgenstein's technical sense) for the existence of private mental states and argues that Wittgenstein did *not* argue that this is impossible. The paper then argues that the conclusion of PLA is a tautology. The paper then argues that since the conclusion of PLA is a tautology, Wittgenstein would be correctly unmoved by any of the aforementioned objections to PLA. Finally, the paper refutes the objection that there is an inconsistency in the present interpretation and shows how resolving this objection shows that Wittgenstein's PLA is to be understood in the context of his longstanding interest in setting *the limits of language*.

**Keywords:** Wittgenstein, private language, private objects, criteria, symptoms, limits of language

Now, what about the language which describes my  
inner experiences and which only I myself can understand?  
*Philosophical Investigations* (256)<sup>1</sup>

A "private language" can *only* be understood by the person who uses it (Kenny 1973, 179; McGinn 1984, 48). One asserts that there is a private language in cases where a person is claimed to have *direct* access, denied to others, to their own mental states (Ayer 1968, 253-54, 258). Descartes (1969 I, 9) appears to be committed to a private language. Dejnozka (1995) sees anticipations of it in Lock and Frege. Fodor (1979) holds that we *must* acknowledge a private language of thought. However, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* (hereafter *PI*), the seminal work in his "later philosophy,"<sup>2</sup> argues that private languages are impossible. Call this Wittgenstein's "Private Language Argument" or PLA! The paper argues that PLA is fallacious but that its conclusion is a tautology.

§ I gives a sketch of PLA. § II discusses PLA's notion of "criteria". § III discusses an irony in PLA's objection to private languages. § IV argues that PLA, viewed logically, is fallacious. § V argues that there *can* be objective *evidence* for the existence of private objects. § VI argues that the

conclusion of PLA is tautologous. § VII explains why Wittgenstein would, correctly, be unmoved by the aforementioned objections. § VIII argues that PLA is properly understood in the light of Wittgenstein's longstanding view that there are limits to language.

## **I. A Summary of Wittgenstein's Private Language Argument**

Wittgenstein's fundamental point is that ... in a putative private language ... there is ... no check on whether the words which only I (the speaker) understand are being employed with a constant meaning .... because [I] only [have] an impression of constancy to go on, which does not entail that any rule is being consistently followed, ...  
McGinn, *Wittgenstein on Meaning* (48)

One would not normally claim that an ordinary person N's colour-language is a private language because ordinary people live in a community of people who talk about colours. If members of N's linguistic community observe N describe green objects as red, they can correct N. One normally asserts a private language only in those cases in which a person is alleged to enjoy a *direct* acquaintance with their own mental states and unavailable to others. That is, whereas N is directly aware of her own toothache, her friend, M, can only know of her toothache *indirectly*, if at all. Similarly, M is directly acquainted with his own toothache and to which N can only have indirect access. On this view, people share a common world of public objects, like trees, about which they discourse relatively unproblematically, but each harbors a private world mental states with which each alone is directly acquainted. Thus, only N really knows what she *means* by "toothache". Further, since no one other than oneself can be directly aware of one's mental states, each person is the ultimate *authority* on the facts about their own mental states. As Wittgenstein puts it: "Even if no one knows what I call 'toothache', at least I know" (*LSD*, 295; See *Z*, 536). Thus, if N wishes to set up a private language to record the history of her toothaches, she is in the perfect authoritative position to do so.

Wittgenstein argues that this is an illusion. The core of PLA is stated in *PI* (para. 258),

I want to keep a diary about the recurrence of a certain sensation. To this end I associate it with the sign "S" and write a sign in a calendar for every day [when] I have the sensation. ... [A] definition of the sign cannot be formulated. But ... I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition. ... I speak or write the sign down, and ... concentrate my attention on the sensation—and so, as it were, point to it inwardly. But what is this ceremony for? For that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of the sign. Well, this is done by [concentrating] my attention; for in this way I impress upon myself the connection between the sign and the sensation. But "I impress it on myself" can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connection right in the future. But in the present case, I have no criterion of correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here we can't talk about "right".

Wittgenstein has sensation S, which he calls "S", and determines to record in his diary every later date on which he has this sensation. In order to ensure that he uses this private language

correctly, he *concentrates* on S to make sure that he *remembers* the connection between his sensation and sign "S". If S reappears the next day, he will write "S" in his diary on that date.<sup>3</sup>

PI (258) disparages this procedure for setting up the private language as a "ceremony". His objection is that this method for establishing the connection between the sensation and the sign does *not* establish any *criterion* for the correct use of the sign. For, if he later *misremembers* the sign-sensation correlation, he has no way of determining that his memory is incorrect. This problem does not arise for a public language. Suppose Wittgenstein sees a green patch, which he calls "G", and decides to write down in his diary every time he subsequently sees that same colour. He later sees a red patch and records "G" in his diary. His friend, observing the mistake, can correct him. The possibility of this kind of independent check is what is lacking for a private sensation-language. That is why Wittgenstein concludes that in a putative private language, "whatever is going to seem right to me is right", which means that "we can't talk about 'right'": "The balance on which impressions are to be weighed is not the impression of a balance" (PI, 259). Since a genuine language requires standards for the right use of words, and since a private language does not permit such standards, a "private language" is not a genuine language.

## II. Wittgenstein's Notion of Criteria

Philosophers have notoriously found it difficult in making sense of Wittgenstein's remarks about criteria.  
Baker and Hacker, *Scepticism, Rules and Language* (111)

Given the importance of the notion of a criterion to PLA, it is surprising that Wittgenstein takes such little care in defining it. Albritton's account of criteria is discussed in the present section. Cavell's alternative account is discussed in the replies to objections in § VII. Albritton (1968, 232-33) remarks that the only place in Wittgenstein's published work in which he "gives anything like a definition" is in the *Blue Book*, which he did not, apparently, hold in high esteem and which he intended primarily as a set of notes for his Cambridge students (Rhees 1965, vii). The *Blue Book*, together with the *Brown Book*, which latter Wittgenstein preferred, were later published together as *The Blue and Brown Books* (hereafter, *BB*) (Rhees 1965, vii). The definition of a criterion in the *Blue Book* boils down to the view that the criterion of X's being F is "a logically sufficient condition" of X's being F (Albritton 1968, 234). However, there are places in the *Brown Book* which suggest that the criterion of X's being F must be a logically necessary *and* sufficient condition of X's being F (*BB*, 121-122; Albritton 1968, 235).

One can further clarify this notion by reference to *BB*'s distinction between criteria and symptoms. If science *defines* angina as an inflammation of the throat caused by bacteria Y, then an inflamed throat is merely a symptom of angina, but the criterion of someone's having angina is the presence of Y in the blood (*BB*, 24-25). That someone with an inflamed throat has angina is only a "hypothesis", but that someone with Y in the blood has angina is a "tautology" (*BB*, 25). *BB* does not mean that it is a tautology like those of formal logic, but in the ordinary sense in which something

is a tautology if it “says the same thing twice over”. The connection between the phenomenon and the criterion is “logical” while that between the phenomenon and its symptoms is contingently discovered by experience.

Albritton (1968, 236) stresses that by characterizing *BB*’s notion of a “criterion” for X’s being F as the notion of “a logically necessary and sufficient condition” for X’s being F, *BB* does *not* mean that the “defining criterion” correspond to a *real essence*. Rather, *BB*’s (114) criteria are rooted in the fact that people “accept”, “adopt” or “apply” certain “conventions” in their uses of words (Albritton, 1968, 236). It is crucial that these criteria are *public*. The *Blue Book* (1-2) *begins* with the discussion how “we” use words and how words are used in “our” language. The *Brown Book* (77) *begins* with the contrast between the way the word “brick” is used in one of Wittgenstein’s “language games” and the way it is used “in *our* language [LW’s italics]”. The emphasis on how “I” view the world in Wittgenstein’s earlier *TLP* (5.631), is replaced in *BB* by an emphasis on how “we” use words in “our” public language. That is, *BB* understands “philosophical grammar” as the “grammar” of a *public* language.

Finally, *BB* (9, 61-62, 69, 87, 91, 107-115, 134, 137, 171) stresses that what counts as the criteria for X’s being F does so only in certain “contexts” or “circumstances.” Wittgenstein’s *BB* and his subsequent works are much more sensitive to the *context-dependency* of human language than *TLP* had been. To take one obvious example, X’s holding their jaw and writhing on the couch may be a *criterion* of X’s having a toothache in normal circumstances, but not if the event takes place in a play or as part of a prank. For *BB*, the criterion of X’s being F does not consist in some timeless essence fixed once and for all. Rather, one can only ask about the criterion of X’s being F *in certain circumstances*.

Although Albritton’s (1968, 243) remark that most of the ways Wittgenstein talks about criteria in *BB* are “almost entirely suppressed” in Wittgenstein’s subsequent works is an overstatement, there is some truth to it. Albritton goes in the same passage to explain that the “dominant conception” in Wittgenstein’s post-*BB* works is that a criterion for somethings being X is that it is “something by which” in certain circumstances “one may be justified in saying that the thing” is X “and by whose absence” in those circumstances “one may be justified in saying that the thing is not” X. However, *BB*’s talk of *sufficient or necessary and sufficient conditions* is absent from *PI* and replaced by the idea that the criterion of X’s having a toothache might, in certain circumstances, simply be a kind of behaviour, like holding one’s jaw and writhing on the couch. Although *BB* recognized the importance of the circumstances in which criteria are applied, Wittgenstein’s *PI* recognizes that a full appreciation of the *context-dependency* of criteria destroys the idea that criteria for something’s being X might consist in necessary and/or sufficient conditions. However, *PI* retains the idea that a criterial connection is “logical” because *PI* still makes a distinction between criteria and symptoms (Albritton 1968, 244). The logically necessary and sufficient conditions for X’s being F in *BB* is replaced in *PI* by the notion of someone’s being *justified*, on broadly logical grounds, to *say* that X is F, where the “semantic ascent” (Quine 2013, 249ff) from

the idea of criteria for X's being F to the idea of criteria that *justify* one in certain circumstances to *say* that X is F, is crucial to *PI*'s new formulation.

It is because Wittgenstein's notion of criteria is constantly evolving that he only comes close to *defining* it in a work that he disparages in a letter to Russell. Since one must glean its relevant meaning in *PI* from a handful of examples, Kripke (1982, 99) wisely declines to attempt to settle "the finer exegetical points in Wittgenstein's notion of a criterion," but only to sketch the key points of that notion that are relevant to his own project. The same strategy is followed here. For what remains constant from the beginning is that these broadly *logical* criteria are part of a *public* language that must be applied in the correct *circumstances*.

### III. What Need for a Criterion?

What is the criterion for the redness of an image? For me, when it is someone's else's image: what he says and does. For myself, when it is my image: nothing.  
*Philosophical Investigations* (377)

Wittgenstein's demand in PLA for a criterion concerning the correct use of his private sensation words is ironic since he regularly chastises philosophers for demanding reasons in many cases. Since he states in the first paragraph of *PI* that "Explanations come to an end somewhere," this general recurrent idea must be of some importance to him. (See also *Z*, 313-315) An analogous theme appears in his philosophy of mathematics (*RFM*, II, 78). But if one can get by without explanations in such very different cases, why should one need a criterion for how one uses words in a private language? One might reply that an *explanation* for how one uses words is not the same thing as a *criterion* for how one uses words—and that is true. However, multiple variations on this theme are pervasive throughout his "later philosophy". At *PI* (211), referring to our reasons for continuing certain patterns as we do, he writes, "Well, how do I know [how to continue the pattern]?—If that means "Have I reasons?" the answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I will act without reasons." At *PI* (217), referring to the question how we obey rules, he writes: "If I have exhausted the justifications, I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do'." At *OC* (78, 253, 612) he states that our practice of giving reasons must come to an end. At *OC* (148), in response to a question how he is certain that he can get up from a chair, he answers: "There is no why. This is how I act". At *OC* (164), in response to a question whether one needs to do tests to determine whether objects continue to exist when unobserved, he replies that testing must come to an end somewhere. At *OC* (624-25), in response to a question whether one can be certain that this colour is called "green" in English, he replies that our rules come to an end somewhere and adds that "A doubt that did not come to an end would not be a doubt".

Thus, when Wittgenstein demands a criterion for how one uses one's private words, *why should one not reply that criteria come to an end somewhere?* If Wittgenstein replies that surely one needs a reason for applying private words as one does, why should one not reply that reasons come to an end somewhere? If Wittgenstein is asked how one can be certain that one has identified

sensation S properly, why should one not reply: “There is no why. This is how I act”? When Wittgenstein points out that one can raise doubts about how one applies one’s private words, why should one not reply that “A doubt that did not come to an end would not be a doubt”? Wittgenstein admits this himself. When asked what *his* criterion is for deciding whether his own image is red, his answer is “nothing” (see epigraph above). But then why does one require a criterion for how one uses one’s private words? Thus, Ayer (1968, 260) points out that on Wittgenstein’s own principles, “Verification must stop somewhere”. Call this the objection to PLA from the fact that the need for Criteria must come to an End Somewhere or CES!

#### IV. The Fallacy in the “Private Language Argument”

I should like you to say [*Ich möchte doch, daß du sagst*]: “Yes, it’s true, you can imagine that too, that might happen too”—I wanted to put that picture before him, and his acceptance of that picture consists in his now being inclined to regard that case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* rather than *that* set of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*. (Indian mathematicians: “Look at this!” [all emphasis, LW’s])  
*Philosophical Investigations* (144)

The last two crucial lines of *PLA*, that 1.) “whatever is going to seem right to me is right”, and that, 2.) “we can’t talk about right”, are misleading in several ways. Consider the first of these claims. For, in fact, *PI* (258) does *not* assert that “whatever is going to seem right to me is right”. The *complete* line is: “One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right”. However, there are many things the present author “would like to say” but cannot say because they are not true. The present author “would like to say” that mass shootings in the US will soon become a thing of the past, but that does not mean that this will become true. Further, Wittgenstein’s remark that he “would like to say ...” something is not a casual formulation but is connected with his unusual way of arguing. Referring to one of his arguments about what it means to say something about the learning process (see epigraph above), he explains his way of arguing, namely that he puts a new “picture” before one in order to get one to look at the case in a new way. Thus, *PI* (258) does *not* present a logical argument that in a private language “whatever is going to seem right to me is right”. It presents the reader with a new *picture* of language in order to break the grip of the old more rationalist picture that sees more cognitive structure underlying language. If Wittgenstein can *persuade* people to accept his new picture, they will then “like to say”, with him, of a putative private language that “whatever is going to seem right to me is right.” That is, *PLA* does *not* aim to *prove* anything, but to *persuade* people, by employing certain *imaginative* techniques, to see language differently.

This is connected to the second oddity in *PLA*. The entire argument at *PI* (258) is conducted from the first-person point of view (“I want to keep a diary ... To this end I associate ...”)—until the last sentence where the “I” unaccountably changes to “We”: “And that only means that here we [can’t ...”. But how can Wittgenstein possibly infer from the fact that I, LW, from my private mental prison, cannot talk about “right,” to the conclusion that *we* beings in the real world cannot talk about

right? For, if the entire argument is conducted from his first-person point of view, he is only entitled to infer that “I [LW]” can’t talk about ‘right’”—and what does that have to do with the much more robust conceptual resources of a public linguistic community? Further, since, as argued above, *PI* (258) never asserts that “whatever is going to seem right to me is right”, but only that he “would like to say” this, and since one cannot make inferences from a sentence that is not asserted in the argument, the final conclusion of the argument (that *we* cannot talk about right), *is not arrived at by inference*. Thus, if PLA is judged logically, it is fallacious. Call this the objection from the fact that PLA is Fallacious or PLAF!

Although it sounds paradoxical, Wittgenstein’s “Private Language Argument” is not an argument (not an attempt to infer conclusions from premises by means of logical principles). Wittgenstein never describes it as an argument, and numerous commentators have questioned whether it can be called an argument proper (Candlish 2014, §1; Biletzki and Matar 2018, § 3.5). This should be no surprise. Wittgenstein holds that “Philosophy simply puts everything before us and neither explains nor deduces anything” (*PI*, 125). PLA is not a deduction. But if PLA is not a logical argument, what is it? At *PI* (109) Wittgenstein states that “we must do away with all explanation and description alone must take its place”. Thus, the proper inference is that PLA is an imaginative *description* to *persuade* “we” beings who live in a public world to *look* at the perennial philosophical idea of a private language in a different way: “Indian mathematicians: “Look at this!” (*PI*, 144). “To repeat: don’t think, but look!” (*PI*, 66).

## V. Scientific Standards for the Existence of Private Objects

Using psychophysical ratings to define pain sensitivity and functional magnetic resonance imaging [fMRI] to assess brain activity, we found that highly sensitive individuals exhibited more frequent and more robust pain-induced activation of the primary somatosensory cortex, anterior cingulate cortex, and prefrontal cortex than did insensitive individuals.

Coghill *et al*, “Neural Correlates of Interindividual Differences in the Subjective Experience of Pain” (8538)

The conclusion of PLA is ambiguous. One must distinguish between 1.) the criteria for the use of words that the speakers of those private languages themselves *understand*, and 2.) objective *standards* (not criteria) for the presence of private states from a 3<sup>rd</sup> person point of view. Kripke (1982, 109) attributes the first of these to Wittgenstein when he defines a private language as one that it is “impossible for anyone else to understand.” That is, he rejects the view that some third party could possess “criteria” for the correct uses of N’s private words without *themselves* understanding N’s private criteria. By contrast, a third-party account lend itself to scientific *standards* for the correctness of N’s private uses of words - and one only requires a third-party *standard* (not criteria) to be able to “talk about ‘right’” in N’s use of private words. That is, a neuroscientist does *not* themselves have to *understand* N’s private “criteria” when they attribute a certain sensory state to

N. The present section argues that *nothing in PLA* precludes that there could be objective scientific *standards* for the right uses of private words.

Consider the following example! Wittgenstein writes down the penultimate conclusion of *PI* (258) when he is interrupted by two Cambridge scientists who inform him that he is mistaken when he infers that *we* cannot take about “right” here. They tell him that they have been monitoring his brain, behaviour and physical environment over the past months with state-of-the-art equipment. The findings are that when he set out to write down the name “S” every time he has sensation S, he was staring at a specific kind of green plant and they have a detailed description of all of his neurophysiological and sensory states over that period. There are, they inform him, 34 different shades of green in his environment, but the only thing that exhibits that particular shade of green (call it green<sub>29</sub>) is that plant. Furthermore, they have verified that on all of the occasions in which he wrote down “S” in diary he was looking at that same green<sub>29</sub> plant in good lighting. In addition, and perhaps most surprising, on 9 occasions over that period, he was observed staring at a different green plant and began to write down “S” in his diary but hesitated and deleted the entry. This is very interesting, they point out, because that colour of that plant, green<sub>28</sub>, is very similar to that of the green<sub>29</sub> plant. However, since the two shades, though close, *are* visually distinguishable, they are impressed that though he began to record an “S” in his diary, he ended up deleting it in each case, which shows that he *can* see the difference between these colours. Thus, they are happy to inform him that each time he wrote down “S” in his diary, their scientific data confirms that he was in fact having exactly the same sensation S. Despite his “human, all too human”<sup>4</sup> doubts that his memory might have deceived him about his diary entries, their data shows that he correctly applied “S” to the same sensation S over the whole period and never wrote down “S” for a non-green<sub>29</sub> object. “You may be right,” they tell him, “that *you* don’t have any standards for talking about ‘right’ here, *but we scientists do have them*”<sup>5</sup>

Finally, these scientists add that they do not pretend to “understand” Wittgenstein’s private sensation words the way he does inside his private mental prison. What we can say, they tell him, is that your (LW’s) neurophysiological and sensory states and relations to the environment display such impressive regularities that we can say with confidence that each time you wrote an “S” in your diary you were in the very same neurophysiological and sensory state that you were in when you first named sensation “S”. It is just a happy *contingent* fact that whether you have a private “criterion” or not, your memory in such cases *is* very good—which is not surprising since a reliable memory of one’s sensations would enhance survivability and therefore be selected to by evolution. Indeed, Wittgenstein appears to acknowledge the possibility of such correlations between private sensations and physical states himself when he admits that one might discover a “useful” correlation between one’s private sensation and a rise in one’s blood pressure *PI* (270).

One cannot, therefore, deny that there could be substantial objective scientific *evidence* that Wittgenstein is correctly re-identifying the sensation S when his memory tells him that that he is having that sensation. In fact, although there is much more work to do, neurophysiologists have



documented an impressive set of similar regularities (see epigraph above).<sup>6</sup> However, the present argument does *not* presuppose that these correlations have been definitively scientifically established. It requires only that it is *possible* to establish such correlations. For if *PI* (258) were to provide a convincing argument that privately correctly reidentifying one's sensations is impossible, it would have to rule out that such scientific evidence is even possible. But nothing in the *PI* (258) even addresses the question of possible *scientific* standards and *PI* (270) appears to admit that such correlations are possible. Call this the objection from the existence of an Objective Scientific Model of private criteria or OSM!

It will be replied that the standard view that the moral of *PI* (270), taken in its *entirety*, is the *opposite* of the one drawn here, e.g., Garver (1994, 214-15) points out that this "perplexing" passage seems to take back everything Wittgenstein has been arguing, but that, taken as a whole, it denies that the passage changes everything. For, Garver points out, the last lines in *PI* (270) reaffirms the standard interpretation that the "private sensation" drops out as irrelevant. Thus, what this "useful" correlation really amounts to is only a correlation between writing "S" in one's diary and a rise in one's blood pressure (both public events).

Garver makes a good point, but it does *not* undermine the present argument. First, the present argument is *not* based on an exegesis of *PI* (270). It is rather that when the scientific facts are taken into account, what *PI* (270) gives with the one hand *cannot completely* be taken away by the other. For OSM can be run entirely without an appeal to Wittgenstein's "admission" in *PI* (270). *PI* (270) is useful here because it provides a textual opening to raise OSM. Further, it is argued later (§ VIII) that when the whole series *PI* (270-272) is taken into account, it becomes clear that Wittgenstein *does* make an important admission at *PI* (270) that is often unappreciated.

Consider Garver's interpretation from the perspective of OSM! When Garver says that Wittgenstein's ultimate point in *PI* (270) is that the alleged private sensations drop out as irrelevant to that "useful" correlation, the aforementioned Cambridge scientists will point out that when Wittgenstein said on 13 occasions that he experienced sensation S and wrote "S" in his diary, the scientific evidence shows that he was in a relevantly similar neurophysiological and sensory states. Since Wittgenstein reports his sensations as a result of his *experiences*, not by looking at scientific data, it would be impossible to deny that Wittgenstein was *sensing* the same thing in all the cases when he wrote "S" in his diary. It is, however, crucial to recall that these scientists are *not* claiming to have discovered scientific *criteria* (in Wittgenstein's sense of the word) for the presence of private sensations, but, rather, scientific *evidence* for the presence of private states that correlate with Wittgenstein's overt behaviour. *PI* (258)'s conclusion that "we can't talk about 'right' here" at all is simply too strong.

## VI. The Tautologous Conclusion of the “Private Language Argument”

The problems are solved, not by giving new information,  
but by arranging what we have already known.  
*Philosophical Investigations* (109)

Although PLA is often understood as an argument for the claim that a “Private Language” is impossible, the conclusion of PLA is actually a tautology in the ordinary sense that it just repeats the same thing over again. If Wittgenstein’s views are “grammatical propositions” (*PI*, 251, 295, 458), then they are true by virtue of grammatical “conventions” (*PI*, 355). Thus, the conclusion of PLA gives no information but merely rehearses the grammatical conventions of our language.

In fact, Wittgenstein *presupposes* in *BB* and *PI* that he is concerned only with the sense in which words in a *public* language have meaning. *BB* (1) *begins* with the remark that asking how “*we* [emphasis added] measure length?” helps us to understand the problem ‘What is length?’”. In *PI* (1) he describes an interaction between a customer and shopkeeper in the purchase of 5 apples, the point being that what is relevant to the meaning of the words is only what goes on in their *public* interaction, not what goes on in the shopkeeper’s mind. This theme continues at *PI* (6) where the “purpose” of the word in the block-pillar-slab language is not to produce an image in someone’s mind but to get other members of the “tribe” to perform certain actions.

It is evident throughout his “later philosophy” that what interests Wittgenstein is “our [public] language” (*PI*, 51, 497, 230; *Z*, 532, 545). He makes this explicit at *PI* (261),

What reason have we for calling “S” the sign for a sensation? For “sensation” is a word in our common language, not one intelligible to me alone. So the use of this word stands in need of a *justification which everybody understands* [emphasis added].

Since the criteria for the use of words are “necessarily” public (Khatchadourian 2007, 57), the conclusion of PLA only means that words in a language that only employs criteria for the *private purposes* of the language-user cannot have a public purpose—but that is a tautology. One can put this another way: Since Wittgenstein makes clear in *PI* that he is interested in language as a system of *communication* (See *PI*, 3, 491), the conclusion of PLA is that private words useful only for oneself are not useful for communication with others—but that too is a tautology. Thus, a private language would be of no use whatsoever for the participants in the shopkeeper-customer or block-pillar-slab or “language-games” at *PI* (1-2).

This result provides a different perspective on Kripke’s (1982, 109) view that in a private language it is “logically impossible” for anyone other than the user of that private language to understand. Kripke’s definition is correct, but easily misconceived. If, for example, one thinks this logical impossibility derives from a mysterious “condition or process of consciousness” (McGinn 1984, 80), i.e., from something *metaphysical*, it is misconceived. The reason it is logically impossible for anyone other than N to understand the meanings of N’s private words is very similar to the reason

why it is impossible for there to be “a rod without a length” (*PI*, 251). For both of these “claims” run afoul of our grammatical conventions.

## VII. No Thesis, No Debate

If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them,  
because everyone would agree to them.  
*Philosophical Investigations* (128)

If as argued in § IV, PLA is logically fallacious, and if, therefore, PLA is merely an attempt at persuasion, is this not an admission that it is sophistry? The answer is that *if* the conclusion of PLA were a substantial thesis, the answer would be “yes”, but that since the conclusion of PLA is really a tautology, the proper response is not a philosophical argument for a substantial conclusion, but a “reminder” about the grammar of the relevant words (*PI*, 127). People do not generally need such reminders until they have “become calloused by doing philosophy” (*PI*, 348; Malcolm 1986, 160). For no one who has not done philosophy would ever think of saying that they cannot know that their child, who is writhing on the floor from a bad burn, is in pain. A philosopher will entertain such fantastic “theses” in their study, but, like Hume (1967, 264, 269) when they return to their daily life, these alleged “theses” will appear “cold” and “ridiculous”.

Since the conclusion of PLA is a tautology, not a *thesis* (see epigraph above), it does not need to be *proved* any more than that the statement “Every rod has a length” needs to be proved. There is therefore no possibility of debating such matters because everyone would agree on them, just as there is no possibility of debating analytical sentences—assuming that people understand the words involved. Thus, for Wittgenstein, a philosophical discussion is not a “debate” about what is true, but an attempt to “clarify” what is being said (*PI*, 125, 133, *CV*, 19). This is why Wittgenstein would be unconcerned with the previous objections to PLA in §’s III, IV and V respectively.

Consider first CES, the objection that since Wittgenstein himself regularly stresses that explanations and reasons must end somewhere, he is inconsistent when he refuses to accept the private language user’s claim that their memory is a sufficient criterion for the correct uses of their private words! However, if the conclusion of PLA is really the tautology that a language that only employs words for the *private purposes* of the language user cannot employ those words for a *public purpose*, Wittgenstein can admit that the private language user’s criteria can also come to an end somewhere but insist that it is a tautology that *in a language proper* these criteria must come to an end in *public* ways of behaving. The problem with private criteria is not that they come to an end somewhere *but that they are private*. There is no inconsistency.

Consider second the objection from the fact that the Private Language Argument is Fallacious or PLAF. However, since the conclusion of PLA is a tautology, it does not require the sort of proof it would require if it were a substantive conclusion. Since, in this sort of case, one only needs “reminded” of the tautological character of the conclusion, it does not matter if it is logically fallacious. In this kind of case, what is important is only that the “argument” is persuasive. And, in

fact, PLA is precisely, as Wittgenstein states at *PI* (109), a “description” of linguistic behaviour designed to persuade us that the alleged “meanings” of private worlds are not comparable to the meanings of words in a genuine public language.

Consider now the third objection based on the existence of an Objective Scientific Model of private criteria or OSM! Once again, Wittgenstein would reply that when he talks about criteria, he means the sorts of criteria that are found in the *grammatical conventions* of a language, not the *evidence* that might emerge from a scientific laboratory. Wittgenstein’s remark that “it’s in language that it’s all done” (*PG*, VII, 9; *OC*, 3), cannot be overemphasized. For what scientists can discover in their laboratories are correlations between items in the world, e.g., a brain state and a rise in blood pressure, not grammatical conventions *within* the language. Since the scientific *standards* that determine that there is a right and wrong about Wittgenstein’s private states resemble what Wittgenstein calls “symptoms” of his sensory states learned from experience rather than grammatical conventions, scientists might discover *evidence* that someone has reidentified a certain private sensation correctly, but it is a tautology that the scientist cannot discover the kind of *grammatical* “criteria” (in Wittgenstein’s and Kripke’s technical sense) that determine the meaning of a word in a public language.

The final objection is that the present interpretation relies too heavily on Albritton’s account of criteria and ignores other accounts, like Cavell’s (1999) alternative account. Whereas Albritton and other early scholars interpreted Wittgenstein’s notion of a criterion against the background of the skeptical challenge whether one can know that a certain private object exists, Cavell (1999, 16), emphasizing *PI* (373), holds that the criterion for the use of a word determines “what kind of object anything is”, which, in turn, determines how the words that describe that sort of object are properly used. In fact, Cavell’s account *facilitates* the argument of the present paper. For, on Cavell’s interpretation, the criteria for the words “pain” and “coin” determine “what kind of ‘objects’ pains and coins are, which is to give the “grammar” of those words. But if the criteria give the grammar of such words, Wittgenstein’s point in PLA is that the grammar of the words “language” and “meaning” require that a genuine linguistic meaning must be publicly communicable. But that is precisely what is meant in the present paper by the claim that the conclusion of PLA is a tautology.

### VIII. Private Objects and the Limits of Language

The essential thing about private experience [*privaten Erlebnis*] is really not that each person possesses his own exemplar, but that nobody knows whether other people have *this* [LW’s emphasis] or something else.  
*Philosophical Investigations* (272)

One might argue that there is a *glaring* contradiction in the present paper. How can the paper consistently claim in § V that there can be objective scientific evidence that Wittgenstein correctly correlates his words with private sensations and yet claim in § VI that the conclusion of PLA, that there cannot be a private language, is a tautology? For if the conclusion of PLA is a tautology, there cannot be scientific evidence that Wittgenstein has one!

There is no contradiction, but one must pay close attention to the specific formulations in § V. What is argued there is that there can be objective scientific *evidence* that Wittgenstein correctly *reidentifies* his private sensation S and this correlates with his diary entries—and that is sufficient to establish that “we” scientists *can* “talk about” a “right” use of words here. That is, although in this case there are no “criteria” in Kripke’s and Wittgenstein’s technical sense for the correct use of private words, there can be scientific *standards* that determine whether or not Wittgenstein correctly wrote “S” in his diary upon having certain sensations. The tautological conclusion of PLA only requires that Wittgenstein’s establishing *such correlations does not constitute a language proper!*

To illustrate this, consider a hypothetical case in which, Lara, hiking in the jungle, encounters a gorilla and the gorilla becomes frightened. The present author assumes that there is something going on in the gorilla’s brain or “mind”, in whatever sense one can talk about a gorilla’s mind, when he encounters Lara for the second time, reidentifies her, and attacks her. Note that nothing in this description of the gorilla’s reidentification of Lara implies that it has a private *language*.

Compare this with Wittgenstein’s reidentifying his sensation S and writing down “S” in his diary, where Wittgenstein’s reidentifying his sensation corresponds to the gorilla reidentifying his experience of Lara and Wittgenstein’s writing down “S” in his diary corresponds to the gorilla’s attacking behavior. Just as the gorilla reidentified Lara on their second meeting and attacked her, Wittgenstein reidentifies his sensation S on a later occasion and writes “S” in his diary. Thus, there is something “right” about Wittgenstein’s behavior just as there is something “right” about the gorilla’s behavior. The gorilla did identify the “right” person in his second experience of her. Presumably a neuroscientist, monitoring the ape’s neurophysiological states and environment could verify these facts. That is, in both of these cases, one has merely described a biological *mechanism*, not a meaningful grammatical connection.

The critic might reply, however, that § V claims more, namely that science can provide evidence that Wittgenstein correctly reidentifies a *private object* – and this is the case! In order to render this consistent with Wittgenstein’s view that it is a tautology that there cannot be a private language, *one must, therefore, show that there is a gap between private objects and private languages*. That seems extreme, but this is precisely what Wittgenstein suggests in *PI* (272) where he admits that, when discussing “*privaten Erelebnis*,” people “can have their “own exemplar,” but denies that there can be a private “*this*” that nobody else can know about (where the demonstrative “this” is crucial to the formulation). But why is ok to say that N has a private sensation but wrong to say that no one can know that N has “*this*” private sensation?

At *PI* (380), warning against the tendency to posit a “private ostensive definition,” Wittgenstein remarks that it must be possible to ask of any putative “this” “what” it is: “This?—What?”. Since that is precisely what is impossible for the private “this” referenced in *PI* (272), *Wittgenstein can admit “privaten Erelebnis”* (“one’s own exemplar”) but deny a private language to describe it. This is a difficult position. There is only one way to resolve it, namely, that PLA is a later installment on Wittgenstein’s longstanding interest in setting the “limits of language” (*TLP*,

Preface). Against this background, what PLA actually purports to show is that in the attempt to construct a private *language*, a private system of descriptions of these private “thisses”, one “bumps” one’s head “against the limits of language” (*PI*, 119), thereby enabling one better to understand the nature of language proper. These “bumps” on one’s head enable one to see that one may have one’s “*privaten Erelebnis*”, but that one cannot put these “*privaten Erelebnis*” into words. But that does not mean that a scientist cannot determine that Wittgenstein is in a private sensory state, so long as that scientist is not themselves required to *understand* what it means for someone to be in “*this*” sensory state (that is, to possess the criteria that would enable them to do so). But why should the scientist be expected to understand such criteria when Wittgenstein, who is in that state, cannot understand them either. For it is a tautology that there cannot be such criteria. Wittgenstein, despite the fact that he possesses his own “*privaten Erelebnis*,” does not *understand* anything the scientist does not understand.

### Endnotes:

1. Wittgenstein’s works are abbreviated as follows: *Tractatus-logico-philosophicus* [*TLP*]; “The Language of Sense Data and Private Experience” [*LSD*], *Philosophical Grammar* [*PG*], *The Blue and Brown Books* [*BB*]; *Philosophical Investigations* [*PI*]; *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics* [*RFM*]; *On Certainty* [*OC*]; *Culture and Value* [*CV*], and *Zettel* [*Z*]. References to *TLP* are by proposition number, to *LSD* and *CV* by page number, to *OC* and *Z* by paragraph number, to *PI*, unless indicated otherwise, by paragraph number, to *PG* and *RFM*, by section and paragraph number. References to works of other philosophers are, unless otherwise indicated, to page number.
2. Although it is difficult to make a sharp distinction between Wittgenstein’s “early” and “later” philosophies, Wittgenstein made this distinction himself (Kripke 1982, 78, 120-123), and this is sufficient *for present purposes*. By Wittgenstein’s “early philosophy” is here meant *TLP*. By his “later philosophy” is here meant the works *beginning* with *BB* and *PI*. The remarks from *PG* and *CV* cited here are consistent with the later philosophy.
3. Candlish (2014, § 3.3) distinguishes between remembering the meaning of the sign “S” and being able to “apply ‘S’” infallibly “only to S’s in the future” and argues that *PI* (258) only requires the former. However, *PI* (258) states that one wants to keep a diary about the “recurrence [*Wiederkehren*]” of certain sensations. This clearly requires being able to correctly record the *recurrence* of that sensation in the future.
4. See Nietzsche’s *Human, All Too Human*!
5. The textual example abstracts from various kinds of differences that could complicate matters, e.g., race, gender, and species differences. The present aim is only to show, employing a simplified example, that scientists could in principle provide objective evidence that someone correctly reidentifies the same sensation over time. See note # 6!
6. For a discussion of the positive results that have been achieved in identifying the neural correlates of sensations, but also a frank discussion of the problems, see Fonteneau and Davidoff (2006)! See note 5!

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