

## Justifying Knowledge Claims after the Private Language Argument

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I will try, in what follows, to show, by way of an example, that Wittgenstein's thinking can still foster some interesting contributions to philosophy. The example consists in my own attempt to propose a way in which we could better conceive the justification of our knowledge claims. In doing this I will first offer my understanding of the Private Language Argument and of the challenge it raises for the empiricist foundationalist. Secondly, I will argue that one may find some interesting suggestions for a better way to conceive knowledge justification in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*. At the end of my paper I will consider some possible objections to my conceptual proposal.

In short, I take the PLA to offer support to the claim that no experience, conceived as an inner episode to which only the subject having it has direct access, can be semantically relevant. A direct consequence of this would be that no experience, thus conceived, can be epistemically relevant. If this is accepted, then the traditional empiricist project fails. Some newer takes on the project seem, however, unaffected. This requires a closer scrutiny, but let us see, first, how the initial claim is given support in *Philosophical Investigations*.

I will start with a reconstruction of a Wittgenstein's arguments according to which they involve one of the morals derived from the Rule Following Considerations, namely that every concept must presuppose a practice. Pace Kripke<sup>1</sup>, I do not think that the idea that it is impossible for an isolated subject to name her sensations follows immediately from the previous assumption, since one could invent a practice, as Wittgenstein himself does quite often. In fact, the remarks grouped under the PLA tag start with the observation that there are practices which a human being could be involved in alone:

“A human being can encourage himself, give himself orders, obey, blame and punish himself; he can ask himself a question and answer it. We could even imagine human beings who spoke only in monologue; who accompanied their activities by talking to themselves. [...]” (PI, §243)

The point here is that naming or describing your own sensations from the position of an

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<sup>1</sup> See Kripke 1982.

epistemic subject who does not have direct access to anything else but those sensations cannot be a practice. In other words, a subject who only considers her private sensations cannot invent a practice of speaking about them, if such a practice must include the use of names to refer to sensations.

Why is this so? To keep things simple, we will focus on Wittgenstein's argument for the impossibility of naming a sensation. Let us call the subject who does not have direct access to anything else but her own sensations Joan. Now, it is important to note that Joan cannot talk about what causes her sensations or about the effect of her sensations on her behaviour until she can talk directly about her sensations. We have to imagine, then, the way in which Joan could use a name to refer to a sensation. We take it that the sensation in case is not a particular irrepetableirrepetible sensation, but a re-occurringreoccurring one. Two steps are involved. At the first step Joan introduces a name for her sensation. At the second step Joan uses the name to refer to the same sensation. In Wittgenstein's own words:

“Let us imagine the following case. 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 this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation. [...]” (PI, §258)

Joan cannot introduce the name “S” by using a description of the sensation for which the name stands, since, in order to do this, she should talk about the qualities S has in common with other sensations which she must be able to refer to directly. Since we will have to face such a case anyway, we should consider, then, that S's case is like that. So the only alternative left is that “S” is introduced by an ostensive definition.

Wittgenstein's critique of ostensive definitions is well-known, but that critique amounts only to the idea that a language cannot be learned starting with ostensive definitions. The main reason for that idea was that recognizing something as an ostensive definition requires that we already know how to take part in a series of linguistic practices. Here, however, we will not make use of that idea. To be clear about this, let us say that either Joan is in principle able to learn new words by ostensive definitions, or she could invent herself the practice of introducing names by ostensive definitions. Were she to give a name to an object from her environment, she could grasp it and write the name on it, for instance. The problem is that at this point Joan does not consider her environment, but only her sensations. As a consequence, she must use a private ostensive definition. Instead of grasping an object or pointing at it she tries to concentrate her attention on the sensation she wants to call “S”. There is, however, an important difference between the two kinds of acts. While pointing to something is a public act, concentrating your attention on a sensation is not. Public acts,

in Wittgenstein's view at least, can succeed or fail and we have established criteria in order to recognize if an act did in fact succeed or not. If I try to point to something which my interlocutor cannot see, she can tell me so. Even if I am alone, I can think that I am pointing to (or waving at) another person and it is in principle possible for me to discover at a latter time that I have failed to do so. A trick of light made me think there was a person there when there was none etc.

I will take one step further and consider the extreme case in which after naming a small rock one throws it away to a place full of similar small rocks, thus making it impossible for herself to recognize it again. It could be convincingly argued even for such a case that the person in case did succeed to introduce the name of that small rock by ostensive definition. The criteria of success for the definition and implicitly for the act of pointing at that small rock (or grasping it) are independent of the subsequent uses of the name introduced by the definition.

The case of a private ostensive definition is, however, different. The only guarantee Joan can have that she succeeded to point inwardly to her sensation is that her private act produces the expected result - the correct identification of the sensation in case in future cases. This makes the correctness of the private ostensive definition dependent on the future uses of the name thus introduced. However, if such a name is to be used to refer to a private mental object, the correctness of such an use can be established only by comparing it with the use of the same name when it was introduced. It is this circularity which makes it impossible to distinguish between correct and incorrect uses of a private name. As Wittgenstein puts it:

“Let us imagine a table (something like a dictionary) that exists only in our imagination. A dictionary can be used to justify the translation of a word X by a word Y. But are we also to call it a justification if such a table is to be looked up only in the imagination? - «Well, yes; then it is a subjective justification.» - But justification consists in appealing to something independent. - «But surely I can appeal from one memory to another. For example, I don't know if I have remembered the time of departure of a train right and to check it I call to mind how a page of the time-table looked. Isn't it the same here?» - No; for this process has got to produce a memory which is actually *correct*. If the mental image of the time-table could not itself be *tested* for correctness, how could it confirm the correctness of the first memory? (As if someone were to buy several copies of the morning paper to assure himself that what it said was true.) [...]” (PI, §265).

Another reason why Joan cannot name her sensations is that in order to do this she must have the concept of a sensation. For instance, we usually say that a feeling of uneasiness is not a sensation because it is not the direct result of our sense organs being affected by our environment. Joan,

however, cannot speak about her sense organs. In order to distinguish a feeling of uneasiness from a sensation she would have to talk only about qualia-like inner experiences (experience like “it feels as a feeling and not as a sensation”). In addition, any such qualia-like inner experiences would have to be distinguished from each other. This leads to an infinite regress. This is why Wittgenstein says:

“What reason have we for calling “S” the sign for a *sensation*? For “sensation” is a word of our common language, not of one intelligible to me alone. So the use of this word stands in need of a justification which everybody understands. [...]” (PI, §261)

The same objection could be raised when we imagine that in order to introduce ‘S’ by a private ostensive definition Joan performs an act which she calls ‘directing my attention toward that sensation’. Calling a private act the act of directing one’s attention towards something (in opposition, for instance with cases in which “something gets one’s attention” or “one gets interested in something” and so on) requires, in Joan’s case, an inner qualia-like experience specific to the act of directing one’s attention towards something. This experience must be such as to justify the application of the concept of “attention” to the act performed.

On my understanding, the same kind of objection already underlies Wittgenstein’s reply to the attempt to justify the correctness of an application of ‘S’ by invoking a different sort of inner experience available by introspection - the belief that something is right:

“«Well, I *believe* that this is the sensation S again.» - Perhaps you *believe* that you believe it! [...]” (PI, §260)

What is Wittgenstein saying here? It is not that a person can hold a belief and yet be wrong, or at least mistaken with respect to the content of that belief being meaningful. Even if there were beliefs which could justify the application of a sign by themselves, we would still have the problem of recognizing something as such a belief. The correct application of ‘S’ would still depend, in this case, on the correct application of the concept of ‘belief’ to some private episode.

It could also be noted that in order to *name* a sensation Joan should have the concept of a name. The case which seems unproblematic with respect to establishing a connexion between a name and a particular object is that in which I write the name on the object. However, writing a mark on an object could be part of a great variety of different practices. I could put a mark on an object to enable someone (perhaps myself) to recognise the object, or to enable one to remember the object easier (as a mnemonic device), I could use the name as a tag on a container, to indicate something about its content or as some visual aid when counting a range of objects (“I have counted up to this

one"). More generally, it is in principle possible to use a mark as a visual aid for a lot of different activities - I mark the place where I want to make a hole in an object, I mark your height on the door frame etc. If what distinguishes all these practices from that of introducing a mark in order to use it as a name is my intention to refer to the object at a later time by using the mark, we are facing the same problem: we have to apply the concept of *that particular intention* to some inner experience which we have when writing down the mark. In Wittgenstein's words:

“It might be said: if you have given yourself a private definition of a word, then you must inwardly *undertake* to use the word in such-and-such way. And how do you undertake that? Is it to be assumed that you invent the technique of using the word; or that you found it ready-made?

«But I can (inwardly) undertake to call THIS ‘pain’ in the future.» - But is it certain that you have undertaken it? Are you sure that it was enough for this purpose to concentrate your attention on your feeling? - A queer question. -” (PI, §262-3)

This recurrent theme points out to one moral: if we conceive mental episodes as private, then we cannot conceptualize them. A side point of the RFC was that we can have a concept only insofar as we have a practice, but we needed the PLA to understand why one could not invent a practice starting from the position of a subject who only has access to her own sensations. The foundation of knowledge, then, cannot consist in experiences conceived as sense data. This is of course not to say that one cannot conceive human experience in a way such that it would not consist of private mental episodes and it would have conceptual content<sup>2</sup>. Wittgenstein himself seems to offer us some suggestions in *On Certainty*.

Our problem is to understand what we do when we justify our everyday knowledge on the ground of our experiences without talking of any “raw sensations”. To see what Wittgenstein's suggestion could be, let us look at a simple case. Suppose we talk about the following belief:

*(Chair)* There is a chair in this room.

Now, the traditional empiricist's justification for *(Chair)* would perhaps be that she has being-in-this-room-like sensations and chair-like sensations. Wittgenstein's reaction to this is unchanged:

“An inner experience cannot shew me that I *know* something. Hence, if in spite of that I

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<sup>2</sup> McDowell 1994 is perhaps the most prominent attempt to do so. The connection of that project with PLA can be seen in McDowell 1989.

say, «I know that my name is...», and yet it is obviously not an empirical proposition,---” (OC, §569)

No amount of psychological introspection can justify the belief that my name is X or the belief that (Chair). In this sense, (Chair) is not empirical.

According to Wittgenstein, the question whether there is a chair in this room or not does not rise in any usual circumstances:

“[...] I believe that there is a chair over there. Can't I be wrong? But, can I believe that I am wrong? Or can I so much as bring it under consideration? [...]” (OC, §173)

A situation could be of course imagined in which we would want to test for the presence of a chair in this room. In the same way:

A mad-doctor (perhaps) might ask me «Do you know what that is?» and I might reply «I know that it's a chair; I recognize it, it's always been in my room». He says this, possibly, to test not my eyes but my ability to recognize things, to know their names and their functions. What is in question here is a kind of knowing one's way about. [...]” (OC, §355)

Nevertheless, in regular cases we do not *know* that there is a chair in this room. That is, we do not play the game of knowledge with respect to the chair in our room, but we *are certain* that there is a chair in the room, since this is an assumption of our actions involving the chair, including our verbal actions:

“Every language-game is based on words ‘and objects’ being recognized again. We learn with the same inexorability that this is a chair as that  $2 \times 2 = 4$ .” (OC, §455)

“Children do not learn that books exist, that armchairs exist, etc. etc., - they learn to fetch books, sit in armchairs, etc. etc. [...]” (OC, §476)

In other words, (Chair) is a necessary condition for us performing some actions *as actions involving the chair in the room*<sup>3</sup>. If I sit in the chair in my room, for instance, (Chair) is assumed by my action, even if I do not express the belief that (Chair). The following case is similar:

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<sup>3</sup> (Chair) is a necessary condition for us to perform intentional actions involving the chair in our room, i.e. actions under such descriptions as “Sitting on the chair in this room”, “Moving the chair in this room (in such-and-such a way)”, “Touching the chair in this room”, “Testing to see whether the chair in this room supports a certain weight” a. s. o. See Anscombe 1963, §6.

“Imagine a language-game «When I call you, come in through the door». In any ordinary case, a doubt whether there really is a door there will be impossible.” (OC, §391)

The belief that “there really is a door” is assumed by the language-game imagined. That is, both the call to come in through the door and the action of coming in through the door are possible only if it is certain that there is a door. In another formulation:

“If I say «we assume that the earth has existed for many years past» (or something similar), then of course it sounds strange that we should assume such a thing. But in the entire system of our language-games it belongs to the foundations. The assumption, one might say, forms the basis of action, and therefore, naturally, of thought.” (OC, §411)

Wittgenstein seems to acknowledge, however, the idea that having the belief that (Chair) does not have to do with being in a psychological state of belief towards the content of (Chair):

“[...] Haven't I made the elementary mistake of confusing one's thoughts with one's knowledge? Of course I do not think to myself «The earth already existed for some time before my birth», but do I *know* it any the less? Don't I show that I know it by always drawing its consequences?” (OC, §397)

Since (Chair) could be epistemically relevant (we could perhaps justify something within the game of knowledge by it) and we can be said to believe that (Chair) even if the belief in case does not consist in a particular mental state accessible by introspection, perhaps there is a sense in which it could be said that we *know* that (Chair):

“It is queer: if I say, without any special occasion, «I know» - for example, «I know that I am now sitting in a chair», this statement seems to me unjustified and presumptuous. But if I make the same statement when there is some need for it, then, although I am not a jot more certain of its truth, it seems to me to be perfectly justified and everyday.” (OC, §553)

Now, if we accept that A is a necessary condition for B IFF B is a sufficient condition for A<sup>4</sup>, then from:

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<sup>4</sup> This could be disputed, of course. See, for instance, Sanford 1989, pp. 175–6.

(*Nec*) Our knowledge that (Chair) is a necessary condition for our actions involving the chair in this room (under such descriptions).

it follows that:

(*Suff*) Our actions involving the chair in this room (under such descriptions) are sufficient conditions for our knowledge that (Chair).

This could also give us some empiricist moral: our experiences are the basis of our knowledge, but only if we conceive them as (constituted by) actions performed by us in our environment. It is my belief that this is the way in which we could understand Wittgenstein when he says:

“Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.” (OC, §204)

To this one could reply that the basis of our knowledge that (Chair) cannot consist in actions (involving the chair in the room) under some descriptions, since in order to conceive an action as "sitting in a chair" one has to know that "that is a chair", "one can sit on that" etc. According to this objection, even if we conceive our experience as being constituted from actions and not sense impressions, the same sort of circularity we were faced with in the case of private sensations still applies.

One escape route would be to notice that sitting on chairs and talking about chairs are practices one can learn from others. These have to be shared practices. The communal character of language makes knowledge communal too:

“If experience is the ground of our certainty, then naturally it is past experience. And it isn't for example just my experience, but other people's, that I get knowledge from. [...]” (OC, §275)

This applies to scientific knowledge as well: the foundation of theoretical knowledge is our experience, which is formed by us acting in our environment. However, experience is not constituted by us performing "empirical actions" (touching, listening to, watching, observing, testing, experimenting, etc.) in isolation, but by performing such actions within shared practices.

What we get from Wittgenstein's view, according to my understanding, is the suggestion that



when we consider knowledge within the space of reasons<sup>5</sup>, the bottom line is represented by our empirical actions (considered as actions under descriptions). This is how we can conceive experience as having conceptual content without talking about some pseudo-psychological entities which also have a conceptual content - perceptions.

In this sense, our beliefs about our environment share the same conceptual content with the actions performed by us in our environment. They represent knowledge because we use them to justify other beliefs, but in order to lose their epistemic status they have to be challenged by the performance of other empirical actions, or perhaps by attempting to perform empirical actions which would justify such a belief and failing, as in the case in which a try to sit on what seems to be a chair and fall down.

This is why in order to challenge a belief we have to accept other beliefs. For instance, I cannot challenge the belief that (Chair) if I do not believe that I have a body, since that belief is assumed by my “attempt to sit on something”.

We are still left with a problem. How does a learned behaviour become an action under a description? The first thing which we need to note is that this is not an epistemological problem. We need, of course, to make sure that the concepts we use to offer a natural explanation of this process do not lead us to any philosophical troubles<sup>6</sup>, but an explanation must be in principle possible, since this is a fact of nature. We share some forms of behaviour and the capacity to learn some forms of behaviour with other animals and have evolved the ability to communicate (i. e. to perform speech acts) and to perform other intentional actions (i. e. actions under some descriptions) as well. The main trouble here is that we fear that at some point in the course of our natural explanation we will have to switch from talking about natural events consisting in some kind of behaviour being displayed by human beings to talking about persons performing intentional actions within shared practices governed by rules. This is, however, far beyond the topic discussed here.

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<sup>5</sup> See Sellars 1997, §36.

<sup>6</sup> Sellars’s distinction between rules of action and rules of criticism is the sort of conceptual proposal which could be useful for a naturalist attempt to answer the question “How does a learned behaviour become an action under a description?” (see Sellars 1969:508).

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