

# Second Philosophy

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Led by	Sojourna Alexandre
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## INTRODUCTION

Today's discussion I've given the title of Wittgenstein's beetle or how to have a good philosophical discussion.

My interest in discussing Wittgenstein's beetle began when I was thinking about how we participate in philosophical discussions. Sometimes it seems to me that philosophical debates go in circles with no consensus even on the main points of the discussion topic or the main terms and language used? Is this because our private understanding of words, objects, sensations, concepts and ideas interferes with our public use of the same words and concepts?

OK, so that's why I'm here today leading this discussion. But I want to address this in my third question. First let's look at the actual analogy. To quote Wittgenstein's beetle analogy:

Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a "beetle". No one can look into anyone else's box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. --Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. -- But suppose the word "beetle" had a use in these people's language? --If so it would not be used as the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language-game at all; not even as a something; for the box might even be empty. --No, one can 'divide through' by the thing in the box; it cancels out, whatever it is.!

Wittgenstein is telling us that we know something (e.g. the beetle in our box, or something else like pain) because we identify an internal object or sensation.

### Wittgenstein makes two observations:

1. We cannot make assumptions about whether everyone is referring to the same kind of beetle or pain. This is because we cannot look into each other's boxes, meaning we cannot know another's internal and subjective sensations are.
2. The word for beetle or pain has a meaning in the language used by us. This is a public language in which we all participate and upon which we all agree.

## QUESTIONS:

### SO: Two things are happening here:

1. We look into our own private box and exclaim, This is a beetle, or this is pain.
2. We use the same word (beetle/pain) in the "language-game" which is a stable and rule-governed language game and a public one, too.

How do these two things connect? Wittgenstein says they do not.

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## DISCUSSION:

**Chazz:** It would certainly be reasonable, if we had some foolproof test, to find that most or nearly all or all humans experience very similar/identical sensations from the same stimulus. The evidence watching people react to things suggests that is the case. Most of it. Some suggests otherwise, but those differences could be explained by differences in "PP". Emotional reaction, for example.

**Simulat:** It seems that W is treating the mind and communication as if it is based on logic - but rather than being necessary I'd say that mind and communication are contingent

**Seneca:** Subjective experience is private, and W is right to argue that this must inform our public use of words that purport to refer to events that are entirely private. It won't entirely help to argue that we can examine our perceptual apparatus and compare with other people's perceptual apparatus to infer that their experience is similar to our own, since that might simply be interpreted as having more beetles of our own to look at—our qualitative experience as we make such comparisons is another private Wittgensteinian 'beetle.' One might conclude that it requires an inferential leap, and perhaps one we cannot entirely justify, to believe that others' pain is like one's own pain. Does it follow from this that when we use the term 'pain,' cannot be refer to the private inner sensation we experience when we feel pain? I don't so. Empathy with others' pain involves a pragmatic leap that can't entirely be justified in epistemic terms.

**Shak:** Wittgenstein produced a powerful insight here. The point is, we are not individuals. Biologically, we are a social species. We have no way of knowing whether other members of our group have the same experience as we do when they see a red apple, or stub their toe on a step. But we instinctively assume that they do and this assumption has served us well. Language is what we use to communicate with each other, and a word in the language is an agreed representation for an experience which we agree has followed exposure to a certain stimulus, for most people. Some such experiences are hard-wired responses - like discomfort on hearing prolonged crying from a baby, or fear on hearing a lion roar nearby. But some are highly cultural in nature - like feelings of piety engendered in a Catholic congregation when a bell at point in the mass denotes consecration. Language which references common culturally-based experience can't therefore mean the same outside of the cultural group as it does within it. That must cause some problems!!

**Shingles:** As a poet, I see how credibly words' meanings can be perverted, in fact one can completely upturn that word's whole concept, yet still communicate effectively, so what is its nature then? I see the word as an ingredient in a recipe of the communication. It can be perverted or broken somehow, but it started as that word. For me, its about the intention, the purpose of the communicator in communicating, that is what it most potently communicates, about the intention, and that generates reactions in a wide variety of aspects in the listeners

**Marya:** I think to some degree we have a 'beetle in a box' but I don't really agree that no one else can ever see it – perhaps not in its entirety, but neuroscience these days is helping to open that individual box and giving us a clearer idea of what goes on inside. Also, I do agree that there is no private language; that public language is the language used privately when attempting to describe private sensation. Up until that point of an attempted description, there is no language involved at all – only sensation. Is public language incoherent when used to refer to a private sensation? I see that it certainly 'could' have been to some degree, but science, as mentioned before, shows us a great deal more now.

**Shingles:** v good :)

**Sojourna:** OK cool science. Marya you are talking about neuroscience - but Chazz you mentioned evidence - do you mean human behaviour?

**Marya:** Yes, cognitive science, psychology, psychiatry etc - science in general

**Chazz:** people react very similarly

**Sojourna:** Human behaviour giving evidence of what a word like pain might refer to when an individual talks about subjective sensation?

**Chazz:** maybe they learned that, maybe the same reaction is the most likely/ possible for a range of different sensations

**Shak:** It can be very culture dependent though, can't it?

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**Simulat:** I've had the internal meaning of pain change for me quite dramatically in my lifetime

**Seneca:** Culture may be the same kind of social institution as language, Shak. Just as there is no private language (if we believe W), there can be no private culture, right?

**Shak:** I don't mean pain, obviously, but other stimuli...

**Chazz:** Seems to me that once we've taken note of the fact we don't know for sure that a private sensation like pain is the same for different individuals, it's time to move on and look for measureable, non metaphysical differences and just keep that original idea on file.

**Sojourna:** Simulat - how so and do you still use the same word for it, to describe or to refer to it?

**Shak:** Yeah, very important point!

**Marya:** You mean how that pain is expressed in words, Shak?

**Shak:** No, like in, my brother told me my sister got divorced.

**Shak:** If I live in country A, I feel sympathy

**Simulat:** yes, Sojourna - it feels the same - but its meaning is different - now its just a signal - once pain was an affront that made me afraid

**Shak:** In country B I feel outrage.

**Sojourna:** (BTW, I'll just add this but not really sure what it means exactly - Wittgenstein says we do not know we are in pain, we just feel it. So we can't say it, makes no sense. The private language for that is incoherent even to us. )

**Marya:** I understand - thanks, Shak

**Shingles:** well, do you mean emotional pain, Shak?

**Sojourna:** Simulat - wow - it feels the same but means different - you are onto something

**Marya:** Well, I think that's because there is no private language - that it is just sensation

**Shak:** Yes, that's closer.

**Chazz:** agreed

**Sojourna:** Yep, Marya.

**Sojourna:** So what is the public meaning of the word pain?

**Shingles:** but meaning of notions would certainly differ between individuals, no?

**Marya:** yes absolutely, Shing

**Shak:** When I feel pain, I need a word to tell others how I feel.

**Seneca:** But inference about others' pain isn't always based on language. I might hear someone's involuntary groan, and ask "what would cause me to make a sound like that?" "What have I experienced that made me groan?"

**Sojourna:** We have basically moved onto the second question here; let me just paste the question here 2. Let's move from beetles to pain. We all talk about our own private sensation of pain, using the word pain. We can never know about another's pain. We can probably deduce that someone is in pain because of the way they behave, but only we can be sure of our own pain. Still, we all use the word pain to refer to our subjective sensation, so much so that in the end we all agree on the meaning of pain even though everyone's sensation of pain might differ. If it means the same for everyone, if it is a constant, this means it derives its meaning solely from its use in a social and public context and not from any relevance to the private sensation of pain. The private object beetle or the private sensation of pain, according to Wittgenstein, drop out of consideration. What is your response to this? How can we communicate private sensations and ideas if we only have access to a language that is meaningful from its public, not private, use?

**Simulat:** I'd say it's a projection - that we assume that others respond to stubbed toes, or hammers on thumbs or toothaches the same way we do

**Shak:** The word I use must have come to me through experience of others and how they describe their painful feelings?

**Sojourna:** Shak - hold on! So when you tell me you are in pain - you are referring to some internal sensation of yours that I can never ever know?

**Chazz:** Unless you've experienced it

**Chazz:** no

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**Sojourna:** Seneca - what you say is interesting and I found your use of the word empathy interesting earlier.

**Shingles:** we can give hints about how it feels privately, as Shak might suggest, but communicating that private feeling is not very possible.

**Seneca:** Two different conclusions one might draw: (1) Wittgenstein's conclusion: We can't refer to subjective experiences. (2) The alternative I would recommend: We can refer to our subjective experiences and others, but we're fallible and when we try so to refer, we can't be sure we've got it right.

**Sojourna:** Seneca - you are suggesting that communicating internal sensations is done without language - now, Shingles - you make a good point about communication being a practical thing - use words to communicate - Shingles, are they accurately communicating internal states?

**Sojourna:** OK, Shingles, I like what you say about giving hints...nice way to put it.

**Simulat:** What we do is state to each other our internal states in various ways - we never actually transmit those internal states

**Chazz:** I think the words describe nothing, they are only markers. The message is "refer back to the sensation you had that was denoted by this word"

**Sojourna:** Seneca - why don't you move away completely from that - that we can't refer, not with words of the public language game, but go back to empathy again?

**Shingles:** I see that we can, as I say, formulate a communication of our private feeling, but as to whether it accurately describes the feeling depends very much on the Listener

**Seneca:** OK.

**Sojourna:** Simulat - transmission, no we can't seem to.

**Shak:** Soj, I was with Custer at the last stand. All these people being chopped and speared. Groans!! They said they were in pain. Later I got toothache. I had a word to describe how I felt so others could understand.

**Sojourna:** Shak - yep, but how are you even sure that your word describes what you think other experienced? How can you know?

**Simulat:** well - if someone kicks my shin and makes me cry out, then I can kick their shin back to transmit the feeling

**Shak:** I can't know for sure. I guess that's W's point.

**Marya:** It is possible to some degree to 'know' how another experiences pain - while this may not be exact - we recognise that we are the same species and in our species we know that a particular sort of C-Fibre stimulation causes us to feel pain, so, we can measure that sensation in ourselves scientifically and measure that in others as well - thereby we can 'know' to some degree, that we are using the word pain in a fairly correct way.

**Shingles:** not necessarily exactly the same feeling, it would differ a little, Sim

**Sojourna:** Even if we here right now tried to develop some sort of sign to denote an internal state, say we gave that feeling or sensation a P each time we felt it, we still could not compare our results.

**Seneca:** It may be even more direct than you describe, Shak. We may be \*wired\* to make the analogy between our own experience and that of others. When I see Sim raise his arm, arm-raising neurons in my own system are active.

**Shak:** But I can assume they're all like me.

**Shingles:** but it would approximate it, Sim et al

**Simulat:** yes Shingles - nothing is perfect :-)

**Shak:** Seneca, good point.

**Seneca:** Perhaps our tendency to make inferences like this, based on empathy (or more generally by analogy from our own experience to that of others), is necessary to get language going in the first place.

**Shak:** I reckon we are indeed wired, as a social species, to assume others have the same feelings we do.

**Shingles:** I feel something like that if I see a leg injury on a TV programme; I feel a tingle in the same leg.

**Sojourna:** I'm thinking about what Marya is saying

**Seneca:** Language begins as imitation.

**Simulat:** I wonder if W had any idea of our current ideas about things like Shak pointed to "we are indeed wired, as a social species, to assume others have the same feelings we do."

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**Sojourna:** How does that impact or influence private language? Are you saying that if science develops new rules for understanding internal states then a private language might be possible?

**Sojourna:** Yes, Simulat, in fact, I think his beetle analogy is exactly that. Just that we keep on talking about our own private beetles in our boxes - and just assume that because everyone else is talking about a beetle then it must be the same thing.

**Simulat:** Why would we want a private language? What would we use it for?

**Shingles:** that may be a meme, I'm not sure if it would be of bodily origin, Sim

**Marya:** I don't see that there is a private language - as far as I am concerned, private language is public language

**Sojourna:** Simulat - I don't know, we just do. We want to communicate our own private somethings....

**Shak:** I doubt if we'd develop a private language. As a matter of fact, all language is publically acquired.

**Sojourna:** Yes, Marya, well we are using the public language to express private sensations.

**Marya:** we can only use words to describe our private sensations - those words are the same language as public language, if that makes sense?

**Shingles:** But aren't we also predisposed to attempt to assert the meaning of our beetle over the meanings of others' beetles too?

**Simulat:** we do it fairly well though, Sojourna - some are better at it than others

**Seneca** is not persuaded by Wittgenstein that the language of thought is not essentially private. I think we sometimes fit words (social meanings) to thoughts that have their own semantic structure.

**Sojourna:** Shingles, haha, in fact, I think we do. And this is what I want to get to in the third question about how this impacts on our own philosophy discussions - but we'll get there soon.

**Simulat:** and we don't need a private language to talk about our experience

**Marya:** yes, agree with that Sim

**Sojourna:** Seneca - could you elaborate...

**Shingles:** ok, ill sit on it for now :)

**Sojourna:** Shingles :)

**Seneca:** If language refers to the words and meanings we use to communicate, then language can't be private.

**Sojourna:** Simulat - why don't we need a private language to communicate our experience?

**Seneca:** But if 'language' refers to a structured system or model with reference, then I think we can have private language.

**Simulat:** well - it seems that we don't have a private language, and we communicate our experience with public language - so clearly a private language isn't needed

**Shak:** The more you think about, the more absurd the idea of a private language becomes.

**Sojourna:** Seneca, ok. Well, language does refer to a structured thing with rules that we all agree upon and is only meaningful in its social context where it was born?

**Shingles:** Well put, Seneca

**Shak:** Nobody develops a private language. All language is learned from others.

**Sojourna:** Ah, Simulat. Isn't needed or is incoherent?

**Wren:** Shak, what about twins who invent languages that only they understand?

**Shingles:** I was going to suggest the same example, Wren

**Shak:** The twins are talking with each other.

**Shak:** A public of two!

**Marya:** I don't think that would matter Wren & Shing - it is still a language that they mutually understand

**Chazz:** yes

**Wren:** still, something separate from common language

**Simulat:** I don't think that something we don't seem to have (private language) can be incoherent

**Seneca:** Good question, Soj. I find myself stumped. But I often have the experience that I have thoughts I can't easily express. The thoughts have structure and reference, but it takes time to find a way to communicate them.

**Sojourna:** Ah, Shak - you are so right - yes it is a public language, even between two - do you agree Wren?

**Shingles:** but languages such as French are separate from English

**Wren:** hmm, I suppose

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**Sojourna:** Shingles - yes, but these a public languages also?

**Shingles:** oh yes, of course, I agree also that if the public was the two twins, that would be their public language

**Sojourna:** Seneca I agree with you - do you think being forced to use a public language to communicate them changes the thoughts? IN the end are we referring to something internal or something else? Something the public will have access to?

**Seneca:** A private revelation: I have migraine headaches that leave me with temporarily aphasia-- unable to find or articulate words. But I can still think clearly when I'm in that state.

**Seneca:** I think the language of thought really is a private language.

**Wren:** yes Seneca, I was thinking of thought

**Shingles:** do you think in words, Seneca?

**Wren:** sometimes I catch myself simply thinking, not thinking in words

**Seneca:** Sometimes, Shing.

**Wren:** and then of course by catching that I ruin it...

**Sojourna:** So, when we talk about pain, our pain, what are we referring to exactly? Wittgenstein (I think) says we are not referring to the internal object or sensation of pain, but some public understanding of it, some public fact of pain.

**Sojourna:** Well, now that Seneca brought up thought, maybe we could actually move onto question three:

**Shingles:** well in the case of deceit we communicate that we are in pain, but experience not the sensation, this would seem to show that they are separable in nature, Sojourna

**Shak:** If I work with other people in a kitchen, I quite often see folk spill hot water, and hear them complain of painful scalding. I've no way to associate that phrase with aspects of my own experience until it happens to me. Then I know. But the phrase was public before I properly knew what it meant.

**Sojourna:** 3.OK, so what are the implications of Wittgenstein's beetle in a box analogy for our own philosophical discussions? \*but please continue flow of discussion and just begin thinking about this\*

**Sojourna:** Shingles, hah, that's really interesting - saying we are in pain to deceive when we do not have the sensation of pain

**Sojourna:** yes

**Seneca:** Whether there can be a private language or not, discussion must take place using a public language. So the possibility of a private language of thought doesn't solve the beetle problem at all-- at least not as that problem comes up in philosophical discussions.

**Shak:** I guess we need to be aware that we're using public language, and that there's a big cultural element in it. There must be a danger of misunderstanding, especially if we talk of things like shame and guilt, which are very culture-dependent.

**Sojourna:** Yes, Shak, I guess each culturally-specific use of a word has its own rules etc on which users agree

**Shak:** Yeah, that's what I mean

**Sojourna:** Seneca - just thinking about what you said - yes

**Sojourna:** Wittgenstein says something else too; that because you can't know what is in everyone's box the object or sensation referred to drops out of consideration, the contents of the box are irrelevant because you can't check what they are or verify them. So - we are almost out of time - what do you all think about the third question - how does this relate to how we discuss things

**Simulat:** The thing is that the beetle in a box idea is set up to make it obvious that there could be all sorts of different things that people call beetles - but there is no reason to suppose from that that pain is the same - we have good reason to think that when people experience what they call pain they all mean the same thing

**Chazz:** private language on a different level. I mean words in the normal public language, which for a variety of reasons are being used with completely different meanings by the participants in a discussion. We see this every minute of every day at Philosophy House. This is completely outside of any metaphysical musing about whether your sensation when you stub your toe is different from mine even though we use the same word. This is just failing to take enough time to define terms before and during the discussion. While doing all that defining could get pretty tedious, I think a whole lot more discussions would either produce new understanding for participants or result in the discovery that there is agreement.

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**Shingles:** As I said before, we are predisposed to assert our meanings of our beetles over everyone else's, this manifests itself differently in each of us, but one should always be aware of that pre-disposition

**Seneca:** (Pasting this in...): Reasoning with others involves a threshold set of shared concepts, shared premises (beliefs) and shared understanding of (some) rules of inference. These are the necessary underpinnings for sensible discussion. We cannot always be sure that our philosophical discussions start with all these things in place—some of them are bottle-beetles, after all! It is worthwhile to begin a discussion by stipulating, clarifying, and specifying as many of these underpinnings as clearly as we can. Perhaps we can't ever be sure that the required underpinnings are all in place, even after careful investigation, just as I can't see other people's beetle. But active discussion must begin at some point anyway. We may need to solve the problem in the course of discussion, as we discover ambiguities and failures of reference.

**Marya:** I don't know that I would say we assert them 'over' others - perhaps we assert them in order to be understood

**Shak:** I guess feelings need to be counted, as well as beliefs.

**Seneca:** I agree, Shak.

**Shingles:** well, the stipulations only work if everyone adheres to them either by consent or being enforced, Seneca

**Seneca:** Or by a common goal. Pursuit of truth perhaps, Shing?

**Chazz:** and taking a step back, the fact that the description, the transmission from one individual to another, of the contents will never be perfect does not make the contents irrelevant. If the task is describing those contents, then the contents, whether verifiable by another or not, are absolutely the standard against which the accuracy of the communication is measured. Unless the idea is to just blather at one another without a goal, just for the joy of hearing noise come out of your own head.

**Shak:** Couldn't truth mean different things in different cultures?

**Shingles:** Well, then that's working together and consensual. You know my position on Truth, Seneca ;)

**Sojourna:** Nice one Seneca

**Seneca:** (Do I?)

**Shingles:** I'll tell you later, Sen

**Simulat:** I think before we can talk about truth we need to understand what people are saying to us, and they need to understand what we are saying to them

**Shak:** For me it is true that freedom from oppression is the greatest good. For my brother in Africa, freedom from AIDS may be the greatest good.

**Shingles:** If there was a private language, wouldn't that make any ideas about 'the truth' very difficult?

**Sojourna:** Yes, Simulat and for that we tend to have access to a tool, public language .... er .... but ... why doesn't it always work? Wittgenstein for one, on this stuff about private language argument (though he never calls it that) is quite obscure at times.

Simulat nods

**Simulat:** I think too that he likes to work up his ideas from first principles - but maybe that doesn't work

**Simulat:** I know in physics all the attempts I've seen to work up a description of reality from first principles turn out to be absurd and very complex

**Sojourna:** Any final thoughts before I close this officially (and invite you to hang for more unofficially?)

**Shingles:** I would always urge us to remember that anyone communicating has an agenda or else they have no cause to speak. It is not so important as to exactly how it is phrased necessarily, it is what the communicator intends to achieve that we should try to ascertain

**Sojourna:** Shingles what do you mean?

**Simulat:** I have that in mind all the time Shingles - that when people speak to me they have a message they are trying to get across, at least

**Marya:** Well, if you count wanting to learn something and/or wanting to be understood, as an agenda, then sure - I would refer to it as some sort of intention. If that is the case, then we are using different words for the same meaning, which is relevant to the subject matter somewhat :)

