1 What is Private Language Argument?

To introduce the Private Language Argument, we have to know what is Private Language first. From [1], “If someone were to behave as if they understood a language which no-one else can make sense of, we might call this an example of a private language”. However, it is not sufficient here.

The Private Language Argument is a philosophical argument introduced by Ludwig Wittgenstein, in whose sense, a private language must be in principle incapable of translation into an ordinary language, for example it were to describe those inner experiences supposed to be inaccessible to others. The private language mentioned is not one that in fact can be understood by one person, but a language that in principle can only be understood by one person. A private language must be unlearnable and untranslatable.

There are a series debates or discussions on the Private Language Argument. For examples:

- The Sensation S It is a thought experiment set up by Wittgenstein, in which someone is imagined to associate some recurrent sensation with a symbol by writing S when the sensation occurs. In Wittgenstein’s sense, such a case can be regarded as an example of Private Language.

- Memory scepticism There exists possibility that one might misremember the sensation, and therefore one does not have any firm criterion for using S in each time feeling the sensation [2]. In other words, when you trying to use a symbol to represent a sensation, when next time another sensation comes, you are not sure whether it is the same sensation you feel previously. Thus the symbol used is not firm.

- Meaning Scepticism Presented by Anthony Kenny [3], the problem with a private ostensive definition is also unable to lead to a meaningful statement. Since the symbol S the person use to represent that sensation is a part of private language, it is impossible to provide an explicit definition of S. In other words, there is no way to check the meaning of S.

- The Beetle in a Box This is another thought experiment presented by Wittgenstein [4]. Imagine a community in which everyone has a box containing 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. It is entirely possible that each person has a completely different beetle in his or her box, but they all use word “beetle” to represent it. It is an analogy to pain, since pain can only be felt by individuals themselves, so any name of pain is possible that in everyone’s own world, means different pain in indeed.

A lot more thought experiments and scepticism are related to the Private Language Argument, which in a group become common to call them Private Language Argument.

2 Another Thought Experiment, Red Color Number 30

Before reading all the materials on Private Language Argument, I thought about the several similar cases as presented before, which have bothered me for a long time.

For example, when we are talking about something is “red”, is the color sensed by each individual the same? Different from “pain” described in The Beetle in a Box experiment, there is an object with “Red” color we can justify the term “red” by saying “the color of that object is Red”. However, it does not change the fact
that the color we actually perceive may vary between individuals. So the “Red” I am saying, may not be
the same “Red” in another person’s world.

Similarly, if we ask people to put hands into hot water, they can feel the pain. We can symbolize this pain as
“Pain H”, and say “the pain you feel when you put hands into hot water is “Pain H”. Still, different people
feel different “Pain H”. For example, it is possible to have someone who actually does not feel any pain but
comfort after putting their hand into hot water, then “Pain H” means comfort to them in this scenario.

Moreover, if we have an object with a specific color, called “Color Number 30”. A normal person highly
possibly will be unable to remember the exact color afterwards, and the same Memory Scepticism like private
language occurs.

3 What is the Main Issue then?

In my view, the Private Language Argument falls into the fundamental philosophical debates and discussion
on Metaphysics. It is actually about which one, “soul” or “body”, is the dominating part of our world.

If we think “soul” is the dominating part, then we can explain Private Language Argument by saying since
the “world” will not even exist if the “soul” vanish, then all the symbols, no matter from public or private
language, that I learned during my life time are totally private. The argument starts from that my “world”
is not your “would” and different from anyone else’. Everyone has his or her own “world” and that world
vanish when his or her “soul” vanish, like passed away. It sounds quite untrue, but it is a claim you can not
prove it wrong. How to prove the world you see and feel right now will still continue after you were dead?

Let me put it in another way. Imagine your whole “world” is simulated by a giant computer from the
beginning, so everything in that “world” is actually virtual and the language, no matter in the sense of
public or private, are all your private language. Thus when game is over, the whole world will vanish. There
does not even exist the argument between public and private language at all.

On the other side, if we believe “body” is the dominating part, which our “soul”, or thoughts are just
reflection of our “body” actions, like the brain activity is the source of any thought. Then the Private
Language Argument becomes invalid since we assume the “world” I have is the same “world” everyone
else has. In which sense, we can have assumptions such as “the body structure of you is similar to my
body structure, so the ‘Red’ you perceive, is the “Red” I perceive too”. Under such assumptions, for the
sensation S example, since the sensation is just one of the millions ( or more, but limited) of the brain states,
eventually you can express it by that state if our technology is advanced enough to sense the state of the
brain thoroughly. Thus, the sensation S can be explicitly expressed by the state codes, which makes it belong
to a non-private language.

So, I would like to argue the private language argument is there, and it also stems from the very fundamental
philosophical problem about our world.

4 References

[1] A detailed account can be found in: Dejnozka, Jan Origins of the Private Language Argument Dilogos
66, pp.269, 1995

[2] A detailed account can be found in: Dejnozka, Jan Origins of the Private Language Argument Dilogos
66, pp.207, 1995


[4] A detailed account can be found in: Dejnozka, Jan Origins of the Private Language Argument Dilogos
66, pp.293, 1995