

Can There Be a Private Language?

As Ayer points out in his article of the same title, there is an ordinary sense in which there can be private languages. There are languages which are understood by a limited number of people, so such languages are possible. Likewise a single person could devise a code, keeping it secret, for a diary. These languages can be viewed as private in that, in fact, they are understood only by one person, or a limited number of people. Such languages could become public; the person can give the key to the code away. As Ayer says, this isn't what philosophers have had in mind, when speaking of a private language.

Before turning to the question of "Can there be a private language?" in the philosophically important sense, I want to discuss the possibility of a private language, in a sense I take not to be philosophically important, but which Ayer has used in arguing against Wittgenstein and Rhee felt it proper to defend Wittgenstein with respect to. Could a Robinson Crusoe, left alone on an island from birth, develop a language, giving names to objects and/or sensations? My view is that, although it may be psychologically impossible or very improbable, so far as philosophy is concerned, Ayer's Crusoe could have a language, with names for objects and sensations. In my discussion of this subject, I will refer to Ayer's Crusoe, a person developing in isolation from other people, as A. I will refer to Defoe's Crusoe, a person developing, and learning language, in a society and who is then isolated from other people, as B.

The criteria of whether or not a person is obeying a rule concern how he acts. Suppose A develops a complex way of life, even though this way of life does not involve any other people. He lives in natural caves and often moves around. When he enters into caves, which he has never been in before, he makes marks, like arrows, with chalk pointing along the path he takes. Sometimes he follows the arrows back out. This could be described in terms of behavior. It is a grammatical proposition that exhibiting such behavior is a criterion for A's obeying a rule. That such behavior is not possible would be a hypothesis, and does not concern the philosophical point. Other sorts of behavior could be described to make the same point. The more kinds of such behavior A displays, the more natural it would seem to us in any of the cases to say that A is following a rule.

As above described, A obeys a rule, but does he obey a rule privately? If A were obeying a rule privately, then his obeying the rule would be the same as his thinking that he is obeying the rule. (202) Does A think he is obeying a rule? So far nothing has been said about this. So far nothing has been said about whether or not it is possible to obey a rule privately.

Suppose a mental picture occurs to A when he sees the mark on the cave floor. (So far it hasn't been said what the criteria are for a person's having a mental picture are, but ignore this for now, although it is important.) The mental picture cannot determine which direction A is to move, in order to be obeying the rule. Movement in either direction can be made to accord

with the mental picture. Thus the mental picture does not determine what movement will count as obeying the rule. (201)

Does thinking that you are obeying a rule consist in having a certain mental picture? Someone who who claims to have a private language must think so. Thinking you are obeying a rule does not take time, but obeying a rule takes time. "Thinking you are obeying a rule" fits the grammar of "having a mental picture" in that neither takes time. "The balance on which impressions are weighed is not the impression of a balance." (259) In a private language however, the impression of a balance would have to serve to weigh impressions. The impression of a balance a person has at one time does not determine what impression of a balance the person will have at any later time. Thus the impression of a balance will not serve to determine an action, e.g. which way to go in order of follow an arrow. A's obeying a rule does not consist in his thinking he obeys a rule, although A may think he obeys a rule (nothing has been said about this). A does not obey a rule privately.

A can obey a rule, but can A have a language? Everything we have called a language has been used by a community, never only by a lone individual. However, sometimes an individual might be separated from the community and continue to use language. (Defoe's Crusoe, D) D will be able to use language in a number of ways. He may keep a diary for others to find. He may develop a system of agriculture, and keep records of where he plants each kind of crop each season, and use this record for rotating the crops according to some system. A

could exhibit behavior exemplifying the second use of language just mentioned, but not the first use mentioned. Rather, I suppose it is possible A could exhibit the same behavior as B does in the first use mentioned but even if he did, it cannot be described as that use of language because the appropriate context is lacking. ~~xx~~ However some things, ~~relevent~~ to context of A's use of language, relevent to whether