

# Private Language and Property Dualism

Jesper Kallestrup, Copenhagen

## 1. Physicalism and Dualism

Physicalism says that all the facts, including all the phenomenal facts, are metaphysically necessitated by the physical facts. If physicalism is true at the actual world, there is no metaphysically possible world, which is physically identical to the actual world, but different in some other respect. Note that 'physicalism' is defined in terms of *metaphysical necessity*, because everybody should endorse law-like correlations between the mental and the physical, and so can accept supervenience with *nomological necessity*.

Many philosophers believe that physicalism is false. A repeated line of reasoning is the so-called *conceivability argument*: a certain scenario is ideally conceivable, and whatever is thus conceivable is metaphysically possible, so this scenario is metaphysically possible. But the metaphysical possibility of this scenario is inconsistent with physicalism, so physicalism is false. Thus Descartes argued that it is clearly and distinctly conceivable that I exists without my body given that I, and not my body, is a thinking, non-extended thing, and whatever is thus conceivable is really possible by divine interference, so it's possible that I exist without my body. But if it's possible that I exist without my body, I'm not strictly identical to my body, although I'm closely connected to it, e.g. by laws of nature.

Descartes took this to be an argument for *substance dualism*, the view that each of us is composed of two distinct existing kinds of stuff. Modern proponents of anti-physicalism, however, don't believe in the existence of mental substances. They think that all substances have physical properties, hence that all substances are physical substances, assuming mental substances are those with only mental properties. What they hold is merely that some physical substances have some mental properties that don't metaphysically supervene on physical properties. Call this view *property dualism*. The kind of properties that the property dualists believe are the best candidates for failure of metaphysical supervenience are *phenomenal properties*. These involve the qualitative character of experience, the how-it-is-like aspect of phenomenal consciousness. To have knowledge of phenomenal properties is, on this view, to have *irreducible, propositional, phenomenal information*, which no amount of physical information will enable one to derive. Property dualists also deploy our purported rational access to real modalities in order to refute physicalism: it's conceivable on ideal reflection that there be worlds physically identical to our world in which all qualia are inverted or absent, and what is ideally conceivable is metaphysically possible, so there are metaphysically possible inverted or absent qualia worlds that are physically identical to the actual world. Thus in (1996, 97) Chalmers argues from a possibility – same functional organisation but different physical constitution and lack of phenomenal properties – physicalism allows for to a possibility – same functional organisation and same physical constitution but lack of phenomenal properties – physicalism prohibits.

## 2. The Argument against Private Language

Now, let's turn to Wittgenstein's considerations about private languages, which are centred in *Philosophical Investigations* §§256-60. What is such a language? It is a language that necessarily only one individual, namely its originator, can understand. The necessity is important. The argument against private language better not rule out the possibility of a language that as a matter of fact only one individual understands. Thus in the case of Robinson Crusoe, only one individual understands it, but someone else might have understood it. Moreover, a private language isn't to be found amongst natural languages; it's a by-product of misguided philosophical theories; §§133, 255. The problem with a private language isn't just that it doesn't exist; it's that it couldn't possibly exist. The reason is that a language necessarily unintelligible to anyone but its originator is unintelligible to her as well, and a necessarily unintelligible language isn't a language at all.

Needless to say, the subject matter of a private language is a private subject matter, entities that necessarily only one individual can come to have knowledge of. The best candidates for privacy are mental objects and properties when misconceived in certain ways. Thus it's part of *Cartesianism* that at least phenomenal properties are such that only the individuals who have them could possibly form a justified opinion about their occurrence and character. This isn't a point about *ownership*. The question isn't whether if I have a token sensation of a particular type, you might have had that very token or just a different token of the same type. The question is whether there is anything about my token sensation that you couldn't possibly come know. If so, that token is private to me. And if there could be private sensations, there could presumably also be a language that reports these sensations

Now, imagine circumstances in which a private language might be thought possible: the *private linguist* S has a sensation of pain that is not tied up with any typical natural pain-expressions such as wincing and escape-behaviour; §256. It's a private particular that S has exclusive epistemic access to. The thought is that S introduces a name 'P' for her sensation by a *private ostensive definition*:

(POD) Let 'P' designate *this* (while focusing her attention inwardly on the sensation).

Thus S has mentally associated 'P' with her sensation. It's true that S couldn't convey the alleged meaning of 'P' to anyone else given that the sensation itself exhausts its meaning, and in the circumstances envisaged only S has epistemic access to that sensation. We assume that the meaning of 'P' is entirely constituted by its referent; if it isn't, we just introduce a new term 'Q' for that part of the semantic content of 'P' that is determined by that sensation. So, if the subject matter of S's language is private, and its meaning is due to that subject matter, then the meaning of her language is also private.<sup>1</sup> Let's grant all

<sup>1</sup> As Wright (1986) points out, this assumes that mutual understanding requires reason to think that mutual understanding obtains; otherwise it might just be that as a matter of lucky fact S\* does understand S's language, namely if they associate the same symbols with the same private sensations. In the absence of this assumption, a private language is better defined as one that necessarily no two people can have reason to think they share.

that. The question is whether S herself could be said to understand 'P'.

The point in §258 is that if (POD) is to fulfil its purpose, it must establish a connection between the sensation and 'P' that has *normative future consequences*. The meaning of a referential term must be a property that determines whether a given object is *correctly* picked out by that term. If S's mental act is to have the required semantic implications, it can't just be an occurrent event in her consciousness; S must form an *intention* to comply with a rule governing the use of 'P'. She must "undertake" in the future to conform to a regularity in the use of 'P' sanctioned by that rule such that 'P' is *correctly* used iff all and only sensations of the *same type* as the initial sensation are called 'P'; §§261-3. But there's no *criterion for correctness* that could guide S's use of 'P'. There's no distinction between S having the *impression* that 'P' is used correctly, and S using 'P' correctly. This follows from the supposed private nature of the referent of 'P'. It has no connection with her sayings and doings, so whether it occurs or not at some later time is only a question about whether S *judges* that it occurs or not at that time. But S's assertion is a judgement about some state of affairs that are *independent* of the judgement. S's assertion is correct iff the state of affairs asserted obtains. On the present view, however, there is no space for ways S's judgements about the reoccurrence of the initial sensation could go wrong: if P occurs, yet it seems to S as if P doesn't occur, S will not judge that P occurs, and if P doesn't occur, yet it seems to S as if P does occur, S will judge that P occurs. But if there is no distinction between what is right and what seems right, no private meaning has been bestowed on 'P'. And if 'P' has no private meaning, and the sensation that 'P' designates is private only if the meaning of 'P' is private, there is no private sensation.

### 3. Infallibility

It may be objected that the argument *begs the question* against the Cartesian. On this conception of the mental, a suitable endowed subject S is not only incorrigible, but also infallible, and omniscient with respect to her sensational states. S introduced 'P' to refer to a particular token of a type of private phenomenal state. Given that S has an infallible ability to recognise and re-identify tokens of the same type of state in the future, there is no problem about S having a private practice with respect to 'P'. On this view, there is a distinction between what seems right and what is right, i.e. the obtaining of the relevant state of affairs is distinct from S's judgement that they obtain. It's just that whenever they obtain, S judges that they obtain, and whenever they do not, S doesn't judge that they obtain. But the argument assumes, or so the thought goes, that there are cases where S mistakenly judges that P occurs, and where P occurs without S judging so, and so it makes an assumption the Cartesian rejects.

There are two responses. The first is that it's doubtful whether it so much as makes sense to be infallible with respect to a private subject matter. In §§265-6 Wittgenstein imagines, by analogy, an individual with photographic memory checking when a train leaves by bringing forward a memory image of the page in the timetable. Now, this may work, because we have an *independent* test for the correctness of the memory image, namely check the timetable. But in the case of private sensations, there are no independent means by which S can inspect the correctness of the memory image of the original sensation. Unless there are external methods of testing, whatever S

brings to mind, it will not tell him how 'P' is to be applied in future cases.<sup>2</sup>

Secondly, *even if* we grant introspective infallibility and omniscience, that isn't enough to make his judgements infallible. When S judges that now P occurs again, he intends to use 'P' with the same meaning as when he baptised the original sensation. That in turn presupposes that he brings the sensation in question under the right concept. But then infallibility with respect to the sensation falls short of infallibility with respect to the judgements. And surely everyone must concede that our ability for *conceptual classification* is fallible; this holds for judgements based on perception as well as for judgements based on introspection. But in the case of a private language, it doesn't make sense to say that S loses track of which term goes with which sensation, for whichever sensation S judges that is P is the sensation that is P. Nor does it make sense to say that S has an impartial grasp of the meaning of 'P' since S is assumed to be infallible and all-knowing when it comes to the sensation that constitutes the whole meaning of 'P'.<sup>3</sup> This means that the Cartesian substance dualist's claim that we are infallible and all-knowing with respect to our sensational states, is, if a meaningful claim at all, inessential to the argument. But then it's hard to see why both forms of dualism are not in the same boat when it comes to the argument in question.

### 4. Dualism and Privacy

Let's go back to the dualist arguments against physicalism. According to substance and property dualism, there are law-like correlations between mental and physical properties. It may be that, say being in pain and having C-fibre firing are nomologically co-extensive properties, or that there are *ceteris paribus* laws pertaining to pain-behaviour and pain. But that is all. There are neither metaphysical connections between the property of being in pain and neurological or behavioural properties, nor conceptual connections between the corresponding terms for those properties.<sup>4</sup> In worlds with different laws of nature, individuals are in pain, but are neither in a typical brain-state nor display typical pain-behaviour, and in other worlds with yet different laws of nature, individuals have C-fibre firing and display pain-behaviour, but have no pain. And what is true for pain holds for all phenomenal states. Such possibilities were explicitly embraced in the conceivability arguments. But this means that at least in worlds nomologically different from the actual world, phenomenal states are *private* in the sense we have defined the term. No two individuals could ever come to know about their respective sensations, so no two individuals can ever have any reasons to think they both understand 'P' in the same way, because any such reason would derive from circumstances that they could both at least in principle come to know. In the envisaged circumstances, all they have to go on is their respective utterances of 'now P reoccurred'; there are no publicly accessible criteria for the correct application of 'P'.

<sup>2</sup> This reflects an earlier point about *understanding* in §§138-84, namely that to grasp the meaning of a term never consists in having a mental picture before the mind.

<sup>3</sup> Blackburn (1984, 297-300) argues that the private linguist S, if ingenious, can have a private practice with respect to her use of 'P', if she constructs a theory around her observations of the private sensations. On Blackburn's view, S is fallible yet incorrigible. Wright (1986, 239-47) responds that this *fallibilism* fails for the same reason as the private linguist who invents no theory but merely 'reports' his sensations, because when theory and observation conflict there is no best way to resolve the inconsistency.

<sup>4</sup> Chalmers (1999) is explicit that phenomenal concepts are not causal concepts.

So, if the foregoing argument is sound, it afflicts all those views about the mental that deny metaphysical and conceptual connections between the mental and the physical. Analytical behaviourism and common-sense functionalism, for example, both purport to analyse mental vocabulary in terms of ordinary folk psychology. These analyses need not be conceptually reductive in any stronger way than the Lewis-Ramsey method requires. But even views that reject conceptual analysis such as empirical functionalism or a posteriori physicalism entail that mental phenomena are not necessarily private. If the mental is metaphysically necessitated by the physical, it is at least in principle empirically possible to come to know the former on the basis of knowledge of the latter. This means that on these views, mental phenomena are sufficiently tied up with publicly accessible circumstances. The fact that these circumstances are easier to get at on the former views makes no crucial difference as long as both views deny worlds where mental phenomena are disconnected from all such circumstances. Both forms of dualism, however, explicitly allow for such worlds. What the argument against private languages shows is, remember, not just that as things stand, there are no private languages; it is that, no matter how things are, there couldn't be a private language. The upshot is therefore that even modern forms of dualism are faced with this argument.<sup>5</sup>

## Literature

- Blackburn, S. 1984 'The Individual Strikes Back', *Synthese* 58, 281-301.
- Chalmers, D. 1996 *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Chalmers, D. 1999 'Materialism and the Metaphysics of Modality', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59, 473-96.
- Wittgenstein, L. 1953 *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Wright, C. 1986 'Does Philosophical Investigations I. 258-60 suggest a cogent argument against private language?', in P. Pettit and J. McDowell (eds.) *Subject, Thought and Context*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 209-66.

<sup>5</sup> Chalmers [1996, 381, fn. 13] thinks the argument either rests on dubious premises or equally applies to everyday concepts. If the foregoing is right, both disjuncts are false.