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WITTGENSTEIN’S CRITICISM OF CARTESIANISM

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of ideas is often simplified and dramatized, so that it becomes more like folklore than real history. The mythologizing of philosophy is most conspicuous at its crises and turning-points, and the treatment of Wittgenstein’s private language argument is a very clear example of it. When I say that, I am not referring to the recent controversy about the identification of the argument: Is it the argument against the possibility of a sensation-language completely detached from everything in the physical world? Or is Kripke right when he identifies it with Wittgenstein’s denunciation of certain general theories about rule-following? I am going to avoid that controversy, because my concern is solely with the argument against the possibility of a completely detached sensation-language, and I do not really care what this argument is called. I want to look at the argument because it seems to me that commentators have simplified it and made it into something much less interesting than it really is.

It is understandable why this argument has been mythologized. The texture of Wittgenstein’s writing makes it difficult to cut neat packages out of it. When he offers a new way of looking at a problem it is not his practice to try to persuade us with a single self-contained argument. He has many different ways of inducing us to get rid of the point of view that he is rejecting and to replace it with something better. He uses realistic sketches of our actual linguistic practices, diagnoses of our misunderstandings of them, illustrations of viable alternatives, and a host of other devices. Of course, there are arguments in his text, but he seldom rests his case on a single one.

The argument against the possibility of a completely detached sensation-language – which henceforth I shall simply call “the private language argument” – looks like a welcome exception to his usual strategy of scattering his forces in a kind of guerilla warfare. It is a reductive argument, and it appears to concentrate the whole campaign into a single decisive battle.

A philosopher working in the Cartesian tradition, like Russell, would maintain that sensation-language comes first in any logical reconstruction of our knowledge of the world around us. Wittgenstein retorts that, on the contrary, it would not be possible to set up sensation-language in complete detachment from the physical world. For in that situation we would have no viable way of distinguishing between two kinds of cases in which we think we are applying a word to a sensation correctly, the cases where we really are, and the cases where we are not applying it correctly. This is a reductive argument and it looks attractively simple: Russell's detached sensation-language would collapse for lack of a viable distinction between correct and incorrect uses of a word. So we cut this argument out of the complex pattern of Wittgenstein's thought, and take it to mark a turning-point, or, at least, a crisis in the development of western philosophy.

I am not saying that this interpretation of *Philosophical Investigations* is mistaken – that would be absurd – but I do want to show that it is less than the whole truth. So the rest of this paper will be concerned with what has to be added to these bare bones.

There are two big additions to be made. One is an account of the place of the argument in the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy, and its connections with other closely related arguments used by him. It is important to add this material, because the private language argument is not the single decisive battle that it is usually taken to be – not the final breakthrough achieved after a lot of false starts and unsuccessful strategies. The second *addendum* is an investigation of the premisses of the argument. In any convincing *reductio*, the premisses must be clearly identified, because, if they are not, the absurdity may not be validly deduced, or, if it is, the finger of blame for it may not point clearly at the culprit.

2. THE PLACE OF THE PRIVATE LANGUAGE ARGUMENT

The private language argument does not stand alone in the development of Wittgenstein's philosophy. It makes its first appearance in his writings in his notes for a course of lectures given in 1936. But it is preceded by three other, closely related arguments, and it is offered as the last member of a quartet. So the best way to understand it is to take it as it is offered, together with its three companion arguments.

The first thing that needs to be explained is the division of Wittgenstein's campaign against Cartesianism into four parts. A solipsist is a philosopher who withdraws, or, at least, tries to withdraw into a private world containing only a mental subject and its mental objects. So there will be two parts to any critique of this privatization of the world; it will have to deal with the