# Thought experiments in Philosophy

The Beetle in the Box,

from Wittgenstein's

*Philosophical Investigations*

# Thought experiments

**Thought experiments in philosophy are widely used to tease out our intuitions in ethics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, etc.**

# Do three things

1. Outline the story of the 'Beetle in the Box'

2. Say what philosophical point Wittgenstein is making

3. Say whether the thought experiment worked

# Beetle in the Box

## Thought experiment

If I say of myself that it is only from my own case that I know what the word "pain" means – must I not say *that* of other people too? And how can I generalise so irresponsibly?

Well, everyone tells me that he knows what pain is only from his own case!  - Suppose that everyone had a box with something in it which we call a "beetle". No one can ever look in 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 what if these people's word "beetle" had a use nonetheless? If so, it would not be as the name of a thing. The thing in the box doesn't belong to 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.

That is to say, if we construe grammar of the expression of sensation on the model of 'object and name', the object drops out of consideration as irrelevant (§293)

# Private Language

A private language is
*necessarily* incomprehensible
to others
*but*
## Much of modern Western philosophy assumes a private language is possible

**(Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)**

# Implications for philosophy

**The impossibility of a private language can be argued to have far-reaching implications for**

- **Epistemology**
- **Philosophy of mind**
- **Metaphysics**

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# Broks' interpretation

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# Broks' interpretation

## We cannot share experiences

## Public language and meaning are limited to what we can teach each other

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⬇

## Public language and meaning are limited to what we can teach each other

### *but*

## Is teaching the whole story?

# Child's interpretation

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# Child's interpretation

**You can't verify your own sensations**

**No-one can know the character of someone else's sensations**

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**Inner experiences are not a privileged starting point for philosophy**

# If introspection is not privileged....

## What can we say exists?

## What grounds our knowledge?

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## Is philosophy at an end?

# If introspection is not privileged....

## What can we say exists?
## What grounds our knowledge?

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## Is philosophy at an end?

### *and yet*

## *Philosophical Investigations* is not fast and is not sweeping

# Philosophy of language

**Monolithic**                    **Representational**

# Is philosophy of language incorrect?

## Monolithic?

There is a *variety* of language games

•giving orders and acting on them

•reporting an event

• speculating on the event

•acting in a play

•cracking a joke

•or telling one

•guessing riddles

•requesting, granting, cursing…

(*Philosophical Investigations*, §23)

## Representational

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## Representational?

The number 'two' seems uncontroversial:

- correct and incorrect uses appear to be clearly demonstrable

(*Philosophical Investigations*, §28)

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## Representational?

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**Words *do not* represent**

(*Philosophical Investigations*, §28)

# Is philosophy of language incorrect?

**Kripke says that Wittgenstein is saying something even more extreme...**

**...after a long previous exposition**

# Kripke's interpretation

We see language as *normative*

*and yet*

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We see language as *normative*

*and yet*

It's *impossible* for us to give any grounds for this normativity

- we cannot explain meaning with words ➡ regress

- we cannot state a normative rule only ➡ the rule used so far

# Kripke's conclusion

**Wittgenstein's paradox of normativity says it is metaphysically impossible for us to give grounds for meaning in language**

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**A 'sceptical conclusion' which is 'insane and intolerable'**

# Kripke: Wittgenstein's weak solution

## Community view of language

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## Community view of language

**Stronger dispositionalist accounts**

**e.g. Hannah Ginsborg**

**Anti-reductionist accounts**

**e.g. John McDowell**

## Are these responses capable of addressing the perceived 'sceptical conclusion'?

# Baker's interpretation

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## Arises from consideration of a dilemma:

### First horn

My pain sensation is important to what 'pain' means

*but*

I have no correctness criteria for 'pain'

How can I communicate 'pain'?

### Second horn

# Baker's interpretation

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### First horn

My pain sensation is important to what 'pain' means

*but*

I have no correctness criteria for 'pain'

How can I communicate 'pain'?

### Second horn

'Pain' is understood by others

⬇

This requires objective standards, public rules

⬇

'Pain' does not mean my pain sensation

# Baker's interpretation

## Dissolve the dilemma:
## read §293 as a critique of our expectations

- We expect to name physical and non-physical objects by using ostension and by using reference

- We expect to understand how we communicate: how language fits to the world

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## Dissolve the dilemma:
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- We expect to name physical and non-physical objects by using ostension and by using reference
- We expect to understand how we communicate: how language fits to the world

## §293 tells us this model does not work for sensation words, and worse,
## our expectations are contradictory

# **Philosophy of language**

**Do we need to start from the bottom?**

- **Explore each of the many different uses of language**
  - identify the dynamic of each
- **Then, maybe, review the series of dynamics revealed**
  - identify any common themes

**Maybe, come to an over-arching theory?**

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Nonetheless, *many* interpretations

•has raised questions, especially about meaning in language

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Does it tease out our intuitions?

• no consistency in interpretation

Nonetheless, *many* interpretations

• has raised questions, especially about meaning in language

Has prompted much philosophical thinking and debate

**A valuable contribution to philosophy**