

THE EMPIRICISTS' TROUBLE WITH PRIVATE LANGUAGE¹

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I. Introduction

Private language does not appear as an articulate philosophical problem in British Empiricism. As a consequence of their theory of meaning, British Empiricists take it for granted that language is essentially private. This theory of meaning, of which Locke and Hume were advocates, and Berkeley was a fellow-traveller,² is responsible for a conflict arising between the empiricists' theory of cognition and the requirements of linguistic communication. The conflict is this: the process of cognition is to acquire and manipulate ideas. Due to their origin in subjective experience ideas are essentially private properties. Linguistic communication is an exchange of ideas by means of words whose meaning is determined exclusively by private ideas. Yet in order to be successful, this exchange requires the intersubjectivity of language. How is such an exchange possible when ideas are essentially private?

In this essay my purpose is not to discuss the possibility of a private language; nor is it to investigate or modify the arguments that lead to the inevitable acceptance of its possibility. Instead, I will try to figure out the response British Empiricists would give if faced with the above question. I will proceed as follows. First, as the meaning of „privacy” in British Empiricism is far from being unproblematic, I take a short detour in exploring some features of its meaning in Locke and Hume, and then in the second step I introduce how the problem sketched above arises in Locke. In the third step I sketch Locke's less sophisticated and unsatisfactory solution to it. In the fourth step I will argue that not in Locke but in Hume can we find better tools to solve the problem, though it takes some effort to reveal them. Finally, I will point out some aspects of the Humean solution that, I believe, make it less appealing than it initially might seem.

II. Privacy in Locke and Hume

Semantic privacy presupposes a substantial notion of privacy, and its applicability in Hume's case may seem problematic to some. To understand the worries that

¹ I'm indebted to Gergely Ambrus and Volker Munz for their scepticism about a substantive sense of privacy in Hume. I'm also indebted to Michael Bresalier for his stylistic proposals and corrections of my English. While writing this paper I enjoyed the support of the Hungarian State Eötvös Scholarship.

² Cf. Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume. Central Themes*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1975, p. 1.

may appear here we should take a closer look at the less problematic case of Locke. For Locke there is a substantive self whose specific character consists in its sense of itself, i.e. its being self-conscious. Let me quote at length how he introduces his account of the self: „[It] is a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it: It being impossible for anyone to perceive, without perceiving, that he does perceive [...] [S]ince consciousness always accompanies thinking, and 'tis that, that makes every one to be, what he calls *self*; and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists *personal Identity*, i.e. the sameness of a rational Being: And as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past Action or Thought, so far reaches the Identity of that *Person*.”³

Locke's picture of the self is based on the consideration that any act of perception is accompanied by another act that perceives this perception. This latter act tells us that ideas, which for Locke are the only objects of perception, belong to a specific self distinct from others. This provides grounds for the privacy of ideas, the very source of complications that bother us here.

One could argue, however, that the problems arising from privacy may be significant in Locke's case, but are far from being general in British Empiricism. Hume, for example, famously denied the existence of a self that could fulfil the role Locke assigns to it. As Hume himself puts it: „For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.”⁴ Hume here explicitly denies what seem to be the very grounds of privacy in Locke, namely the perception of perceiving ideas. This amounts to the denial of a substantive self that is replaced by mere ideas that could serve as substances, without presupposing the existence of some other (thinking) substance to which they belong: „[If [...] anyone shou'd [say] that the definition of a substance is *something which may exist by itself*; [...] I shou'd observe, that this definition agrees to every thing that can possibly be conceiv'd; and never will serve to distinguish substance from accident, or the soul from its perceptions. [...] [S]ince all our perceptions are different from each other, and from every thing else in the universe, they are also distinct and separable, and may be consider'd as separately existent, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing else to support

³ John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by Peter Nidditch, Oxford: Clarendon, 1975, 2.27.9.

⁴ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by David Fate Norton – Mary J. Norton, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 1.4.6.3.

their existence. They are, therefore, substances, as far as this definition explains a substance.”⁵

So, on the one hand it seems we cannot experience ourselves the way Locke claims, that is we cannot be self-conscious, as the objects of our perceptions are always ideas, and not something distinct from them. On the other hand we do not need to presuppose a substance with this property either, as ideas themselves can be thought of as substances – if one needs this terminology.

Is it then possible to talk about privacy in Hume's case? No, if one thinks that privacy presupposes some notion of a substantive self, which we cannot get from Hume. But for the argument of this essay I do not need to rely on any notion of a substantive self, I only need to establish that there is a relevant sense in Hume in which ideas are private. This follows from the project of tracking privacy in empiricist semantics: if privacy is possible without any notion of a substantive self then the claim that ideas are private will make sense. So here is the crucial passage from Hume that is instructive how to avoid the notion of a substantive self while keeping the privacy of ideas: „[T]he true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other. Our impressions give rise to their correspondent ideas, and these ideas in their turn produce other impressions. One thought chases another, and draws after it a third, by which it is expell'd in its turn. In this respect, I cannot compare the soul more properly to any thing than to a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination, and give rise to other persons, who propagate the same republic in the incessant changes of its parts. And as the same individual republic may not only change its members, but also its laws and constitutions; in like manner the same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity. Whatever changes he endures, his several parts are still connected by the relation of causation.”⁶

So privacy is still possible. It is true that from Hume we do not receive a picture of a substantive self that persists through time, something that remains the same through a variety of changes. The picture is more dynamic here: there is only a complex bundle of ideas, which are linked together by various idea-relations, most notably causation, and this compound we can call „self”. A component of this bundle may be private precisely by virtue of its links to other ideas, most importantly to its causes and effects. There is then a temporal and causal chain of ideas that constitutes personal identity. For Hume, ideas are private by virtue of being part of this chain as opposed to some other.

⁵ Ibid, 1.4.5.5ff.

⁶ Ibid, 1.4.6.19.

III. The problems

From this background of privacy in Locke and Hume, let's turn to the semantic consequences of privacy. Private language is an inevitable consequence of empiricist semantics. For language to be meaningful we must be able to produce articulate sounds and to use these sounds as marks of ideas in our minds, thereby making them accessible to others.⁷ Without constant conjunction between words and corresponding ideas there is no meaning, only insignificant noises.⁸ Correspondingly, the Lockean model of communication goes like this: The speaker attaches ideas to his words, thereby fixing speaker meaning, and produces the corresponding signs (verbal or otherwise). The listener receives the signs, decodes them by translating them into his ideas, thereby fixing listener meaning. The meaning of words is therefore derived from ideas on both sides of conversation. To communicate is to convey ideas from one mind to another by means of signs. Locke puts it as follows: „Man, though he have great variety of Thoughts, and such, from which others, as well as himself, might receive Profit and Delight; yet they are all within his own Breast, invisible, and hidden from others, nor can of themselves be made to appear. The Comfort and Advantage of Society, not being to be had without Communication of Thoughts, it was necessary, that Man should find out some external sensible Signs, whereby those invisible *Ideas*, which his thoughts are made up of, might be made known to others [...] Thus we may conceive how *Words*, which were by Nature so well adapted to that purpose, came to be made use of by Men as *the Signs of their Ideas*.”⁹

There are two kinds of problem with this picture. The first of these is the following: How come we attach the same ideas to our words that make understanding possible? Or to put it differently: How can speaker meaning and listener meaning be similar enough in significant respects so as to facilitate communication? This seems to be inevitable for successful communication. If we mean entirely different ideas by our words we could never communicate, as signs would invoke entirely different ideas on both sides. Therefore we need to attach identical or at least highly similar ideas to the same words. How is this possible? The most obvious way is to establish some kind of agreement within linguistic communities that fixes the link between ideas and words. Explicit agreement, however, seems to be impossible because it presupposes the use of language. We could agree to attach particular words to particular ideas if we had language, and in case of newly introduced words it is arguably a possible scenario. But with only this model at hand language simply cannot get off the ground.

This problem becomes even more problematic and mysterious given that

⁷ Cf. John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 3.1.1-2.

⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.2.7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.2.1.

Locke grants us total autonomy to accompany whatever ideas we want with whatever noises we make. As he puts it: „every Man has so inviolable a Liberty, to make Words stand for what *Ideas* he pleases, that no one hath the Power to make others have the same *Ideas* in their Minds, that he has, when they use the same Words, that he does.”¹⁰ Given this kind of semantic individualism, how can linguistic communities emerge at all?

The second kind of problem arises from the fact that the final origin of ideas is in subjective experience. Although a given word always means the same idea, this idea is different in each of us; therefore we are alone in our language. Even if all of us attach the same ideas to the same words, there is nothing that ensures the identity of the contents of ideas across different minds. This problem can be illustrated by reference to phenomenal qualities: Two people can have seemingly identical ideas of red – for instance, they can respond in the same way to red things – but they may nevertheless have different subjective experiences. Do they mean the same by „red”? No, if our semantics is based on ideas whose foundations rest on subjective experience. And it remains the case even if Locke himself tries to make this problem insignificant by pointing out that there are no pragmatic consequences to these differences that should bother us.¹¹

A related problem is that we know our own ideas directly in an infallible way; therefore it is also transparent to us what we mean by our words. But it may never be transparent what others mean by their words, as the very signs of their meaning something by them are the words they use: it is therefore impossible to understand others without knowing their ideas, but this knowledge is impossible without language. We are getting circular here. The only way to get out of this circle is to admit that we always understand others imperfectly, and meaning is always indeterminate, as it is underdetermined by available evidence. And here again Locke could easily argue that this imperfection of understanding has no practical consequences whatsoever; still the problem persists: from here onwards it is only a matter of degree, of philosophical taste, whether we consider this as a fatal consequence for the possibility of communication.

IV. Locke's inadequate response

These two problems of Lockean semantics arise from its commitment to a private conception of language. The first problem arises from the denial that the origin of language is social; the second from the denial that a symbol-system for thought (that is, ideas) must also be a device for communication. Both suffice to make us sceptical about the possibility of language on Lockean grounds. Let's now take a

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.2.8.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 2.32.15.

look at how Locke tries to avoid this consequence.

The general character of Locke's solution to these problems is pragmatic. For the first problem Locke does not have an explicit solution. A possible Lockean line of argument is that the point in using language is to communicate. Therefore, even if it is possible to use words in an arbitrary, entirely autonomous way, it makes no sense whatsoever, given the function of language. However, this is not a satisfactory answer. We would need some explanation of how a common language can come about given semantic individualism. Locke does not tell us how this might happen. With his model it is impossible to explain the emergence of a linguistic community from a set of individuals using their words autonomously to stand for their private ideas. As we shall see soon, it takes Hume to get a solution to this problem.

But for the second problem, Locke has an explicit solution that bears relevance on the first problem too. Let me quote him at length: „Neither would it carry any Imputation of *Falshood* to our simple *Ideas*, if by the different Structure of our Organs, it were so ordered, That *the same Object should produce in several Men's Minds different Ideas* at the same time; v.g. if the *Idea* that a *Violet* produced in one Man's Mind by his Eyes, were the same that a *Marigold* produced in another Man's, and *vice versâ*. For, since this could never be known: because one Man's Mind could not pass into another Man's Body, to perceive, what Appearances were produced by those Organs; neither the *Ideas* hereby, nor the Names, would be at all confounded, or any *Falshood* be in either. For all Things, that had the Texture of a *Violet*, producing constantly the *Idea*, which he called *Blue*; and those which had the Texture of a *Marigold*, producing constantly the *Idea*, which he as constantly called *Yellow*, whatever those Appearances were in his Mind; he would be able as regularly to distinguish Things for his Use by those Appearances, and understand, and signify those distinctions, marked by the Names *Blue* and *Yellow*, as if the Appearances, or *Ideas* in his Mind, received from those two Flowers, were exactly the same, with the *Ideas* in other Men's Minds. I am nevertheless very apt to think, that the sensible *Ideas*, produced by any Object in different Men's Minds, are most commonly very near and undiscernibly alike. For which opinion, I think, there might be many Reasons offered: but that being besides my present Business, I shall not trouble my reader with them; but only mind him, that the contrary Supposition, if it could be proved, is of little use, either for the Improvement of our Knowledge, or Conveniency of Life; and so we need not trouble our selves to examine it.”¹²

Here we have got three considerations supporting the rejection of the second kind of problem that arises from the differences of ideas. 1) We could never know if they are different. 2) The ideas caused in us are indiscernibly alike. 3) The contrary presupposition is of no use for science and life. Once highlighted this way,

¹² Ibid, 2.32.15.

it is obvious that neither of these considerations will do for us, but let's see why, step by step.

1) Locke may be right in saying that we could never know the differences of ideas, and that such a problem is of no practical relevance. However, his semantics says that meaning arises from ideas, and if these ideas are different then meaning must be different as well. This entails private language on the one hand, and imperfect communication on the other – without any reference of practical relevance.

2) It is hard to accept that ideas are indiscernibly alike, mostly because we do not get an argument for it. Besides, even if this is true, it is contingently so, and it could easily be the other way round. Even if ideas happen to be indiscernible in all of us, this is certainly not a conceptual or metaphysical necessity, so private language prevails, and communication suffers.

3) The contrary presupposition may be of no use, but this is not a consideration that a philosopher should be worried about. It is certainly not our business to consider whether a position is useful or not: even if it is not useful, it may nevertheless be true.

To sum up: Locke provides us with three considerations, neither of which is backed by arguments. It is certainly not hasty to conclude that his proposals are unsatisfactory.

Let me add, however, that if Locke's picture was acceptable, it would partially solve the first problem too, and this may be a reason for not having an explicit Lockean solution for the first problem. If our ideas are indiscernible and language is to express these ideas, then private languages will be similar as well, and the only thing that is in need of explanation in this case is the uniformity of noises we make when expressing ideas.

V. A Humean solution

A much more promising solution to these problems can be read off Hume. The central notion of this solution is convention. Hume's theory of convention is developed in the context of his social philosophy, and more specifically as a component of his account of justice. One can find two alternative accounts in Hume. The one that I will call here the *robust* account appeals to the declaration of mutual interests that serves as basis for regularities of conduct. These regularities are what he calls convention: „This convention is not of the nature of a *promise*: For even promises themselves, as we shall see afterwards, arise from human conventions. It is only a general sense of common interest; which sense all the members of the society express to one another, and which induces them to regulate their conduct by certain rules. I observe, that it will be for my interest to leave another in the possession of his goods, *provided* he will act in the same manner with regard to me. He is sensible of a like interest in the regulation of his conduct. When this common sense of interest is mutually express'd, and is known to both, it

produces a suitable resolution and behaviour. And this may properly enough be call'd a convention or agreement betwixt us, tho' without the interposition of a promise; since the actions of each of us have a reference to those of the other, and are perform'd upon the supposition that something is to be performed on the other part."¹³

On the other hand, the *minimalist* Humean account does not require the declaration of interests. Convention can be formed in virtue of pure behavioural regularity among the parties to the convention – so it may serve as a basis for convention-based language. This lesson can be drawn from Hume's famous example of rowing, where two people behave as if they agreed on a rate of strokes without actually making an agreement, or even expressing preferences to synchronise the number of strokes.¹⁴ On a weaker interpretation of the minimalist account, though mutual interests are not expressed explicitly, the parties to the convention nevertheless recognise them, and more importantly act in accordance with them. Thus conventions are built around the concept of interest. On a possible stronger interpretation, a sense of interest need not even be present as constitutive to the convention, though they can be imposed on similar situations at a somewhat abstract, descriptive level.

Both Humean accounts represent an alternative to an explicit, agreement based, or contract-like account of convention. This is fairly obvious in the minimalist case, but seems to be true in the robust case as well. The declaration and/or recognition of mutual interests does not entail that the agreement itself needs to be of explicit nature. It is not presupposed in either picture that a social contract must be made in order for the convention to come into force. Thus Humeanism is in opposition to social contract theories like that of Hobbes.¹⁵ These two traditions conceive differently the process of convention formation. Humeans are inclined to accept an evolutionary view where conventions appear from behavioural regularities, combined and built upon each other, and thus become more and more complex as time goes by. An outcome of this process is an institutional structure. This process is predominantly tacit, or implicit, even if it may be based on mutual recognition of interests. For a Hobbesian the case is quite different. Institutions are formed through social contracts whose parties agree explicitly to create an institution for certain purposes.

Hobbesian and robust Humean theories of convention rely inherently on language: in the process of convention-formation we need language in order to achieve the equilibrium state as represented by the convention. Social contracts

¹³ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.2.2.10.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 3.2.2.15.

cannot be agreed upon, and interests cannot be expressed without using language. As they presuppose language, these theories cannot provide the basis of a conventionalist account of language. Hobbesianism, of course, is stronger in this respect than robust Humeanism – as the acts of making contract and promising equally presupposes certain verbal features. Though David Lewis allows declaration of intention to be sufficient for reaching agreement without promises,¹⁶ it is not plausible that any agreement can be reached without some sort of explicit commitment, that is, without something that is promise-like. Giving promises is constitutive in making contracts, as the parties must commit themselves to obey contracts.¹⁷ One cannot make promises without using language, but for a Humean promises themselves arise from conventions,¹⁸ thus they, and contracts along with them, are not eligible to provide the general basis of conventions, including linguistic conventions. Robust Humeanism, as we have seen above, requires only the explicitness of interests, and does not rely on language in general, and promises in particular, in the process of convention formation. Minimalist Humeanism, on the contrary, does not need any linguistic components in convention as it relies exclusively on behavioural regularities. Thus it becomes possible to treat language itself as an institution evolving gradually from convention. Lacking constitutive linguistic elements in a theory of conventions, this perspective can account not only for linguistic conventions but more generally, for any convention that is not dependent upon contract, or explicit mutual agreement.

As I pointed out above, Hume's theory of conventions is developed in the context of his social philosophy, and he does not specifically develop a theory for language on these grounds, but he gives us explicit permission to do so: „Thus two men pull the oars of a boat by common convention, for common interest, without any promise or contract: Thus gold and silver are made the measures of exchange; thus speech and words and language are fixed by human convention and agreement. Whatever is advantageous to two or more persons, if all perform their part; but what loses all advantage, if only one perform, can arise from no other principle. There would otherwise be no motive for any one of them to enter into that scheme of conduct.”¹⁹ Elsewhere, he is even more explicit with respect to the same point: „Two men, who pull the oars of a boat, do it by an agreement or convention, tho' they have never given promises to each other. Nor is the rule concerning the stability of possession the less deriv'd from human conventions,

¹⁶ David Lewis, *Convention*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, p. 34.

¹⁷ John Searle (in his *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: The Free Press, 1995, p. 35) adopts a similar position concerning this question.

¹⁸ Cf. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.2.2.10.

¹⁹ David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. by Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 172.

that it arises gradually, and acquires force by a slow progression, and by our repeated experience of inconveniencies of transgressing it. On the contrary, this experience assures us still more, that the sense of interest has become common to all our fellows, and gives us a confidence of the future regularity of their conduct: And 'tis only on the expectation of this that our moderation and abstinence are founded. In like manner are languages gradually establish'd by human conventions without any promise."²⁰

Now given this general perspective, how is it possible to have language as a conventional device of communication? Meaning can be elucidated in terms of intending: to mean something by an utterance is to intend by this uttering to produce in hearers a certain result. If this intention is accompanied by another intention on the hearer's part, namely the intention to understand what the speaker meant by his utterance, then speaker and hearer share a common interest on which the necessary conventions can be based. This mutual interest need not be expressed explicitly, the parties to the convention may nevertheless recognise them, and act in accordance with them, as the above example of rowing shows.

For the empiricist, the problem of communication is a coordination problem, namely: How to reach a community-wide constant conjunction between ideas and words? Hume sees the solution clearly: If a given coordination problem has been solved successfully, it provides a precedent for future instances of the same problem. For a solution to become a precedent it must be, or must somehow become salient in some respect that ensures the extrapolation of a given solution to future instances of the same problem. This salience can arise from successful repetition: if a given word has been used successfully to represent a specific idea on several occasions then it may become a stable solution for the coordination problem of expressing this idea by this specific word. Thereby, Hume's account of language does not presuppose explicit agreement, and avoids the pitfalls of Locke's model in this respect.

Salience, precedence, and past conformity to a convention all induce common knowledge of the following: everyone has reason to conform to a regularity, thus everyone expects everyone to conform to it. Acquaintance with past examples of the same solution gives rise to expectations in the parties to the convention. These expectations can be first-order expectations, that is they can be about others' behaviour; or they can be higher-order expectations, that is expectations about others' expectations. Thus with an established solution an iterated system of concordant first and higher-order expectations appears in the linguistic community. Given these expectations it becomes possible to follow the Lockean model of communication. The speaker uses certain words to express ideas, and expects, on the basis of convention, that the hearer will associate the

²⁰ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3.2.2.10.

same ideas to the words as the speaker himself does. And vice versa: the hearer expects the speaker to use words to express ideas according to the convention.

So it seems we have a solution to the first problem: convention fixes the relation of words and ideas. Does it suggest a solution to the second problem too? Possibly yes. A Humean can say that the idiosyncrasy of ideas is irrelevant to successful communication once language is fixed by convention, as it tells us which idea to attach to a word. However, this Humean response entails the modification of Locke's picture in at least two significant respects. First, we are forced to give up our autonomy, granted by Locke, to attach words to ideas in an arbitrary manner. If convention fixes the relation between words and ideas then our semantic autonomy may only be a philosophical fiction without real cognitive significance. Secondly, and more importantly, if language is dominated by convention then linguistic meaning is not exclusively a matter of private ideas, but also of public, conventional practice. It is primarily conventions, and not ideas, that constrain what can be expressed.

VI. A problem

It may seem that with Humean modifications, the Lockean picture of communication can survive, and perhaps the threat of private language can be avoided. Now I will try to show that this is not so. The reason why British Empiricists cannot avoid private language arises from the fact that they separate the realms of cognition and communication: ideas belong to the first realm, words belong to the second. Locke's proposal ties language to ideas very strongly: the privacy of ideas is inherited by language. Hume's proposal can be read as showing that the first realm of ideas can remain private, while the second, being public, seemingly avoids private language. But this proposal could not help the empiricist.

As Castañeda put it, the lesson of Wittgenstein's private language argument is that any symbol system for thought must be a means of communication too.²¹ Hume's suggestion as presented here relies on the distinction between private ideas and public language, the first being the raw material for thought. But this distinction cannot be maintained for a well known reason: there is no way to find a criterion of identity to tell whether my idea of red *is* the same today as it was yesterday, or merely it *seems* to be so: „is identical” and „seems identical” cannot be distinguished. Or more precisely, they could be distinguished if their stability was ensured by a public language. But in this case ideas become

²¹ Cf. Hector-Neri Castañeda, „Direct Reference, the Semantics of Thinking, and Guise Theory (Constructive Reflections on David Kaplan's Theory of Indexical Reference)” in Joseph Almog – John Perry – Howard Wettstein (eds.), *Themes from Kaplan*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 107.

language-dependent, and the realm of cognition and communication merges – a consequence intolerable to empiricists.

In conclusion, the lesson of the present story on the one hand is that British Empiricists can account for the possibility of a public language and communication, but they cannot do it by maintaining semantic individualism. On the other hand, British Empiricists cannot escape critiques of private language, as they inevitably reappear at the level of ideas.