

Wherefore the Failure of Private Ostension?

I. Introduction

The private language sections (§§243-415) of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* speak to many issues, among them privacy,¹ identity,² inner/outer relations,³ sensations as objects,⁴ and sensations as justification for sensation talk.⁵ Also at issue is the nature of the meaning of our sensation words and expressions, and how they acquire meaning. Wittgenstein introduces the idea of a private language at §243 as a way to get at these issues. Often §258 is seen as a key remark in what is often thought of as "the private language argument." However, in addition to Wittgenstein's methodological remarks,⁶ the variety and complexity of issues discussed in the remarks from §§243-315, and their very subtlety, suggest that there is not one single argument that could be labeled "the private language argument." The remarks appear to approach related issues from different directions,⁷ rather than to be a sustained critique of one particular issue. This, however, does not diminish the importance of §258, though it may make it less central in the overall discussion of sensations, their expressions, and sensation language and its meaning.

¹ §246, 293-295. Please note, the references to particular remarks are not meant to be exhaustive but merely examples of remarks dealing with that issue.

² §§253-254

³ §§244, 257, 258, 270, 281, 282, 293

⁴ §§271, 274, 290, 293, 296-298, 304, 311

⁵ §§289-290, 296, 304

⁶ For example, §122 ff.

⁷ Cf. Wittgenstein 1998, v.

It seems clear in §258 that Wittgenstein is critiquing the efficacy of associating a word with a sensation in the absence of either a preexisting practice or natural expression of the sensation. However, it is not entirely clear why the attempted private ostensive definition in §258 fails. This is evidenced by the wide variety of conflicting interpretations as to why the private ostensive definition does fail. In particular, interpreters have had great difficulty in agreeing on what role the last four lines of §258 play in that and related remarks. Why exactly there is no criterion of correctness is a key question. Answers vary, for example, from i) there being problems with memory (Norman Malcolm, Robert J. Fogelin, and ultimately Anthony Kenny), to ii) the original association of sign and sensation failing so that nothing was established that could be a criterion (Barry Stroud, David G. Stern, Fogelin, Hans-Johann Glock, and P.M.S. Hacker), to iii) the special kind of criterion needed simply not being available in the context of the private diarist (John V. Canfield). The requirement of a linguistic stage-setting is often cited as a reason for ii. I will argue for this interpretation and subject the alternatives to scrutiny. In particular, we will examine Kenny's and Canfield's denial that the stage-setting requirement is relevant to §258. I will attempt to show that both their interpretations and objections to the stage-setting requirement applying to §258 are unconvincing. My purpose is to show the strengths of the no-stage-setting interpretation of §258 in light of the weaknesses of the other interpretations.

II. Background of the Private Language Discussion

Wittgenstein opens the *Philosophical Investigations* with these lines from Augustine: "When they (my elders) named some object, and accordingly moved towards something, I saw this and I grasped that the thing was called by the sound they uttered

when they meant to point it out” (§1). Augustine describes here his learning of language. An aspect of this description that might call our attention is that in the absence of any linguistic ability (i.e., he cannot yet speak or understand the words and sentences of his elder’s language), Augustine was able to see that when his elders pointed at a chair and said ‘chair’ that they were naming the object, and the object was called ‘chair’. This first sentence of the *Philosophical Investigations* already contains several of the issues, i.e., naming, meaning, and ostensive definition, that Wittgenstein focuses on throughout the book, though especially in the beginning and in the discussion of a private language. The ideas that one can understand an ostensive definition or give a name to something in the absence of a sufficient linguist setting, whatever that might come to, and that names become meaningful simply by association with an object come under severe criticism. One of the key points drawn from Wittgenstein’s remarks on ostensive definitions is that outside of particular, disambiguating contexts, it is not clear from pointing, for example, to a red ball while saying “Red!”, that something is being named, much less that it is the color and not the kind of object that is being named. Examples of contexts that are insufficient for successful naming are where the recipient of the ostensive definition is not familiar with the act of naming, does not know what a color or a ball is, or is completely without linguistic ability.⁸ In such cases the ostensive definition will not be understood nor will a meaningful connection be established between the name and thing named. Sufficient contexts are where, for example, the recipient is familiar with naming

⁸ In this last example, however, there could occur the kind of ostensive teaching that Wittgenstein remarks on in PI §6: “An important part of the training will consist in the teacher’s pointing to the objects, directing the child’s attention to them, and at the same time uttering a word; for instance, the word ‘slab’ as he points to that shape. (I do not want to call this ‘ostensive definition’, because the child cannot as yet ask what the name is. I will call it ‘ostensive teaching of words’.”

and has learned to talk of differences in shapes, colors, and the like.⁹ Presumably, it is such considerations that lead one of the voices of the *Investigations* to say: “So one might say: the ostensive definition explains the use—the meaning—of the word when the overall role of the word in language is clear”.¹⁰ The role of the word, much less that it is even a word’s use being explained, will not be clear for a person who does not yet possess a language. Hence, concerning Augustine’s description of language acquisition: “And now, I think, we can say: Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one.”¹¹ For it is in the context where one already knows one language and is learning another that it makes sense to say that one learns the new language, that language’s names for objects, merely by watching others point to objects while saying their names.

III. The Remarks on Private Language

In the first sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein critiques certain philosophical notions of naming and ostensibly defining public objects. It is argued, or at the very least we are reminded, that ostensive definition and naming require a linguistic context of some sort. At §243 and following, names and ostensive definitions are once again at issue; however, now it is a critique of the naming of supposedly private sensations. We are reminded of the earlier discussion: “When one says ‘He gave a name to his sensation’ one forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is

⁹ By ‘sufficient contexts’ I do not quite mean ‘sufficient conditions,’ since I do not want to say that if the sufficient contexts obtain, then automatically the ostensive definition or act of naming was successful or understood; for there might be other factors that prevent the success of either the naming or defining, though the context is sufficient.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein 1998, §30.

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presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense. And when we speak of someone's having given a name to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word 'pain'; it shews the post where the word is stationed."¹² Without involving ourselves too much in the complicated issue of what Wittgenstein meant by 'grammar', we can at the very least say that for Wittgenstein grammar has to do with rules for the way words are used.¹³ So the grammar of the word 'pain' will concern the use and application of the word 'pain.' To give a name to a pain there needs to be a preexisting meaning and way of using the word 'pain'. If there is no grammar, then there is no use or meaning.

Let us briefly look at the progression of this issue from §§243 to 258. At §243 the notion of a private language is introduced. At §244, Wittgenstein or his interlocutor¹⁴ asks how it is that words refer to sensations. It is observed that this is not usually an issue in everyday life, for we talk and name sensations regularly; still it is asked how the connection between a name and the thing named is set up. In §244, Wittgenstein writes that this question is the same as: "how does a human being learn the meaning of the names of sensations?—of the word 'pain' for example?" He gives as a possibility that a hurt child cries and adults teach the child "exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour."¹⁵ We are reminded next that 'pain' does not thereby come to mean crying but rather 'pain' comes to replace the crying. At §256 after various

¹² Wittgenstein 1998, §257.

¹³ Cf., for example, Wittgenstein 1998, §§247, 496, and 574.

¹⁴ Stern differentiates between at least three voices in the *Philosophical Investigations*: a commentator, an interlocutor, and Wittgenstein's narrator: "none of which can be unproblematically identified with the author's" (See Stern, 5. p22). Without going into the details here, Stern's discussion of the voices in the *Investigations* is interesting and promising. However, for our purposes, not much hangs on how we differentiate between the voices and we will here only differentiate between Wittgenstein and his interlocutor. Further, when I write "Wittgenstein writes that..." I do not mean necessarily to attribute what follows to Wittgenstein as philosopher; I merely mean that as the author he did write such-and-such.

¹⁵ Wittgenstein 1998, §244.

remarks concerning grammar and knowledge of pain, among other things, Wittgenstein comes back to naming and private language. It is asserted that a language would not be private if name and sensation were connected in the ordinary sense, i.e., through its natural expression, as described in §244, for it then would be public. In contrast, with a private language one is left to simply associate a name with the sensation itself. At §257 we are reminded of the need for a stage-setting in order for naming to actually be effective. At §258, we are asked to imagine an instance of “simple” association of name and sensation: the case of the diarist keeping a daily diary of a particular recurring sensation. “To this end I associate it [the sensation] with the sign ‘S’ and write this sign in a calendar for every day on which I have the sensation.” Thus far in §258 there are two things at issue. One, the naming of the sensation, i.e., the initial association of the sign with the sensation; and two, the subsequent use, writing down, of the sign ‘S’ on the calendar whenever the sensation reoccurs. This division of §258 into two issues is not necessarily fixed or definite, for as we will see the first affects the second and the second affects the first. How they do so and to what degree depends on how they are interpreted. Thus, one of the main question in interpreting §258 is how these two issues are connected.

It is not difficult in §258 to distinguish the roles of the speakers. Dashes separate the changes of voice. The first issue is the naming of the sensation. After the interlocutor has described how he is going to keep a diary of a recurring sensation that he has named, Wittgenstein says, “I will remark first of all that a definition of the sign cannot be formulated.” A verbal or written definition cannot be given for two reasons. First, because there is not yet any private language—since it is now supposed to be

begun—the diarist cannot give himself a private linguistic definition, i.e., some private version of “‘S’ means pain.” Second, if a definition could be formulated linguistically, it would not be a private language, for presumably others could then be made to understand it. The interlocutor replies, “But still I can give myself a kind of ostensive definition.” To which comes the reply, “How? Can I point to the sensation?”¹⁶ Again the interlocutor, “Not in the ordinary sense. But I speak, or write the sign down, and at the same time I concentrate my attention on the sensation—and so, as it were, point to it inwardly.” At first, this may seem uncontroversial. Certainly one can imagine concentrating one’s attention on a sensation while saying or writing a name. As Norman Malcolm notes, we can form a picture of ourselves doing this. But it is a misleading picture, for when one tries to apply it to actual cases it breaks down (7, p69). This is one thing that Wittgenstein is trying to show. And so comes the objection, “But what is this ceremony for? for that is all it seems to be! A definition surely serves to establish the meaning of a sign.” Wittgenstein denies that the association of sensation and sign in the context of the private diarist is successful in naming the sensation, i.e., establishing a meaning for the sign. Hence, the attempted inner ostensive definition was not really a defining “gesture.” The reason for the failure will be our main topic. But the interlocutor goes on to insist that he has defined the sign: “Well, that is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation.” At this point the second issue comes into play. Wittgenstein responds, “But ‘I impress it on myself’ can only mean: this process brings it about that I remember the connexion *right* in the future. But in the present case I have no criterion of

¹⁶ At this point in the German text there is a dash which is missing in the Anscombe translation.

correctness. One would like to say: whatever is going to seem right to me is right. And that only means that here 'we can't talk about 'right'.'

IV. No-Stage-Setting Interpretation

What is the problem with the diarist naming his sensation and then subsequently using the name? The interlocutor's line, "that [the establishing of the meaning of the sign] is done precisely by the concentrating of my attention; for in this way I impress on myself the connexion between the sign and the sensation" makes it sound as if all that is required in connecting the sign and sensation is the concentration of one's attention on the sensation while writing or saying 'S' to oneself. This should remind us of the discussion of naming, meaning, and ostension earlier in the *Philosophical Investigations*, especially §§23-49. For example, Wittgenstein writes at §49, "We may say: *nothing* has so far been done, when a thing has been named. It has not even *got* a name except in the language-game." The act of naming does not in itself bestow meaning upon a sign and something does not have a name except within a language-game. The private diarist falls ill to both of these points: he tries to give 'S' a meaning simply through naming but has no preexisting language game within which to give something a name.

Given such points from early in the *Philosophical Investigations* and given the reminder at the end of §257 of the need for a linguistic stage-setting if naming is to make sense, the following interpretation naturally suggests itself. The private diarist has no preexisting linguistic stage-setting. He cannot use English, German, or any other existing public language, for then the diarist would not have a private language. There is no preexisting private language. Therefore, the concentration of attention on the sensation while writing or saying 'S' is merely ceremony, for without the stage being previously set

by means of a preexisting language, the inner ostensive definition does not define the sign or establish any meaning. Because the ostensive definition was a failure, 'S' has no meaning, i.e., there was no connection established, and there is thus no question of correctness or remembering the connection right in the future. All the private diarist may have is the *impression* of having made a connection between sensation and sign; thus leaving him with nothing but seeming correctness when he goes to use 'S' again. But this of course means that there is nothing to remember rightly or wrongly in the future. What follows are a few brief sketches from the secondary literature that more or less agree with this interpretation.

In discussing the failure of the diarist's private ostensive definition in §258, Stroud stresses the implications of the diarist's lack of a linguistic context. Stroud refers to §261 where it is pointed out that the diarist cannot use the word 'sensation' or even say that he 'has something' in talking about what the 'S' is to mean, since 'sensation', 'has', and 'something' are public words. Having no conceptual, i.e., linguistic, apparatus to draw from, the diarist can only attempt to associate the sign 'S' with a sensation, but he cannot say that the supposed referent of the 'S' is a sensation or anything else. The supposed ostensive act of association cannot by itself determine anything about what the diarist is attending to, since, as is pointed out at §30 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, an ostensive definition explains the meaning of a word when its overall role in the language is clear. But there is no private language and the role of 'S' is not clear. This leaves the diarist without a criterion of correctness for the application of 'S'. In other words, 'S' has not been given a meaning. Stroud thinks the rest of §258 follows naturally from this interpretation: not having any meaning or criterion for the correct application

of 'S', whatever seems like the correct application of the sign will be right for the diarist, and so there actually is no right or wrong concerning the use of 'S'. Thus there is no issue of the fallibility of memory, for nothing has been established by the attempted ostensive definition for the diarist to remember or not remember (11, pp75ff.).

In discussing the ideas of naming, ostension, and private ostension, Stern writes that the role of training, practice, and the practical aspects of our language use, which involve abilities and skills rather than the grasping of theory, prevent a private linguist from giving a sign any meaning. The problem is not epistemological; there is no real issue about knowing whether the sign is employed correctly in the future, for the sign has not been given any meaning and thus cannot be correctly or incorrectly employed. Stern calls this a logical problem in that the required stage-setting for a linguistic act is missing. So for the diarist, since there is no prior practice of naming and differentiating between kinds of things, nothing can be said of what the 'S' is supposed to mean. A referent cannot be determined by ostension in absence of a linguistic background. Naming and using signs meaningfully can occur only within a linguistic context; for the private diarist there is not yet any linguistic context within which to name or use the sign (9, pp182-84).

Similarly, Hans-Johann Glock argues that the reason the diarist's lack of a criterion of correctness for the use of 'S' is the failure of the initial attempt at an ostensive definition due to the lack of stage-setting. Denying that the last lines of §258 concern skepticism about memory, Glock writes that the meaningfulness of the diarist's use of 'S' and not its truth is at issue. Glock maintains that this reading does not rely on "an indefensible verificationism," for it is not that we cannot know about the diarist's use of a criterion of correctness, but that the diarist does not have one: "Wittgenstein argues

not that we could not possibly know whether the private linguist is applying the rule correctly, but that even for him no rule for the use of 'S' has been laid down" (4, p312). The "logical category" of 'S' needs to be determined in order for it to be defined ostensively; however, since the diarist is cut off from any public language and does not yet have a private one no logical category can be determined (4, pp311-12).

Though the nuances of his account are quite different from the others, we can say that P.M.S. Hacker also attributes the failure of the diarist's attempted ostensive definition to the lack of stage-setting. Similar to Stroud, Stern, and Glock, he writes that genuine acts of naming "take place in a complex social setting governed by an array of conventions which determine a particular language-game in which the name has a subsequent use..." (5, p101). The implication is obviously that since a complex social setting is missing in the case of the diarist he fails to define the 'S'.

These brief sketches are not meant to imply that the interpretations given by Stroud, Stern, Glock, and Hacker do not have their important differences. These sketches are meant to show that several prominent Wittgenstein scholars offer an interpretation similar to the one offered here.

V. Complications

We know that whatever else is the case, the point of §258 is that for some reason the attempt to keep a private diary is supposed to fail. Because Wittgenstein does not explicitly invoke the stage-setting requirement in §258, there are two general ways to read the two issues found there (those being the initial baptism and the subsequent use of the sign). First, we can understand the ostensive definition to have been in some sense successful, but because of there not being, for whatever reason, some kind of criterion of

correctness, the defined 'S' cannot be meaningfully used on subsequent occasions and thus actually lacks any meaning beyond the initial user. Alternatively, we can understand the ostensive definition to have failed because of something like the required, missing stage-setting; with no established meaning there is thus no rule or criterion of correctness, and therefore there cannot be any correct application, and a fortiori, any reapplication of the sign 'S'. Now clearly, taking the initial ostensive definition to have failed will affect how one reads the last four sentences of §258. For example, if one understands it to have failed because of the lack of a linguistic stage-setting, then one might, like Stroud et al., say that there is no criterion of correctness because no meaning was given to the sign 'S'. Thus anything may seem right to the diarist since there is no meaning of 'S' with which to conflict. On the other hand, if one understands it not to have failed, then the lack of a criterion of correctness for subsequent employment of 'S' will have to come from something like the following issues: problems with dependence on memory without public checks, from a lack of independent verification of correct application of 'S', or from a lack of some form of criterion for remembering right the connection in the future. We now turn to an examination of interpretations of §258 that explore these different possibilities in an effort to show that our no-stage-setting interpretation from IV above is correct.

Robert J. Fogelin also connects the stage-setting requirement mentioned in §257 to §258 and thereby interprets the initial private ostensive definition to be a failure since it lacks a stage-setting. It is thus as idle a gesture as the right hand giving the left hand money (3, p173). However while endorsing it, Fogelin does not think that a no-stage-setting interpretation demonstrates the impossibility of a private language. It merely

shows the difficulty of constructing a private language. On his account it leaves open the possibility that the diarist establishes a use for the sign 'S'. Fogelin reads Wittgenstein as offering two arguments against such a possibility. The first he calls "the training argument" and the second "the public check argument" (3, p175ff). Since it is the public check argument that concerns §258 we will look at it. Fogelin interprets the last lines of §258 as saying that, in the end, the private diarist only has his memory of the past sensation available as a paradigm of the sensation, i.e., he has no public check; however, a memory alone does not provide for a means of differentiating between seeming to have the same sensation again and actually having it. Fogelin writes that if he is correct in this interpretation, Wittgenstein has "simply gone wrong" (3, p173). This is because Wittgenstein, according to Fogelin, has used a general skeptical argument to achieve his point against the private diarist. However, since it is a general skeptical argument, Fogelin sees no reason that the private diarist cannot turn around and say the same thing to someone who is checking her memory against a public record. That is, for example, a person checking the correctness of her memory of a train timetable against the actual timetable does not have any way to differentiate it seeming that the memory she calls to mind matches the timetable and it actually matching: "things may seem to match without matching, so we appear to need yet another standpoint for deciding whether my recollection really matches or only appears to match the real timetable" (3, p180). Fogelin makes it clear that he is not advancing these skeptical doubts, but only wants to question why they should apply to the private diarist and not to everyone since they are of a general form. Fogelin makes a valid point against the skeptical doubts about memory, making it problematic for one who holds that memory is at issue in §258. However, the

question remains as to whether he is correct in attributing these doubts to Wittgenstein in §258.

It is unclear why Fogelin would give a no stage-setting interpretation of §258 and then go on to raise the possibility that a use for 'S' might be established such that Wittgenstein needs to raise skeptical doubts about memory. If the sign 'S' was not given meaning by the initial attempted ostensive definition, then how could there be any question about the later establishment of a use for the 'S'? It would seem that in the context of the private diarist, any attempt to establish a use for 'S' must involve repeated association of 'S' with the same sensation on subsequent occasions. If each particular association without a stage-setting fails, there is no reason to think that a series of failed associations will amount to the establishment of a use for 'S'. So, since the no stage-setting interpretation does away with the need for an appeal to memory skepticism, which as Fogelin points out can be used by the private diarist in a similar fashion against public language users, it seems misguided to attribute such an appeal to Wittgenstein or whomever we take to be speaking in the dialogue of §258.¹⁷

VI. Denial of the No-Stage-Setting Interpretation

Unlike the interpretations given by Stroud et al., Anthony Kenny separates §257 from §258. He argues that §§243-255 show that our word 'pain' is not a word of a private language and that from §258 onward the topic is pseudo-pain instead of pain: "a sensation supposed to be like pain but different from pain in being incommunicable" (6,

¹⁷ One possibility is that Wittgenstein wants to say that "for the sake of argument let us suppose either a) the initial association of 'S' with the sensation was successful or b) that over time a use could be established for 'S'; even if either were possible, there would then be a problem involving memory." Concerning a), if we agree that memory skepticism is a poor objection for the reasons Fogelin gives and that the lack of a stage-setting really makes it impossible to establish a meaning for 'S', it seems unnecessary to read into §258 a "for the sake of argument" clause involving memory skepticism. Concerning b), if we agree that the lack of stage-setting makes it impossible to establish a meaning for 'S', then, as before, it is unclear how repeated attempts could ever establish a use for 'S'.

p220). Kenny interprets §257 as arguing for the futility of removing the natural expression from pain, i.e., with its removal comes incoherence of what 'pain' could mean. Starting at §258 the attempt to start with pseudo-pain and then add a "linguistic correlate" is discussed (6, p220). Hence for Kenny, the topics of §257 and §258 are related but different, i.e., pain and pseudo-pain respectively. However, even if Kenny did not separate §257 and §258 in this way, he still would not take the issue of stage-setting to be relevant for §258. Kenny argues that the stage-setting requirement is not the whole story concerning private language. If it were, the possibility of a private language would be removed before the idea of a private language is even mentioned. This is because the stage-setting requirement is discussed early in the *Philosophical Investigations*. More importantly, the stage-setting requirement leaves open the possibility of a private language being learned from private sensations by "some private analog of training in the use of words" instead of through "bare ostension" (6, p211). This sounds similar to the possibility that Fogelin saw left open by the stage-setting requirement, i.e., that the diarist establishes a use for the sign 'S'. According to Kenny, "the critique of the primacy of ostensive definition does not render superfluous the later explicit discussion of private languages. What the later discussion does, in effect, is to show that in the case of the private ostensive definition there cannot be any analogue of the background which is necessary if public ostensive definition is to convey meaning" (6, p211). That is, the private language discussion does not assume either the earlier critique of ostensive definition or the requirement of linguistic training to make ostensive definition intelligible; rather, it is supposed to show that no such training is possible which could serve as the required background for ostensive definition. In this way it blocks the

possibility of learning a private language through a private analog of training oneself what words mean. Thus for Kenny, it is not the stage-setting requirement mentioned at the end of §257 that causes the private ostensive definition to fail in §258. The private ostensive definition fails because of problems with “remembering which sensation the sign means” (6, p223).

According to Kenny, critics of Wittgenstein are unsympathetic to the memory skepticism some interpreters find in §258. The critics want to know why it should be problematic for the private diarist and not for a public speaker. Wittgenstein’s defenders, according to Kenny, have tried to argue that the public speaker can be corrected by others whereas the private diarist cannot, and therefore, the private diarist cannot be said to remember rightly or wrongly.¹⁸ However, Kenny argues that both critic and defender base their arguments on a misunderstanding of Wittgenstein’s argument (6, p221).

According to Kenny, Wittgenstein is not arguing in §258, “‘When next I call something ‘S’ how will I know it is really S?’ He is arguing ‘When next I call something ‘S’ how will I know what I mean by ‘S’?’” (6, p221). Kenny is offering a semantic rather than epistemic reading. Accordingly, the main point here is that Wittgenstein is not advocating the need for a way to verify whether a current sensation is really ‘S’, for this would be an unreasonably strong requirement of infallibility of reidentification. Not even public speakers are held to such a strict requirement of being able to verify the correctness of their use of names. Requiring only the ability to remember what the sign

¹⁸ Malcolm would seem to be such a defender. According to Malcolm, a memory impression must be either accurate or inaccurate and the private diarist has no way to establish the accuracy of his “memory” of the association of sensation and sign in regard to future instances of the sensation (7, p70). The diarist has no basis for distinguishing between remembering the connection correctly and seeming to remember it correctly (8, p137). Further, an essential feature of language is the possibility of being corrected by others (8, p138).

means, on the other hand, does not require infallibility: “attaching meaning to a name does not mean acquiring infallibility in its use – knowing what ‘woman’ means does not guarantee that one will never mistake a woman for a man” (6, p223).

According to Kenny, the private diarist has only three possible ways of knowing what ‘S’ means at later instances after the initial ostensive definition. The diarist may a) once again associate ‘S’ with a current sensation, b) appeal to a memory of S, or c) he relies on a correlate of S. Kenny argues that Wittgenstein shows that all three possibilities fail and with them goes the possibility of setting up a practice. With a) the problem is that it essentially involves a redefining of the sign each time, in which case the association which is supposed to give ‘S’ content also gives it its truth—so whatever seems right is right. With b) the diarist must call to mind the right memory of what was meant by ‘S’. However, if it is not possible for him to remember wrongly, then ‘S’ means whatever comes to mind as connected to ‘S’, thereby making whatever seems right be right. In turn, if it is possible to remember wrongly, then the diarist is actually unsure of what he means by ‘S’ since he is left only to believe that the current sensation is what ‘S’ meant earlier. Kenny takes c) from PI §270: with the use of a correlate such as a manometer showing a rise in blood-pressure whenever the diarist has a particular sensation misidentification is irrelevant as long as the diarist misidentifies the kind of sensation and misremembers what kind of sensation indicates a rise in blood-pressure. There is thus, according to Kenny, no way that the diarist can make an actual mistake (6, p224).

Now because a), b), and c) are supposed to be the only possibilities where the diarist can be said to correctly remember what ‘S’ means, and since they all fail,

according to Kenny, the sign 'S' cannot be meaningfully used in the future and thus is not supposed to have any meaning. Kenny surely doesn't want to say that the diarist forgets what the sign means but rather that there is nothing that can count as remembering what it means. It is in this way that Kenny believes Wittgenstein tries to argue that the private ostensive definition cannot be used to confer meaning on the sign and to establish a subsequent practice. Kenny's interpretation of the last lines of §258 is one that is not supposed to suffer from the problems of verificationism or memory skepticism, for those are problems that arise from interpretations based on misunderstandings of the text which Kenny is trying to rectify. However, it is not clear that Kenny has really offered an interpretation that removes controversial claims about memory.

Kenny may have shown that possibilities a) and c), from above, legitimately fail. This is not necessarily the case with option b). Recall that Kenny writes that for the diarist, if i) it is not possible for him to remember wrongly, then 'S' means whatever comes to mind as connected to 'S', thereby making whatever seems right be right. If ii) it is possible to remember wrongly, then the diarist is actually unsure of what he means by 'S' since he is left only to believe that the current sensation is what 'S' meant earlier. What could it mean for the diarist not to be able to remember wrongly? Does it mean there is no way for him to find out whether he remembers wrongly or that he always remembers correctly? If it is the former, then the issue is that the diarist has no way to check whether the memory he has called to mind is the right one. If it were the latter, there still would be the issue of whether he could check whether he had called to mind the right memory, for he cannot know in advance that he will always call to mind the right memory. With public things like time-tables one can check whether one

remembered correctly by looking at the original time-table. This is something the private diarist cannot do even if he did happen to always remember rightly. So, whichever way we answer the question as to how it could be that the diarist could not remember wrongly, the issue arises of being able to check for the correctness of the memory called to mind. However, this is problematic for i) then falls prey to Fogelin's criticism. The private diarist can ask how it is that that a person knows that when he looks at the public timetable that it is not just that it seems that the timetable either confirms or contradicts his memory. So, if being able to tell whether a memory is correct and does not just seem correct is a problem for the private diarist, it also is for the public speaker using a timetable. ii) also falls prey to the same criticism, for the possibility of remembering wrongly is only an issue when the diarist cannot tell the difference between remembering wrongly or remembering correctly. So, with ii) the issue of being able to check a memory is at issue. Therefore, since Kenny argues that the diarist could not remember the meaning of 'S' because none of the possibilities a), b), or c) are sufficient for remembering the meaning of 'S', but it turns out that b) actually may be sufficient, Kenny's interpretation of §258 fails to show why the diarist private ostensive definition fails. This, of course, does not show by default that the stage-setting requirement actually is the reason why the private ostensive definition fails.

In discussion of the same Kenny text, Stewart Candlish makes similar criticisms.

He writes:

Kenny ...implicitly suggests that the question of memory skepticism is not at all an issue where 'private language' is concerned.... But we see here [in Kenny's writings, which we have examined] that Kenny wants to say that Wittgenstein's argumentation is essentially based on an even less convincing view than the conventional memory skepticism – and it is even less convincing because it is an even extremer version of the same

skeptical view. For according to it, the crucial thesis reads: “If it is possible that I do not remember aright my earlier ostensive definition of ‘S’, then I actually do not know what ‘S’ means.” That is just an expanded form of the conventional memory skepticism – one which no longer concerns only judgments but also meaning.¹⁹

Candlish does not bring up Fogelin’s criticism of such skeptical arguments; however, he does point out that Kenny is not consistent when he argues against memory skepticism and the view he offers in its stead still involves, on Candlish’s account, an even worse version of memory skepticism.

Kenny’s more general interpretation is that the stage-setting requirement leaves open the possibility of a private language being learned from private sensations by “some private analog of training in the use of words” instead of through “bare ostension” (6, p211). However, he does not make clear what this “private analog of training” might amount to. Further, private training in the use of words presents two immediate difficulties. First, when Wittgenstein speaks of training, the context is one where there is already a practice where the words have meaning. Secondly, the one doing the training knows the words where the one being trained does not.²⁰ Concerning the private diarist, the first is the more problematic, for as to the second, one could conceivably train oneself in the sense of practicing something. But that is the problem for the private diarist: we do not have any reason to believe that he has something to practice. Again, this does not show that §258 actually involves the stage-setting requirement; however, it does suggest

¹⁹ Candlish 1998, 154-55. My translation. Candlish’s German reads: implizit hat Kenny auch angedeutet, daß die ganze Frage des Erinnerungsskeptizismus gar nicht angebracht ist, wenn es um die “private Sprache” geht....Doch nun sehen wir, daß Kenny an dieser Stelle meint, Wittgensteins Argumentation beruhe im Grunde auf einer weit weniger einleuchtenden Einstellung als dem konventionellen Erinnerungsskeptizismus – und weit weniger einleuchtend ist sie, weil sie eine extremere Version der gleichen Einstellung ist. Denn danach wird aus der entscheidenden These folgende Behauptung: “Wenn es möglich ist, daß ich mich nicht richtig an meine frühere hinweisende Definition von ‘E’ erinnere, weiß ich eigentlich nicht, was ‘E’ bedeutet.” Das ist eigentlich bloß eine erweiterte Form des konventionellen Erinnerungsskeptizismus, der sich nicht mehr nur auf Urteile, sondern auch auf Bedeutungen bezieht.

²⁰ See, for example, Wittgenstein 1998, §§5, 6, and 9.

that Kenny's alternative and reasons for that alternative to the stage-setting requirement being found in §258 are not entirely viable.²¹

There is another objection to the no-stage-setting interpretation. Canfield argues that the stage-setting requirement cannot be at issue in §258 because it would make the argument there circular. It is not that there is no criterion of correctness because the private ostensive definition failed but rather that the ostensive definition failed because there is no criterion of correctness.²² Let us look at why he thinks this and why his interpretation is unconvincing.

Canfield admits that it is clear that Wittgenstein rejects the notion of a private ostensive definition because of the stage-setting requirements; however, Canfield argues that the stage-setting requirement cannot be said to be the reason he rejects private ostensive definition in §258. On Canfield's account, the last four lines of §258 are supposed to demonstrate why the private ostensive definition failed in the earlier part of §258. Key to the demonstration of the failure of the private ostensive definition is the diarist's having no criterion of correctness. Hence, if we say that the reason there is no criterion is because the attempted private ostensive definition failed, we have a circular argument. From this, Canfield concludes that the failure of the private ostensive definition is not due to the lack of a stage-setting and that Wittgenstein is making some further point against the possibility of private ostensive definition.²³

²¹ Without mentioning Kenny, Canfield argues against the idea of a practice being set up in the use of 'S'. He writes, "The one engaging in a private practice must, like the equivalent diarist of §258, go on in the right way; and to speak of doing so, I have argued, makes no sense unless one has some criterion for determining which rule is being followed" (p392). Presumably then, the diarist has no such criterion.

²² Canfield 2001, 379 and 390-91.

²³ Canfield 2001, 382-83.

The supposed circularity that Canfield finds when attributing the stage-setting requirement to §258 clearly stems from his assumption that the private ostensive definition fails because there is no criterion. This is not the assumption made by Stroud et al., when they interpret §258 as involving the stage-setting requirement. They presume that there is no criterion of correctness because the private ostensive definition fails. That is, they take the last four lines of §258 to be spelling out the consequences of the failed attempt at definition not as giving the reason for the failure. Instead of arguing that the last four lines of §258 should be interpreted as giving the reason for the failure of the private ostensive definition Canfield simply asserts that they do, goes on to state that this makes the no-stage-setting interpretation of §258 circular, and then goes on to give his own interpretation of the last four lines of §258. Given this, Canfield's charge of circularity against those that interpret §258 as involving the stage-setting requirement fails to hit its mark. However, there still remains the question of the cogency of Canfield's interpretation. If his interpretation is cogent, it may be enough to give us reason to think he is correct in his assumption that the last four lines of §258 give reason for, not the consequences of, the failure of the private ostensive definition, and therefore reason to hold the no-stage-setting interpretation to indeed be circular.

According to Canfield, in §258 Wittgenstein “assumes that the meaning of the diarist's subsequent judgment ‘S’ is a function of the rule of sign-referent association governing it.”²⁴ That is, the sign ‘S’ has meaning on later occasions of its use insofar as there is a rule that governs the association of ‘S’ with the sensation to which it is to refer. To clarify this, Canfield makes the distinction between a factual mistake and a rule-related mistake. The first involves, for example, when someone is given the ostensive

²⁴ Canfield 2001, 383.

definition of 'pen' and later mistakenly identifies a pencil as a pen because that pencil looks like a pen. The second involves, for example, the recipient of the ostensive definition misremembering what was defined as 'pen': mistakenly taking a crayon to be a pen, she calls the crayon a 'pen'. According to Canfield, Wittgenstein is concerned with a rule-related mistake in §258. The point of §258 then becomes that the diarist cannot be said to successfully impress the connection between sign and referent on himself if he cannot go on later to remember that connection right and thereby make judgments in virtue of that remembered connection. It is a necessary condition for the success of an ostensive definition that the recipient, even when it is oneself, remembers the connection right in the future. Wittgenstein is supposed to be using §258 to state this necessary condition.²⁵

Canfield distinguishes between strong and weak interpretations of the diarist remembering right the connection between sign and sensation. On the strong interpretation the diarist must know or in some way prove that he remembers the connection right. On the weak interpretation the diarist must simply remember right. Canfield points out that the weak interpretation may seem "lame" since the diarist might be lucky enough to just happen to remember right. Additionally, the strong version is easier to attack since it requires the diarist prove that he judges and that seems to be at the very least very difficult for him to do. However, the strong version leaves open the possibility of the private linguist using the weak version as an "escape hatch." Importantly, if the weak version is rebutted, then so is the strong version: "if remembering right is senseless here so is knowing, justifying, or determining that one has

²⁵ Canfield 2001, 383.

remembered right.”²⁶ Canfield holds that the weak interpretation is correct. The criterion of correctness is supposed to govern whether the diarist remembered right not whether he knows he remembered right. The point, according to Canfield, is not an epistemological one but rather the logical or grammatical one that for the private diarist to remember rightly or wrongly does not make sense.²⁷

It is understandable that Canfield does not want to endorse what he distinguishes as the strong interpretation of remembering the connection right. One problem is that the strong interpretation brings to issue how it is that public users of language prove that they remember things correctly. If we are to require of the private linguist that he prove that he has the right memory, why can't he ask us, the public linguists, to do the same? This is the issue Fogelin brings up in his interpretation and that we saw was a problem for Kenny's interpretation. Indeed, Canfield labels Kenny's interpretation a version of the strong interpretation.²⁸ Canfield endorses the weak interpretation because he wants to show that it does not make sense for the private linguist to remember the connection. That is, he wants the focus of the attack in §258 to be on the fact that remembering in the private diarist's case does not make sense in general, not that the diarist may actually remember right and just not be able to prove it. To show that remembering in itself does not make sense for the diarist, Canfield draws on a remark in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Remarks*—"Our propositions are only verified by the present"—which Canfield holds has an analogue in the *Philosophical Investigations*: "Present tense

²⁶ Canfield 2001, 387. A defender of private language might argue against this by saying that if the weak interpretation fails because the diarist cannot remember right, that might be because he did not try to verify that he remembered right. Of course then that defender is open to the objections against the strong interpretation, such as the difficulty with verification in the private context.

²⁷ Canfield 2001, 388.

²⁸ Canfield 2001, 387-88.

criteria govern the truth of past tense propositions.”²⁹ He holds that this is a key, though admittedly controversial, presupposition behind Wittgenstein’s claims in §258.³⁰ Present tense criteria are criteria that concern what happens concurrently with, or subsequently of, the time of judgment. For example, a present tense criterion for my saying that I just *drove* here a few minutes ago would be to check to see if my engine *is still* warm.³¹

An important question is whether we should attribute such a presupposition to the Wittgenstein of the *Philosophical Investigations*, particularly since he nowhere makes such a claim in that work. One reason Canfield gives for thinking Wittgenstein did endorse it is that it allows for what Canfield thinks is a plausible account of the last lines of §258. For Canfield the most plausible account is a version of the weak interpretation. As Canfield points out, this leaves the glaring question as to why exactly a criterion of correctness is not available. In short, this is answered by the need, according to Canfield, for there being a present tense criterion, i.e., a present tense criterion for the subsequent entry of ‘S’ in the diary. A present tense criterion is needed but there isn’t one; thus, the private diarist cannot be said to remember rightly or not.³² The reason why there isn’t one is because when the diarist makes a new judgment ‘S’ he cannot appeal to anything like a public definition (his language is supposed to be private) and he has no practice to which to appeal. Thus, all the diarist has to appeal to are the *present* “contents of his mind,” but there is nothing “in his mind” that possibly qualifies as a criterion. All the diarist can have is the feeling of remembering the connection right; hence, he has no

²⁹ Canfield 2001, 388.

³⁰ Canfield 2001, 388.

³¹ Canfield 2001, 388.

³² Canfield 2001, 389.

objective criterion, thus leading Wittgenstein to say whatever seems right is right, which means there is no right.³³

This still leaves us wondering why we should attribute the requirement of a present tense criterion to Wittgenstein. Canfield offers another paragraph of support for this attribution. Canfield reads Wittgenstein as implying that judgments of length get their meaning as “a function of the criteria governing them (*PI* p 225).”³⁴ From this Canfield thinks it plausible to say that Wittgenstein would want to handle judgments about the past in a similar way, i.e., relative to the method of their assessment. That such assessments will be made by using present tense criteria Canfield thinks is intimated by the remark that: “An ‘inner process’ stands in need of outward criteria.”³⁵ Justification for statements about the past relies on present tense criteria as justification for statements about inner processes relies on outward criteria. In both cases criteria make knowable that which would normally remain unknowable. And finally, Canfield writes that “Wittgensteinian considerations about how people might learn to make past tense claims suggest the necessity of present tense criteria.”³⁶

There are at least two problems with Canfield’s support for his reading. First, on page 225 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein is neither talking explicitly about criteria nor is he making a point, explicitly or implicitly, about present tense criteria. He is discussing, in part, what it means to measure something, the idea of approximating more and more the *actual* length of an object, and the idea of a method of

³³ Canfield 2001, 390.

³⁴ Canfield 2001, 389.

³⁵ Wittgenstein 1998, §580.

³⁶ Canfield 2001, 389.

determining a length defining what length is.³⁷ Second, it is unclear how the idea of an inner process requiring an outward criterion connects to the idea that a past tense proposition requires a present tense criterion. The only thing the two have in common is the idea of a criterion. An outward expression that has already occurred can be used subsequently to justify that someone was in pain. For example, Wittgenstein could say that Russell was in pain two hours ago because he saw him two hours ago clutching his right arm while moaning. So, it is hard to see why Canfield thinks the statement that an inner process requires an outward expression supports his attributing the requirement of a present tense criterion to Wittgenstein.

By bringing in the idea that Wittgenstein requires a present tense criterion for governing past tense propositions, Canfield provides a way of endorsing the weak interpretations and answering the question as to why there is no criterion. Canfield admittedly goes to a lot of trouble to make various distinctions, to be consistent, and to be convincing. However, his account of §258 is ultimately unconvincing for two reasons. First, his transformation of a remark from *Philosophical Remarks* into a requirement that Wittgenstein nowhere actually suggests himself is itself a very dubious move. Further, the support Canfield offers for attributing the requirement of this present tense criterion to Wittgenstein is insubstantial; Canfield needs to present more evidence. Secondly, as

³⁷ *PI* page 225: One judges the length of a rod and can look for and find some method of judging it more exactly or more reliably. So—you say— *what* is judged here is independent of the method of judging it. What length *is* cannot be defined by the method of determining length.— To think like this is to make a mistake. What mistake?—To say “The height of Mont Blanc depends on how one climbs it” would be queer. And one wants to compare ‘ever more accurate measurement of length’ with the nearer and nearer approach to an object. But in certain cases it is, and in certain cases it is *not*, clear what “approaching nearer to the length of an object” means. What “determining the length” means is not learned by learning what *length* and *determining* are; the meaning of the word “length” is learnt by learning, among other things, what it is to determine length.

(For this reason the word “methodology” has a double meaning. Not only a physical investigation, but also a conceptual one, can be called “methodological investigation”.)

was argued above, attributing a role in §258 to the stage-setting requirement only involves circularity when you assume that the private ostensive definition fails because there is no criterion. This is not the assumption made by Stroud et al., when they interpret §258 as involving the stage-setting requirement. They presume that there is no criterion of correctness because the private ostensive definition fails. That is, they take the last four lines of §258 as laying out the consequences of the failed attempt at a private ostensive definition—not the reason for the failure as Canfield does. The question then, is why should we take Stroud and company to be correct in their assumption and Canfield wrong in his. The answer is simple. Supporting the no-stage-setting interpretation there are Wittgenstein’s lengthy discussion of the importance of a stage-setting for ostensive definition in the first part of the *Philosophical Investigations* and his very clear reminder of this at the end §257. Canfield wants Wittgenstein to say something new and important in §258 and he thinks that if the stage-setting requirement were used there, nothing new and interesting would be said. However, even if the stage-setting requirement is not new by the time one gets to §257 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein’s application of it to our “inner” life is new.

VI. In Conclusion

Applying the stage-setting requirement to the private diarist’s case in §258 allows for a simple and plausible reading of the text. A reading that coheres well with other things that Wittgenstein writes—particularly in the beginning parts of the *Philosophical Investigations*—and which does not suffer the ills of the kind of interpretations given by Kenny, Malcolm, and Fogelin. Canfield’s interpretation is interesting and provides much grist for discussing important issues concerning the issue of private language. However,

it is ultimately unconvincing and attributes a dubious and controversial presupposition to Wittgenstein, especially in light of the much cleaner no-stage-setting interpretation.

While no interpretation is perhaps provable, the no-stage-setting interpretation offered here and endorsed by Stroud and others has, at the very least, hopefully been made more plausible, especially in light of the failings of other interpretations.

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