

# REASONS TO DOUBT THE AMBIGUITY ARGUMENT: CONTRIVED WITTGENSTEINIAN VALUATIONS LEAD TO A FALSE DICHOTOMY

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**ABSTRACT:** Scott Soames argued that Wittgenstein's private language argument reveals ambiguity, presenting two possible conclusions, wherein either conclusion exhibits devastating implications for the private language argument. I contend that interpreting Wittgenstein's reasoning holistically dissipates inclinations to infer ambiguity in the private language argument. In particular, I challenge Soames' ambiguity argument by demonstrating its contrived limitations, resulting in a false dichotomy. However, allowing the dichotomy for argument's sake adequately corresponds to Wittgenstein's conclusion, raising further questions about the ambiguity argument's veracity and redundancy. As such, Wittgenstein's private language argument withstands charges of ambiguity, demonstrating reasons to doubt Soames' ambiguity argument.

**KEYWORDS:** Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, private language argument, Scott Soames, ambiguity argument

## 1. Introduction

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein's private language argument concludes that private language has no meaning if language refers only to private sensations. More specifically, words limited to private use lack objective standards by which function and accuracy are determined, rendering the words meaningless in subsequent public usage (Wittgenstein 1986). Nevertheless, in *Philosophical Analysis in the Twentieth Century*, Scott Soames argued for possible ambiguity in the private language argument, committing Wittgenstein to equivocate between a weak thesis: that meaningful words cannot entirely determine the private sensations they represent; and a strong thesis: that meaningful words cannot determine private sensations at all. Furthermore, the veracity of this position exposes the weak thesis to logical instability, overcome only by appealing to the strong thesis. However, it is argued that the strong thesis is untenable, necessitating the private language argument's revision to avoid the strong thesis (Soames 2003). This is referred to as the ambiguity argument. In Wittgenstein's defense, I evaluate Soames' criticisms and

demonstrate a false dichotomy in shouldering the two-thesis ambiguity argument, further revealing that accepting Soames' weak thesis and Wittgenstein's correctness criterion evades the strong thesis altogether. Thus, despite the private language argument's implications, Soames' criticisms unsuccessfully repudiate it, raising reasons to doubt the ambiguity argument.

## 2. Assessing the Arguments

Expressing the arguments as charitably as possible is necessary before demonstrating deficiencies in Soames' ambiguity argument. Brief summaries and extractions of the private language and ambiguity arguments develop and provide foundational premises for the sake of argument and maintaining intelligibility. The first objective is to elaborate on the nuance of Wittgenstein's private language argument, highlighting the emphasis on private language to describe private sensations. Then, detailing Soames' argument underscores possibly disastrous consequences for Wittgenstein's ambitions considering the ambiguity argument's sustainability.

### 2.1 Wittgenstein's private language argument

Wittgenstein's (1986) private language argument (PLA) attempted to demonstrate that no privately derived language referring to private sensations is meaningful, reasoning that a word's meaning is determined through use in a linguistic community, where observer-contingent, public criteria determine correct and incorrect word application. Thus, privately derived language is meaningless if no public criteria exist to determine accurate word usage. The PLA is formally expressed here:

1. Private language is meaningful and describes private sensations.
2. Language derives meaning through observer-contingent, public criteria determining proper word application.
3. However, observer-contingent, public criteria cannot determine proper word application if private language is limited to describing private sensations.
4. Therefore, private language describing private sensations is meaningless.

The PLA introduces a *reductio ad absurdum* of the notion that private language is meaningful despite its limitations in describing private sensations. Wittgenstein (1986) questioned the possibility of a private language that "can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations" (88). This raised further questions of whether private language could express one's private perceptions, such as pain, without displaying observable behaviors (grunts, groans, crying, etc.) and whether this language could be meaningful "without being able to

explain its meaning to anyone” (Wittgenstein 1986, 92). Determining how a word’s meaning arises was central to solving these pressing challenges.

Establishing Wittgenstein’s approach to determining word meaning is essential to the strength of the PLA. Wittgenstein (1986) contended that a word’s meaning derives from language use among the linguistic community; meaningful words are learned expressions signifying natural behaviors in public communication. From this standpoint, words are meaningless without public standards for determining correct or incorrect usage. However, although consistency demands that private language also withstand public correctness standards, Wittgenstein determined that private language has “no criterion of correctness” given its limitations to the speaker’s sensory experiences and the inability to communicate those experiences objectively (Wittgenstein 1986, 92). Since privately derived language merely refers to private sensations, expressing private language remains insulated from public standards for proper word application. However, any language insulated from the correctness criterion is meaningless if such standards are essential to a word’s meaning. In this way, the PLA is a *reductio ad absurdum* for the notion that private language entails the private sensations it describes, insulating private language from the public correctness criterion required for determining a word’s meaning. Therefore, private language expressing privately experienced sensations is meaningless.

## 2.2 Soames’ ambiguity argument

The ambiguity argument presents a critical response to the PLA, attempting to demonstrate the argument’s ambiguity given conflicting notions of how Wittgenstein derives a word’s meaning. Soames (2003) distinguished two possible consequences of the PLA, resulting in the strong thesis that no “meaningful word used by a speaker stands for any kind of private sensation, idea, or internal experience of the speaker” and the weak thesis that no “word used by a speaker is meaningful **solely** in virtue of standing for any kind of private sensation, idea, or internal experience” (48). For example, considering the expression “my feet ache,” the strong thesis indicates that *ache* is meaningful only if it replaces behaviors emerging from private sensations, such as moaning or grimacing, rather than describing private sensations. In contrast, the weak thesis indicates that *ache* is meaningful only if it describes a publicly verifiable but private sensation.

Nevertheless, the weak thesis appears to correspond to a straightforward reading of Wittgenstein’s argument that private language cannot be meaningful if it refers to private sensations. For instance, Soames (2003) identified the weak thesis in sections 256–258 of *Philosophical Investigations*, agreeing that:

Wittgenstein seems to be saying that if all there is to the meaning of a certain sign is some entirely private type of sensation that it stands for, then there can be no criterion for determining whether new applications of the sign are correct or not. But if there is no criterion, then there is no distinction between correct and incorrect application; and if that is the case, then there is no meaning. (47-48)

According to Soames, *Investigations*, section 243 runs contrarywise, indicating that Wittgenstein's inquiry into the possibility of a private language expressing only private sensations that "another person cannot understand" validates the strong thesis. In this way, Soames interpreted Wittgenstein as declaring "that there can be **no** language, or part of language, in which words stand for sensations...entirely private to agents," thereby concluding that such a perspective "is pretty close to the claim that there are no private sensations at all" (Soames 2003, 48). Only by isolating section 243 is such a radical interpretation of PLA available despite the weak thesis' overarching but conflicting objective in sections 256-258.

Accepting PLA entails the weak thesis, as shown above, the principle that a word's meaning is contingent upon use in a linguistic community, where observer-contingent, public criteria determine proper word applications. Moreover, Soames (2003) detected obscurity in the weak thesis, that no word is meaningful *solely* in virtue of reference to private sensation implies the public criterion doctrine, rendering the weak thesis indefensible. In context, the word *solely* implies that reference to private sensation sometimes sufficiently determines a word's meaning. However, referring to private sensations must be discarded entirely if observer-contingent, public criteria determine proper word application. From this, Soames concluded that the weak thesis is no longer defensible, collapsing into the strong thesis that *no* word is meaningful in virtue of reference to private sensations (Soames 2003). Although the weak thesis appears to illustrate Wittgenstein's PLA *reductio* precisely, the strength of the ambiguity argument rests in the notion that the weak thesis implies the strong thesis, presenting devastating results for the PLA.

According to the ambiguity argument, the PLA ultimately demands the strong thesis. More specifically, accepting the weak thesis entails a commitment to the strong thesis. However, as Soames (2003) effectively reasoned, sense expressions often refer to private sensory perceptions. For instance, the expression "my feet ache" reports a private sensory perception commonly understood by the linguistic community, implying the expression's meaning. Although the public cannot share in one's private experience, exclaiming "my feet ache" signifies shared linguistic expressions frequently used in communication with one another. Consequently, meaningful expressions do, in fact, refer to private sensory perceptions, rendering the strong thesis false (Soames 2003). Recall that the strong thesis implies that no meaningful words refer to private sensations. Therefore, if the weak thesis entails

the strong thesis, and the strong thesis is false, Wittgenstein's PLA *reductio ad absurdum* is flawed. For the sake of clarity and maintaining logical coherence, the ambiguity argument was extracted and formalized as such:

1. If PLA is correct, then either the weak or strong thesis is true, but a word's meaning necessitates public criteria for proper word application.
2. However, if the weak thesis is true and public criteria derive a word's meaning, then the strong thesis is also true.
3. Thus, if PLA is correct, then the strong thesis is true.
4. But the strong thesis is false.
5. Thus, PLA is false.

Assuming the extracted ambiguity argument charitably captures Soames' task, taking issue with the argument's conclusion indicates problems with premises 1, 2, or 4. Since I disagree with Soames' conclusion, I challenge the ambiguity argument by demonstrating that premise (1) presents a false dichotomy and that accepting (1) for the sake of argument renders premise (2) false. If successful, counterexamples to premises (1) and (2) substantiate reasons to doubt the ambiguity argument.

### 3. Doubting the Ambiguity Argument

This section is dedicated to challenging Soames' ambiguity argument. The ambiguity argument's validity is sustained, so given the controversy of its conclusion, I propose counterexamples to premises (1) and (2). Premise (1)'s counterexample illustrates the PLA's intent, determining that private language is meaningless if it refers to private sensations, agreeing only with the weak thesis. As such, the weak/strong thesis dichotomy loses footing, rendering premise (1) untenable. Premise (2)'s counterexample takes the first premise for granted, demonstrating that the weak thesis tenably avoids collapsing into the strong thesis. It should be noted, however, that the success of either counterexample renders the ambiguity argument unsound.

The ambiguity argument starts with (1) if PLA is correct, then either the weak or strong thesis is true, but a word's meaning necessitates public criteria for proper word application. As described, premise (1) suggests we must accept either the weak or strong thesis if PLA is correct, not both. Soames detected the weak/strong thesis dichotomy through the emergence of a seemingly conflicting section in *Philosophical Investigations*:

But could we also imagine a language in which a person could write down or give vocal expression to his inner experiences – his feelings, moods, and the rest – for his private use?... The individual words of this language...refer to what can only be

known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language. (Wittgenstein 1986, 88)

In isolation, section 243 appears to indicate that language or words referring to perceived sensations are entirely private. Nonetheless, it is plausible that Wittgenstein merely asks the reader to imagine a private language that refers only to private sensations for the sake of argument, setting the stage for the PLA's first premise. Recall that PLA is a *reductio ad absurdum* for the notion that private language is meaningful despite its reference to private sensations. Considering that *Investigations*, section 243, simply elaborates on the meaning of private language, the PLA and weak thesis are sustained. If *a private language refers to private sensations* (Wittgenstein 1986, 88), then *no private word is meaningful solely in virtue of standing for any kind of private sensation* (Soames 2003).

In a peculiar move, Soames (2003) recommended a considerably stronger but contrived interpretation of section 243, arguing that it commits Wittgenstein to the proposition that "no word can stand for a private sensation at all" (46). However, why come to this conclusion? Wittgenstein (1986) never invited us to imagine *any* language but explicitly emphasized a language "for private use." Perhaps that is why Wittgenstein made a point of rhetorically asking, "Well, can't we do so in our ordinary language?" immediately followed by, "But that is not what I mean" (88). Hence, establishing the strong/weak thesis dichotomy requires explicating where/how Wittgenstein transitions from (a) *no private language that refers to private sensations can be meaningful* to (b) *no language that refers to private sensations can be meaningful*. Anything short of this substantiates premise (1)'s counterexample, rendering the dichotomy false and disrupting the ambiguity argument. Still, accepting premise (1) for argument's sake instigates problems with premise (2) that accepting the weak thesis implies the strong thesis.

Premise (2) of the ambiguity argument maintains that if the weak thesis is true and public criteria derive a word's meaning, the strong thesis is also true. Assuming the antecedent's plausibility, as it corresponds to the weak thesis and PLA, premise (2)'s consequent unnecessarily follows. In defense of premise (2), Soames (2003) argued that the public correctness criterion renders the weak thesis untenable if no word can be meaningful *solely* in virtue of reference to private sensation. Notably, reference to private sensations must be discarded entirely since the public correctness criterion determines meaning. In effect, the notion that no meaningful word can *solely* refer to private sensations becomes perplexing if referencing private sensations is discarded. Thus, no meaningful language refers to private sensations.

However, the public correctness criterion implies that external observers in the linguistic community determine proper language applications. A private

language referring to private sensations cannot be meaningful if external observers in the linguistic community cannot determine proper word usage. This principle leaves room for learned behavioral language, explained by Wittgenstein (1986) as behavior-replacing expressions rather than private sensation descriptors, exemplifying the plausibility that no word is meaningful *solely* by virtue of referencing private sensation. Soames (2003) emphasized a similar counterexample to the strong thesis, suggesting that sensation terminology may sufficiently refer to private sensation perceptions, expressing observer-contingent language. For instance, the expression ‘my feet ache’ simply reports a private sensation, open to public criteria for proper word use. Thus, according to Wittgenstein (and possibly Soames), the weak thesis plausibly stands on its own without implying the strong thesis, indicating that non-private words referring to private sensations can be meaningful according to the criterion for correctness.

As demonstrated, no *private language* referring to private sensations is meaningful given the correctness criterion, that a word’s meaning derives from public criteria determining proper application among the linguistic community. Therefore, the weak thesis is consistent with the public correctness criterion, avoiding the strong thesis altogether. Moreover, the strong thesis is plausible only if the ambiguity argument’s dichotomy is sustained. Thus, counterexamples to premises (1) and (2) of the ambiguity argument are reasonable and supported by *Philosophical Investigations*, raising genuine concerns with Soames’ conclusions. As such, buttressing the ambiguity argument requires (a) establishing a legitimate weak/strong thesis dichotomy fully supported by *Philosophical Investigations* and (b) substantiating the claim that the weak thesis is incompatible with the correctness criterion, thereby collapsing into the strong thesis.

#### 4. Pondering an Objection

My counterexample to premise (1) accused Soames of contriving unsupported interpretations of *Philosophical Investigations* section 243 to expose contradictions in Wittgenstein’s correctness criterion. Recall Soames’ (2003) assertion that:

Wittgenstein seems to be saying something stronger—namely, that there can be no language, or part of language, in which words stand for sensations that are entirely private to agents. And that is pretty close to the claim that there are no private sensations at all. (48)

Although section 243 does not corroborate Soames’ assertion, Soames might argue that Wittgenstein (1986) inferred it by exclaiming that the “individual words of this language are to refer to what can only be known to the person speaking” (88–89), which contradicts Wittgenstein’s example in the following section that a “child

has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and, later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behavior” (89). This ostensible contradiction renders the PLA ambiguous, resulting in the weak/strong thesis dichotomy.

However, section 243 likely sets the stage for developing the PLA *reductio ad absurdum* if read in context. Ostensible contradictions arise by cherry-picking passages rather than reading Wittgenstein’s argument holistically. As explained above, section 243 merely invites one to *imagine a private language that refers to private sensations*. This seems most reasonable given Wittgenstein’s objective. Furthermore, simply viewing section 243 as clarifying the connotation of a *private language that refers to private sensations*, section 244 unsurprisingly follows with an example of how private sensations are expressed through learned vocabulary (not private vocabulary). This sustains the counterexample that the weak/strong thesis presents a false dichotomy, further substantiating the PLA and weak thesis that no private word is meaningful solely in virtue of standing for any private sensation if a private language refers to private sensations.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Reasons to doubt Soames’ ambiguity argument emerge upon closer evaluation of Wittgenstein’s private language argument as illustrated in *Philosophical Investigations*, sections 243-258, exemplifying a sustainable thesis: if private language refers to private sensations, then private language is meaningless. Confining the argument to private languages seems to establish the crux of Wittgenstein’s objective, delivering a defensible argument concluding that private language has no meaning if it refers only to private sensations. Furthermore, the ambiguity argument’s inherent deficiencies stem from inferring a weak/strong thesis dichotomy and strong thesis inevitability by contriving unsupported inferences in *Philosophical Investigations*. Determining the private language argument’s soundness requires further analyses, which was not the objective of this survey. However, reasons to doubt Soames’s ambiguity argument exposed the argument’s inability to invalidate Wittgenstein’s private language argument.

## References

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