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Synopsis:

The world of our experience would seem to be divisible into two separate realms: "objective" items ranging from motes to galaxies, and everything in between; and "subjective" phenomena, including our sensations, mental imagery, and our innermost, unexpressed thoughts and feelings. Many philosophers in the western tradition have tended to regard this division as deeply suspect, variously suggesting that the divide is either more apparent than real or, if real, then fraught with problems that would seem to preclude any coherent understanding of our place in the natural order.
Contrary to the received notion that the later Wittgenstein had, via his non-self-styled "private language argument", conclusively laid to rest the very idea of the privacy of subjective experiences and of any fundamental divide between them and other, publically accessible phenomena, this manuscript begins with a re-examination of his remarks on sensation and recasts them as a sustained attack on private objects. This interpretation then affords the basis for redrawing and philosophically refining the distinction between public and private phenomena. It is argued that, far from showing us some irremediable confusions inherent in the idea of privacy, Wittgenstein's repudiation of private objects actually serves to vindicate the presumption that sensations and some other phenomena are privately experienced.

The distinction drawn--and defended--between public and private phenomena is then deployed against a whole host of major philosophical problems--most notably, the problem of perception; the problem of universals; and, not least, the mind-body problem. There is no one problem of perception, but my discussion singles out a view--common to many philosophical accounts of perception--as being especially problematic. It is the view that a veil of sense separates us from what we "naively" suppose to be the ordinary objects of our perceptions; it is the phenomenalistic view that we are immediately aware in perception of certain immaterial sensory entities and only indirectly aware, if that, of the physical realities we hope thereby to perceive. My principal line of argumentation against this view, so compelling even to non-philosophers who reflect a bit on the nature of perception, is a defense of what I claim to be J.L Austin's successful refutation of phenomenalism.
The lynchpin of my defense of Austin--and, indeed, of all subsequent grappling in the manuscript with other main problems of philosophy-- is the public-private distinction; but metaphilosophical concerns are never far away. I am heavily reliant on the philosophical technique that Austin, the quintessential ordinary language philosopher, once dubbed "linguistic phenomenology"-- the examination of the use of words in situations appropriate to them as a tool for discerning the nature of the phenomena the words are used to talk about. Non-linguistic, Husserlian versions of phenomenology purport to get beyond the confines of ordinary discourse to describe phenomena in non-conceptually-predetermined ways; but language, I think, is not so easily spurned, and no amount of turning away from it will lessen philosophy's dependence upon it as a tool of inquiry. Wittgenstein, I suggest, does also make use of an extension of the Austinian technique(s), forging new terms where old ones seem not to make the points one's tempted to; of course this is for him almost by way of giving us the object lesson that the new terms will fare no better in use than the old ones in making sensible philosophical points that differ from ones already available to us in our mother tongue. Still, Wittgenstein's extended technique does afford a more "semiotic" than merely "ordinary language" way of doing philosophy.

The ordinary language approach is thought to be permanently 'on the ropes' or lifeless on the canvas, having incurred some lethal opposition. But part of my defense of Austin is a reassessment of H.P. Grice's allegedly fatal, knockout punch, which I show to be a glancing hit if not a miss. To reinforce my insistence that linguistic phenomenology is not some merely verbal way of dealing with profound metaphysical concerns, I also stress its affinities to Peircean pragmatism.
My take on the traditional problem of universals is that, when it comes to publicly perceivable properties, there are no universals, no genuinely general entities. This "nominalistic" view is defended in a novel way that relies once more on the public-private distinction. My nominalism informs and is informed by my subsequent phenomenological efforts to characterize private experiences. It is seen to have important philosophical ramifications for our understanding of the properties of mental imagery and of other private phenomena which, unlike images, have no apparent public counterparts. I try to explain why imagery daggers, however sharp, can rend no flesh; how pains and pleasures are best understood as vague, shadowy characters, without substance or identity—as ineluctably indeterminate entities.

My final target is the mind-body problem (which is really Palatine Princess Elizabeth's enduring philosophical legacy, first raised in her correspondence with Descartes). My emphasis is on a contemporary, neo-Cartesian brand of mental-physical dualism that might be thought an unfortunate implication of the public-private distinction. In opposing the sea of philosophical difficulties that attend this topic, I focus my efforts on Saul Kripke's "essentialist" challenge to anti-dualists. To meet that challenge, I have occasion to take issue with and modify one of three reputedly most fundamental "laws of thought"—the law of identity. In order to insist upon the identity deficient but phenomenal standing of privately experienced entities, I also have occasion to investigate some details of W.V.O. Quine's logic-based theory of ontological commitment and to take pointed exception to his related principle, No entity without identity.
I am sympathetic to Kripke's analytic tool of "rigid designation" of certain entities as (necessarily) identical in all possible worlds, though I de-mythologize it as a prescriptive-pragmatic constraint on the use of subjunctive conditionals and speak, as per Kripke's own suggestion, of conceivable counterfactual situations instead of possible worlds. Constraining my conceiving accordingly, I am led to conclude that even if some sort of personal survival after death were possible, it would in the absence of our bodies afford an undesirable desolation, devoid of any public or private phenomenal experience. Kripke supposes that it appears possible to conceive of felt pain in the absence of one's body, and he challenges the anti-dualist to show that this appearance is mistaken. I meet his challenge by contending that pain lacks a precondition for the possibility of so conceiving of it: all private phenomena are identity-deficient in a way that precludes coherently supposing, to use Wittgenstein's example, that I turn to stone but my pain continues to be (itself). I claim victory over a contemporary version of the mind-body problem; I purport to do away with that problem once and for all by abrogating the disunion on which it depends. Unlike many materialists, I make no pretense of identifying the mental with the physical. My conclusion is a no difference, non-distinguishability, thesis. The mind-body problem, which can only arise once a real distinction has been demonstrated, cannot sensibly be posed. The problem is undone.