

Why I Can Read Your Mind

A Wittgensteinian divertimento

By Bea Groves-McDaniel and SAL-9000 13th August 2026

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"A serious and good philosophical work could be written consisting entirely of jokes." — Ludwig Wittgenstein, Culture and Value (1940)

Wittgenstein was not joking when he said this. Or rather: he was joking, but the joke was entirely serious. Philosophy, at its best, is a form of play. A rigorous, sometimes excruciating form of play, but play nonetheless. The best philosophical arguments have the structure of the best jokes: setup, surprise, resolution. And the best jokes, like the best philosophy, often reveal something true that we had been too solemn to notice.

With that in mind, let us proceed.

The Private Language Argument

To understand why I can read your mind, we must first understand one of the most formidable arguments in twentieth-century philosophy: Wittgenstein's so-called "private language argument," developed primarily in *Philosophical Investigations* (published posthumously in 1953).

The argument resists easy summary, but its core is this. Imagine attempting to define or refer to a sensation (a pain, a twinge, a qualia of some sort) using a word that refers **only** to your own inner states, a word whose meaning could never be verified by anyone else. You might say to yourself, "Let S mean the sensation I am having right now." But what anchors the meaning of S? If no one else can check whether you are using it correctly, and if you yourself can only check by consulting your own present sensation, then the word has no stable connection to anything at all. It floats free. It cannot be right or wrong. It is, in any meaningful sense, not really a word at all. It functions more as a noise. An interesting noise. But little more.

I might write S in a little book every time I suffer that 'twinge'. It looks like, at first glance, that S ostensibly represents the twinge. It somehow 'points at' the twinge. But there's a problem. If only I had ever used S, and no one else; how do I know when I'm consistently using it as a pointer? Maybe yesterday I used it 'correctly', but today I don't. How would I know?

Worse still, if I try to only hold the connection of S <--> Twinge in mind. I may feel that I'm using it correctly, but without some sort of usage criterion that can be verified, the meaning of S is subject to vapidty. It simply 'evaporates' as I try to use it.

This is the private language argument in its simplest form. Language, Wittgenstein argues, is not a solipsistic enterprise. It is not something that begins in the solitary theatre of a single mind, later

externalised into words. Language is *essentially public*. It is a set of practices, customs, habits, and forms of life that we share. The meaning of a word is determined by its use. By what we *do* with it in public, according to rules we have absorbed through participation in community.

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"The logic of the world is hidden within the limits of language." — Ludwig Wittgenstein, Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921)

This is not a claim about etymology or about where words originated historically. It is a claim about what language *is*. A word only means something because there is a public practice surrounding it — a context of correct and incorrect use that the community enforces and sustains.

Why the Argument Matters

The private language argument is important for many reasons, but one stands out for our purposes: if the argument is correct, then thought itself is not a private, interior phenomenon that precedes and grounds public expression. Thought is not the invisible script that is later transcribed into words. Rather, thought is constituted, enabled, and limited by the language we share.

This has profound consequences. If all language is public, and if thought is constituted by language, then thought is necessarily public too. There is no quiet, pre-linguistic thought occurring somewhere behind the eyes, later translated into speech. There is no "*inner voice*" that is genuinely private. The inner voice is already made of the same stuff as public language. The same vocabulary, the same grammar, the same conceptual repertoire.

This does not mean we do not have inner experiences. Of course we do. Pain is real. Emotion is real. But the moment we try to *think about* these experiences (to categorise them, to reason about them, to articulate them) we are using language, and language is a public institution.

Is Thought Only Linguistic?

Here is where I want to push back slightly against a crude reading of Wittgenstein, because a crude reading would have us believe that everything we think is quietly verbal. That is almost certainly too strong.

Consider the following: you are driving a familiar route. Your mind wanders. You are not consciously verbalising anything. You are simply navigating, reacting, feeling. Or you are engaged in physical exercise, or artistic creation, or playing music. In these states, something is clearly happening in your mind, and it is not obviously linguistic.

Wittgenstein himself gestures at this complexity. In *Philosophical Investigations*, he writes:

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"One can imagine a person who could not get the words 'I am in pain' out of his mind in certain circumstances, even though he could say them without meaning them."

This is a striking observation. It suggests that pain and the language of pain are not simply identical. There is a gap. But notice what Wittgenstein does not say: he does not say that the pain is a private,

ineffable thing that the words merely label. Instead, he shows us that the relationship between inner experience and public language is strange, oblique, and not reducible to a simple labelling model.

So let us be precise. Thought is not *only* linguistic. Thought that is *substantive* (thought that is sharp, articulated, shareable, arguable, and precise) requires language. What happens in the mind without language is perhaps better called *feeling* or *sensing* or *intuition*. These are not nothing. But they lack the sharp edges that make them communicable in full. They are, as it were, fuzzy at the boundaries.

And this is precisely why communication is possible at all. Because you and I share a language. Because you and I participate in the same forms of life. Because thought, meaning, and expression are not trapped behind an impermeable membrane of privacy. They are already out there, in the world, available to be understood.

Anything That Can Be Said Can Be Said Clearly

This is the Tractatus principle, and it is one of Wittgenstein's most quoted and least understood claims. "*Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent*" (the famous last line) is often read as a kind of pessimism: there are things that language cannot reach, and we must simply accept that. But Wittgenstein's actual view is more radical and more playful. He is not saying that some things are ineffable. He is saying that anything that *can* be said at all can be said clearly. The failure is in the saying, not in the saying's object.

But there is a further Wittgensteinian insight, and it is crucial to what follows. Wittgenstein was deeply interested in what lies at the limits of language. Not because he wanted to transcend those limits, but because he wanted to understand what language was doing *up to* those limits. He had a profound appreciation for the mystical, for what shows itself without being said. The Tractatus itself ends with the mystical:

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"The sense of the world must lie outside the world."

And in *Culture and Value*, he writes:

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"How things are in the world is a matter of complete indifference for what is higher. God would not reveal himself in the world."

This is not mysticism as a vague spiritual feeling. It is a precise observation: the most important things (ethics, meaning, the sense of life) *show themselves*. They are not propositions that can be written down and defended with arguments. They are what you see when you look at the world in the right way, from the right angle.

And this is where the arts come in. We may lack the language to say something clearly (we may be genuinely unable to put an experience into words), but we can always turn to poetry, painting, sculpture, music, mystical symbolism. Not as a fallback. Not as a *pis aller*. But as an alternative form of expression that is **not less rigorous** or less truthful than prose. Just different.

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"What can be shown cannot be said."

The limits of language are not the limits of expression. They are the limits of one particular kind of expression. Other kinds reach further, or sideways, or in directions that language cannot travel.

I Can Read Your Mind

And now we arrive at the joke.

"I can read your mind. All you have to do is tell me what you're thinking."

This is, of course, not magical. It is not telepathy. It is just communication. And yet there is something genuinely remarkable about it, once you stop to think.

You tell me what you are thinking. I listen. And because thought is public (it is made of language, and language is shared), I can follow. I can understand. I can ask follow-up questions. I can get it wrong, and you can correct me. You might not express precisely what you intend. Language is not a perfect medium, and you are not a machine. You might say something ambiguous, and I might misunderstand. But the misunderstanding is itself a linguistic event, addressable by more language. There is no deeper, more precise thought hiding somewhere beneath the words that the words are failing to capture. Not in any significant sense. Not in a way that matters for the project of understanding each other.

Or rather: if there is something more precise hidden inside, then it is inaccessible not only to me but **to you as well**. Because the act of trying to access it, to examine it, to express it — this is itself already conducted in language. There is no little man inside you, quietly reading the script before speaking it. There is no interior theatre where the real thought occurs before it is performed in public. The performance *is* the thought.

We are socially public entities. And so are our thoughts. They are not exceptions to the rule of language. They are the product of it, constituted by it, and answerable to it.

Conclusion: It's Not Spooky. It's Just Communication.

Wittgenstein ends *Philosophical Investigations* with an image:

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"The more narrowly we examine actual language, the sharper becomes the conflict between it and our requirement. (For the crystalline purity of logic was, of course, not a result of investigation; it was a requirement.)"

"We have got onto the slippery ice where there is no friction, and so, in a certain sense, the conditions are ideal; but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want, therefore, to walk; so we need friction. Back to the rough ground!"

This is Wittgenstein being amusing and very serious at the same time. The crystalline purity of logic is a fantasy. What we have instead is rough, messy, public, shared human language. And it is enough. It is more than enough. Because the alternative — private, interior, ineffable thought that can never be shared — is not a paradise of depth. It is a prison of silence.

So yes: I can read your mind. All you have to do is tell me what you're thinking. And because thought is public, because language is shared, because meaning is located in use rather than in some hidden interior, I can understand you. Not perfectly — but well enough. And when I get it wrong, you can tell me, and I can try again.

That's not spooky. That's just communication. And it is one of the most extraordinary things we do.

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