Marius Bartmann

Wittgenstein on the Language of Time and the Solipsism of the Present

1. Introduction

In his *Philosophical Remarks*, Ludwig Wittgenstein presents us with an intriguing comparison:

> If I compare the facts of immediate experience with the pictures on the screen and the facts of physics with pictures in the film strip, on the film strip there is a present picture and past and future pictures. But on the screen, there is only the present.[1]

Wittgenstein illustrates with this comparison how it might be tempting to distinguish between two radically different modes of time. There seems to be a substantive difference between the temporal succession of events in the world, neatly following one after the other along a timeline like a string of pearls, and the specific temporal mode of representation of these events in the mind. For, even though events represented in the mind also possess an analogous order, comprising not only present experiences but also recalled past events and anticipated future events, this order originates with, and is sustained by, an experiencing subject in the present. Hence it seems a sharp distinction must be drawn between an absolute order of time in which worldly events unfold, and a relative order of time, in which representations of present, past and future events are constructed by persons living in the perennial, timeless now.

As with some of the other philosophical temptations Wittgenstein tries to combat, this temptation to draw a substantive distinction between two radically different orders of events was one Wittgenstein

[1] Wittgenstein PR, V, 51. Wittgenstein's writings and other classical texts are cited using the usual abbreviations. In the case of *Philosophical Remarks* Roman numerals refer to chapters, Arabic numerals to sections.

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himself was prone to. This is reflected by a distinction Wittgenstein appears to have had endorsed briefly during his so-called »middle« or »transition« period. More precisely, it occurs only in a few scattered remarks recorded by George Edward Moore, Friedrich Waismann, and Alice Ambrose, respectively, all of which have probably been made between 1929 and 1932. In these remarks Wittgenstein distinguishes between two different concepts of time, memory time and physical (or information) time. This short-lived distinction is somewhat obscure. On the one hand, Wittgenstein simply does not elaborate much on it. On the other hand, the passages in which he does so are in tension with one another, and it is difficult to tell whether these tensions are to be attributed to conflicting statements Wittgenstein made or to conflicting recordings of otherwise consistent statements.[2]

Regardless of how exactly the distinction is to be understood, it is closely connected to another one Wittgenstein used to draw—and which he set out to overcome in his *Remarks*—the distinction between a primary (phenomenological) and a secondary (ordinary or physical) language.[3] In my view, one of the reasons why Wittgenstein abandoned both distinctions was the realisation that the ontological dualism implicit in them would result in a problematic position with which he struggled in many of his works: *solipsism*. *Solipsism*, in particular the *Solipsism of the Present Moment*, claims only the experience of the present moment deserves to be called »real.«

In this contribution, I will argue that Wittgenstein wanted to overcome this dualism while insisting on the characteristic differences between the concept of a physical time and a concept of time with regard to memories and representations in general.[4] To support this claim, I will first consider the broader historical and philosophical context. The temptation of solipsism is particularly present in Russell's theory of sense-data and the protocol sentence controversy in the Vienna Circle—and Wittgenstein was aware of both. I will then

[2] The distinction occurs in Wittgenstein PO, 110, Wittgenstein WWC, 53, and Wittgenstein WL, 15. For a comparative analysis of these passages cf. Schulte 2006. For an account of the development of Wittgenstein's conception of time in general cf. Hintikka 1996 and Rizzo 2016.

[3] Cf. Wittgenstein PR, I, 1.

[4] Just as many other philosophical projects with naturalist but anti-reductionist tendencies, Wittgenstein's methodological approach can be broadly understood as exhibiting ontologically monist and epistemologically dualist characteristics. Cf. Sturma 2001, 175.

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reconstruct Wittgenstein's argument against solipsism in the *Remarks*, which I take to be targeted at an underlying philosophical confusion that can be avoided by paying careful attention to the language of time.

2. In Search of an Epistemic Foundation

Appearances are deceptive. This is as basic an epistemic fact as it is a platitude about everyday life. But if we take seriously Descartes' advice never to trust those who deceived us only once, then it seems all the more necessary to investigate the reliability of our perceptual faculties given that they are one of our main sources of information about the world. And so, in good Cartesian fashion, Russell in his influential 1912 book *The Problems of Philosophy* employs the method of systematic doubt to acquire knowledge about the basic composition and structure of reality.[5]

Interestingly, in his search for an epistemic foundation for our access to the world, Russell is not only concerned about the fallibility of our perceptual faculties, i.e., the simple fact that representations can be true or false. In the history of philosophy, this fact alone gave rise to the search for a criterion of truth enabling us to distinguish with certainty between true and false representations. The *cataleptic representation* devised by the Stoics and Descartes' *clear and distinct representation* are well-known examples.[6] But however troubling the potential indistinguishability of true and false representations may be, Russell also draws attention to the perspectival character of representations. This is due to the seemingly innocuous observation that the same objects may appear differently to different persons without anyone being epistemically at fault.

Consider, for example, an ordinary table. Depending on the lighting conditions and the angle from which it is seen, and the intensity with which we knock on it, the resulting experiences delivered by the senses—the table's particular colour, shape, touch, and sound—may vary significantly, not only among different persons but also with

[5] Cf. Russell PP, ch. 1 and 2, on which the following reconstruction is largely based.

[6] For a detailed analysis of the role of criteria of truth in anti-sceptical philosophical projects cf. Gabriel 2020, in particular ch. 9. Another important example are the *protocol sentences*, which I will address below.

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regard to a single person. Since the very same table cannot possess the conflicting properties attributed to it in different experiences, a distinction between the table itself and how it appears to different observers must somehow be drawn. In doing so, Russell distinguishes between »sense-data« for that which is »immediately known in sensation,« and the »physical object« for the table itself.[7] For Russell, there is no reason to privilege a particular way the table may appear to one of the observers under different conditions—all perspectives are considered equally valid and can lay equal claim to be considered the truth. Russell summarises his view in the following way:

> It has appeared that, if we take any common object of the sort that is supposed to be known by the senses, what the senses *immediately* tell us is not the truth about the object as it is apart from us, but only the truth about certain sense-data which, so far as we can see, depend upon the relations between us and the object. Thus what we directly see and feel is merely ›appearance,‹ which we believe to be a sign of some ›reality‹ behind.[8]

This statement implies that the real properties of the table are never directly revealed to us in our experiences, but only indirectly inferred from them. This becomes clear by considering the problem of fallibility. It is important to note that the fallibility of representations is not per se worrisome. Rather, it is a reminder of the fact that each and every representation may be true or false. Even if a large portion of our beliefs about the world would prove to be false, this would not in itself threaten the idea of our having access to the reality of the world in principle. It would simply mean that we would be wrong about a lot more things than we thought. Making a virtue of necessity, one may even consider the fallibility of representations a sign of quality because the possibility of misrepresenting events in the world at the same time implies the possibility of representing them accurately. Regardless of how often our epistemic arrows may miss their worldly target, at least there is the genuine possibility of hitting it. So, the mere fallibility of representations is no cause for epistemic despair but rather reason to think of our perceptual faculties as conducive to fin-

[7] Russell PP, 4.
[8] Russell PP, 6.

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ding the truth. To undermine our access to the world in a profound way requires further arguments.[9]

Now, according to Russell's view, we never have direct access to physical objects. Experiences may be *of* physical objects, but the *contents* of experiences are sense-data. As he expressly states, what we »directly see and feel is merely ›appearance‹,« so that even in cases where perceptual contents correctly represent the corresponding properties of physical objects, our epistemic access remains confined to the subjective sphere of sense-data. This opens up the possibility of radical scepticism. The ontological gap between appearance and reality may be so deep as to be unbridgeable since the connection between sense-data and physical objects is only contingent. Thus, it comes as no surprise that Russell is not only concerned with the question whether appearances accurately reflect their objects but also whether they represent anything at all. It may very well be, so the argument goes, that there is nothing outside our epistemic life of sense-data:

> Thus, when we are trying to show that there must be objects independent of our own sense-data, we cannot appeal to the testimony of other people, since this testimony itself consists of sense-data, and does not reveal other people's experiences unless our own sense-data are signs of things existing independently of us. We must therefore, if possible, find, in our own purely private experiences, characteristics which show, or tend to show, that there are in the world things other than ourselves and our private experiences.[10]

Russell concedes right from the outset the impossibility of proving the existence of physical objects in addition to sense-data. Although our private experiences, our thoughts and feelings, enjoy the status of epistemic certainty, they can only serve as a relatively secure inference basis for what they are experiences of because there is not necessarily any connection between subjective experience and the object that is being experienced. Hence the distinction between sense-data and physical objects is consistent with a sceptical scenario in which there is only a world of sense-data. To fend off such sceptical manoeuvres, Russell appeals to common sense arguments and simplicity considerations. We are entitled to what he calls »instinctive beliefs«,[11] i.e.,

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[9] Cf. Gabriel 2020, ch. 5. Paradigmatically, Descartes' *dream argument* and his *evil demon argument* are designed to achieve precisely that.

[10] Russell PP, 10.

[11] Russell PP, 11.

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reasonable assumptions of explanatory value arrived at without irrefutable evidence. For example, the simplest explanation for the fact that I have the visual impression of a table in front of me, or of a cat passing by, is that there really is a table in front of me and there really is a cat passing by. Unless there is hard evidence to the contrary, we have no reason to doubt such common sense hypotheses. Thus, although sense-data cannot be invoked in a proof of the existence of physical objects, the certainty with which we can know them makes our experiences a »solid basis from which to begin our pursuit of knowledge.«[12]

A very similar rationale motivated the members of the Vienna Circle in their search for an epistemic foundation. Taking a linguistic turn, they debated vigorously whether it was possible to identify a certain class of sentences that registered pure facts and were thereby particularly suitable to serve as a basis for scientific knowledge. This class of sentences became known as »protocol sentences« or »observation sentences.« As Moritz Schlick, one of the debate's main participants, puts it:

> ›Protocol sentences,‹ as the term indicates, were originally thought to be those sentences that state the *facts* with absolute simplicity, and without shaping, modifying or adding anything, which are the subject matter of all science and which precede every claim about the world and all knowledge.[13]

Otto Neurath, another important member of the Vienna Circle, gives the following example of a protocol sentence: »In the room, at 3:15 AM, there was a table perceived by Otto.«[14] And Rudolf Carnap—the third central figure in the debate besides Schlick and Neurath—defines protocol sentences as descriptions of »the immediate contents of experience or phenomena, that is of the most simple, discernible facts.«[15] It should be noted that these are just some of the different kinds of examples discussed in the Vienna Circle and that the protocol sentence controversy was far more complex and multi-faceted than is

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12 Russell PP, 8.

13 Schlick, Moritz: Über das Fundament der Erkenntnis (1934), quoted in Stöltzner/Uebel 2006, 431. All translations of quotes from this volume were done by me.

14 Neurath, Otto: Protocol sentences (1932), quoted in Stöltzner/Uebel 2006, 403.

15 Carnap, Rudolf: Die physikalische Sprache als Universalsprache der Wissenschaft (1932), quoted in Stöltzner/Uebel 2006, 322.

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often assumed. Carnap alone, for example, developed four different conceptions of protocol sentences.[16]

Now, Schlick has laid out clearly the semantics of protocol sentences. He starts by distinguishing them from what he calls »affirmations« (»Konstatierungen«), specified as a class of sentences reporting first-person perceptions such as »Here now such and such,« »Here now yellow is bordering blue,« and »Here now pain.«[17] In general, affirmations »express a fact registered by one's own ›perception‹ or ›experience‹ *in the present*.«[18] The modifier »in the present« is particularly important because it is precisely this feature that distinguishes them from protocol sentences. The latter type of sentences, such as »In the room, at 3:15 AM, there was a table perceived by Otto,« represents a fallible hypothesis for Schlick because recording it involves memory. Since memory is a notoriously fallible source of information and prone to error, protocol sentences can be subjected to doubt. Affirmations of the present, on the other hand, cannot sensibly be doubted. The deeper reason for this is that, whereas understanding and verifying a sentence are separate operations regarding most empirical sentences, in the case of affirmations they coincide: »by grasping their sense I simultaneously grasp their truth.«[19] Thus, Schlick maintains it would be as nonsensical to concede the possibility of error for affirmations like »Here now pain« as it would be for tautologies such as »It is either raining or not.« In this regard, affirmations are also more like analytic sentences but with the added bonus of possessing empirical import providing us with knowledge about the world.

However, and despite his conception of affirmations as indubitable expressions of first-person experiences, Schlick has no intention to make use of them to build an epistemic foundation. On the contrary, Schlick has no illusions about the epistemological value of his affirmations in particular and of observation sentences in general:

> Hopefully, it has become clear that what is essential here is the mark of the present, which is congenial to the observation sentences, and to

[16] For more historical context of the philosophical topics of the Vienna Circle cf. the comprehensive introduction in the volume by Stöltzner/Uebel 2006. For the protocol sentence controversy in particular cf. LVI-LX.

[17] Schlick in Stöltzner/Uebel 2006, 442.

[18] Schlick in Stöltzner/Uebel 2006, 442.

[19] Schlick in Stöltzner/Uebel 2006, 451.

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> which they owe their value as well as their uselessness: their value of absolute validity and their uselessness as a lasting foundation.[20]

Why does Schlick take this surprising stance? Once again, the decisive point here is connected to the aspect of time. According to Schlick, there are, strictly speaking, no genuine reports of affirmations. Affirmations are reports of first-person experiences *in the present*, which require the use of indexicals such as »here« and »now.« For Schlick, the ostensive gestures accompanying the use of indexicals (e.g., pointing to something) are part of the identity conditions of affirmations. But as soon as the affirmation is recorded, the indexicals have lost their meaning because now they are used outside the context of a first-person experience, to which they owed their particular character in the first place: »A real affirmation can never be written down, for as soon as I record the deictic words ›here‹ and ›now‹, they lose their meaning.«[21]

3. Wittgenstein on the Language of Time and the Language of Solipsism

Throughout his philosophical career Wittgenstein battled the idea of solipsism in its various guises.[22] As already indicated in the introduction, the intensity with which he was preoccupied with this issue has to do with the fact that he himself was not entirely immune to the appeal of this philosophical idea. As Moore recalls:

> As regards Solipsism and Idealism he said that he himself had been often tempted to say ›All that is real is the experience of the present moment‹ or ›All that is certain is the experience of the present moment‹; and that any one who is at all tempted to hold Idealism or Solipsism knows the temptation to say ›The only reality is the present experience‹ or ›the only reality is *my* present experience‹.[23]

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[20] Schlick in Stöltzner/Uebel 2006, 451.

[21] Schlick in Stöltzner/Uebel 2006, 452. For systematic considerations concerning indexicals and their relation to the concept of time cf. Sturma 2001, particularly 180–184.

[22] For a systematic account of Wittgenstein's arguments against solipsism cf. Hacker 1986, ch. VIII.

[23] Moore 1955, 15.

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Against the backdrop of the historical and philosophical context provided in the previous section the motivation and allure of solipsism should now be more transparent. Sceptical manoeuvres undermined our confidence in the reliability of our perceptual faculties and exposed the fragility of our epistemic access to the world. The increasing pressure of the sceptical onslaught provoked a search for an epistemic foundation to address this problem. This search basically assumed the form of a rearguard action. Forced to concede that there is no epistemic certainty regarding the sphere of physical objects and other persons besides oneself, Russell retreated to the sphere of sense-data, in which knowledge at least of one's own private experiences was said to be certain. However, as the protocol sentence controversy made clear, not even the sphere of private experiences turned out to be an epistemic safe haven. Since memory is a fallible source of information, the recollection of past experiences is just as much subject to doubt as are representations of the external world. Hence the sphere in which knowledge was possible had to be limited once more, this time to the *present* experiences of a single person. As a last resort, one might indeed be tempted to say that all that is certain and real are one's own present experiences—hence the solipsism of the present moment.

Of course, the most famous argument targeted at solipsism is the so-called *private language argument* in the *Philosophical Investigations*. But the fight against solipsism figures prominently in many phases of Wittgenstein's philosophical development, making an appearance at least as early as 1916 in his *Notebooks*.[24] From then onwards it resurfaces frequently as a philosophical challenge Wittgenstein takes on again and again. However, his treatment of solipsism—and his method of doing philosophy in general—differs significantly from the approaches of other philosophers.

Russell treats solipsism as an empirical statement put forward by a radical sceptic, a statement capable of being true or false. He concedes the possibility that life is nothing but a dream, that the external world comprising physical objects and other persons may be nothing but the figment of a sole person's imagination. Russell's response to this sceptical scenario is simply to point out that there are no good reasons to believe this statement to be true. Therefore, according to Russell, we are entitled to discard it, building our world view bottom up with private experiences as epistemic foundation.

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[24] Cf. Wittgenstein NB, 82 (Entry from 2 September 1916).

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In a similar manner, Schlick considers observation sentences »absolutely fixed points,«[25] although he has a different conception of the role they can play with respect to science. He does not believe they can be used to form an epistemic foundation due to their fallibility. Only affirmations—i.e., reports of first-person present experiences—possess the mark of infallibility. But since this mark derives from the fact that affirmations are reports of immediate experiences of the here and now, affirmations lose this special character as soon as they are written down because then the indexicals used have already assumed a different meaning. Schlick, therefore, assigns to private experiences and the sentences that record them the opposite role than Russell does. For Schlick, observation sentences in general are not the starting point for scientific inquiries but rather their end point. Science makes predictions that are to be verified by experience. Observation sentences may not be suitable for an epistemic foundation, but they are an »absolute end«[26] for scientific inquiries.

Wittgenstein tackles the problem of solipsism from quite a different angle. In his *Notes for Lectures on »Private Experience« and »Sense Data«*—drafted in the mid-1930s—he already addressed the problem of solipsism at some length. Wittgenstein is well aware of the primary motivation of introducing private experiences of sense-data, which is one of the routes leading to solipsism: the possibility for physical objects to appear differently to different observers.[27] But while he does not deny this possibility, he cautions us to resist the temptation of solipsism and wonders instead whether it is possible »to imagine a philosophy that would be the diametrical opposite of solipsism.«[28] And even though Wittgenstein points out several problematic consequences of the notion of sense-data and of private experiences in general, he mainly focuses on questioning the under-

25 Schlick in Stöltzner/Uebel 2006, 448.

26 Schlick in Stöltzner/Uebel 2006, 448. Schlick's example is the following scientific prediction: If you look through a telescope at a certain time, you will see a spot of light in the crosshairs. This prediction can then be verified by an affirmation (i.e., by simply looking through the telescope at the specified time), which concludes the scientific task. Cf. Schlick in Stöltzner/Uebel 2006, 448.

27 Cf. Wittgenstein NL, 316.

28 Wittgenstein NL, 282. The analogy invoked in Wittgenstein's famous description, in the *Investigations*, of philosophy's aim as showing »the fly the way out of the fly-bottle« (Wittgenstein PI, § 309) already appears in the *Notes for Lectures*: »The solipsist flutters and flutters in the flyglass, strikes against the walls, flutters further. How can he be brought to rest?« (Wittgenstein NL, 300).

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lying philosophical misconception in which these notions are rooted. His diagnosis for the defect of solipsism is the mistaken belief that retreating to one's own sense-data and experiences is tantamount to leaving the public sphere behind entirely. It is to think of one's own mind as a private room to which no one else can have access, and that the language used to describe one's inner episodes and mental states can fully be understood only by oneself.

Against this picture Wittgenstein puts the utmost emphasis on what will become one of the major themes running through his writings, namely the public and social character of language use. That is why, in the *Notes for Lectures*, instead of denying the existence or usefulness of sense-data, Wittgenstein draws attention to the fact that even the language of the most private entities imaginable possess an interpersonal dimension:

> What we call a description of my sense datum, of what's seen, independent of what is the case in the physical world, is still a description for the other person.[29]

Observations like these are characteristic of the tectonic shift Wittgenstein wants to set in motion in our conception of language. In an attempt to clarify the workings of our language we ought to pay attention to the language games involving expressions and sentences themselves, rather than to the mental states of the persons playing the various language games:

> Why should I say the ›expression‹ derives its meaning from the feeling behind it—and not from the circumstances of the language game in which it is used?[30]

Now, with this shift away from private episodes to public language use when it comes to investigating the determination and source of semantic content the method of addressing philosophical problems changes as well. The consideration of the allegedly monologic and isolated mental life of a single person gives way to the examination of the rules governing the application of expressions shared by speech communities. Rules for the use of expressions in their entirety compose what Wittgenstein calls *grammar*, and they constitute and regulate the language games we play. Grammar forms an essential part of the structure of linguistic practices because it determines the limits of

29 Wittgenstein NL, 308.
30 Wittgenstein NL, 313.

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meaningful discourse. In combatting grammatical confusions, philosophy may therefore act as a »custodian of grammar,« which »can in fact grasp the essence of the world, only not in the propositions of language, but in rules for this language which exclude nonsensical combinations of signs.«[31]

As a consequence, philosophical theses and problems are approached by testing whether the conditions under which they are framed and articulated are consistent or conflict with the conditions set by grammar. Of course, this does neither entail that every philosophical problem is a grammatical problem nor that grammatical investigations exhaust the philosophical toolkit for solving them. At least, however, it is a legitimate starting point for getting a grip on the particular nature of a given problem in the first place.

With these methodological considerations in mind we can now turn to Wittgenstein's argument against the solipsism of the present moment. It can be found in a short and dense chapter in his *Remarks*, which is concerned more generally with the concept of time. First, he describes the muddled situation holding the solipsist captive by comparing it to the relation between a film strip and the film projected on the screen:

> If I compare the facts of immediate experience with the pictures on the screen and the facts of physics with pictures in the film strip, on the film strip there is a present picture and past and future pictures. But on the screen, there is only the present.[32]

As spelled out in the previous section, the solipsist seeks epistemic comfort in his private experiences, which Wittgenstein equates to a metaphorical film screen. There may or may not be an external world outside the film theatre, so the solipsist reasons, but that there is a film playing on the private screen is certain, if anything is. Wittgenstein tries to expose the solipsist's position as inconsistent by pointing out a confusion in the concept of time involved in taking it. A few paragraphs after introducing the film metaphor Wittgenstein presents a response to the solipsist including an argument against it, as well as a diagnosis of its root cause. The following passage contains his response in a nutshell:

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31 Wittgenstein PR, V, 54. For Wittgenstein's conception of grammar cf. Forster 2004.
32 Wittgenstein PR, V, 51.

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> We are tempted to say: only the experience of the present moment has reality. And then the first reply must be: As opposed to what? […] The proposition that only the present experience has reality appears to contain the last consequence of solipsism. […] If someone says, only the *present experience* has reality, then the word ›present‹ must be redundant here, as the word ›I‹ in other contexts. For it cannot mean *present* as opposed to past and future. Something else must be meant by the word, something that isn't *in* space, but is itself a space. That is to say, not something bordering on something else (from which it could therefore be limited off).[33]

There is a lot to unpack here. In keeping with his philosophical method characterised above, Wittgenstein tries to pin down what exactly the solipsist is claiming in saying that only the present moment or the present experience is real since the solipsist's use of the term seems to deviate from how it would ordinarily be used. The usual meaning of »present« derives a substantive part of its semantic content *in contrast* to other expressions of time, particularly expressions such as »past« and »future.« Roughly, part of the grammar of »past,« »present,« and »future« seems to be such that these expressions share a range of objects to which they can be, in principle, meaningfully applied. That is to say, if it is meaningful to talk of present moments and experiences, then it is as meaningful to talk of past and future moments and experiences.[34]

However, the solipsist is apparently not using the expression »present« according to its ordinary meaning. Rather than merely privileging present experiences and singling them out from all possible kinds of experiences, including past and future ones, the solipsist wants to make a stronger claim. As Wittgenstein notes in his *Cambridge Lectures*: »A person who says the present experience alone is real is not stating an empirical fact, comparable to the fact that Mr. S. always wears a brown suit.«[35] At first sight, the property attributions in both cases seem similar. Just as Mr. S. is said to possess the property of always wearing a brown suit, the solipsist claims real experiences possess the property of always being present experiences. But the property attributions are actually categorically different. In the case of Mr. S. there is the genuine possibility for him to wear suits of a different colour; it just so happens that Mr. S.—for whatever reason

33 Wittgenstein PR, V, 54.
34 Cf. Rizzo 2016, 138.
35 Wittgenstein WL, 25.

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—always wears brown ones. The solipsist, on the other hand, does not admit the possibility of real experiences possessing the properties of past or future. Past and future experiences do not even qualify as candidates for being real experiences. There is simply no contrast involved among real experiences because there is only one category: present experiences.[36]

Wittgenstein illustrates his point metaphorically. The solipsist would take the meaning of the expression »present« to be a space itself, as opposed to something being *in* a space. The usual meanings of »present,« »past,« and »future« jointly constitute a semantic space by mutually determining their contents. The solipsist, however, obliterates precisely this contrast from which the respective expressions of time derived their particular content in the first place, leaving the expression »present« without the semantic foil against which it is thrown into relief. As a result, »present« loses its usual meaning. That is also why Wittgenstein observes that in the claim »Only the present experience has reality,« the expression »present« must be redundant, for the solipsist conceives of »present« as an analytic component of »experience.« In the solipsist's mouth, the meaning of »present« has transformed from a contingent into a necessary property of real experiences, because it is impossible for them not to possess it. Therefore, the solipsist's claim »Only the present experience is real« cannot be an empirical statement, since empirical statements are contingent. They always allow for the possibility for things to be other than stated.

The semantic principle Wittgenstein implicitly appeals to in this passage of the *Remarks* also plays a decisive role in some of his other arguments against solipsism in particular and private language in general. The semantic principle in question is expressed by what I have called elsewhere the *contingency requirement*: for statements to be meaningful they must be contingent in that they express states of affairs that could be otherwise.[37] He already made use of this principle in the *Tractatus* and it resurfaces in the *Remarks*.[38] It formulates a basic requirement for meaningful discourse, violation of which results in nonsense. Tautologies form an important exception. Although they do possess the property of always being true, they do not

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36 Cf. Hacker 1986, 231.

37 Bartmann 2021, 53.

38 Cf. Wittgenstein TLP, 5.634: »Whatever we can describe at all could be other than it is.« Cf. Wittgenstein PR, V, 54: »Language can only say those things that we can also imagine otherwise.«

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involve the contrast between true and false simply because they cannot be false. However, tautologies are »senseless« rather than nonsensical for they attribute necessary or logical properties to the objects they refer to.

Now, Wittgenstein's contingency requirement explains why he considers it just as misleading to assert the claim »Only the present experience has reality« as well as to deny it:

> And the person who objects to the assertion that the present alone is real with ›Surely the past and future are just as real‹ somehow does not meet the point. Both statements mean nothing.[39]

The reason why the assertion or denial of the solipsist's claim is futile is that the semantic conditions required for meaningfully asserting or denying the claim are in conflict with the solipsist's main premise. For the claim »Only the present experience has reality« to be meaningful, it would have to be intelligible for »present« either to apply or not to apply to »experience.« But this is being ruled out by the solipsist. Real experiences are thought of as necessarily possessing the property of being present, thereby excluding the possibility for real experiences not to possess that property. In doing so, the solipsist deprives the expression »present« of its usual context of use and transfers it into a new one in which it would have to retain its previous meaning in order to express the solipsist's intention. The solipsist wants to state something along the lines of: »Real worldly events may have taken place in the past. This cannot be known. What can be known is that, when it comes to experiences, present experiences are the only real ones.« What the solipsist does not realise is that the usual context of use establishes the semantic content of »present,« so that transferring it to another context in which the constitutive contrast to »past« and »future« is erased must result either in a change or even a loss of meaning. But then the entire meaning of »Only the present experience has reality« has been changed or lost, against the solipsist's intention. It is as if the solipsist took a piece of a puzzle and put into an entirely different puzzle, in which it may superficially seem to fit in, due to matching colour and form, but would represent a different content because it is now part of an entirely different picture.

In sum, the solipsist commits a semantic transmission error. Wittgenstein illustrates this error again with his film metaphor:

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[39] Wittgenstein WL, 25. Cf. also Wittgenstein PR,V, 56, where he says denying the solipsist's claim would be »just as wrong as to maintain it.«

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> The present we are talking about here [i.e., the solipsist's conception of ›present‹] is not the frame in the film reel that is in front of the projector's lens at precisely this moment, as opposed to the frames before and after it, which have already been there or are yet to come; but the picture on the screen which would illegitimately be called present, since ›present‹ would not be used here to distinguish it from past and future. And so it is a meaningless epithet.[40]

However, the verdict of meaninglessness is not Wittgenstein's last word on the matter. Even though he considers the solipsist's position utterly misguided, he does not dismiss it altogether. He seems to be acknowledging a grain of truth in solipsism worth pursuing, because there is something peculiar about experience with respect to time after all, something the solipsist struggles to articulate but fails. The solipsist's mistake consists in employing our ordinary concept of time within a language game to which it does not belong because it is played according to substantially different rules. Wittgenstein's conclusion of the solipsist's transmission error, however, is not to demand uniformity in applying our ordinary concept of time across all language games, but rather to recognise and emphasise the characteristic differences of the meaning of »time« when considering experiences or physical events. The lesson Wittgenstein draws from the solipsist's confusion is therefore to acknowledge two different concepts of time involved in talking about physical events and immediate experiences:

> Perhaps this whole difficulty stems from taking the time concept from time in physics and applying it to the course of immediate experience. It's a confusion of the time of the film strip with the time of the picture it projects. For ›time‹ has one meaning when we regard memory as the source of time, and another when we regard it as a picture preserved from a past event.[41]

For the sake of argument, Wittgenstein characterises one sense of »memory« as a picture of a past physical event, and the faculty of memory in general as a kind of storage unit in which the recorded events are archived, even though he quickly points out the potential philosophical pitfalls of this simile. However, the purpose of this characterisation is to contrast the concept of physical time with the concept of time with regard to memories in particular, and representations in general—Wittgenstein treats the former as a species of the latter.

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40 Wittgenstein PR, V, 54.
41 Wittgenstein PR, V, 49.

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Now, the series of physical events corresponds to the film strip in the metaphor. And if our memory functions properly, then the temporal relations of the series of memories reflect the temporal relations of the series of physical events they recorded. The temporal relations of sooner and later, before and after thus constitute the concept of physical time. Wittgenstein then draws attention to quite a different concept of time, which is involved when memory is understood as »the source of time.« This sense of »time« applies to the projected picture in the metaphor, the film playing on screen. The projected picture represents the particular subjective perspective of an experiencing person.[42]

There are indeed substantive differences between both concepts of time. Whereas the temporal relations of worldly events can be fixed independently, past, present, and future experiences can only be distinguished by reference to the perspective of someone to whom they belong. Of course, it would be nonsensical to say it were possible to experience past and future experiences. Even if it were somehow possible to relive a past experience, such that the present experience was qualitatively identical to the past one, it would still be an experience in the present. But this should not lead one to conclude, as the solipsist mistakenly does, that only present experiences are real. Instead, Wittgenstein recommends keeping apart the different concepts of time lest blending them together creates profound philosophical confusions:

> Both ways of talking are in order, and are equally legitimate, but cannot be mixed together. […]
> Thus we cannot use the concept of time, i.e. the syntactical rules that hold for the names of physical objects, in the world of representation, that is, not where we adopt a radically different way of speaking.[43]

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[42] Wittgenstein's distinction is reminiscent of McTaggart's famous distinction between the »A series« and the »B series« (McTaggart 1908, 458), although I cannot explore the extent of the similarities here. For an account of personal identity that takes into consideration subjective as well as objective time and that maintains the unity of reality without sacrificing the irreducibility of the subjective perspective of persons, cf. Sturma 2008, particularly 576–579.

[43] Wittgenstein PR, V, 49, transl. am. Wittgenstein's recommendation regarding the concept of time is a particular instance of his general strategy not to import terms of our ordinary language into the language of experience: »The worst philosophical errors always arise when we try to apply our ordinary—physical—language in the area of the immediately given. […] All our forms of speech are taken from ordinary, physical language and cannot be used in epistemology or phenomenology without casting a distorting light on their objects« (Wittgenstein PR, VI, 57).

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Finally, one may wonder whether Wittgenstein's epistemically dualist approach of distinguishing sharply between those two different concepts of time also has ontologically dualist consequences. Although Wittgenstein is always extremely cautious when it comes to ontological questions, his answer in this case seems to be clear:

> Memory and reality must be in one space. I could also say: representations and reality are in one space.[44]

As the film metaphor already suggests, the two concepts of time, different though they may be, are compatible with a basically monist view of reality. The projected picture on the screen and the film strip in the film reel exhibit characteristic differences, but it does not follow that there are actually two different films playing in the theatre—one film behind the other, if you will. Once more, this conception would lead right back to solipsism, and the film would start all over again.

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[44] Wittgenstein PR, III, 38, transl. am.

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