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Recommended Citation
(1994) "Editorial Board," Undergraduate Review: Vol. 7 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/rev/vol7/iss1/3

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A Case for Private Language

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A. J. Ayer, in his paper "Can There Be a Private Language?", argues that there are really two different ways for a language to be private. The first is a language in which the objects of the terms in the language are only subjectively accessible, a language of private sensation. This is the sense of private language he feels most philosophers have taken in the debate over the possibility of private language. The way Ayer wishes to interpret private language is as a language which is developed and used by a single speaker, where the terms can refer to objects which are externally observable as well as to objects which are only subjectively accessible. To distinguish this sense of a private language, I shall call it a solitary language and oppose it to a language with more than one speaker, a social language. Ayer argues that a solitary language is logically possible and extrapolates from this that a language of private sensation might also be logically possible.

Ayer's defense of private and solitary language depends on his diffusing an argument from Wittgenstein on the impossibility of language of private sensation. Ayer relies on his arguments for the possibility of solitary language to do this. I think that Ayer has taken Wittgenstein's argument too strictly and that by extending the implications of Wittgenstein's argument it can be shown that a solitary language is epistemically impossible, at least in the fashion that is required by Ayer. I will show that while it might be logically or metaphysically possible for a solitary individual to devise a language, it is epistemically impossible for a solitary speaker to fix the terms of language to the degree required for it to qualify as a language for that speaker.

Wittgenstein's argument against the possibility of a private language is generally taken to be an argument against a language of private sensation. This interpretation takes it that a language of private sensation will be epistemically impossible because the references of the terms are not externally observable. I think that what his argument really amounts to is showing the epistemic impossibility of any solitary language, regardless of the observability of the referents. I think that Wittgenstein discusses private sensations because this is a clear example of a case of allegedly private meaning, where the referents are solipsistic. But Ayer points out that an individual such as Robinson Crusoe, if he were to shipwreck before having acquired a language, would be in a position to develop a language capable of describing