The Beetle in the Box

Suppose everyone had a box with something in it we call it a beetle. No one can look into anyone else’s box and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at his beetle. Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing. But suppose the word beetle has a use in these peoples language? If so it would not be used as a the name of a thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language game at all, not even as a something for the box might even be empty…it cancels out whatever it is.

What do you mean when you say ‘pain’? That’s obvious you might think: you are referring to a particular sensation to one among many things in your subjective experience. But the Austrian philosopher LW claims that this is not indeed cannot be what you are doing. He attempts to explain why by means of an analogy the beetle in the box. Think of your inner experience as a box whatever is in the box you call a beetle. Everyone has a box but they can only ever look into their own, never into anyone else’s. Everybody will use the world beetle when talking about the contents of their box yet it is perfectly possible that the various boxes contain different things or indeed nothing at all. By beetle people will simply mean whatever is in their box. And the actual contents will be irrelevant and have nothing
to do with the beetle itself whatever it may be `drops out of consideration. ` When we talk
about what is going on inside us we use language that is learned through public discourse
and is governed by public rules. Inner private sensations which are beyond scrutiny by
others can play no part in this essentially public activity; whatever these sensations actually
are, they have nothing to do with the meaning of words like pain.

The Private Language Argument.

The beetle in the box analogy is introduced by LW at eh end of one of the most influential
philosophical arguments of eh 20th century the so called Private Language Argument PLA.
Before LW a common and commonsense view of language was that words get their
meaning by representing or standing for things in eh world; words are denotive they are
basically labels that designate things by being attached to them. In the case of sensations
such as pain so the theory goes, the labelling process happens by some form of
introspection, in which a particular mental event or experience is identified and associated
with a particular word. Furthermore for philosophers such as Descartes and Locke who
followed the way of ideas according to which all our contact with the world is mediated by
inner representations or ideas the meaning of all language must ultimately be dependent on
an inner process in which every word is matched up with some or other mental object. The point of the PLA is to deny that words could ever get their meaning in that way.

Suppose LW invites us to imagine that you decide to record every occurrence of a particular sensation by writing down in a diary the letter S where S is a purely private sign meaning this sensation I am having now. How can you tell on a subsequent occasion whether you have applied the sign correctly? The only thing that made the designation right the first time was your decision that it should be so, but the only thing that makes it right on a subsequent occasion is the decision you make at that time. In other words you can decide what you like if the designation seems right, it is right and that only means that here we can’t talk about right. There is no independent criterion of correctness LW concludes, nothing outside ones private subjective experience to act as s standard; it is like someone protesting `But I know how tall I am` and laying his hand on top of his head to prove it. Since there is no non arbitrary way of telling whether a private sign has been applied correctly or not such a sign can have no meaning and a language made up of such signs a Private language, would be meaningless unintelligible even to its own speaker.

Meaning Through Use
So words do not and cannot get their meaning in the way that the inner process model shows. So how do they get their meaning? Naturally enough having demonstrated the impossibility of a Private Language LW insists on the necessity of a public language— that words have meaning `only in the stream of life`. Far from being some mysterious process hidden within us, the meaning of language instead lies at the surface in the detail of the use to which we put it.

The mistake is to suppose that we should discover the use and purpose of language and then probe deeper to unearth as an additional fact its meaning. Meaning is something that is established between language users agreement on the meaning of a word is essentially agreement on its application. Language is public; woven seamlessly into the fabric of lives that people live together; to share a language is to share a culture of beliefs and assumptions and to share a common outlook on the world.

To elaborate this idea of meaning in use LW introduces the notion of a language game. Mastery of language resides in being able to make apt and skilful use of words and expressions in various contests from narrowly defined technical fields to the broadest social arenas. Each of these different contexts broad an narrow constitutes a different language
game in which a specific set of rules applies these rules are not right or wrong but may be more or less appropriate to a particular function or purpose in life.