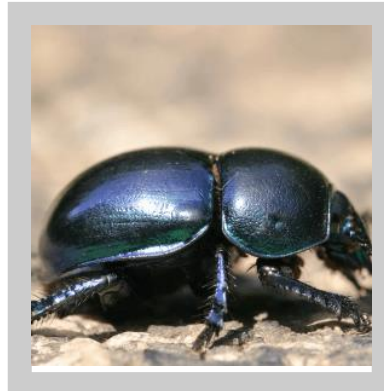


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## A Beetle in a Box

In his thought-provoking work *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein uses an easily conceptualized scenario in an attempt to clarify some of the problems involved in thinking about the mind as something over and above the behaviors that it produces. Imagine, he says, that everyone has a small box in which they keep a beetle. No one is allowed to look in anyone else's box, only in their own. Over time, people talk about what is in their boxes and the word "beetle" comes to stand for what is in everyone's box.



Through this curious example, Wittgenstein attempts to point out that the beetle is very much like an individual's mind; no one can know exactly what it is like to be another person or experience things from another's perspective—look in someone else's "box"—but it is generally assumed that the mental workings of other people's minds are very similar to that of our own (everyone has a "beetle" that is more or less similar to everyone else's). However, it does not really matter, he argues, what is in the box or whether everyone indeed has a beetle, since there is no way of checking or comparing. In a sense, the word "beetle"—if it is to have any sense or meaning—simply means "what is in the box." From this point of view, the mind is simply "what is in the box," or rather "what is in your head."

Wittgenstein argues that although we cannot know what it is like to be someone else, to say that there must be a special mental entity called a mind that makes our experiences private, is wrong. His rationale is that he considers language to have meaning because of public usage. In other words, when we talk of having a mind—or a beetle—we are using a term that we have learned through conversation and public discourse (rooted in natural language). The word might be perceived differently in each of our minds, but we all agree that it signifies something; this allows us to develop language for talking about conceptualizations like color, mood, size, and shape. Therefore, the word "mind" cannot be used to refer specifically to some entity outside of our individualized conception, since we cannot see into other people's boxes.