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A Tale of Two Problems: Wittgenstein's Discussion of Aspect Perception

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Between 1946 and 1949 Wittgenstein occupied himself intensely with the topic of aspect perception or seeing-as. It is one of his main concerns in the typescripts and manuscripts that have now been published as *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* and *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, and it is discussed at considerable length in the selection of remarks Wittgenstein culled from those volumes in 1949 (MS 144; TS 234), and which was eventually printed under the title 'Part II' of *Philosophical Investigations*.¹ Half a century later it is probably still true to say that 'Wittgenstein's treatment of aspect perception continues to be one of the least explored and least understood of the major themes in his later philosophy'.²

In his 1949 selection Wittgenstein begins the discussion of aspect perception with the following distinction:

Two uses of the word 'see'.

The one: 'What do you see there?'—'I see *this*' (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: 'I see a likeness in these two faces'—let the man to whom I tell this be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself.

What is important is the categorial difference between the two 'objects' of sight.

¹ In the 4th edition of the *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009) this text is renamed *Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment* (abbreviated 'PPF') and the remarks are numbered. Hence what used to be *PI* II. xi (pp. 193–229) is now: PPF §§111–366. My references will be to this new edition, followed by the page numbers from the old one: *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, 2nd edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).

² S. Mulhall, 'Seeing Aspects', in H. J. Glock (ed.), *Wittgenstein: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), p. 246.

I observe a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience ‘noticing an aspect’. (PPF §§111, 113; p. 193)

Seeing a likeness between two faces [A], however, is only the first of a number of examples Wittgenstein considers. Others are:

- (B) Seeing a geometrical drawing as a glass cube or as an inverted open box, or as three boards forming a solid angle (PPF §116; p. 193); or again, seeing a triangle as a triangular hole, as a solid, as a geometrical drawing; as standing on its base, as hanging from its apex; as a mountain, as a wedge, as an arrow or pointer, as an overturned object which is meant, for example, to stand on the shorter sight of the right angle, as a half parallelogram, etc. (PPF §162; p.200).
- (C) Seeing an ambiguous puzzle picture in one way, e.g. seeing a rabbit’s head in what at first glance looks just like the drawing of a duck’s head (PPF §118; p. 194); or a human figure where there were previously branches (PPF §131; p. 196).
- (D) Suddenly recognizing a familiar object in an unusual position or lighting (PPF §141; p. 197); or recognizing an old acquaintance (PPF §§143–4; p. 197).
- (E) Seeing three-dimensionally (PPF §148; p. 198).
- (F) Seeing a sphere in a picture as floating in the air (PPF §169; p. 201); or seeing a horse in a picture as galloping (PPF §175; p. 202).
- (G) Aspects of organization: seeing a row of four equidistant dots either as two groups of two dots or as two dots in the middle bracketed by a dot on each side (cf. PPF §§220–1; p. 208).

What is the point of Wittgenstein’s persistent discussion of such cases? Whence this tenacious interest in those phenomena?

1. Continuous and Episodic Aspect Perception

It is true that in the course of Wittgenstein’s discussion of seeing-as certain philosophical theories of visual perception are criticized and rejected; but, as Stephen Mulhall rightly notes, the attraction and defects of those theories, however important to bring out, cannot fully explain Wittgenstein’s abiding fascination with the topic. According to Mulhall’s own interpretation, Wittgenstein wants to teach us that aspect perception is a ubiquitous phenomenon: everything we perceive, we perceive in its relevant aspects: in a picture we immediately see what it represents and respond to it accordingly,

just as we always see artefacts as what they are for us, what roles they play in our lives, or again, we generally experience words as having a certain meaning. That is, we always take up the attitude towards objects that Heidegger calls *readiness-to-hand* [*Zuhandenheit*].³

There is indeed textual support for Mulhall's interpretation. Wittgenstein emphasizes the distinction between knowledge of an aspect—say, what a picture represents—and actually seeing it:

When should I call it just knowing, not seeing?—Perhaps when someone treats the picture as a working drawing, *reads* it like a blueprint. (PPF §192; p. 204)

That is *not* our attitude towards a portrait or a photograph. We do not just read off it some information about the visual appearance of a person, we see the person in the picture:

we *view* the photograph, the picture on our wall, as the very object (the man, landscape and so on) represented in it. (PPF §197; p. 205)

Of course, that is not to say that we uncritically accept every portrait as accurate. We may, for example, have grave doubts whether Shakespeare really looked like the man in the Flower portrait. Wittgenstein's point, however, is that when looking at that portrait we see a man with a moustache (the picture's 'internal subject'),⁴ and don't just apprehend pieces of information about the appearance of a man, e.g. that he has a moustache. It is noteworthy that here Wittgenstein applies the 'seeing-as' locution to ordinary and unambiguous pictures, and not only to puzzle pictures that can be seen first as one thing and then as another. In the latter case we may suddenly notice new aspects (which 'light up'), whereas the former can be called the 'continuous seeing' of an aspect (PPF §118; p. 194). Mulhall's claim is that in spite of the fact that most of the time Wittgenstein appears to discuss cases of aspect change, the concept of *continuous* aspect perception—and the general attitude it characterizes—is his real concern.⁵ The same view was expressed some twenty years earlier by P. F. Strawson:

the striking case of the *change* of aspects merely dramatizes for us a feature (namely seeing as) which is present in perception in general.⁶

³ S. Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 1990), pp. 15–28, 106 ff., 126 ff.; cf. Mulhall, 'Seeing Aspects'. Cf. M. Heidegger, *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927], trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), §15, p. 98.

⁴ Cf. J. Hyman, 'Language and Pictorial Art', in D. E. Cooper (ed.), *A Companion to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 261–8; p. 263.

⁵ Mulhall, 'Seeing Aspects', p. 255.

⁶ P. F. Strawson, 'Imagination and Perception', in his *Freedom and Resentment* (London: Methuen, 1974), p. 58.

This interpretation may be strengthened further by the following: It is no coincidence that Wittgenstein begins the discussion of aspect perception in his 1949 selection of remarks (PPF) with the case of seeing a likeness, because all the other examples can be regarded as variations of this theme. Aspect perception, in general, involves noticing a similarity. 'In all those cases one can say that one experiences a *comparison*' (RPP I §317). An object is seen as a variation, or derivation, or copy, of another one (RPP I §508). When I see something *as X* I am aware of a similarity between it and X, be it a glass cube, the head of a rabbit, or a galloping horse.⁷ But then, it can be argued that virtually *all* seeing is or involves seeing resemblances. When I see a tree, for example, and realize that it is a tree, I see its resemblance with other trees. In general, seeing that something is of a certain kind involves seeing its likeness, in relevant respects, with other, familiar, objects of that kind. And even when looking at an arrangement of shapes and colours I cannot make out what it is or represents, I will at least be able to identify certain shapes and colours, which again means: seeing in what way they are like other shapes and colours I've seen before. To the extent to which 'to see' is a verb of epistemic success, every seeing involves identification of kinds of objects or appearances, which means seeing them as similar to others of that kind.⁸

It is true that Wittgenstein mentions the inappropriateness of saying 'Now I see it as . . .' in cases of ordinary perception. For example, as long as I haven't realized the ambiguity of the duck-rabbit drawing, but simply see it as the drawing of a duck's head, the 'seeing as' locution would make as little sense for me as to say at the sight of a knife and fork 'Now I see this as a knife and fork'. Nevertheless someone else could correctly say of me: 'He sees the picture as a duck' (PPF §§120–2; pp. 194 f.). Similarly, although normally with a conventional picture or photograph there is no question of seeing it *as* something, and so the expression is out of place, the question can be raised when, by way of contrast, one considers anomalous attitudes towards a picture. Thus, Wittgenstein imagines people who would be repelled by small black and white photographs, and would perhaps be unable to see human faces in them (PPF §198; p. 205). By contrast with such people we can then meaningfully say that '*we* view a portrait as a human being' (PPF §199; p. 205).⁹

⁷ When I recognize an old acquaintance, I see a resemblance between a face in front of me and one I remember. When I see three-dimensionally, I latch on to a resemblance between the visual appearance of what I see and the visual appearances of familiar three-dimensional objects.

⁸ This applies even if I can answer the question 'What do you see?' only by producing a drawing (cf. PPF §111b; p. 193). For in that case I am aware that what I see looks *like* this →.

⁹ Cf. Strawson, 'Imagination and Perception', p. 58.

However, there is a considerable number of passages in Wittgenstein that appear to contradict Mulhall's interpretation (and Strawson's claim). Not that Wittgenstein would have denied the ubiquity of aspect perception as a continuous, dispositional attitude; it is only that there are many parts of the discussion where that is clearly not his main interest. The contrast between two different concepts of seeing-as—one dispositional, one episodic—is brought out in the following remark:

I say: 'We view a portrait as a human being'—when do we do so, and for how long? *Always*, if we see it at all (and don't, say, see it as something else)?

I might go along with this, and thereby determine the concept of viewing a picture.—The question is whether yet another concept, related to this one, also becomes important to us: that, namely, of a seeing-as which occurs only while I am actually concerning myself with the picture as the object represented. (PPF §199; p. 205)

The answer to this question is clearly: yes. The concept of an ephemeral *experience* (*Erlebnis*) of seeing-as—as opposed to a general attitude—plays a prominent role in Wittgenstein's thoughts:

The phenomenon we are talking about is the lighting up of an aspect. (LW I §429)

Of aspect perception in this episodic sense Wittgenstein says that it is essentially an 'unstable state' (RPP II §540).¹⁰ Only in the change of aspect does one become *conscious* of an aspect (LW I §169). And it is this sudden experience of change, Wittgenstein says, that he is interested in (LW I §173). The experience of aspect perception is like the experience of recognition, which also does not last all the time I know who somebody is. Wittgenstein draws this analogy with recognition in a lecture:

Do I always see a thing *as* something, although only puzzle-pictures bring this out? . . .

Suppose I show it to a child. The child says, 'It's a duck' and then suddenly, 'Oh it's a rabbit.' So he recognizes it as a rabbit. This is an experience of recognition. So if you see me in the street and say, 'Ah, Wittgenstein.' But you haven't an experience of recognition all the time. The experience only comes at the moment of *change* from duck to rabbit and back. In between, the aspect is as it were dispositional. . . .

Geach: Couldn't I say at any time how I see it—not just when it changes?

Wittgenstein: Only if you are concentrating on it. . . . (LPP 103–4)

Thus, although Wittgenstein is prepared to speak of continuous aspect perception when using the term in a dispositional sense, in other passages, using the term in an episodic sense, as denoting a particular experience, he denies the ubiquity of aspect perception (RPP I §§24, 860; LW I §§170, 454). *Pace*

¹⁰ Cf. LW I §§438, 518, 588; RPP I §1021; PPF §237; p. 210.

Strawson, the feature that interested Wittgenstein in aspect change is not present in perception in general.

Aspect perception is concept-laden. Seeing something as an *X* presupposes mastery of the concept of an *X*. For example to see a row of six equidistant dots as two groups of three dots requires familiarity with the concept of a group of things, of things 'belonging together' (PPF §221; p. 208). And only someone who has mastered the psychological concept of happiness can see a circle with two dots and four curved lines in it as a happy face. Thus a logical condition of one's having an experience of aspect perception is that one has mastered a certain technique (PPF §§222–4; pp. 208–9). This is something that struck Wittgenstein as paradoxical:

But how odd for this to be the logical condition of someone's having such-and-such an *experience!* After all, you don't say that one only 'has toothache' if one is capable of doing such-and-such. (PPF §223; p. 208)

Here, again, it is very clear that (*pace* Mulhall) Wittgenstein is concerned with the concept of a *momentary experience* of seeing-as; for the observation that mastery of a technique should manifest itself, dispositionally, in—and be presupposed by—a certain attitude towards a picture is not in the same way puzzling.

In short, Wittgenstein appears to shift between two different accounts of aspect perception, and Mulhall's interpretation may well fit one account, but not the other one. The fact is, I think, that Wittgenstein occupied himself with two connected, but distinct conceptual problems in this area and was not always careful to keep them separate, moving from one to the other and back again. The two problems are:

- (1) Are visual aspects (resemblances) actually *seen* or are they only *thought* of in an interpretation?
- (2) How (or in what sense) is it possible to *experience* an aspect (a thought, the meaning of a picture) in an instant?¹¹

I shall try to unravel the discussion, especially in the relevant sections in the 1949 typescript on philosophy of psychology, by expounding those two discussions in turn.

¹¹ It has been suggested that Wittgenstein's main concern in discussing aspect change was to dissolve the following paradox: 'when looking at a picture-object we can come to see it differently, although we also see that the object itself remains unchanged. It seems to have changed and yet seems not to have changed' (H.-J. Glock, *A Wittgenstein Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 37; cf. Mulhall, 'Seeing Aspects', p. 247). However, if this is a paradox, it is dissolved at the very beginning of the discussion by Wittgenstein's remark that there are two uses of the word 'see' and hence two 'objects' of sight (PPF §111; p. 193). Once we note this ambiguity it is not surprising that what we see (in one sense) can change while what we see (in another sense) remains the same. What remains puzzling, of course, is that in the former case, too, we use the word 'see'; which is what I presented as problem (1).

2. Seeing or Interpreting?

(1) Are visual aspects actually *seen* or are they only *thought* of in an interpretation? (PPF §§140, 144, 148, 149, 169, 175, 181 f., 187, 190, 248.) Of course we commonly *say* that we see aspects (as the opening remark PPF §111, quoted above, shows), but one may suspect that that is only a conventional figure of speech, a derivative (metonymical) use of the word ‘see’ (PPF §169; p. 201; cf. §190; p. 204). Just as one speaks of marrying money, although of course one does not literally marry money, but rather a rich spouse (LW I §765). Again, consider Wittgenstein’s analogy with the phenomenon of ‘secondary meaning’: Under certain circumstances we are prepared to apply colour words to vowels (PPF §177; p. 202); or the words ‘fat’ and ‘meagre’ to days of the week (PPF §§274–8; p. 216). But we are always prepared to add that this is just a quirk of language: of course the letter ‘e’ is not *really* yellow; and Wednesday is not really fat. Similarly, it might be held that an aspect is not really seen, but only thought of or associated with one’s vision. Thus, Berkeley insists ‘that the ideas of space, outness, and things placed at a distance, are not, strictly speaking, the object of sight’.¹² All we actually see are configurations of colour; anything else can only be ‘suggested to the mind by the mediation of some other *idea* which is itself perceived in the act of seeing’.¹³

Against Berkeley and, more generally, against the view that aspects are only interpretations Wittgenstein makes the following points:

(i) ‘To interpret is to think, to do something; seeing is a state’ (PPF §248; p. 212). That is, seeing has genuine duration: one can ask for how long one saw the drawing as a duck before it changed to a rabbit, whereas it sounds incongruous to ask for the duration of an interpretation (LPP 330).¹⁴

(ii) ‘When we interpret we form hypotheses, which may prove false’, whereas “‘I see this figure as a . . .’” can be verified as little as (or only in the same sense as) “‘I see a bright red’” (PPF §249; p. 212).—This, however, is problematic. For one thing, seeing too tends to involve taking something to be true, which may conceivably turn out to be false (e.g. if it is an illusion or hallucination). And my seeing-as can also turn out to be true or false: for instance, when in the dark I see as a suspicious human figure what in truth

¹² G. Berkeley, *An Essay Towards a New Theory of Vision* [1709], in *A New Theory of Vision and other writings* (London: Dent 1969), §46; cf. LPP 109.

¹³ Berkeley, *New Theory*, §16; cf. PPF §211; p. 207: ‘[In aspect perception] it is as if an *idea* came into contact, and for a time remained in contact, with the visual impression’.

¹⁴ Cf. RPP I §§882, 1025; RPP II §§43, 388. Note, however, that this criterion is not as easily applicable to the dispositional sense of ‘seeing-as’, discussed above.

is only a bush. Or, to take one of Wittgenstein's examples, I suddenly seem to recognize an old friend, seeing his former face in an older one (PPF §143; p. 197)—but then it turns out that it wasn't him after all. Of course, seeing something *as X* need not involve any belief that it actually *is X*, but then, similarly, one can retreat from hypothesizing to mere imagining. That is, both on the side of vision and on the side of thinking one can distinguish between taking something to be true and merely toying with an idea. Thus, the fact that many cases of seeing-as belong to the latter category may show that they cannot be construed as interpreting, yet, more importantly, it is not enough to set them apart from thinking and vindicate them as proper seeing.

(iii) If seeing something as *X* were only an interpretation (assertorical or fictional), superimposed on what is actually seen, it should be possible to describe what is actually seen, the uninterpreted data; but typically we cannot. Saying 'I see it as . . .' is not just an indirect description of the visual experience, that could be replaced by a more direct one. It is the most appropriate report of what I see (PPF §117; pp. 193f.; RPP I §318). Or, in some cases, it would perhaps be possible to replace the expression of an aspect perception (e.g. the three-dimensional impression of a landscape, or a facial expression) by a Berkeleian description in terms of mere colours and shapes, but only after special instruction and practice (PPF §148; p. 198; LPP 110).

(iv) As already explained above: when we see a picture as representing something, we do not *read* it like a blueprint, but respond to it as to the object represented (PPF §§192–9; pp. 204 f.). The aspect is directly perceived and not only thought or known to be there as the result of an interpretation. This experience of actual perception is also manifest in certain emphatic expressions, such as: 'The sphere [in the picture] seems to float', 'One sees it floating', 'It floats!' (PPF §169; p. 201), or, of an eye represented by a dot: 'See how it's looking!' (PPF §201; p. 205).

(v) Finally, as already noted, seeing-as is essentially noticing a resemblance, an internal relation between an object and other objects, real or imagined (PPF §247; p. 212). But the act of noticing a visual resemblance cannot be construed as distinct from that of seeing (the resemblance). Of course you can see the same object without noticing the resemblance, but the noticing (when it occurs while looking) is not a mental operation distinct from seeing. Rather, it *is* seeing (LW I §511).¹⁵

¹⁵ Could one notice a visual resemblance without seeing it? Yes, indirectly: When on two occasions I write down a description of what I've seen, and then later deduce from the similarity of the descriptions that the two objects must have looked alike in certain respects, although I didn't realize at the time. Again, by feeling two objects with my hands in the dark I may notice similarities in shape that could also be seen.

Those are the conceptual justifications for calling visual aspect perception ‘seeing’. The observation invoked in the last point (v)—namely that in aspect perception one experiences a comparison (RPP I §317)—serves also to dissolve two apparent objections to calling it ‘seeing’, which focus on the way aspect perception can change:

The first objection is that since when I suddenly see something differently (e.g. switch from seeing a drawing as a duck to seeing it as a rabbit) the object itself remains unchanged, the change can only be one of interpretation. The lighting up of an aspect is essentially a subjective experience (*Erlebnis*) and not a truthful cognition of an object; even though it is reported as if it were a visual perception (PPF §137; p. 197).

A second objection to accepting seeing-as as a proper case of seeing is that, unlike veridical perception, it is subject to the will. ‘There is such an order as . . . “Now see the figure like *this!*”; but not: “Now see this leaf green!”’ (PPF §256; p. 213; cf. RPP II §544).

However, once we appreciate the essentially relational character of aspect perception (i.e., that it involves an awareness of a resemblance between what is seen and something else (RPP I §317)), it is no wonder that aspects can change although the object remains the same; just as Socrates can without undergoing any intrinsic change be found first tall and then short—depending on whom we compare him with. And of course, respects of comparison can be changed at will. Nonetheless, aspect perception can be said to identify an objective feature of the object, namely a relation of likeness between it and some other object, even if the latter is arbitrarily chosen (PPF §254b; p. 213; cf. §247; p. 212). Hence, in as much as it picks out an actual resemblance it is of course a form of perception. Seeing-as is seeing all right, but a kind of seeing that is particularly concept-laden, typically more so than seeing shapes and colours.

That, however, was denied by the Gestalt psychologist Wolfgang Köhler, who argued that what we see, in the strictest sense of the word, is not only colours and shapes, but also ‘organization’. It is a ‘sensory fact’ that usually in our visual field the contents of certain areas ‘belong together’ as circumscribed units from which their surroundings are excluded.¹⁶ Thus, when we see a puzzle picture first as a duck, then as a rabbit, each time we experience a different ‘visual reality’. The aspect is seen just like shapes and colours.¹⁷

Wittgenstein disagreed with Köhler (cf. LPP 110). He was not in general opposed to saying that at the lighting up of a new aspect (when looking at

¹⁶ W. Köhler, *Gestalt Psychology* (London: G. Bell, 1930), p. 114.

¹⁷ Cf. LPP 100 ff.

a puzzle picture, for example) the ‘organization’ of one’s visual impression changes. The expression sounds phenomenologically apt enough. The question is, however, what exactly it is supposed to mean. If one regards the ‘organization’ as a feature on a par with colour and shapes (as a ‘visual reality’) one is treating the visual impression as an inner object, as some kind of mental representation (PPF §134; p. 196). The actual drawing remains the same, yet *something* in one’s vision changes; so that must be one’s inner picture. But note that a change of aspect is not an illusion: one is not under the wrong impression that the drawing does in fact change. Rather, the change of aspect goes together with an awareness that the drawing itself remains unchanged. Hence, if seeing it is construed in terms of awareness of an inner picture (one’s visual impression), that inner picture must both change its ‘organization’ and remain unchanged!

Of course, this makes this object chimerical; a strange vacillating entity. For the similarity to a picture is now impaired. (PPF §134; p. 196)

In fact, a visual impression is not a picture, nor can it always be accurately represented by a picture. For take any picture you like, it can always be seen in different ways. In other words, the way a picture is seen, cannot—on pain of an infinite regress—be determined by another picture; for that again could be seen in different ways, and so on and so forth. So, when after an aspect change my visual impression has a different ‘organization’, the pictures I draw to represent my visual impressions before and after the change may be the same (PPF §131; p. 196). Perhaps only a three-dimensional model could bring out the difference in visual impression (PPF §135; p. 196). ‘And this suffices’, Wittgenstein concludes, ‘to dispose of the comparison of “organisation” with colour and shape in the visual impression’ (PPF §136; p. 196). The colour and shapes in the visual field can always be represented by an image, whereas ‘organization’ cannot: sometimes it can only be represented by further means of expression, such as a three-dimensional model, or perhaps a description of what is seen in terms of concepts that are not literally applicable to the object (e.g. seeing a triangle as fallen over). What this brings out is that many aspects are not ‘organizational’ in Köhler’s sense: that is, seeing them requires not only taking certain elements of the visual impression together, as foreground, but essentially involves one’s imagination—surrounding the object with some fiction (PPF §234; p. 210)—and some knowledge of what other things look like; for example, my noticing that somebody resembles his absent father; or that the duck-rabbit figure resembles a rabbit’s head (PPF §§211, 216 f.; p. 207).

To conclude: visual aspect perception may well be called ‘seeing’, although it is often more concept-laden than seeing just shapes and colours. An important result of the discussion so far is that one’s visual impression cannot be construed as an inner picture. One crucial consideration for Wittgenstein to justify calling visual aspect perception ‘seeing’ is that it involves a certain *attitude* towards an object, especially the internal object of a pictorial representation (PPF §193; p. 205). Here, seeing-as is taken not only in an episodic sense, but also as a continuous and largely dispositional stance.

But then there is the more specific phenomenon of the lighting up of an aspect, already touched upon in this discussion, which occasions Wittgenstein’s other major concern:

3. The Instantaneous Experience of an Aspect

(2) How (or in what sense) is it possible to *experience* an aspect in an instant? This is a variant of a philosophical problem that had occupied Wittgenstein already in the *Philosophical Investigations* (‘Part I’), underlying, for example, the famous rule-following considerations. Understanding, intention, expectation, remembering, and other such mental occurrences, can have remarkably rich and complex contents. It may take very long to spell out completely what exactly someone understood, intended, expected, or remembered on a given occasion. And yet, it appears that the understanding, intending, expecting, or remembering can occur instantaneously: in a flash. How is it possible for some incredibly complex contents to be experienced in one moment?

Consider, for example, that the meaning of a word is its use, which can be very complicated and difficult to describe. How on earth can such a complicated grammatical description be instantaneously present to one’s mind?

When someone says the word ‘cube’ to me, for example, I know what it means. But can the whole *use* of the word come before my mind, when I *understand* it this way? (PI §139)

Surely not, and yet it is possible to have such an instantaneous understanding. The puzzle recurs repeatedly in the *Investigations*:

A writes series of numbers down: B watches him and tries to find a law for the sequence of numbers. When he succeeds he exclaims: ‘Now I can go on!’—So this capacity, this understanding, is something that makes its appearance in a moment. (PI §151)

I want to remember a tune and it escapes me; suddenly I say ‘Now I know it’ and sing it. What was it like to suddenly know it? Surely it can’t have occurred to me *in its entirety* in that moment! (PI §184)

There is no doubt that I now want to play chess, but chess is the game it is in virtue of all its rules (and so on). Don't I know, then, which game I want to play until I *have* played it? or are all the rules contained in my act of intending? (PI §197)

This is *the paradox of the instantaneous experience of complex contents*: *The contents must all be there in a flash*, for I can correctly avow that *at a particular moment* I have understood, I intend, expect, or remember. Yet, of course, *the contents are not all there in a flash*, for I am not really aware of all the details: all possible uses of the word; all numbers of an arithmetic series; all notes of a melody; all rules of chess; they are not all in front of my mind at the same time. That is particularly obvious in the case of understanding an arithmetical series, where the object of understanding is literally infinite.

So how is it possible to experience such complex contents in a moment?—It isn't. If to experience the meaning of a word, say, is to have an account of it in one's mind, a mental representation, then no such instantaneous experiencing occurs; and likewise with other intentional mental phenomena. Hence, even God, had he 'looked into our minds he would not have been able to see there whom we were speaking of' (PPF §284; p. 217), or what it was we understood or remembered. The mental representation we feel compelled to postulate in such cases is an illusion. That is the upshot of the discussions of the paradox of the instantaneous experience of complex contents in the *Investigations*: the rejection of a wrong philosophical picture (cf. PI §115).¹⁸

One may well feel that this entirely negative result is not the whole story. After all, in such cases there *is* an experience of sorts, and surely, it can be correct to report: 'Now I understand!' Wittgenstein himself felt that there remained some unfinished business and he thought further about the puzzling phenomenon of instantaneously 'experiencing' a complex content, especially the meaning of a word, during the years 1946 to 1949 (cf. LPP 347).

While in the *Philosophical Investigations* ('Part I') Wittgenstein asks 'How is it possible to experience the meaning of a word (for example) in an instant?' and returns a negative answer ('It isn't' (cf. Z §180)), in those later writings he pursues the follow-up questions: 'Why do we (feel compelled to) say so then?' and 'What are we to think of that odd kind of experience?' The phenomenon is particularly poignant in the case of ambiguous words. The word 'till', for example, can be uttered and heard as a verb, as a noun, or as a conjunction (PPF §8; p. 175). That is, even when the word is spoken in isolation we can *hear* it in either of its different meanings; although there is really nothing in such

¹⁸ Cf. S. Schroeder, *Wittgenstein: The Way Out of the Fly-Bottle* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), chs 4.5–4.6.

an experience that could possibly determine the meaning of the word. Oddly enough, the ‘experience of meaning’ has no actual content (RPP I §105).

A philosophical puzzle is not so much to be solved as to be *dissolved*. ‘The only way to deal with the puzzle is to get someone to see it’s *not* a puzzle’ (LPP 347).¹⁹ Sometimes that can be achieved by reminding oneself that what strikes us as odd is in fact not as rare and peculiar as we thought:

The particular peace of mind that occurs when we can place other similar cases next to a case that we thought was unique, occurs again and again in our investigations . . . (BT 416)

For example, Augustine found it puzzling how we could measure time:

That I measure time, I know; and yet I measure not time to come, for it is not yet; nor present, because it is not protracted by any space; nor past, because it now is not. What then do I measure?²⁰

He should have reminded himself that other things too are measured while not being present in their entirety. Length is sometimes measured while the object is passing by (e.g. by counting the wagons of a railway train). Then the case of measuring time loses its disquieting uniqueness, its appearance of anomaly, and begins to look once more as common as it is.

This methodological device is explicitly brought up again in the context of the discussion of strangely meaningful experiences:

Philosophy often solves a problem merely by saying: “*Here* is no more difficulty than *there*.”

That is, just by conjuring up a problem, where there was none before.

It says: ‘Isn’t it just as remarkable that . . .’, and leaves it at that. (RPP I §1000)

And what Wittgenstein invokes as ‘just as remarkable’ as experiencing the meaning of a word is, amongst other things,²¹ the experience of instantaneous aspect perception (the ‘lighting up’ of an aspect). At one point he explains that his interest in the discussion of aspect perception is indeed largely due to his hope that it might shed some light on his older problem of instantaneous experiences of word meaning (PPF §261; p. 214). Does it? That is far from obvious. To begin with, aspect perception provides not only another variant of a known type of problem, it brings up some fresh conceptual problems of its own (as illustrated above). Indeed, in some respects it might appear even more

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.* ch. 4.3.

²⁰ Augustine, *The Confessions* [*Confessiones*, 400], trans. E. B. Pusey (London: Dent, 1907), Bk XI, §xxvi, pp. 271 f.

²¹ Other objects of comparison are: remembering (PPF ch. xiii; p. 231) and momentary intending (PPF §§279 ff.; pp. 216 ff.; RPP I §178).

puzzling than experiences of meaning. It was noted earlier that Wittgenstein found it odd that a logical condition of one's having an experience of aspect perception is that one has mastered a certain technique, whereas the parallel phenomenon that experiencing the meaning of a word presupposes a mastery of that meaning does not appear equally odd.—Still, it may be worthwhile to consider the analogy further.

Wittgenstein's next move was to inquire after the importance and role in our lives of the kind of experience he found puzzling. The importance an experience has in our lives can be thrown into relief by considering the imaginary case of people lacking that experience. Thus, Wittgenstein introduces the idea of a 'meaning-blind' person: somebody who understands the meanings of words, and is also able to use homonyms according to their different meanings, but never has the experience of hearing a word, in isolation, as having one meaning or another (RPP I §§202, 232, 239, 242, 247, 250). The question is: 'What would someone be missing if he did not *experience* the meaning of a word?' (PPF §261; p. 214). Would this be a serious handicap? And again, in the analogous case of aspect perception:

Could there be human beings lacking the ability to see something *as something*—and what would that be like? What sort of consequences would it have?—Would this defect be comparable to colour-blindness, or to not having absolute pitch?—We will call it 'aspect-blindness'—and will now consider what might be meant by this. (A conceptual investigation.) (PPF §257; p. 213)

Is an experience of aspect perception perhaps not only conditioned by certain abilities, but also a condition for certain abilities? Does one, under certain circumstances, need to *see* something in a particular way in order to be able to do something—not only dispositionally: that one takes it, responds to it, in a certain way, but as an occurrent experience? Wittgenstein suggests that that may indeed be so, for instance in aesthetic contexts (PPF §178; p. 202), or when following a geometrical demonstration (PPF §§179–80; p. 203). However, his remarks on this point are only tentative and suggest merely that aspect perception may *help* one's understanding, not that it is an absolute precondition. According to other remarks, what an experience of aspect perception is likely to manifest itself in, is not so much new abilities as new dispositions, that is, inclinations to react or comment in a certain way: What I expect from someone who sees the duck-rabbit as a duck will be different from what I expect from someone who doesn't (PPF §196; p. 205). He may for example find the beak too long.

Unfortunately, Wittgenstein's intention to investigate the concept of aspect-blindness is not really carried out. In the remainder of the quoted remark (PPF

§257), he notes that an aspect-blind person would still be able to recognize similarities. Then there follow only three more remarks on the topic—in which none of the questions raised are satisfactorily answered—before Wittgenstein links it up with, and moves back to, the parallel issue of experiencing the meaning of a word (PPF §261; p. 214).²² After that there is no more mention of the topic of aspect perception. In the remainder of this paper I shall try to continue where Wittgenstein left off and investigate the concept of aspect-blindness a little further, to see whether it can shed any more light on the phenomenon of experiencing a meaning.

4. Aspect-Blindness, Emotional Seeing-As, and the Experience of Meaning

Could there be a generally aspect-blind person? No. As suggested earlier, whenever something is seen (and not only looked at inately or absent-mindedly) *some* aspect of it must be noticed, be it only certain shapes or colours. Of course for any particular aspect of an object it may be imagined that an onlooker fails to see it; but then, as long as it is to be granted that the person sees the object at all, there must be some other visual aspects of it that he does notice. Thus, if you fail to see the face in a puzzle picture, you see, say, only leaves, or perhaps some arabesque patterns. And if when looking at a bookcase you don't see it three-dimensionally, you see it as an arrangement of different coloured rectangles on a flat surface; and can describe it as such.

Wittgenstein seems to suggest a distinction between noticing a shape in a drawing and seeing the drawing *as* one of that shape:

is [the aspect-blind man] supposed not to recognize that the double cross [which can be seen as white cross on black ground or as black cross on white ground (PPF §212; p. 207)] contains both a black and a white cross? So if told 'Show me figures containing a black cross among these examples', will he be unable to manage it? No. He should be able to do that... (PPF §257; p. 213)

But in that case it is hard to deny that he can see the drawing *as* one of a black cross on white ground (or vice versa). Again, someone may not be able to see a schematic drawing of a cube (cf. PPF §116) three-dimensionally, as a cube, but only as a two-dimensional geometrical drawing of a square and two rhomboids. But then such a person would hardly be able to observe the relevant resemblance between the drawing and a cube. For once he notices

²² Experiencing the meaning of a word was already discussed earlier in PPF, in section ii: §§7–17.

that resemblance, does he not *ipso facto* see the drawing *as* (a drawing of) a cube? Or again, if while looking at

(a) ●●●●

you bring to mind the resemblance between it and

(b) ●● ●●

do you not *thereby* see (a) as two pairs of two dots? It seems that at least in some simple cases seeing an aspect consists in nothing more than noticing a certain resemblance. Hence it would appear inconsistent to suggest that somebody may be blind to that aspect and yet perfectly capable of noticing the resemblance in question.

It was noted that Wittgenstein is particularly interested in the episodic experience of aspects. Perhaps, then, his idea is that the aspect-blind person cannot see the *lighting up* of an aspect, even though he may be able to see aspects continuously:

The aspect-blind man is supposed not to see the A aspects [i.e., the two aspects of the double cross] change... he will not be supposed to say: 'Now it's a black cross on a white ground!' (PPF §257; p. 213)

... for him [the schematic cube] would not switch from one aspect to the other. (PPF §258; pp. 213 f.)

However, elsewhere Wittgenstein denies explicitly that it is merely blindness to aspect *change* that he has in mind:

Of course it is imaginable that someone might never see a change of aspect, the three-dimensional aspect of every picture always remaining constant for him. But this assumption *doesn't interest us*. (RPP II §480)

Moreover, that assumption too is problematic. Given, as Wittgenstein seems to allow of the aspect-blind person, that one can be made to see first the black cross in the double cross figure (perhaps by being shown a straightforward black cross as an object of comparison) and later can be made to see the white cross, it is hard to imagine that once one has realized that the drawing consists of both a black cross and a white cross interlinking one should not be able to switch from one to the other. (It may be different with a more complex puzzle picture where the aspects are not so easily located and conceptualized—as black cross and white cross—and hence may be much more difficult to retrieve.) And even if one doesn't experience a change of aspect while looking, remembering that one saw a different cross the last time would be enough to allow one to say: 'Now it's a black cross'.

It would appear, then, first, that the idea of general aspect-blindness is inconsistent. Secondly, considering the example of the double cross, Wittgenstein's idea that blindness to certain aspects may be compatible with normal vision and intelligence, in particular with a capacity to spot the relevant resemblances, seems to be equally unworkable.

At this point, however, it may be useful to distinguish between different kinds of visual aspects. For one thing, there is an obvious difference between pictorial aspects and others. Seeing-as may be seeing something as a picture of something else, for example, as the drawing of a duck, or of a cube. On the other hand, seeing a row of equidistant dots as grouped in a certain way; seeing a black cross on white ground; or seeing something as a three-dimensional object—is not seeing what a picture represents. These are non-pictorial aspects.

Some of Wittgenstein's remarks suggest that he is particularly interested in pictorial aspects, and they are perhaps what we should focus on when trying to get a grip on the idea of aspect-blindness:

The 'aspect-blind' will have an altogether different relationship to pictures from ours. (PPF §258; p. 214)

But it seems to me that the class of pictorial aspects needs to be further subdivided in order to make sense of some of Wittgenstein's ideas. The remark above relates back to Wittgenstein's claim that 'we *view* the photograph, the picture on our wall, as the very object (the man, landscape and so on) represented in it' (PPF §197; p. 205). That, however, is not applicable with equal plausibility to *all* pictures. A photograph of a loved one is a very different matter from a schematic drawing of a cube or a face. I see this: ☺ as a face, but I do not relate to it as to a real person. So we need to distinguish between schematic or very stylized drawings, on the one hand, and fairly elaborate paintings and photographs, on the other. Hence, we can now distinguish three classes of visual aspects:

1. Non-pictorial aspects
2. Schematic pictorial aspects
3. Elaborate pictorial aspects

With the first two classes there is nothing more to seeing an aspect than recognizing a shape or arrangement, or noticing a resemblance. Hence, in such cases Wittgenstein's suggestion that one might be able to see the relevant resemblances and yet be blind to the aspect is unconvincing. With elaborate pictorial aspects (3), however, a more demanding concept of aspect perception gets a foothold. Here it is indeed possible to notice the relevant resemblances without yet seeing the aspect, because aspect perception in this fuller sense

requires also that the picture is experienced as transparent for a certain imaginative engagement with the object depicted. 'We view a portrait as a human being' (PPF §199; p. 205); just as we view an actor as Henry V, and a mere stage cockpit as the vasty fields of France. In such cases it is easy to imagine somebody unable to adopt the required attitude. Indeed, for most people full absorption into the represented or fictional scene is only ever fairly brief: 'a picture is not always *alive* for me while I am seeing it' (PPF §200; p. 205), and a theatregoer's experience of seeing *Henry V* is likely to be interrupted by thoughts about the quality of the acting or salient features of the production, or indeed by the distracting noises made by a school class in the auditorium. It seems certainly possible that someone may well understand the practice of dramatic representation on stage, notice the relevant similarities between the actors and the characters they are meant to impersonate, and yet not be able to enter into the game of make-believe: Instead of seeing the people on stage as French and English soldiers in combat, he only ever sees them as actors wearing historical costumes and imitating the motions of a battle. Such a person could be called aspect-blind, in a sense of the word that is not applicable to the cases of non-pictorial or schematic pictorial aspects.

Thus the only kind of aspect perception that allows of aspect-blindness (as envisaged by Wittgenstein) is the experience of a picture or theatrical representation as transparent for an imaginative engagement with the object depicted. In such cases seeing-as is not so much a cognitive achievement as an imaginative and emotional experience. The aspect-blind person is not deficient in his understanding of what is represented, nor does he actually see less, he merely lacks a certain emotional response; a response that others experience at most intermittently, when momentarily fully engrossed in the representation.

And it is only this kind of aspect perception, the *emotional seeing-as* of pictorial representations, that affords Wittgenstein the desired analogy with the phenomenon of experiencing the meaning of a word. Sometimes, hearing a word we experience it as having a familiar face, as having 'taken up its meaning into itself' (PPF §294; p. 218). This experience may accompany our understanding of a word, but it is not itself an act of understanding. Because, for one thing, it is an illusion to think that we experience a representation of the linguistic meaning on which our capacity to use the word correctly could be based. As noted above, Wittgenstein argued repeatedly that no such complex contents are in fact experienced in such a case. For another thing, most of the time we use and understand words in ordinary conversation we do not, in this sense, experience their meaning at all (PPF §272; pp. 215 f.). The meaning-blind person is not lacking in linguistic competence (cf. PPF §8;

p. 175), but merely in his emotional attachment to words (PPF §294; p. 218). Such a person would feel about language in roughly the way we feel about recently learnt code words:

Suppose I had agreed on a code with someone; 'tower' means bank. I tell him 'Now go to the tower'—he understands me and acts accordingly, but he feels the word 'tower' to be strange in this use, it has not yet 'taken on' the meaning. (PPF §263; p. 214)

Similarly, the aspect-blind person understands that a certain actor represents Henry V, yet he never experiences him to *be* Henry V, to have 'taken on' the character.

It has been argued above that only one of Wittgenstein's concerns with aspect perception was the question whether seeing-as can properly be regarded as a case of seeing. That that is not the full story of Wittgenstein's discussions can be highlighted once more by reverting to that initial question. Wittgenstein discusses it mainly with respect to non-pictorial and schematic pictorial aspects, and he presents good reasons for an affirmative answer. Seeing a geometrical drawing as a cube, for example, is indeed a case of seeing, not only of interpreting. But what about elaborate pictorial aspects and emotional seeing-as? Is emotional seeing-as really seeing? Arguably not. When someone smiles tenderly at a photo, relating directly to the person depicted, he doesn't *see* anything the aspect-blind person fails to see. In particular, it is not as in other cases of aspect perception that somebody who sees an aspect notices a resemblance which somebody else who doesn't see the aspect misses. No, both parties see the likeness and understand the representational purpose. The difference lies in their emotional responses. One of them may, for example, feel a glimpse of his daughter's presence while looking at her picture, whereas the other one experiences only an inanimate photograph. It was argued above (359(iii)) that aspect perception was not only an interpretation imposed on what was really seen since, typically, one cannot give a more direct description of what one sees. This case is different. When emotionally relating to a person while looking at his photograph one can easily syphon off the extra element of the experience and describe what is actually seen, namely a mere photograph. After all, emotional seeing-as is not a form of illusion: in spite of one's emotional engagement one remains fully aware that what one sees is only a representation. So, whereas earlier, in the discussion of non-pictorial and schematic aspect perception, Wittgenstein argued, with certain qualifications, that we do see aspects, here the thrust of his remarks points in the opposite direction. Emotive aspects are not really seen, but only felt. And that provides an illuminating model for the phenomenon of experiencing the meaning of a word.

To say that a word is heard to be ‘filled with its meaning’ is only a figurative expression (PPF §265; p. 215). The meaning of a word is its rule-governed use (PI §43)²³ and cannot literally be discerned in its sound, nor mentally represented while hearing the sound. It can only *feel* to us as if it were there, owing to the familiar association of the word with its use; just as the name ‘Schubert’ can feel to us to have taken on the atmosphere of Schubert’s music (PPF §270; p. 215). However, that is not self-evident. There is, on the contrary, a strong temptation to think that somehow it must be possible after all to experience the meaning of a word when hearing it, which when we consider the difficulty of compressing it into a momentary impression, produces a paradox. Wittgenstein’s own long-lasting occupation with the topic indicates how strongly he himself must have felt that temptation. Hence, a comparable phenomenon where the imaginary character of what we experience is obvious might help to dispel the air of paradox. With emotional seeing-as it is obvious that the object of our experience is not really there. What in fact we see is only a *portrait* of a person or a theatrical *representation* of certain events, not the person or the events themselves. And yet, at least momentarily it feels as if we were experiencing the real thing. Thus the analogy between emotional seeing-as and the experience of meaning proves useful after all. It might help us to accept that in the latter case, too, we engage imaginatively with something that is not actually present. The sound of a word is associated with its meaning, but the meaning is not really present in the sound of the word, nor in our experience of that sound, even if that is the way it sometimes feels to us.²⁴

²³ Cf. Schroeder, *Wittgenstein*, ch. 4.4.

²⁴ I am grateful to John Cottingham, David Dolby, Maximilian de Gaynesford, Peter Hacker, Stephen Mulhall, Angus Ross, and Constantine Sandis for comments on earlier versions of this paper.

