Seeing the Investigations Through Cubist Eyes

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In 1932 Wittgenstein wrote, 'my main movement of thought is a completely different one today from 15 to 20 years ago. And this is similar to when a painter makes a transition from one school to another' (Wittgenstein 2003). Wittgenstein's movement from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations* is similar to a transition from representational art to Cubism. He shifts from a fixed logical viewpoint outside the text to a text of dynamic, multi-perspectival and interactive grammatical remarks. The text of the *Investigations* is like an early Cubist painting in form, content, and meaning.

At the beginning of the Cubist movement, Apollinaire notes that 'the new painters were sharply criticized for their preoccupation with geometry. And yet, geometric figures are the essence of draftsmanship … It may be said that geometry is to the plastic arts what grammar is to the art of writing' (Apollinaire 1960). Wittgenstein's use of grammar is similar to the Cubist use of geometry. Grammar is not something hidden (to be discovered) but something that becomes clear or surveyable through a rearrangement (PI 122). In the preface to the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein describes himself as a draftsman, and writes that 'a thinker is very much like a draughtsman whose aim it is to represent all the interrelations between things' (CV 12e). Early Cubists sought clarity of form in order to reveal the dynamic interaction of phenomena. By reducing forms to basic geometrical components, Cubists attempted to present a multi-perspectival or multi-aspectival view of a scene (Miller 2001):

> Cubism is an art concerned with interaction; the interaction with different aspects; the interaction between structure and movement; the interaction between solids and the space around them; the interaction between the unambiguous signs made on the surface of the picture and the changing reality which they stand for. It is an art of dynamic liberation from all static categories (Berger 1965).

The Cubist concern for spatial and temporal flux, the interaction between different aspects, and the visual revelation of interlocking phenomena is similar to Wittgenstein's preoccupation with the spatial and temporal phenomena of language, aspect-seeing, and seeing grammatical interconnections.

The clarity or perspicuity sought in Wittgenstein's grammatical remarks is similar to Cubist attempts to present a multi-perspectival or multi-aspectival view of a scene. One of the problems addressed by early Cubists was how to represent an object or scene from differing viewpoints simultaneously in order to give equal validity to each. One solution was to represent a scene as if an observer were 'moving around an object [in order to] seize it from several successive appearances' (Miller 2001). In 1930, Wittgenstein notes that each of the sentences he writes is trying to say the whole thing (the same thing) over and over again: 'It is as though they were all simply views of one object seen from different angles' (CV 7e). In the preface to the *Investigations,* he writes that 'the same or almost the same points were always being approached afresh from different directions, and new sketches made' (PI ixe). He speaks in terms reminiscent of Cubism in his general remarks on philosophy (PI 89-133). He also notes that 'the axis of reference of our examination must be rotated, but about the fixed point of our real need' (PI 108). Rotating the axis of reference is a recognizable Cubist technique.

The multi-perspectival or multi-aspectival nature of Wittgenstein's investigations can be seen in individual remarks as well as longer sequences. One example of an individual remark that describes a concept from different viewpoints simultaneously is §33 of the *Investigations*. In response to a claim that all one needs to know (or guess) in order to understand an ostensive definition is what the person giving the explanation is pointing to, Wittgenstein asks what pointing to the shape, colour, or number of an object consists in: 'Point to a piece of paper. – And now point to its shape – now to its colour – now to its number (that sounds queer). – How did you do it?' (PI 33) He suggests a possible response: we mean different things each time we point. He then asks how this is done, and suggests that we concentrate our attention on the colour or the shape. Naturally, the next question is 'how is *that* done?' Wittgenstein approaches the investigation from yet another direction when he concedes that we will, no doubt, do something different when we point to (or look at) colours and shapes, but asks whether we always do the *same* thing when we direct our attention to a colour (for example). He asks us to imagine various different cases. To indicate but a few:

> 'Is this blue the same blue over there? Do you see any difference?' – You are mixing paint and you say 'It's hard to get the blue of this sky.' 'It's turning fine, you can already see blue sky again.' 'Look what different effects these two blues have.' 'Do you see the blue book over there? Bring it here.' 'This blue signal-light means … ' 'What's this blue called? – Is it 'indigo'?' (PI 33)

We may do many different things while attending to the colour of something. Wittgenstein also reminds us that this is the sort of thing that happens *while* we direct our attention at something, but that it isn't these things by themselves that make us say someone is attending to the shape, the colour, and so on (PI 33). This leads to an investigation of 'attending to a shape' as well as an investigation of the 'characteristic experiences' of pointing to a shape.

What is the point of all of these investigations? Why present a word or concept from differing viewpoints simultaneously? One reason is that when we do philosophy we often nourish our thinking with only one kind of example (PI 593). Wittgenstein challenges our one-sided diet of examples by presenting numerous cases from differing viewpoints simultaneously (thereby giving equal validity to each). (He often offers not merely one or two examples, but seven or eight.) He also effectively draws attention to the spatial and temporal dimensions of our language-use. And, by presenting our words or concepts from differing

viewpoints simultaneously, he attempts to change our way of looking at things (PI 144). He writes that 'we predicate of a thing what lies in the method of representing it. Impressed by the possibility of a comparison we think we are perceiving a state of affairs of the highest generality' (PI 104). He suggests that when we think we are making discoveries in philosophy we are really discovering a new way of seeing or a new comparison (PI 400): 'What you have primarily discovered is a new way of looking at things. As if you had invented a new way of painting, or, again, a new metre, or a new kind of song' (PI 401). This is not a dismissal of philosophy but its validation. According to Wittgenstein, 'what a Copernicus or a Darwin really achieved was not the discovery of a true theory but a fertile new point of view' (CV 18e).

A new way of seeing alters both the meaning and content of the text or canvas. The meaning of a Cubist painting is not its subject matter but the relation between the seer and the seen (Berger 1969). As Berger explains:

> It [is] impossible to *confront* the objects or forms in a Cubist work. Not only because of the multiplicity of viewpoints – so that, say, a view of a table from below is combined with a view of the table from above and from the side – but also because the forms portrayed never present themselves as a totality. The totality is the surface of the picture, *which is now the origin and sum of all that one sees*. The viewpoint of Renaissance perspective, fixed and outside the picture, but to which everything within the picture was drawn, has become a field of vision which is the picture itself (Berger 1969).

Similarly, it is impossible to confront objects or forms in Wittgenstein's philosophical writings. One of the recurring themes of his philosophy is that the description and use of language does not involve objects and their designation. Rather, he attempts to describe the spatial and temporal phenomena of language. A multiplicity of viewpoints ensures that what is presented or described is never static. Wittgenstein puts words into motion. According to Berger, we should not ask of a Cubist painting: Is it true? Or: Is it sincere? Rather, we should ask: Is there movement and continuity? (Berger 1969) The same applies to Wittgenstein's grammatical remarks.

Within a Cubist painting, the relation between any two forms can be inferred but it does not establish the rule for all spatial relationships between all forms in the picture (Berger 1969). These relationships remain dynamic. Similarly, in Wittgenstein's writings the relation between any two forms of expression can be inferred, but this does not establish a rule for all grammatical relationships between all forms of expression in the text. They remain dynamic, and the multiplicity of forms never presents itself as a totality (PI 183). The meaning of Wittgenstein's writings is the relation between the reader and what is read. He claims that readers should be able to see their own thinking in his writings (CV 18e). A viewpoint that is fixed and outside the text (as in conventional philosophy books) becomes a field of vision which is the text itself. In other words, our relationship to Wittgenstein's texts is not a given. We are participants not merely spectators. What is given is the text itself (in the form in which we now have it) and we must find ourselves in relation to it.

In Cubism, another way of describing the relation between the seer and the seen is to say that everything begins and ends with the surface of the painting:

> We begin with the surface, but since everything in the picture refers back to the surface we begin with the conclusion. We then search – not for an explanation, as we do if presented with an image with a single, predominant meaning (a man laughing, a mountain, a reclining nude), but for some understanding of the configuration of events whose interaction is the conclusion from which we began (Berger 1969).

We also begin in Wittgenstein's later philosophy with the text itself. Here, too, everything refers back to the text, so we begin with the conclusion. We then search, not for an explanation, but for an understanding of what we have read. When we gain insight, we do not discover something new but see what has always been before our eyes (which we were previously unable to see). Berger also writes that:

> the picture surface acts in Cubist painting as the constant which allows us to appreciate the variables. Before and after every sortie of our imagination into the problematic spaces and through the interconnections of a Cubist painting, we find our gaze resettled on the picture surface, aware once more of two-dimensional shapes on a two-dimensional board or canvas (Berger 1969).

The printed page acts in Wittgenstein's philosophy like the picture surface of a Cubist painting. Before and after every sortie of our imagination (through the grammatical interconnections of his remarks) we find ourselves struck once again by words printed on a page (two-dimensional shapes on a two-dimensional piece of paper). Wittgenstein's remarks, separated from one another by blank space, continually draw our attention to the text itself (as does the juxtaposition of German and English on each page). To fill in the blank spaces between remarks is not to provide missing information, but to add imaginatively to the variations already recorded.

The clarity of form found in Cubist paintings is as philosophically complex as its subjects and materials are deliberately modest (Berger 1965). The simplicity of Cubism is not the result of simplification for its own sake. On the contrary, the aim of Cubism is to arrive at a far more complex image of reality than had been attempted in painting before (Berger 1969). According to Berger, the problem facing Cubists was so complex that their manner of stating it and their trying to solve it absorbed all their attention. Thus, the subjects of Cubism are taken from everyday life, and its subject matter is often confined to the world of the studio. The simplicity of Wittgenstein's later writings is also misunderstood. The description of language-use (for the purpose of conceptual clarification) is so complex that his grammatical investigations often involve the simplest possible conditions. His use of ordinary language and everyday examples is not meant to trivialize philosophical inquiry but to acknowledge and address its complexity. Of all possible notations, ordinary language is the one that pervades our lives. Without the simplicity inherent in his writings Wittgenstein's philosophical task would be overwhelming. Although he writes that philosophy simply puts everything before us and neither explains nor deduces anything, the description of what lies open to view is difficult and complex (PI 126). Further, 'the aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something because it is always before one's eyes.)' (PI 129) How to make visible what is always before our eyes is a complex philosophical and aesthetic task. When Wittgenstein returns to philosophy in 1929, he returns words from their metaphysical to their everyday use (PI 116). Far from presenting a commonsense view of the world, this return represents a complex and dynamic way of seeing.

Literature

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