

How Do I Know That The Colour That I Am Now Seeing Is Called "Green"?

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I

In his discussions of language use and rule-following, Wittgenstein repeatedly emphasises the importance of *acting without reasons*. Sometimes, he even makes a connection between ordinary cases of language use or rule-following, and situations in which fear or panic makes us say things without reflecting at all. Consider §§211-212 in *Philosophical Investigations*:

How can he *know* how he is to continue a pattern by himself - whatever instruction you give him? Well, how do I know? - If that means "Have I reasons?" the answer is: my reasons will soon give out. And then I shall act, without reasons.

When someone whom I am afraid of orders me to continue the series, I act quickly, with perfect certainty, and the lack of reasons does not trouble me.

Or, look at the following passage from *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*:

How do I know that the colour that I am now seeing is called "green"? Well, to confirm it I might ask other people; but if they did not agree with me, I should become totally confused and should perhaps take them or myself for crazy. That is to say: I should either no longer trust myself to judge, or no longer react to what they say as to a judgement.

If I am drowning and I shout "Help!", how do I know what the word Help means? Well, that's how I react in this situation.-Now *that* is how I know what "green" means as well and also know how I have to follow the rule in the particular case. (VI-35)

It is very difficult to provide an adequate reading of passages such as these. The difficulty is not just that of seeing the possibility of questioning the over-rationalistic picture of language use that is Wittgenstein's most visible target. It is equally hard to avoid ascribing to Wittgenstein a view which constitutes the dialectical opposite of that over-rationalistic picture. The temptation is strong to think that rejecting the idea of language use as somehow based on reasons all the way down, must involve *depriving*

language of something - what one might want to call its "content", or "cognitive significance". We are inclined to believe that if we fail to make sense of the idea that our linguistic practices have a rational foundation, then we are forced to conclude that such practices can only, to use Kripke's phrase, consist in a series of impulsive "stabs in the dark". (Kripke, 1982) We will then read the passages just quoted as offering a view according to which, basically, language use is not a form of mindful action at all, but just a series of spontaneous, though remarkably unison, reactions.

Now, most Wittgenstein interpreters would probably agree that this sort of reading is mistaken. In recent years, it has often been said - correctly, I think - that Wittgenstein's emphasis on acting without reasons is *not* meant to deprive language of anything. Rather, it is argued, his basic goal is to help us overcome the very dialectic which makes it seem as if we have to choose *either* the over-rationalistic view, *or* its impoverished antithesis. A recurrent theme in many discussions of Wittgenstein is the struggle to understand how, more precisely, he thought the overcoming of this dialectic was to be achieved.

What follows is meant as yet another contribution to this struggle. I want to shed some further light on why Wittgenstein's emphasis on acting without reasons is best seen as an attempt to show why *both* the above pictures of linguistic practice are flawed. My strategy will be to reflect, as Wittgenstein himself often did, on our use of colour words. I hope my reflections can make clearer how passages such as those quoted above can be seen, not as depriving language of anything that we can meaningfully want to find there, but as doing justice to language as we already know it.

II

With respect to our use of colour words, it will be helpful to distinguish between cases of two different sorts. The first sort is illustrated by the following example. Suppose one of my friends shows me a scrap of green paper, and asks me, "Martin, do you know what this shade of green is called?" I look at the paper and answer, with some confidence: "This colour is called 'Emerald Green'."

Now, even if I feel sure that my answer is correct, it may well turn out to be false. Suppose that later, I compare the scrap of paper with the samples of a colour chart, and find that the colour of the scrap matches the colour chart's sample of Pistachio Green rather than that of Emerald Green. In this situation, my confidence in my former judgement would be shaken. If I double-checked with one or two other colour charts and got the same result, I would probably take my claim to have been refuted. "I was wrong," I would say: "The colour is called 'Pistachio Green', not 'Emerald Green'."

The second sort of case is quite different. It is illustrated by the following example. Suppose a colour-blind friend shows me a scrap of paper, the colour of which I immediately recognise as green. He asks me, "Would the colour of this paper be called 'red' or 'green'?" I answer, without hesitation, "Green'." The sort of confidence involved in this answer is of a different kind than the confidence I displayed in the previous case. One might say that in the previous case, I just *felt* confident, whereas in this second case, my confidence is a key characteristic of my *use* of the word "green." Thus, suppose I found a colour chart which seemed to go against my saying that the colour of the paper is called "green": a chart, say, where the sample named "red" had the same colour as the scrap of paper shown to me by my friend. This would not make me withdraw my claim, or make me any less certain that what I said was true. That is to say: I would not treat the colour chart as a piece of counter-evidence. Rather, I would immediately conclude that the chart has been wrongly constructed; that the red and the green samples have been mixed up. Conversely, a colour chart which is in line with what I say - that is, a chart where the sample named "green" has the same colour as the scrap of paper shown to me by my colour-blind friend - would not lend additional support to my claim. For the confidence I have in my ability to tell immediately that the colour of the scrap of paper is called "green," is no less than the confidence I have in my ability to read colour charts correctly, or the confidence I have in my ability to see that the scrap of paper and the samples of the colour chart have the *same* colour. So, the notions of justification and counter-evidence are *both* out of place here.

In the first sort of case, when I tell my friend that the colour is called "Emerald Green," I feel sure that I am right. This feeling has no clear rational basis; at most, I rely on certain vague memories of things that I have heard people call "Emerald Green" before. One might aptly characterise my answer as an "inspired guess." I *could* have been more careful when my friend asked me about the name of the colour. For example, I may have hunted up a colour chart in order to provide a more informed response. But I preferred to take a chance, as it were, and trust my fallible feeling that I was right.

It is tempting to conceive the second sort of case along similar lines. After all, the feeling of confidence and the lack of a reasons are both there. However, when I tell my colour-blind friend, "This colour is called 'green'," I do not guess. That this colour is called "green" is as certain as anything can possibly get. But then, how is this certainty compatible with my lack of reasons? The answer is that in this case, my lack of reasons has nothing to do with my being careless, or my "taking a chance." Rather, I lack reasons because in this sort of case, *there just is no such thing as my having reasons*, or my looking for reasons. My use of the word "green" is characterised by the fact that, in cases such as the one described, nothing is treated as a clear reason for or against my claim that the colour of the scrap of paper shown to me is called "green." I could not have been

more careful than I was, for the notion of a "further justification" has been given no place in this sort of situation.

If one fails to keep this in mind, Wittgenstein's parallel between my knowing that the colour that I am now seeing is called "green," and my shouting "Help!" when I am drowning, is almost bound to be misconstrued. Why? Well, fear or panic often makes us do things impulsively which, had we kept a clear head, we might not have done: driving at a high speed or walking on thin ice without reflecting on whether the danger of such behaviour stands in reasonable proportion to the real cause of our fear. If we had not panicked, we would and could have looked for reasons - checked if the ice were tolerably safe, or if the traffic situation allowed for fast driving. The misconstrual I have in mind reads Wittgenstein as claiming that when I say that the colour that I am now seeing is called "green," I lack reasons in a similar sense. Supposedly, I could have looked for reasons - but I didn't.

However, the real point of Wittgenstein's parallel is very different. Again, what he wants to show is that with respect to my saying that the colour that I am now seeing is called "green," the phrase "looking for reasons" has been given no content at all. Hence, my lack of reasons is not due to my being hasty, or somehow under pressure; rather, it is part of what my use of the word "green" looks like. Of course, alternative uses of the word "green" are imaginable, where colour charts are allowed to override my immediate judgement. But those would not be more rational ways of using the word. They would just be different.

III

In order to get a more complete understanding of the points I have just tried to make, the next thing we need to do is to look at what Wittgenstein says about the role of *agreement* in one of the passages I quoted at the beginning of this paper. After having asked how I know that the colour that I am now seeing is called "green," Wittgenstein goes on to say that "in order to *confirm* it, I may ask other people." This talk of "confirmation" may well strike the reader as peculiar. For how can other people confirm to me that this colour is called "green"? Again, the problem is that the notion of "confirmation" seems to run idle here; for no confidence can be greater than the confidence I already have that this colour is called "green." On this matter, I put no greater trust in other people's judgements than in my own. Indeed, I also have no greater confidence in my ability to understand other people's expressions as expressions of agreement, than in my ability to decide, without further ado, that this colour is called "green." So, isn't it altogether misleading to speak of "confirmation" in this sort of case?

Well; in a way it is. However, look at how Wittgenstein continues the passage. If the people I ask do *not* agree with me, he says, "I should become totally confused and should perhaps take them or myself for crazy." Clearly, he is aware that, in the case at issue, other people's opinions do not function as evidence or counter-evidence in any ordinary sense. Other people's disagreement would not simply contradict my claim that this colour is called "green." What is at stake here is a more radical form of breakdown - a breakdown at a different, more fundamental level. Wittgenstein says that if people disagree with me, "I should either no longer trust myself to judge, or no longer react to what they say as to a judgement." In other words, rather than concluding that my claim that this colour is called "green" is simply wrong, I would perhaps lose sense of what it would mean for it to be *either* right or wrong. Or, I might become completely uncertain about what it is that the people around me are actually doing: are they really disagreeing with me, or are they just joking or ejaculating meaningless noises? What Wittgenstein is talking about is nothing less than a beginning disintegration of the very notions of "claim," "judgement," "evidence," "counter-evidence," "agreement" and "disagreement." And such disintegration is, of course, very different from an ordinary refutation by means of counter-evidence.

Consequently, Wittgenstein's discussion about the role of agreement does not go against what I said above, about there being no such thing as reasons for or against my saying that the colour that I am now seeing is called "green." For what he claims is not that my judgement gains *support* from the fact that other people agree with it. It is not in virtue of other people's agreement that what I say is correct; and, conversely, their disagreement would not prove me wrong. Rather, the agreement comes in at a more fundamental level, namely, as the background against which it can be clear that I am saying something at all, true *or* false.

IV

In his discussions of language and rule-following, Wittgenstein often notices that "The chain of reasons comes to an end." What I have argued in this paper is that this observation should be taken quite literally. The chain of reasons does come to an end, not just in the weak sense that, at one point or another, I decide to act even if, in principle, I could have continued to look for reasons; but in the stronger sense that, at one point or another, the phrase "to continue to look for reasons" ceases to play a meaningful role. Of course, we could always give that phrase a meaning. We could, for example, start treating colour charts as reasons for or against my claim that the colour that I am now seeing is called "green." But this would just mean to change the use of the word "green" - to make it more similar to the use of the word "Emerald Green." And, of

course, the chain of reasons would still come to an end: after my having looked at one, or perhaps two or three, colour charts, nothing would count as my "looking for additional reasons." So, we cannot say that this sort of use would have a "firmer foundation" than the current one. Again, it would just be different.

How, then, should the acting without reasons that Wittgenstein is emphasising be described? Well, to characterise such acts as "inspired guesses" or "stabs in the dark" is clearly mistaken: for such characterisations are used in opposition to expressions such as "well-founded judgement" and "rationally based verdict". However, what I have argued in this paper is that the sort of action Wittgenstein is talking about takes place at a level where the *opposition* between well-founded judgement and mere guesswork does not gain any foothold. Words such as "impulsive", "instinctive" and "spontaneous" may also be misleading in this context, for the same reason. Such words make it sound as if, had he only been more rational and clear-headed, the agent could have looked for further reasons. Whereas what Wittgenstein wants to show is that, at this level, the contrast between acting impulsively and clear-headedly is out of place. What he is talking about is a form of action which must already be taken for granted when the contrast between impulsive and rational conduct is introduced.

This is immediately connected to the opposition I described in the beginning of his paper, between the over-rationalistic picture of language use and its impoverished, meaning-sceptical antithesis. Wittgenstein's way of overcoming the dialectic characterised by this opposition, is to show how both these pictures arise from a blindness to or misunderstanding of the sort of unfounded action I have been talking about. The over-rationalistic picture thinks no such unfounded action takes place at all. Thus, it tries to conceive of my claim that the colour that I am now seeing is called "green," as if it were based on some sort of self-evident insight into the meaning of the word "green"; an insight which is somehow separable from, and serves to sanction, my not being prepared to count anything else as a reason for or against what I am saying. Recoiling from this over-rationalistic picture, its meaning-sceptical antithesis tries to conceive language use as if the chain of reasons *never* comes to an end. This makes it seem as if, at one point or another, the language users have to act *irrationally*, as it were. The idea is that, in principle, there will always be more reasons to look for - but, in order to ever use language, we will sooner or later have to take the plunge and act without a completely secured foundation.

I hope at least to have indicated why Wittgenstein regards these pictures as mistaken. According to his diagnosis, they both arise from a failure to realise that to act without reasons does not always mean to act *unreasonably* or *irrationally*. The acting without reasons that Wittgenstein is interested in, is a sort of acting which is

presupposed by the very contrast between rational and irrational conduct. To emphasise the importance of such acting, is not to deprive language of its "content" or "cognitive significance". It is, rather, to clarify what we can mean when we use notions such as these to characterise our customary linguistic activities.

References

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