

Aesthetics and a Secondary Use of 'Meaning'? On Stephen Mulhall's Vision of Wittgenstein

Christian Herzog, Klagenfurt, Austria

christian.herzog@uni-klu.ac.at

1. 'Secondary' sense as a limitation to the appeal to ordinary language

In the *Excursus on Wittgenstein's vision of language* within his book *The Claim of Reason* Stanley Cavell tries to account for the 'generality' of ordinary language terms – combining the flexibility to be used in various, even unforeseen ways with being constant and rule-governed – by proposing the notion of their *projection* into new contexts (cf. Cavell 1979, p. 169 & 180). Following caveat is made at the end of this section:

It is of immediate relevance to what I have been asking about Wittgenstein's view of language, and indicates one general and important limitation in my account, to notice that in moving, in Part II of the Investigations, to "figurative" or "secondary" senses of a word (which Wittgenstein explicitly says are not "metaphorical senses", cf. Investigations, p. 216), Wittgenstein is moving more concentratedly to regions of a word's use which cannot be assured or explained by an appeal to its ordinary language games (in this, these uses are like metaphorical ones). Such uses have consequences in the kind of understanding and communication they make possible. I want to say: It is such shades of sense, intimations of meaning, which allow certain kinds of subtlety or delicacy of communication; the connection is intimate, but fragile. (Cavell 1979, p. 189; PI 184)

In the case of 'figurative' or 'secondary' use of words the tie to ordinary usage, which following Cavell's conception guides the application of words in new contexts, loses its explanatory power. Such a way of employing words is no longer supported by well established conventions. Even though they mark a limitation of Cavell's account of how innovation and variation in language use are rooted in ordinary usage, those 'shades of meaning' – as well 'intimate' as 'fragile', – do play an important role notably in his writings on aesthetics. Here they are discussed within the context of the relationship between individual and society, as it is expressed in our usage of and attitude towards language. (For an account how the dialectic of uniqueness and commonness appears in literature and philosophy cf. Cavell 1988, p. 132.)

Mulhall's picture of language as 'second nature'

Whilst Cavell in his philosophical response to scepticism in *The Claim of Reason* points out that 'secondary' meaning, as it is discussed in Part II of *PI*, invokes a limitation of the appeal to the authority of ordinary language, Stephen Mulhall takes the remarks on 'experience of meaning' and aspect-perception to be pivotal within the "Vision of Language" (Mulhall 2001, p. 28), which he attributes to Wittgenstein. This is exemplified by Mulhall's reading of *PI* in *Inheritance & Originality*, which directly proceeds from the discussion of rule following in part I of *PI* to the matter of aspect-dawning and aspect-perception. Those concepts, according to Mulhall, provide the key to a profound understanding of the former. Mulhall's treatment of the contro-

versy between Hacker/Baker and Malcolm on rule following, which he conceives to illustrate different "aspects of the specifically mathematical idea of an iterative series" (2001, p. 145), shows similarities with an unfinished essay of Gordon Baker, who suggests an analogy between aspects and Wittgenstein's use of the term *Auffassung* (conception) (cf. 2006, p. 283). More than being merely one subject matter among others Mulhall takes the concept of aspect-perception to be of major relevance to Wittgenstein's way of approaching philosophical problems.

Mulhall's emphasis on aspect-perception as a central theme of Wittgenstein's philosophy is motivated by Wittgenstein's remark stressing "the connexion of 'seeing an aspect' and 'experiencing the meaning of a word' " as the important point about the discussion of aspect-blindness (PI 214d). Mulhall claims that *all* the conceptual distinctions drawn "in the realm of general relationships towards pictorial symbols find an analogous application in the field of attitudes towards linguistic symbols" (1993, p. 35; PI 182). Taking the ambition of *PI II xi* to be more than just to clarify some specific uses of the concepts of 'seeing' and 'meaning' he seeks to give "deeper reasons" and to account for a more general philosophical importance of Wittgenstein's remarks on this issue (1993, p. 34).

Mulhall's reading finally amounts to the picture of a general human attitude towards language, which results from the acquisition and habituation of linguistic behaviour to an extent, that provides us with a deep and pervasive awareness of words' linguistic and non-linguistic contexts while language at the same time becomes so tightly integrated into the behavioural repertoire, that words gain the implicitness of gestures (cf. 2001, p. 165 & 169). Thus "linguistic behaviour is second nature to us" and "to acquire language is to acquire a second nature." (2001, p. 170) Mulhall's interpretation invokes the ambiguity of Wittgenstein's notion *Lebensform* (form of life), which can refer both to natural (hence physiological) and cultural features of a community. As Mulhall considers aspect-dawning to be the manifestation of the more general capacity and attitude of continuous aspect-perception, phenomena such as 'experiencing a word's meaning' or making 'secondary' use of it analogously result from a 'naturalized' attunement to a language. Thereby he is ascribing the ability to employ words in secondary senses a possibly creative role within human culture:

But acquiring forms of linguistic behaviour does not just provide us with new instruments for achieving our practical purposes; it also shapes and informs our nature, making possible the genuine inhabitation of human culture, and the self-transformative potential that this talking form of life opens up. In particular, this mutual information of nature by culture can create a new realm of spontaneous linguistic reactions – responses to our experience that are possible only because we have acquired language, and that themselves form the basis of new language games, a further extension of our range of linguistic behaviour. (Mulhall 2001, p. 170)

2. Two critical questions

Besides general concerns, if the state of the text of Part II allows to regard the discussion of aspect-perception as the focal point of an interpretation of *PI*, objections can be made against Mulhall’s reading in so far as it claims to represent Wittgenstein’s position: Mulhall suggests that section xi of *PI II* presents an implicit critique of the conception of language employed in Part I, which advances the conception of meaning-as-use and therefore conceives words as principally substitutable (cf. Mulhall 2001, p. 178). This can be countered by pointing out that Wittgenstein’s argumentation is consistent with Part I in respect to the concept of meaning and the main purpose of the text is concept clarification, as it has been done by Oliver Scholz (cf. 1995). To avoid possible confusion – Mulhall doesn’t propose a mentalist concept of meaning and but states clearly: “The importance of the experience of meaning cannot therefore reside in a putative contribution to the phenomena of conferring or grasping linguistic meaning. Perhaps, then its interest lies rather in the attitude towards language which it exemplifies.” (Mulhall 1993, p. 38). However Scholz’ reading gives little support to assume such a shift of focus, neither do Wittgenstein’s previous writings on the philosophy of psychology or biographical evidence: Mulhall’s demand for ‘deeper reasons’ underlying the extensive examination of aspect-perception apparently is not contented by seeing the intention of *PI II xi* just in clarifying the morphology of certain psychological concepts, going back to earlier plans of a more comprehensive classification (cf. Scholz 1995, p. 214-217; Schulte 1984, Ch. 3).

A second point of attack is Mulhall’s notion of ‘continuous aspect-perception’ and in consequence his newly coined term ‘continuous meaning-perception’. Whereas aspect-dawning is linked to a specific linguistic expression (seeing-as) and presents a rather rare phenomenon, its opposite – “the ‘continuous seeing’ of an aspect” (*PI 166e*) – is not manifested by specific verbal utterances. Mulhall argues that ‘continuous seeing’ of an aspect is not just an expression limited to the small range of cases were it could be used to mark the difference between having the experience of aspect-dawning and not having it, but it points at a nearly ubiquitous attitude in perception (see Mulhall’s discussion of *Glock*: Mulhall 2001, p. 175). The main evidence he gives for this view is the position of the term within Wittgenstein’s text: preceding the discussion of picture-objects and the attitude towards pictures, which criticizes the idea of a process of interpretation involved in seeing depicted objects that is separable from perception itself (cf. Mulhall 1993, p. 20).

In his discussion of Mulhall’s account of aspect-perception Justin Good acknowledges Mulhall to have correctly emphasized this critical point. But Good objects that in postulating continuous aspect-perception as a feature of a general human relationship towards pictures and other objects of perception Mulhall exceeds the limits of grammatical investigation and raises a metaphysical claim (cf. Good 2006, p. 35). Mulhall relates the concept of continuous aspect-perception to Heidegger’s term of *readiness-to-hand* (cf. Mulhall 1993, p. 24). Good doubts that Mulhall succeeds to provide a reading that connects Wittgenstein to Heidegger while at the same time refraining from claims that reach beyond being mere remarks on grammar. This concern appears to be even more imminent in respect to the picture of language and culture given in *Inheritance & Originality*.

Apart from the difficulties of an encounter between Wittgenstein and Heidegger’s ontological project, the disputable point concerning Wittgenstein’s text remains

whether a shift in the conception of language, as Mulhall suggests, takes place. In respect to the relationship towards pictures Good argues against taking the grammatical clarification to endorse the assertion of continuous aspect-perception as an ubiquitous, general condition: “Where Mulhall goes wrong, however, is by interpreting Wittgenstein’s attack on that picture as the affirmation of a different picture.” (Good 2006, p. 35)

3. Mulhall’s view within a plurality of conceptions of language

An answer to the question if and to what extent Mulhall’s interpretation is supported by Wittgenstein’s text itself is related to one’s conception of Wittgenstein’s method. Rather than to attribute Wittgenstein to imply a philosophical vision of language and culture in this section of *PI II*, as Mulhall does, it seems more plausible to me to regard Mulhall’s interpretation as rooted in and inspired by the openness and sensitivity Wittgenstein exhibits towards the phenomena and linguistic expressions he examines. While his argumentation consequently undercuts a relapse into mentalist conceptions of meaning, he acknowledges the inclination to use the word ‘meaning’ (“figuratively”) in connection with the game of experiencing a word and introduces the notion of ‘secondary’ meaning to account for a further divergent use of it (cf. *PI 183-184*). Wittgenstein elucidates the temptation posed by these uses of the term to draw misleading conclusions for a conception of meaning. At the same time he explores the ramifications of the use of ‘meaning’ deep into the realm of aesthetics, matters of *Sprachgefühl* and, as Cavell puts it, those “shades of sense, intimations of meaning, which allow us certain kinds of subtlety or delicacy of communication” (Cavell 1979, p. 189).

In his late text on the analogy between *aspects* and *conceptions* (*Auffassungen*), which I mentioned briefly earlier, Gordon Baker characterizes *conceptions* to be “essentially plural” (2006, p. 284). Baker’s examples of conceptions are the Augustinian picture of language and the conception of *meaning-as-use*. Although those two conceptions cannot be applied simultaneously or combined with each other, none of it can be claimed to present the only possibility. The aim Baker attributes to Wittgenstein’s philosophizing is therapeutic: to dissolve the fixation to a single conception and make alternatives available. Mulhall’s reading of Wittgenstein can be understood in this sense as developing one more conception of language: one that assigns such phenomena as the ‘secondary’ use of words a more central role, stressing our attitude towards words, and addresses different philosophical (and cultural) problems than the conception of meaning-as-use, while still trying to stay coherent with it. In respect to the realm of aesthetics and to the question, how the notion of meaning can be applied there, Mulhall’s *Vision of Language* and the importance it attributes to ‘secondary’ meaning provides an inspiring prospect. Although it is not without risks of getting into metaphysical claims.

One further merit of Mulhall’s reading is that it paves the way for an encounter between Wittgenstein and the Continental phenomenological traditions. There are not only connections to Heidegger and Kierkegaard which can be explored. Mulhall’s emphasis on a gestural dimension of language use suggests possible intersections with Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s account of language as gestures (1945, Ch. 6) and Ernst Cassirer’s treatment of language in *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (1956, Ch. 2). Examining those writings with a Wittgensteinian view of language and his way to deal with psychological concepts in

mind could bring a dialectical exchange between those approaches or at least show them to be working out an alternative picture within the plurality of conceptions of language.

Literature

Baker, Gordon 2006 *Wittgenstein's method: Neglected Aspects*, Ed. and introduced by Katherine J. Morris. Oxford: Blackwell.

Cavell, Stanley 1979 *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Scepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

— 1988 *In Quest of the ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*. Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press.

Cassirer, Ernst 1956 *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen: Erster Teil, Die Sprache*. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Good, Justin 2006 *Wittgenstein and the theory of perception*. London: Continuum.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 1945 *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.

Mulhall, Stephen 1993 *On being in the world: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on seeing aspects*. London: Routledge.

— 2001 *Inheritance & Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Scholz, Oliver R. 1995b "Wie schlimm ist Bedeutungsblindheit? Zur Kernfrage von PU II xi." in: Savigny/Scholz (eds.) *Wittgenstein über die Seele*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig 2001 *Philosophical Investigations (PI)*, The German text, with a revised English translation, Translated by G. E. M. Anscombe, 3rd Edition, Oxford, Blackwell.