

The Philosophical Relevance of Wittgenstein's Discussion of Experiences of Meaning

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It is often assumed that the discussion of the experience of meaning marks a shift of interest in Wittgenstein's writings after finishing Part 1 of the *Investigations* in 1945. Yet there is abundant evidence of an early interest in this topic in writings from the first half of the 1930s. Thus, Wittgenstein distinguishes between meaning as use and William James's conception of the experience of meaning as early as 1932. In the same period he devotes a long discussion partly published in *Philosophical Grammar* to the relation between understanding in the sense of experiencing the meaning of a word and what he later calls 'aspect seeing'. Finally, in the second part of the *Brown Book*, his most sustained treatment of the experience of meaning at the time is to be found.

Wittgenstein's early discussion of the experience of meaning goes hand in hand with a treatment of the concept of understanding as applied both to language and pictures, e.g. genre pictures, portraits of human faces. Thus, he notes:

'The different experiences I have when I see a picture first one way and then another are comparable to the experience I have when I read a sentence with understanding and without understanding' (*PG*, p. 42).

Thus, I can see the drawing of a cube as if it projects away from the paper, but also as if it projects back, or again as a flat design. Likewise, I may see four points within a circle now as a face, now not as a face. Or I may see a watch as a watch, i.e. as a dial with hands (*PG*, p. 42). As the latter example vividly makes clear, understanding here is different from the ability to use the watch as a watch. Rather, understanding 'is like seeing Orion as a man striding across the sky' (*PG*, p. 42). When we see the watch as a watch we do not merely put a different interpretation upon the same sense datum of a physical object as if we first take the (same) object one way then another way; rather we see both times a different object. Similarly, we can speak of conceiving of signs in a particular way, 'reading something into them'. Thus, we can conceive of signs as signs, apart from the specific meaning we attach to them. Unlike the seeing of pictures, however, understanding language as language seems reserved for special, almost experimental conditions. For instance, when we try to see our native language as if for the first time: 'I tell myself: I want to try to look at a printed English word and see it as if I hadn't learnt to read, as if the black shapes on the paper were strange drawings whose purpose I couldn't imagine or guess. And then what happens is that I can't look at the printed word without the sound of the word or of the letter I'm actually looking at coming before my mind' (*PG*, p. 176). As Wittgenstein takes great pains to show, this 'experience of understanding' occurs simultaneously with reading or hearing the signs and hence seems radically different from understanding in the sense of the ability to use words. Hence, we cannot look at a word of our native language without the experience of understanding it, e.g. without hearing the sound of the word as we know it. Like the seeing of aspects conceiving of a sign in a particular way is easily misconstrued when it is described in purely cognitive terms: as if a particular word is first interpreted

one way, then another way. Anticipating Wittgenstein's discussion of the physiognomy of individual words and syllables, when we are asked to say the word 'March' and 'mean it at one time as an imperative at another as the name of the month' (*PI II*, p. 215), we see or experience it as a different word, e.g. a verb rather than a substantive.

The philosophical importance of the discussion of the experience of meaning and understanding, I suggest, is part of one of the most central concerns of Wittgenstein's later philosophy. To point out potential confusions caused by a failure to see the distinction between empirical propositions and propositions about the rules for the use of words, i.e. 'grammatical' propositions. The experiential notion of meaning and understanding is no exception to this pervasive confusion. Consider this passage:

'We can call a "sentence" ("Satz") that which is conceived first in one way and then in another way; but also this or that conception itself. This is a source of confusions' (*PG*, p. 43).

The fact that one may have difficulty in understanding what the confusion might be here only testifies to the enormous yet deceptive similarity between a proposition describing a physical object or pattern and a proposition 'about' an experience. To spell out the distinction more explicitly: we may define 'what is read' as the string of letters on the display, but we may also define it in terms of the impression the letters make on us, as when we read the sentence 'with understanding'.

As the preceding examples showed, experiences of meaning are simultaneous with processing language, hence the enormous temptation to consider propositions about such experiences as reporting them. Moreover, the explanatory force of experiences of meaning seems further derived from the fact that when one fails to understand a sentence they are typically lacking, such as reading or hearing a sentence in a foreign language.

In *Part II* of the *Brown Book*, Wittgenstein discusses the use of the word 'particular' related to cases that either explicitly or implicitly refer to experience of meaning. He speaks of a transitive and an intransitive use of 'particular'. In the first case, the word 'particular' or 'peculiar' is used preliminary to a further specification. To the question 'In what way peculiar' an answer can be given which explains this way in different words. For instance, I may describe the peculiar smell of a cup of coffee by saying that it has 'a smooth mellow brightness with hints of dark chocolate, berries and a touch of citrus'. In the second case, however, the word 'particular' is used without any further specification or comparison. As the smell-of-soap case illustrates, this can be a non-controversial intransitive use of the words 'particular' and 'peculiar' in daily life.

It is important to note that Wittgenstein also introduces a third term which is related to the preceding distinction of the transitive and the intransitive use of words. This is what he calls the reflexive use of words. He says that we often use 'the reflexive form of speech as a means of emphasizing something' (*BB*, p. 161). Like the intransitive use

of words, the reflexive form of speech is a matter of emphasis, but unlike the former it can always be 'straightened out' (BB, p. 161). With this Wittgenstein means that we can always rephrase what we say in more straight terms. Thus, we may say in the reflexive mode 'That's that', meaning 'That is settled'. But we use the former expression rather than the second because we want something to stand out. Especially when we want to say with 'That's settled' something like 'The matter is closed', we may express this more firmly by saying 'That's that', which lays a certain emphasis on the second 'that'. The reflexive form of speech therefore is a case of the transitive use of words.

Back to the use of the word 'particular'. Consider these two examples:

- (1) 'Each of these handwritten words has a particular character that differs from the same words in print.
- (2) 'Each of these written words has its own particular character'

In (1) the phrase 'that differs from the same words in print' is used as a further specification of 'particular'. It explains the use of 'particular' by opposing it to, hence comparing it with, the words as they appear in print. Someone else may be informed by this further specification. The case is different with (2). Here too it may seem that the sentence prepares for a further specification: 'a particular experience, namely ...' At the same time, it may not be meant as saying that e.g. the words prompt the same feeling as another handwriting, or that it feels different now from the way it felt a few moments back. In this latter case, the sentence is not used transitively but intransitively.

Now in the context of a philosophical discussion the fact that a particular sentence may both have a transitive and an intransitive use may put the mind in a whirl. As Wittgenstein says, 'we are regarding its use as a special case of the transitive use' (BB, p. 160). That is, although the word 'particular' is actually used as a matter of emphasis it may seem to us that we are using the word transitively and, in particular, as a reflexive case of the transitive use. In the reflexive-transitive treatment of what is actually an intransitive use we think of ourselves as denoting by 'particular' an elusive experience which escapes the net of language. A 'something' which we 'cannot' further describe. The very question, however, is whether there is anything to describe.

For instance, consider James's remark that '... no word in an understood sentence comes to consciousness as a mere noise. We feel its meaning as it passes ...' (James 1890, vol. I, p. 281).

James may have meant this remark in such a way that each time when he attends to a letter of his brother Henry in original handwriting the words have an effect on him which they fail to have when they appear in typescript. Or he may have found that the handwriting sometimes has this effect but not always. Put in this context, James's propositions about experience of meaning would be transitive (and temporal). Obviously this is not how he means them. It is crucially important to note that in the discussion about the experience of meaning the various concepts, e.g. 'comes' or 'particular way', are not supposed to distinguish or to describe a particular experience in contrast with other experiences or with experiences at different times at all. Indeed, if it were, it would be contrary to the purposes of the discussion. For if it were e.g. a reading experience at time *t* one referred to, one would thereby concede that this experience need not occur every time one reads the word. But at the heart of James's discussion about phe-

nominal consciousness is that *any* experience is invested with a subjective character. The word 'comes' therefore does not have the meaning it has when it is used transitively, as when one says that e.g. 'the word 'red' "... always comes quicker than the word 'two' when I'm counting colored objects", or "It always comes with a shock", etc.?' (BB, p. 158). 'Comes' is used intransitively yet James thinks that a genuine act of comparison or recognition is involved, one which matches the word with a template in the mind.

Now it remains to be seen how the potential confusion of the intransitive use and the reflexive case of the transitive use of words bears on the issue of the meaning-experience. As this remark shows, Wittgenstein sees an analogy between the sort of mistake we make here and the mistake we are liable to make in the case of ostensive definitions:

'I am in fact going through the acts of attending which could accompany the use of a sample. And this is what makes it seem as though I was making use of a sample. This error is akin to that of believing that an ostensive definition says something about the object to which it directs our attention' (BB, p. 175)

The 'error' in the case of the ostensive definition is to think that in defining the word we establish a connection between language and reality. Thus, the definition 'The color which this book has, is called "red"' is taken to forge a connection between the word 'red' and a property of the book. But the idea that in giving an ostensive definition we make a step from the area of signs to reality is an illusion. What creates this illusion is that we interpret the transition from the *verbal* sign to the gesture of pointing at the book as an application of language, i.e. as a description of what we perceive. Yet the object at which we point functions as a further sign and as such is part of the grammar of language. An ostensive definition, therefore, is still a rule of language.

Now in taking what is actually an intransitive use of words for a reflexive case of the transitive use we come to think that we are applying language, i.e. describing an experience by means of a paradigm, whereas we only 'compare' the paradigm with itself.

In fact the link between the confusion of the transitive and intransitive use of words and the 'error' related to the ostensive definition is more direct than the preceding quotation suggests. It is not just that there is an analogy between the two sorts of confusion, rather the one gives food to the other. In particular, the confusion of the transitive and intransitive use of words is one of the pitfalls in language which deceives us into thinking that we are using a word or expression for the description of an object whereas the object actually functions as an 'object of comparison', a paradigm or sample. Qua paradigm the object is part of the rules of language and is not one of the objects to which the ostensive definition is applied. Rather it enables speakers to make such applications. Now in taking what is actually an intransitive use of words for a reflexive case of the transitive use we come to think that we are applying language, i.e. describing an experience by means of a paradigm, whereas we only 'compare' the paradigm with itself.

Consider now again sentences (1) and (2). In (1), the words in print are invoked in order to say something about the feeling the handwriting gives. Similarly, it might be said here 'Her handwriting gives me a special feeling, namely ...', thereby giving a sample of a gesture expressive of the feeling. But how about (2), 'Each of these writ-

ten words has its own particular character'? As noted before, this sentence is not supposed to distinguish or describe a particular character in the way (1) does. The following remark is relevant here: 'It is as though we could say: "This face has a particular expression: namely this" (pointing to something). But if I had to point to anything in this place it would have to be the drawing I am looking at' (*BB*, p. 162).

This remark makes clear that the problem Wittgenstein identifies has to do with the way we represent sentences about experience rather than the nature of experience and its relation to outward behavior. In mixing the transitive and intransitive use of the word 'particular' we end up in giving what I call, an additive representation of the notion of 'particular' in sentence (2). As the term aptly conveys, an additive representation represents the notion of 'particular' as if it is like any other description of an expression - only 'particular'. That is, sentence (2) is as much about a feature of the expression as (1). The expression may be warm, the same as yesterday, indifferent and besides all this it may also be particular. But this would require giving an explanation of the word which we are not prepared to give: we do not mean to say by 'particular' 'indifferent', 'business manlike', or whatever. Hence, we are in the predicament that we want to give a further explanation or specification of our experience but without being prepared to attach a description of something other than the experience. What we say therefore when we say e.g. 'This room looks familiar to me' amounts to no more than 'The familiar look of this room', thereby pointing at the room, 'is this', pointing again at the room'. Wittgenstein

says that we are using the object 'at the same time as the sample and that which the sample is compared with' (*BB*, p. 174). Put otherwise, we say of the room that it looks familiar to us and, at the same time, *explain* what we mean by 'familiar' by referring to his room. In the reflexive case of the transitive use therefore the experience of the room is treated simultaneously as a *sample* of the experience and as an instance of *having* the experience.

What this reading of the discussion of the experience of meaning shows is at least three things: (1) the discussion of the experience of meaning is not meant to repair a defect in the 'meaning-as-use' approach. Rather, it is meant to expose a 'primitive' notion of understanding which tempts us to get beyond particular uses or explanations of 'experience'. (2) The confusion at the heart of the experience of meaning is analogous to the confusion of an object-as-comparison and the object described in the case of ostensive definition. (3) The later discussion of experience of meaning, such as the 'if-feeling' in *PI II* has to be seen as an attempt to account for the intransitive use in more adequate terms.

Literature

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