

ARTICLES

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Aspect-Perception as a Philosophical Method

Abstract

Inducing aspect-experiences – the sudden seeing of something anew, as when a face suddenly strikes us as familiar – can be used as a philosophical method. In seeing aspects, I argue, we let ourselves experience what it would be like to conceptualize something in a particular way, apart from any conceptual routine. We can use that experience to examine our ways of conceptualizing things, and re-evaluate the ways we make sense of them. I claim that we are not always passive with regard to these experiences, and explain how we can actively induce them. I distinguish this method from other standard Wittgensteinian philosophical methods.

Introduction

I propose that Wittgenstein's discussion about aspect-perception can shed light on his ideas about philosophical method. My discussion follows up on a remark by Juliet Floyd: "Aspect-perception is a way he [Wittgenstein] has of calling attention to what interests us, to our voicing of what we take to be important" (2010: 317). Succinctly, my claim is that we may use aspect-perception to re-evaluate our interest in things; specifically, our ways of conceptualizing them. Aspect-seeing is essentially reflecting on how we make sense of things – capture them in thought and

language. It thus enables a special kind of philosophical investigation.¹

In section 1, I discuss grammatical investigations in general. I then distinguish conceptually committed kinds of reflection on language, discussed in section 2, from conceptually non-committed kinds of reflection that aspect-perception enables, discussed in section 3. In sections 4-5, I describe two ways of inducing aspect experiences and active use of it as a philosophical method – by using images, and by imagining alternative general facts of nature. In sections 6-8, I examine some objections.

1. Grammatical investigations

The point of a typical Wittgensteinian grammatical investigation is to remind us of, recall us to, “our real need” – as Wittgenstein calls it in a pivotal moment (PI §108).² He means, roughly, our need to make sense of things – think of them, and own our world in thought and language.

Things we encounter don’t always present themselves clearly. In some cases, we cannot turn to our linguistic norms for help, because there are no norms, or no clear norms, or because there

¹ Not that when an aspect dawns we are necessarily aware of the need to capture things in thought, or that we would necessarily describe it as a linguistic interest if we were so aware. One does not have to be a philosopher of language to experience aspects; but one also does not have to be such a philosopher to have a need to capture things in thought – have a world. I discuss in detail the grammar of aspect-perception and the kind of mind-work involved in: Agam-Segal 2014.

² For more about this moment, see Mulhall 2004. I suggest that we put Wittgenstein’s notion of “real need” alongside Kant’s talk of “a need of the understanding” (Kant 1952, 184), or of “the needs of our faculty of judgment” (Kant 1952, 347). Like Kant, Wittgenstein took it as fundamental that we need to mentally “own” the world, find our way about it, and make it our mind’s home. We need to be able to think about things, name things, describe things, ask for things, suspect that things are not as they seem, wonder what they are, distinguish between things, organize things, categorize things, be reacquainted with things, use things, be disappointed with things, get creative with things, and take all sorts of interest in things – and that we do all that with others and thus share the world with them. Unlike Kant, Wittgenstein did not think that this need necessarily involves a need for a *system*. It is not the case that this need of ours takes only one shape, or that it always takes the same shape regardless of our particular interest in things in particular occasions. In particular, it is not the case that the only way to satisfy this need of ours to mentally own the world must take the form of being able to think systematically and to unify all our experience in a single principled theory-like structure.

are competing norms: Is it a heap or a group of grains? Is Mona Lisa content or embarrassed? Should this be called “marriage”, or can marriage only exist between a man and a woman? Is this a baby or an embryo? Take this last example: The terms ‘baby’ and ‘embryo’ evoke different sets of norms – contrasting ways of mentally capturing that thing in the midsection of a woman: Thinking about it as an embryo would reflect interest in brain- and lung-functioning; thinking about it as a baby would involve interest in its name, for instance, or holding it when it cries, soothing it, and making eye contact.

Such ambiguities, then, may cause both philosophical and moral problems. Partly, our difficulty in those cases is to make conceptual judgments: to settle on ways to conceptualize such matters – to have them in our world. Borrowing Tractarian terms, we need to find the right *symbol* in a *sign* – determine what norms should govern our relationship with, our life with, the object. Our ability to make moral judgments in some cases depends on our ability to settle what language is appropriate, and in what semantic field we should make the judgment.

Thankfully, this does not normally happen. Normally, we have established conceptual commitments; a ‘world’. Normally we don’t need to conceptualize things; we find them already conceptualized. We don’t look puzzled at the chair across the table, or at our colleague in it, and wonder what these are. But, in the admittedly rare cases under discussion, we may feel as if blind, or as if everyone except us is blind. We do not have a rule that would decide for us, e.g. whether this is a baby or an embryo. But we still need to be able to think about it in coherent terms; and sometimes we can’t stand it – especially in the moral cases – when no obvious concept suggests itself as the only right one. To overcome this difficulty, we need to determine how to properly conceptualize. What we need, then – “really” need – are capacities that are internal to, definitive of, having concepts.³ Having concepts would allow us to make sense of, and own, our reality – to have a world.⁴

³ There are things that having a concept allow us to do that are external to having it. But having a concept is primarily tied to what is internal to having it: mastery of a technique of making sense of certain things. It is meaningless to talk of having a concept without being

In philosophy, Wittgenstein thought, we sometimes lose touch with our real need – our ways of making sense of things. This is exemplified in Plato’s *Parmenides*, in a discussion on multitude and unity. Early on Socrates attempts to prevent misunderstanding by distinguishing between “visible things” and “things that are grasped by reasoning” (Plato 1997: 129e-130a). The distinction is also grammatical: the language of multitude and unity applies differently to visible things and to things that are grasped by reasoning. For instance, a person – a visible thing – can be said to be both a multitude and a unity: she has a left and a right side but is a single person. However, it would be meaningless to talk about the left or right side of the concept *person*, graspable only by reasoning. According to Socrates, it cannot therefore be said to be a multitude, but only a unity.

What is important for my purposes is an abstract point: we may not really need to talk about, make sense of, different kinds of things using the very same language. Thinking we do is similar to a child wondering why she cannot literally *see* the point someone is making, or why people never laugh when they say something smells funny. It can happen, and probably happens more often to philosophers and children, that we think we should be able to do something (e.g. think of concepts as if they were perceptible objects), talk of something using particular concepts, see a certain symbol in a sign, but that we are really very confused. We find ourselves estranged from our “real need”. A typical Wittgensteinian

able to make sense of things. To that extent, concepts and what we do with them are interdependent. In contrast, for some pragmatists at least – Richard Rorty seems to be among them – concepts are available independently of what we do with them; we choose certain concepts and not others because the former fulfill some needs that the latter don’t. This pragmatist idea regarding the usefulness of concepts only makes sense regarding the things we can do that are external to having them. It does not concern the ability to make sense of things, which is the focus of my argument.

⁴ Compare Kant about the savage (*Wilder*): “If a savage sees a house from a distance, for example, with whose use he is not acquainted, he admittedly has before him in his representation the very same object as someone else who is acquainted with it determinately as a dwelling established for men. But as to form, this cognition of one and the same object is different in the two. With the one it is *mere intuition*, with the other it is *intuition* and *concept* at the same time” (Kant 1992: 544-5).

investigation, then, attempts to help people (perhaps oneself) to regain linguistic balance, to re-establish contact with the ways of talking, thinking, and in general making sense of things, that they need.

There are various kinds of conceptual unclarities, and various methods to help people (re)gain grammatical balance. Wittgenstein's discussion about aspects, I suggest, illuminates a particular family of such methods: clarifying grammar by facilitating, educating, aspect-experiences. I shall generally call this family "the aspect-method", and discuss some of its members in section 3. First, however, for comparison, I describe in section 2 another family of grammatical investigations that don't involve aspect-perception.⁵

2. Grammatical investigations without aspect-perception

There is a family of philosophical-grammatical methods, using which we may remind ourselves of the good of mastering certain concepts by taking an "engaged", committed, standpoint. Figuratively, when applying such methods, we engage our mind-mechanism to the linguistic norms governing those concepts and let those norms turn our mental cogwheels. We thus see how having certain concepts allows us to think; the good of having them becomes visible. This typically involves actually using those concepts while attending to the work they do. It does not involve aspect-perception. One distinguished branch in this family is that of the methods of logical analysis. These allow us to examine the good of a concept by examining the inferential powers of propositions that contain it: testing how those propositions function in arguments – what they entail and what they do not, for instance.

⁵ "There is not a philosophical method, though there are indeed methods, like different therapies" (PI §133). Uses of both families of methods can be found throughout both parts of PI.

There are other branches in this family. In a philosophical discussion about sensations, for example, it might be worth mentioning that to say that my hand hurts is not to say that it is my hand that feels the pain, but I in my hand (PI §286). This is similar to a child complaining that no one is taking her headache away from her. In response, we may explain that having things is not always tied to owning them, and engage the child in a use of “have” that does not entail ownership, and tell her: “The reflection in the mirror is yours, you have it. But can you give it to someone else?” As in the philosophical case, here too there is loss of linguistic balance: people – again, often philosophers and children – may think that they ought to be able to do something in certain terms (e.g. think of sensations as objects), whereas they do not really need that. They are not entirely in touch with how they need to be able to make sense of things.

In general, methods of this first kind allow people (perhaps ourselves) to retrieve their real need by making them examine their practices “from within”. They are made to examine their practices by making them exercise them and to thereby expose their grammatical structure: what can be done with a sentence; or what can be done with a headache.


3. Grammatical investigations with aspect-perception

A second family of philosophical methods involves aspect-perception. These aim at a different kind of re-familiarization with our real need. They involve reflection on our linguistic capacities, but this time from a “disengaged” standpoint, apart from any established conceptual routine. And this can help philosophical investigations. In PI §524, for example, Wittgenstein instructs: “Don’t take it as a matter of course, but as a remarkable fact, that pictures and fictitious narratives give us pleasure, occupy our minds”. And later: “Let yourself be *struck* by the existence of such a thing as our language-game of confessing the motive of my action” (PI 224).

Figuratively speaking, in aspect-perception our mental cogwheels are not turned by conceptual norms. Rather, we let ourselves experience what a conceptualization would feel like, or

the absence of a concept. Concept-application in aspect-perception, therefore, does not take the form of exercising conceptual routines.⁶

Take the example of similarity between faces which Wittgenstein's PI discussion about aspects begins with. Suppose you meet the father of an old friend. After a while it suddenly strikes you: there is something in the father's and the son's faces that belongs together. You didn't notice it at first, but it's clear. Your friend's face has now the aspect of his father's, and you can see in it something you couldn't before; you might not have a word for it, but it's there. You now "own" your friend's face anew; it makes new sense. Or take seeing an unfamiliar machine. The object shows itself as more than just 'a bundle of perceptions'. We can see that it is useful, but cannot imagine for what. We sense the need to capture it in thought and mentally own it, to conceptualize. We feel the deficiency. Once more, the aspect reveals a need for conceptualizing an object, having it in our world.

Similarly, when the duck-aspect of Jastrow's  dawns on us, what we experience is a concept contacting it, as if for the first time – possibly for the first time. We experience the concept *duck* as it breathes duck-life into the drawing. We experience how the concept enables us to have this drawing in our world in this particular way – which, once more, allows us to appreciate our real need: to capture this object in thought.

Now, the experience of aspects is a preamble in that it is anticipatory and provisional. Typically, things are already immersed in conceptual normativity. Typically, we don't experience them as they come to have meaning and significance; they have them already. In this sense we don't typically see things under aspects;

⁶ We may even talk here of looking at things *sub specie aeternitatis* (compare CV, 7).

this is not our usual attitude towards things. Aspect-seeing takes a special feat of thought and imagination.⁷

As we experience an aspect, we are not assuming an established normative connection between the object and the concept we bring to it. We associate them, but the association is not part of an established routine with them: we are not using the object in a way that assumes some conceptual judgment as a matter-of-course. We are not putting a concept to work in the sense of actually employing it in inferences and judgments. For instance, to experience the duck-aspect of \approx ? is different from using it as a duck-picture to signal that the duck-hunting season is open; and to be struck by the familiarity of an object is different from identifying it. Rather, to be struck by an aspect is merely to entertain a conceptualization, or feel its absence. It is, for instance, to feel the point of using \approx ? as a duck-picture, or feel the need to identify the object. It may pave the way for such uses.⁸

Both in applying the aspect-method, and the methods discussed in section 2, we exercise concepts. Unlike the methods in section 2 – which, to recall, involve exercising conceptual routines – coming into contact with our “real need” in aspect-perception involves raw exposure, as it were, from a reflective, non-routine, and in this sense disengaged, standpoint. What we are exposed to is the fact that our perceptions demand normative life.⁹ (This is not experience of non-conceptual content, rather, the conceptual connection takes a special form: a concept animates an object, but without taking that conceptualization as a matter-of-course. See section 7.¹⁰)

⁷ This is one point of controversy between Stephen Mulhall (e.g. 2001) and Avner Baz (e.g. 2000). On this, I side with Baz. I discuss other aspects of the controversy in section 6.

⁸ We can distinguish between two ways aspect-seeing can be provisional: (1) a preparatory way, in which the aspect-experience lays the grounds for developing some linguistic ability – conceptualizing, and (2) a non-preparatory way, which indicates that words fail us and that linguistic abilities we have don’t satisfy our expressive needs. See Agam-Segal 2012.

⁹ Investigating our practices in this way – employing what Stephen Mulhall calls our “capacity to find the possibilities of meaning” (2001: 180) – may happen in reminding ourselves of our life with them, but also in examining, questioning, and developing them.

¹⁰ On this, I am in a disagreement with Avner Baz. See Baz, forthcoming.

If I am right, linguistic capacities, to which we are committed, cannot always help us make sense of things, to capture them in thought. In such cases, we face conceptual uncertainties: e.g. whether to call something ‘embryo’ or ‘baby,’ ‘heap’ or ‘collection of grains’. This may engender moral and philosophical difficulties. We may feel that we have been thrown into a linguistic void. We may feel that we have no friction, nothing (or too much) to argue or think with. What we need, we may think, is a way to decide what linguistic norms to adopt, what concepts to endorse, based on facts, logic, and norms we already accept. We may think we need a method to unfold our existing commitments – a method of the type discussed in section 2. Sometimes this can be done, but not always. And my claim is that we are not helpless even in cases in which it cannot be done. Aspect-perception can help.¹¹

“One can use imagining in the course of proving something,” says Wittgenstein (PI 213)¹² and he thereby makes a contrast with argumentation that unfolds logical-grammatical commitments – associated with the methods discussed in section 2. The aspect-method, on the other hand, uses imagining, and in applying it, we are *not* unfolding linguistic commitments.¹³ In fact, the aspect-


¹¹ Duncan Richter pointed out to me that aspect-seeing may sometimes cause problems rather than solve them. This is very true. Aspect-perception is a form of thinking, and thinking can complicate life: the life of a pig is problem-free relative to the life of a Socrates. Needless to say, however, turning into a pig might make Socrates’ problems disappear, but it would not solve them. More thinking might.

¹² According to him, argumentation in such cases may take the form: “I am dissatisfied, I go on looking. At last a word comes: “*That’s it!*” *Sometimes* I can say why. This is simply what searching, this is what finding, is like here” (PI 218).

¹³ The work of the imagination here is related to, but different from, its work in ordinary perception: In both cases a concept is connected to a sense-impression. But in ordinary perception we are not consciously imagining the concept into what we see; the sense-impression is already bound by the concept. In aspect-seeing, we consciously (even if not always intentionally) “see something into the picture” (see RPP1 §1028). It is as if the concept is not an original part of the perception. As Avner Baz puts it: “As if the concept wouldn’t just rest there unless we kept it there, pressed it with our gaze against the object, as it were” (2000: 111).

method is useful precisely because it does not appeal to norms we already accept. Its point is rather to make people experience and thus reflect on such commitments – establish, reaffirm, change, or discard them. Aspect-perception involves a use of language – of concepts – that is essentially a reflection on language. It allows us to feel, and reflect upon, the need – perhaps needs – to make sense of things. It allows us to entertain the having of a concept, for instance, and experience the good of making sense of things with it, and possibly get ourselves to commit.

A student once told me, for example, that after a visit to the beach, she could not eat fish for a while: It struck her that she was the fish's guest, and – she said – you don't eat your host. For a while, the concepts *guest* and *host* animated her experience. Similarly, people who object to gay marriages sometimes change their minds after spending time with gay couples. Sometimes it dawns on them that they cannot quite make sense for themselves of the relationship they witness – the care, quarrels, worries, and hopes – with the concepts they endorse. They need concepts from the conceptual-scheme of marriage.

I wish to address a worry before I go on. I've been lumping together two kinds of cases: (1) experiences of the kind we have when suddenly seeing the duck in , and (2) experiences of the kind we have when suddenly being struck by the idea that a certain relationship is marriage. My claims about the usefulness of aspect-perception depend on the idea that we can see aspects in both kinds of cases. But, so my worry goes, it is unclear whether the experience in the second kind of cases is indeed an aspect-experience or not.

A moral realization, I maintain, can be and often involves a kind of aspect-experience. But I do not want to deny the differences:

I should also mention that in PI 207 Wittgenstein compares seeing the duck-rabbit as a duck to seeing a triangle as fallen over, and says that the latter demands imagination. He implies that seeing the duck-rabbit as a duck does not require imagination. – This, I believe, is too crude. Imagination plays different roles in different cases. It plays one kind of role in ordinary seeing, and another in aspect-seeing. And in each, there is a family of roles it may play – bringing things together, making connections. From the fact that a particular case does not require a particular kind of imaginative activity it doesn't follow that no imagination is required.

When struck by the idea that the relationship is marriage, say, we may add that this is the *right* way to see it. The realization may be powerful enough to make other aspects disappear, to “silence” them.¹⁴ In the duck-rabbit case, in contrast, not only do we not want to say this, it would seem meaningless. So the difference is deep. Nevertheless – and this is what is important for my purposes – both cases involve application of concepts apart from conceptual routines; both involve a kind of reflective attitude without assuming an already established platform of conceptual commitment. In this sense, we are disengaged from established conceptual routines in both cases. This, I maintain, is what is essential to aspect-perception.¹⁵

Experiencing a possible conceptualization doesn't justify it by forcing us to accept it on pain of logical contradiction. Take an example from Maurice Drury, who, in a chapter in *The Danger of Words*, is attempting to decide whether some allegedly religious experiences are in fact madness (1973). Suppose a person starts behaving a-typically, donates large sums, severs close relationships, talks about Judgment-Day, and so on. Suppose that, when asked, this person says it was God's instruction. Drury believes the

¹⁴ John McDowell mentions such “silencing,” but not aspect-perception, in McDowell 1998.

¹⁵ Another difference between the cases concerns the will. It is often noted that aspects are subject to the will: we may choose what to see, e.g. the duck or the rabbit (see PI 213). Now, if that is part of the definition of aspects, then the second kind of cases I mentioned seems to be excluded, since in some such cases a conceptualization is forced and not willed. – In response: the will is not involved in all cases of aspect-perception in the same way. In cases like seeing similarity between faces the will plays a different role. Here too an experience is forced, but the will still plays a role. Compare the way in which the fact that the object I'm holding is a pen is forced to the way in which a sudden grasp of facial similarity, or a sudden moral realization, is forced on us. In the first kind of cases, but not the second, we are passive, and this happens as a matter-of-course – what the pen is is not in question for us. In the second kind of cases, but not the first, we are in the midst of seeing something anew. We are led to ask, to imagine; that is, we are led to *do* something, to be active: to re-engage and re-conceive our relation to things. Thus, even if we later rescind, for the duration of the experience, we are willing accomplices of our experience. And this is how the will is involved in such cases of aspect-perception. This is reminiscent of the force of metaphors and jokes; see Moran 1989.

difficulty might not be that we do not have enough facts. It might rather be with how to conceptualize the facts we already have. The terms ‘madness’ and ‘religion’ represent two different conceptual-schemes – alternative ways of conceptualizing. ‘Madness’ would reflect interest in brain-activity, nutrition, or personal-history; ‘Religious experience’ would reflect interest in life’s purpose, repentance, and soul-searching.

After several failed attempts to decide whether and when such cases involve madness or genuine religious experiences, Drury pauses and reflects:

When in philosophy you keep coming up against a dead end, [...], it is often because we are looking for the wrong type of answer. And this indeed is what I believe we have been doing in our search. For we were sitting back in a cool hour and attempting to solve this problem as a pure piece of theory. To be the detached, wise, external critic. We did not see ourselves and our own manner of life as intimately involved in the settlement of this question. (132-3)

I want to focus on the idea that the decision here is *our* burden. The burden, as I understand, may not be to logically deduce, unfold, what our commitments should be, given the facts and our prior commitments. Generally, when deliberating about how to conceptualize something, we may need to go beyond appeal to such considerations, and the burden may be yet heavier: to try the alternatives out, taste the options, and make up our own experienced minds; and it is similar with the cases discussed above. Aspect-perception allows for just that.

4. Aspect-seeing as method

Can aspect-seeing really be used as a method? Even if we grant that aspect-dawning may facilitate linguistic insight, one may worry that in most cases it just happens; in most we are passive. But if there is a method here, as I claim, the dawning needs to be planned and caused; it should be possible to actively make an aspect dawn. But can we manage that? – I claim we can. We often do so intuitively, e.g. when suggesting in an argument: “Look at the matter this way...” We may also bring about aspect-shifts using metaphors, jokes, and stories. In what follows, I focus on two ways of

generating aspect-experiences: one involving the use of images or pictures, discussed in this section, another involving imagining different general facts of nature, discussed in section 5.

In aspect-perception, I argued, we reflect on the meaning of objects – on how to conceptualize and mentally own them – without exercising any conceptual routine. I now claim that we may do that deliberately by bringing images to objects. To explain, let me proceed from the opposite direction: from a familiar Wittgensteinian worry about images.

Suppose one infers: ‘I have \$2 and you have \$3, we therefore have \$5.’ Wittgenstein claims that the inference may consist entirely of this “therefore” (RFM, 1, §6). The whole of the inferring is encapsulated in the “therefore”; there need be nothing else – an image in one’s mind’s eye in particular. Often, he thinks, there really is nothing else.

Wittgenstein’s claim here invites worries. Without something in the head, so goes one worry, the inference appears utterly unjustified and arbitrary; it may not even be an inference, but a mere random uttering of numbers. Without the proper mental accompaniments, these numbers are inert. We need something in the head to make them come to life as an inference.

The Wittgensteinian reply is that even with a mental accompaniment the problem remains: For how could something like an image, say, make the numbers less inert? Suppose that when making the inference one conjures up an image:



How would that help justify the inference? How could it? In itself, the image is as inert as the numbers in the original problem (also BB, 5).

Now, whatever merit this Wittgensteinian argument has, it does not show that images are entirely useless. In fact, I believe, images can help: By bringing an image to an object, we may allow ourselves to

consider a possible way of conceptualization, to induce an aspect-experience.

Look again at our difficulty. A challenge is being made to the inference. The challenge is not that we might have \$6 together; for this may just happen if there is a forgotten \$1 note in your back-pocket. The fear is that the arithmetical inference is groundless – that the word “therefore” is meaningless, lifeless.

This, I suggest, is where the five-dot image may help: It cannot indeed guarantee that we notice that dollar in your back-pocket, but it can ground the practice. Specifically, the image helps to enliven and justify why we need a practice that allows us to conclude that if I have \$2 and you \$3, then we have \$5 together (and we do not need one that allows us to conclude that if I have \$68 and you \$57, then we have \$5¹⁶). The image does not help by being an additional ingredient, which when added to the “therefore,” turns it into something meaningful. It does not ground the practice this way. Rather, the image makes visible the meaning that the “therefore” *already* has – with which it is already infused. The image, then, does not ground the practice by giving us an argument, whose conclusion we can then follow blindly. The image is not an argument. Rather, it allows us to be “sighted”, to see the point of having this practice. In Aristotelian terms, the image helps us to see the *form* of the “therefore,” without which it is merely *matter*, a bundle of lifeless ink-marks or sounds. In Tractarian terms, it helps us to see the symbol in the sign. The image, in other words, has a tendency to induce an aspect-experience: an experience of a way of conceptualizing. Like a metaphor, it breathes normative life into something.

One implication of my argument is that having a mental image can make an activity possible for someone – e.g. inferring. Take another example. At one point, when defending the permissibility of suicide, Hume writes:

¹⁶ Compare Saul Kripke’s worries about the groundlessness of such practices in Kripke 1982.

It would be no crime in me to divert the Nile or Danube from its course, were I able to affect such purposes. Where then is the crime of turning a few ounces of blood from their natural channel? (Hume 1799)

The channel-image is a way of seeing things – a picture. It may strike us as the wrong picture: someone who merely sees what Hume sees when they witness another slashing her wrists is not really seeing what is happening. Someone like that would not be capable of being horrified, for instance, and of acting from horror. At the same time, however, it may help to be able to see like that if you're a surgeon. Once more, having a mental image can make certain activities possible.¹⁷

On the flipside, being incapable of seeing some aspect – call it “aspect-blindness” – indicates inability to entertain the having of a concept in this reflective way, to experience the life of a practice. For someone like this, this explanatory method, this way of making the practice alive, won't help.

To emphasize: Helpful as images may be, when people perform surgery or make inferences, images do not *have* to occur to them, and mostly don't. Even when images do occur, they don't function in the mechanism of an argument. The five-dot image, for instance, does not function as a middle term that connects 2, 3, and 5; this is not how it grounds the practice. And this means that an image cannot *logically* force a Lewis Carroll tortoise to accept a logical conclusion (Carroll 1895). It is *our* – the tortoise's – burden to let the image make the practice alive for us. It requires *willing*. To the extent that the image helps, it helps us carry that burden: it makes us see the point of having a technique in our linguistic inventory.¹⁸

¹⁷ Wittgenstein writes: “One application would be this: One may tell someone: ‘Look at the triangle as a wedge, and then you won't wonder at... any more.’ And at this perhaps he says ‘Yes, like that it strikes me as more natural.’ – So I have removed some disquiet with my explanation; or helped him to do an exercise more quickly” (RPP1 §315). See also RFM 1, §78.

¹⁸ Wittgenstein connects having mental images to aspect-seeing in several places. The connection, I believe, is far reaching, and pertains to the ontology, the essence, of mental images. Although this is not the place to develop this, I would suggest, roughly, that to have an image is to entertain perceptually, experientially, the usefulness of a certain capacity to mentally capture something.

5. *Imagining alternative general facts of nature*

The ways we talk and think – the ways we make sense of the world, word it, and make it *ours* – echo our (contingent) interests in the (contingent) facts. They reflect what we care about making sense of, what we don't, and how. Our concepts can therefore be said to have a contingent basis. And this suggests another way to facilitate aspect-experiences, with which to methodically examine the ways we mentally capture things: imagining alternative general facts of nature.

In a diary entry from February 4th, 1937 Wittgenstein writes:

After all, another life shifts completely different images into the foreground, necessitates completely different images. Just like trouble teaches prayer. That does not mean that through the other life one will necessarily change one's opinions. But if one lives differently, one speaks differently. With a new life one learns new language games. (Wittgenstein 2003: 169)¹⁹

We may be reminded of, recalled to, what we (really) need – the forms we need of expression, description, inquiry, and so on – by raw exposure to life, so to speak: our concrete and contingent life. And in §xii of the second part of PI, Wittgenstein explains how to use this methodically:

if anyone believes that certain concepts are absolutely the correct ones, and that having different ones would mean not realizing something that we realize – then let him imagine certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to, and the formation of concepts different from the usual ones will become intelligible to him.

Imagine a world, for example, in which objects normally increased or diminished in size for no obvious reason. In that world, our practices of talking about sizes – compare sizes, identify objects by size, etc. – would lose their point, lose functionality (also PI §142).²⁰

In imagining this different world, and our concepts losing their grip – losing their concepthood, as it were, and their ability to make

¹⁹ In such contexts, Wittgenstein often distinguishes between opinions and changes of opinions on the one hand, and on the other hand attitudes and changes of attitudes.

²⁰ Karen Fiser makes similar claims about pain-concepts (1986: 10).

sense of things – we expose ourselves to the need for having them in *our* reality: to the good of making sense of our reality with the concepts we have. In imagining alternative general facts of nature, we expose ourselves to the good of mastering certain concepts – to the point of being able to do certain things, doing which is internal to having certain linguistic capacities – given the admittedly contingent reality we live in (also Diamond 1984: 460).

Exposing ourselves to the contingent basis of our concepts by imagining a different reality is akin to inducing aspect-experiences. Like aspect-experiences, these experiences give us an external – reflective and disengaged – view-point apart from any conceptual routine. This allows us to appreciate the good of conceptualizing things in a certain manner, but not by making us exercise the relevant conceptual routine – not, that is, via methods discussed in section 2. Rather, imaginative exposure to that different reality prods us to feel the point of having those concepts, feel how unintelligible things would be without them, and thereby appreciate our need for them.

6. Conceptual, empirical, logical or psychological

At this point one might again be worried: Is there philosophical room for my proposals? Specifically, is the aspect-method supposed to be conceptual or empirical, logical or psychological?

The dichotomy here derives from a Fregean commandment

... always to separate sharply the psychological from the logical, the subjective from the objective. (1960: xxii)

Now, I presented the aspect-method as capable of fostering conceptual insight, and argued that the insight is gained not by engaging us in established conceptual routines, but by letting the facts leave a sort of experiential impression on us – disengaged from the routine. It may therefore seem that the aspect-method, in so far as it relies on subjective experiences and mental images, is inherently confused: trying to reach conceptual insight by empirical means.

My claim is that the aspect-method indeed facilitates conceptual insight by empirical means and that it nevertheless is not confused. Before I explain, I wish to note a related unclarity about the phenomena of aspect, which surfaces in the exchange between Avner Baz and Stephen Mulhall. Baz challenges: “Is it [Mulhall’s account of aspect-perception] supposed to be a conceptual account, having to do with things we sometimes find ourselves ‘tempted’ [...] to say? Or is it, rather, an empirical or causal account, having to do with why we ‘tend’ to have certain peculiar experiences [...]?” (2010: 238). Mulhall responds: “I suppose it is just possible that part of Baz’s reason for thinking that my strategy threatens to resolve into a species of causal explanation can be traced to the fact that it rests on reminding us of some very general facts about our form of life – features of it that might have been otherwise” (2010: 266).

There is much to sort out here. Baz, I think, is here working rigidly with the Fregean psychological-logical distinction, thinking that it is either-or – either Mulhall’s account is conceptual, or it is empirical; it can’t be both. He does not allow that the Fregean distinction in the present case may take a different shape. Baz also does not take the discussion about aspects to bear on the discussion about conceptualization. In particular, as Mulhall mentions, Baz does not connect aspect-perception to the fact that our concepts have a contingent basis. Not that Mulhall correctly identifies how the two issues connect, however. Mulhall seems to take for granted – perhaps as a foundational fact about our involvement with language – that we are in continuous experiential connection with the contingent basis of our concepts. He maintains that we typically experience aspects continuously. This, however, as Baz argues, is false.

We need a better understanding of the connection between the phenomena of aspect and the fact that our concepts have contingent foundations. We need another look at how an investigation of mental images and subjective experiences can generate conceptual understanding. Let’s examine the aspect-

method again. This method, I argued, lets us experience ways of conceptualizing things independently of any established conceptual commitment. It does not involve us in an engaged exercise of conceptual routines, but leaves us with the initiative to bring concept and object together, and experience the object through the concept anew. By means of this exposure, we experience the need to mentally own the facts: clothe them or re-clothe them with concepts. Aspect-perception just *is* reflection on things and on our ways of mentally owning them. It thus generates linguistic understanding.



Indeed, it is not an abstract form of reflection; in aspect-perception we rather reflect in concrete experience. Yet, the experience is “an echo of a thought” (PI 212), the thought’s vehicle. That is, we experience; but it is reflection nonetheless. So call it empirical or conceptual; the important thing is that aspect-experiences can very well aid conceptual clarity. Appreciation of what conceptual capacities we (‘really’) need can be gained by experientially exposing ourselves to the contingent basis of our concepts.

As for the Fregean commandment: If we are in the business of abiding by it, we should probably *not* follow it blindly, but ask ourselves *how* to abide by it, how to inherit from Frege. Frege instructs us to separate the psychological from the logical, but there is a question how to do that. It is not something we should take ourselves to know *a priori*. The connection and relation between the empirical and the conceptual are not uniform everywhere. In order to abide by the commandment, therefore, we need to look at the relations between the psychological and the logical in particular cases; to look from up close. My argument is meant to be sensitive to the special form that these relations take in aspect-perception, and thereby allow us to abide by the Fregean commandment.²¹

²¹ Wittgenstein’s view is similar: “I want to ask: ‘What is the place here of the conceptual and what of the phenomenal?’” (RPP1 §662). – I take it to be crucial that for Wittgenstein there is a question here: he did not take the conceptual-phenomenal relations to be uniform everywhere. Frege possibly had a more rigid understanding of his commandment. See also Cora Diamond’s comments on Wittgenstein’s discussion of the reddish-green (1996: 231–6), and Diamond 1989: 19.

7. *Not realism nor idealism*

There is another way my suggestion may seem to fail to have philosophical identity. It hovers, seemingly undecidedly, between realism and idealism. On the one hand, I may appear to be advancing a “realist” thesis (or empiricist, or pragmatist, or non-conceptualist). According to this thesis, the facts are thought to be given free of conceptualizations and according to this understanding of my suggestion, this enables us to decide how to conceptualize. To this, a so-called “idealist” (or antirealist, or cognitivist, or conceptualist) answer would be that we cannot investigate without concepts. Investigating something means thinking about it, and thinking requires concepts. On the other hand, I may appear to be advancing an “idealist” thesis, according to which we can decide what the facts are by inducing aspect-experiences. To this, the “realist” answer is that we do not decide what the facts are. We may sometimes be able to conceptualize in alternative ways, but even then our conceptualizations are responsible to the facts, and it is by the facts – as independent criteria – that our conceptualizations are judged. One way or the other, my suggestion does not have a clear space on the philosophical map.

To answer, I should first acknowledge that my suggestion vindicates neither realism nor idealism. Let me clarify its relation to both. There is truth to both the realist and idealist claims. On the realist side, we can to an extent recognize a certain independence of the facts from our concepts. Take the duck-rabbit. We need to be able to express the idea that this image, , is the same, both when seen as a duck and when seen as a rabbit. Taken as a mere cluster of lines and dots – “a bundle of perceptions” –  is independent of both concepts, *duck* and *rabbit*. We may talk of a level on which the facts are independent of at least some applicable concepts.²² Or

²² A separate issue is whether, on some level, the facts are independent of *any* concept. Perhaps the question is more pressing when it comes to concepts like *object* or *event* (we may think here of Kant’s categories). I am not making any claim about this here.

again, we may say that our experience here is such that its expression requires separation between the object and the way or ways in which we may conceptualize it; it is part of our experience of \approx that it may come apart from *these* concepts. This is the truth in the realist claim.

There is also truth in the “idealist” claim. We *can* connect different concepts with \approx – certain very particular concepts, *duck* and *rabbit*; and connecting a concept with \approx here does not leave the two, the concept and \approx , independent of one another. Rather, if we use \approx to signal that the duck hunting-season is open for instance, then it *is* a duck-picture, and in at least one important sense of “see,” someone who does not see that does not see the facts; they do not see what the drawing *is*. Facts are given to us by concepts, and to that extent, facts and concepts are not independent of one another; this is the truth in the idealist claim.

Beyond that, I am not sure what reason there is to continue to ask which is correct – realism or idealism. There is no need to decide between the claim that our concepts are separable from our perceptions, and the claim that they are inseparable. As just explained, there is a sense in which concepts are separable and a sense in which they are not. They do not contradict each other.

I should emphasize that concept-application in aspect-perception is not like concept-application elsewhere: As argued above, it does not take the form of following conceptual-grammatical routines, but rather that of bringing a concept to an object and letting ourselves experience that conceptualization.

Here too the tension between conceptualism and non-conceptualism is felt. Indeed, the way concepts connect with objects in aspect-perception takes its own form, but despite the difference from the typical case, this might still sound like a conceptualist claim which reiterates the idea that we experience through concepts. Nevertheless, in this form of concept application, a distance is maintained between concept and object: they seem to be detachable. The concept seems to only be there as long as *we* keep it there. The aspect “lasts only as long as I am

occupied with the object in a particular way” (PI 210). And this sounds like a non-conceptualist point.

Once more, beyond appreciating the truth in both the conceptualist and the non-conceptualist claims – the adequacy of their phenomenologies – I see no point in deciding between them.

8. What guidance?

There is another, abstract and metaphysical, worry about the aspect-method. For the purposes of re-familiarizing ourselves with our linguistic needs, I argued, it may sometimes be useful to disengage from our conceptual routines. But, so the worry goes, what can assure us, when we are occupying this disengaged reflective standpoint, that we come at things in the right way, or at all? If being reflective here means that we are not bound by – engaged with – our routine conceptual norms, what else can possibly guide us? Guidance requires friction, but what is there, in that reflective disengaged position, with which to have friction?²³ And again, if for a sign to symbolize is for it to function – be in use (TLP §3.326) – how is it even possible for us to see a symbol in a sign, and how is it possible for it to come to normative life, if it is not put to use, applied, according to established norms?

The worry is related to common Wittgensteinian qualms about examining language from an external standpoint – “from sideways-on,” as John McDowell called it (1981). In philosophy, many Wittgensteinians think, we often mislead ourselves into thinking that we need a point-of-view “from nowhere” and try to conduct our investigations in abstraction from contingencies like our interests, the circumstances of our practices, our tones of voices, and so on.

Take the philosophical discussion of *meaning*. In this discussion, the Wittgensteinian warns, searching for a point-of-view from nowhere may cause us to lose track of what we are interested in: the phenomenon of meaning. This is how: To investigate the notion of meaning, we may first wish to isolate it. We may make

²³ I am taking the friction metaphor from PI §107.

distinctions accordingly, in particular between what a sentence *means* and what it *does* – semantics and pragmatics – intending to account for meaning in semantics, not pragmatics. For instance, the proposition “Three is more than two” allows us to say that if you have \$3 and I \$2, then you have more than I do. This is one thing we can *do* with the proposition; but, we think, the idea of counting money is not part of what the sentence *means*.

When we separate what a proposition means from what it does, we are typically clearer about what we intend by “does” than by “means.” That is, we have a better idea of what we think should *not* be included in our notion of meaning, than what should. By itself, the separation does not fully clarify our notion of meaning. We still need to clarify what we mean by ‘the meaning of a proposition’ independently of what can be done with it.

Now, there is reason to suspect that one reason for this unclarity is that we nevertheless maintain some connection between meaning and doing, semantics and pragmatics. First, we think that the meaning of a sentence limits what can be done with it, but second, and more important, to mean something is, after all, to do something. Meaning is also a verb: It’s the name of an activity. We think, that is, that the meaning (noun) of a sentence – whatever it is – is something that we must be capable of meaning (verb), and that this capacity is internal to it. A meaning that cannot be meant is a very obscure idea.

Let us review. We are after a notion of meaning, according to which, to mean a proposition is to do something with it, where this doing is different from the doing of all other things that are external to the meaning of the proposition – things that we might be able to do by meaning it.

The Wittgensteinian worry at this point is that we have lost our grip on what we were after, on that thing that we are supposed to be able to do with the sentence – the notion of that activity of *meaning the sentence* – which is supposedly internal to its meaning. This, because we helped ourselves to the distinction between semantics and pragmatics (in order to isolate what we were interested in – meaning), and we took this to authorize putting pragmatics aside. That is, we did not only want a distinction

between semantics and pragmatics; we wanted to isolate semantics and forget about pragmatics. But it now seems, or so the Wittgensteinian worries, that by putting pragmatics aside, we have lost friction: we have deprived ourselves of access to the means by which to make sense of that activity of meaning, the ability to perform which is supposedly internal and essential to meaningful propositions. We are left with an image of someone saying “Three is more than two,” in a meaningful tone of voice. However, if we ask what this person is *doing* by uttering these words – describing some platonic idea, laying down the law, warning us, or memorizing something – we will not be able to answer. Or rather, since we put pragmatics aside, the only answer we still have available is the uninformative answer that “He *means* the sentence”. The word ‘means’ here is a mere shell with no inner substance.

By putting pragmatics aside, we have put aside what meaning a proposition – functioning with it – could come to: what, for instance, it is to say that you have more money than I do, if you have \$3 and I \$2. And if this is the case, then since it is internal to propositions being meaningful that they can be meant, we have also lost our grip on the idea of a proposition having a meaning, or at least on an essential part of it. The wish to isolate and identify meaning in its pure form, the Wittgensteinian worries, the wish to protect against contamination of semantics by pragmatics, seems to have lead us to fall out of touch with what we were after – the phenomenon of meaning.²⁴

We philosophers sometimes assume that we must need to isolate our subject-matter in some such way. Only such isolated frictionless subject-matter, so we think, is pure enough to sustain the absolute kind of generality we seek: How fast the sentence was spoken, who was its intended audience, for what purpose was it uttered, or whether it was said absentmindedly – factors such as these seem too accidental, too circumstantial, to teach us anything about the pure thing – the *meaning* – that we are after. We think we need to abstract from them.

²⁴ For a detailed discussion of related issues see Baz 2012.

Often, Wittgensteinians think, the thought that we need such abstractions is misguided. And, the Wittgensteinian worry continues, when philosophers nevertheless take a disengaged standpoint, the result is often an investigation detached from anything we know how to care about. It may be about a conception of meaning that no language-speaker would find informative. “So the cat may be on the mat,” the language-speaker may say, “and this is supposed to be meaningful. Fine. But why am I being told that? By whom? Do I need to do something about it? Is it a password? Is it part of a rhyming contest?” Without answers, that is, the language-speaker may feel that she does not really understand what she is being told – she does not understand the meaning (verb) of the sentence, and therefore its meaning (noun).

Metaphilosophically, then, the search for a disengaged standpoint runs the risk of our investigation failing to matter. Its frictionless purity seems to have built into it the inability to connect to anything that can matter. The point-of-view from nowhere, the Wittgensteinian suspects, may thus be a mere philosophical illusion.

This Wittgensteinian worry seems to apply to my suggestions about aspect-perception. I suggested that we can reflect on concepts from “sideways-on”, detached from, and uncommitted to, conceptual routines. We may examine the functionality of our concepts, I suggested, by something that is akin to staring at them: standing remote, letting ourselves feel what it would be like to apply some concept. But can we learn anything about our concepts from such a remote, seemingly frictionless, standpoint? The way things matter to us, a Wittgensteinian may insist, and what sense they make, is mirrored in our norms. It’s in the actual application of those norms. The sign symbolizes something only in use – in application; otherwise, it is just a dead ink-mark. So how can we hope to gain any insight into the functionality of our concepts if we keep our distance, and do not allow conceptual norms to turn our mental cogwheels? How can there be understanding from “sideways-on”? Might my claims be another philosophical illusion?

My answer is, first, that aspect-perception is no substitute to actually practicing conceptual routines. It is no substitute to exercising conceptual norms and thus enlivening and making

visible for ourselves our ways of and needs for making sense of things. My claim is that aspect-perception too can give us conceptual insight – albeit of a different sort. In aspect-perception too our interest in making sense of things – our “real need” – is revealed.

Now, the Wittgensteinian criticizes the attempt to find a point-of-view from nowhere. But the interest in language revealed in aspect-perception is different from that. To experience an aspect is *not* to occupy a standpoint beyond *all* linguistic practices – from which one could make absolutely general claims about language. Aspect-perception is not performed with a view to philosophical theorizing. Furthermore, there is no such thing as an aspect-perception that is not of a *particular* aspect. Standing in a “sideways-on” disengaged position in aspect-perception is always having a particular concept in mind, or a particular need to make sense of something. The point of allowing ourselves to adopt that reflective uncommitted standpoint in aspect-perception is to express concern for the norms we are disengaged from, to find a way to capture something in thought, for instance, or perhaps express frustration about the expressive capacities of language in a particular case.

By employing the aspect-method, therefore, and taking that disengaged standpoint, we do not abstract from all points of friction. Indeed, what is supplying the friction here are not prior linguistic commitments, but there is yet a fact about us – a contingent fact – that supplies friction: the fact that we want to make sense of things – that we care about capturing them in thought. We look at ☞?, for instance, and play with our ability to change the aspects; we look at strange markings in a foreign language and cannot help wondering what they mean; we look at the Mona Lisa and wonder what’s behind that expression; we even look at our face in the mirror trying to read things into it. In a similar way, supplying the friction for the aspect-method, I suggest, is the raw human need for meaning and language – the need to

make sense of things, to have a world. Learning to heed the call of this need is what we can learn by applying the aspect-method.²⁵

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