Aspect Perception and Understanding the Meaning of Words in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*

In Part II Section XI of his *Philosophical Investigations*, Ludwig Wittgenstein asserts that a proper grasp of the concept of aspect perception can elucidate issues surrounding understanding the meaning of words. In this paper I will seek to defend Wittgenstein's view. I will do this by first briefly explaining the nature of aspect perception. Then, I will explain Wittgenstein's account of how we understand the meaning of words, and show why aspect perception can further our understanding of this process. Finally, I will address two objections to the view.

I. Aspect Perception

Aspect perception, as presented by Wittgenstein, is primarily concerned with the visual experience of different aspects of a picture.[1,2] Aspects, here, should not be taken as characteristics of the image, instead they are different ways of perceiving (in the sense of visual experience) the same image without that image physically changing. That is, aspect perception is the experience of "seeing as."[3] To properly understand what this means, it is helpful to consider the example of the "Duck-Rabbit." Figure 1 (See Appendix), presented first by Joseph Jastrow in *Fact and Fable in Psychology* and popularized by Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations*, can generally be held to demonstrate the aspect switch in aspect perception. As the title of the image suggests, the picture can be seen as either a duck, or a rabbit. Due to the fact that most people, though not all, see the picture alternatively — first, as one aspect then the other — it is correct for us to say "I now *see it as* a duck, *now as* a rabbit." If, however, a person were only able to see one of the aspects of the image, the duck for instance, then it is inappropriate

[1] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall), 193.
[2] It is important to note, here, that Wittgenstein does not limit cases of aspect perception only to pictures; I begin with them, as they best lend themselves to a description of the phenomenon more generally.
[3] Ibid., 197.

to say "now I see it as a duck."[4] This is because there would be no change to which the "*now* I see it as" would refer; we would only say: "it is a duck."[5]

So, the expression of aspect perception requires an ambiguity in the perception of the image being considered. If a person does not notice the ambiguity in the picture of the duck-rabbit, then the expression "it is a duck" is one of ordinary perception. The ambiguity is important to the ways in which aspect perception elucidates the issues concerning understanding the meaning of words.

We can now understand Wittgenstein's saying that: "The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged;"[6] while this phrase may appear contradictory, the discussion above illustrates that the two instances of perception, here, differ. The first use is that of aspect perception, while the second is of ordinary perception. So, aspect perception is the change in visual experience (caused by the "dawning" of a new aspect) of an unchanging perception. The criteria[7] for knowing that someone does in fact see the different aspects of an image are based on what Wittgenstein calls "fine shades of behaviour."[8] These subtleties (in intonation, phrasing, etc.) express a familiarity that comes from not just understanding that the image can be used as multiple things, but from actually seeing it as one thing and then another.[9,10]

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[4] Ibid.,195.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.,196.
[7] Criteria are public principles or standards to which we can appeal for justification; Wittgenstein feels that we need criteria to demonstrate any type of understanding, not just understanding words. This entails that we must always be able to publicly demonstrate our understanding if we are to say we understand at all.
[8] Ibid.,204.
[9] Ibid.,201.
[10] We can imagine the reactions of two different people both seeing the duck-rabbit for the first time; one is able to see the switch in aspects, while the other cannot but pretends to. Even if both say "It's a duck… now it's a rabbit!" we can imagine the tone of voice (expressing the level of surprise), for example, being

II. Understanding the Meaning of Words

The meaning of a word, for Wittgenstein, is governed by the set of practices for the use of that word in a language.[11] As understanding is a rule-governed process, to understand a word is to be able to use it properly, over an extended period of time, according to the rule or rules that govern it. A rule, for Wittgenstein, is a standard that governs a practice — where practice should not be taken as a single action, but rather as an institution.[12] Rules can take various forms; for example, in the case of games governed by rules, a rule can be "an aid in teaching the game," "an instrument of the game itself," or "neither in the teaching nor in the game."[13] This is due to this fact that, depending on the situation, any number of different rules may be needed to appropriately address the practice in question — here, it is helpful to consider the difference in rules of a game and rules of etiquette; we accurately describe both as rules, but they inform very different practices in different ways.

So, we can rightly say that we understand the meaning a word only when we have correctly used it (that is correctly followed the rule or rules that govern it) over a period of time. That is to say, the criteria for understanding a word is consistently correct application.[14] This does not mean that we need always apply the rule correctly; every attempt at use contains the possibility of misapplication.

Wittgenstein calls the aggregate of these different rule-governed practices language-games, which he feels constitute language. He says: "We see that what we call

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quite different. Considerations of this kind seem to demonstrate Wittgenstein's acute sensitivity to the ways in which we interact with others.

[11] Ibid., § 43.
[12] Ibid., § 54.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., § 146.

"sentence" and "language" has not the formal unity that I imagined, but is the family of structures more or less related to one another."[15] It is important that we are conscious of the fact that understanding the meaning of a word requires correctly following the rule of the appropriate language-game.

III. Aspect Perception and Understanding the Meaning of Words

The connection between aspect perception and understanding the meaning of words for Wittgenstein comes from the fact that he believes that in certain cases we *experience* the meaning of words.[16,17] That is, there are ambiguous cases in which one word can mean several different things, and we, in understanding the word, "take its meaning *as* such and such" in a certain case. The similarity to aspect perception should already be apparent. In cases where a word has more than one meaning — Wittgenstein uses "till" as an example[18] — we can experience a change in the meaning of a word in the same way as we experience a change in aspect of an image. This connection can be seen more clearly, I believe, through a comparison of what Wittgenstein calls "aspect-blindness" and what I will call "meaning-blindness."[19]

In his discussion of aspect-blindness Wittgenstein begins with a question: "Could there be human beings lacking in the capacity to see something *as something* — and what would that be like?"[20] With respect to our example above, a person with aspect-blindness would not be able to see the duck-rabbit as either a duck or a rabbit, but only one of the

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[15] Ibid., § 108.
[16] Ibid., 214.
[17] We do not, however, experience the meaning of words as we say them (Ibid.,217); the type of experience spoken of here is connected with understanding what someone else is saying, writing, etc.
[18] This is not exactly true; the German word that Wittgenstein uses, *sondern,* does not mean 'till'— it means something equivalent to the English word "but". As the direct translation would not have worked, G.E.M Anscombe (the translator of the edition of *Philosophical Investigations* being used) substituted the German for an equally ambiguous English word.
[19] For the term "meaning blindness" I am indebted to Professor D. Waterfall.
[20] Ibid.,213. Emphasis is from the original.

two. This would be the case even in different contexts; for example, it would entail that, even surrounded by pictures of rabbits, the aspect-blind person (who only sees the duck) would only be able to see the duck-rabbit as a duck *even in this context.* Otherwise "this could not very well be called a sort of blindness."[21,22]

So, aspect-blindness would be a condition characterized by a person's inability to see more than one of the different aspects of an ambiguous image. Similarly, meaning-blindness would be a condition in which a person would not be able to understand more than one of several possible meaning-aspects of a word. In the case of the word "till", we can — though perhaps with difficulty — imagine a person who could only understand it to mean "cash drawer," or something equivalent. In this case the ambiguity in the meaning of "till" would go unnoticed by the person with meaning-blindness — this, again, would be the case regardless of the context in which the word was uttered.

We are now in a position to see the ways in which aspect perception assists in our comprehension of understanding the meaning of words. Assuming that we do not have meaning-blindness, there are certain cases in which we experience the meaning of a word with the same ambiguity that we perceive images such as the duck-rabbit. That is, a word can cause the same type of alteration between meanings as some images cause in visual experience. It is only with the same familiarity, as mentioned above, with the word in question that a person will be able to understand what it means in the context. However,

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[21] Ibid.,214.

[22] There is a challenge to this description of aspect blindness that is worth considering (I am, again, grateful to Professor D. Waterfall for this insight). It can be said that aspect-blindness is the inability to see more than one of the aspects of a picture *in one instance of viewing it*. That is, aspect blindness could be represented by a person's inability to see the duck aspect of the duck-rabbit when they see that image out of context; but that does not mean according to this view that they will not be able to see the duck aspect when other pictures of ducks surround the duck-rabbit. However, I feel that this interpretation of aspect-blindness gives the reader apt reason, as I have quoted Wittgenstein saying above, to not call it a type of blindness at all. I feel that the thought experiment that Wittgenstein employs requires that aspect-blindness really be a type of blindness— rather than mere selective perception.

this is not the primary issue concerning the understanding of words that I would like to demonstrate can be explained by aspect perception. This is due to the fact that different language-games, and therefore different rules, can apply to different meanings of a word; understanding the meaning of the word, then, would have less to do with aspect perception, and more to do with correct application of the rule or rules.

We can see aspect perception as being more useful for explaining two more difficult to comprehend phenomena in language; namely, idiosyncratic uses of words, and construction of metaphor.[23] First, in the case of idiosyncratic uses of words, we must distinguish between primary and secondary senses of words. If I say, as Wittgenstein does, that "Tuesday is lean, and Wednesday is fat" then I have employed a secondary sense of the words "lean" and "fat." "Ought I really to have used different words? Certainly not that. — I want to use *these* words (with their familiar meanings) *here*… for I could not express what I want to say in any other way."[24] In this sense, the idiosyncratic uses of "fat" and "lean," here, are not metaphorical; however, we would be unable to even consider what Wittgenstein means by the phrase "Tuesday is lean, and Wednesday is fat" if we did not first know the common meanings of "fat" and "lean." Wittgenstein says that "it is only if the word has the primary sense for you that you use it in the secondary one."[25] Figure 2 (See Appendix) appears to us, unequivocally, as a triangle — we can take this as its primary aspect. It is possible, then, to also see it as "something that

[23] Wittgenstein also feels that aspect perception is useful in explaining puns. Due to the fact that, in a pun, several meanings of a word are employed at once, we can see the meaning of the word change in a way that is strikingly similar to seeing a new aspect of an image. While this is interesting, and directly related to aspect perception, it is less controversial than the phenomena I will describe. As I am attempting to defend Wittgenstein's view, I feel it is worth engaging with uses of words that are more difficult to explain.
[24] Ibid.,216. Emphasis is from the original.
[25] Ibid.

has fallen over"?[26] The answer to this, it would seem, is "yes." The difference, however, is that we have to *imagine* or *interpret* that it is something that has fallen over. We do not automatically see it in that way — we can, however, take this as one possible secondary aspect of the triangle. We can see that the "triangle" aspect is primary because we cannot fail, if we know the language, to see the triangle as "triangle." Seeing it as "something that has fallen over" is secondary because a person who knows the language could reasonably not be able to see it that way. That is, we must be able to see the triangle as "triangle" before we are able to interpret it as anything else.

While aspect perception generally does not require interpretation (as in the case of the duck-rabbit), in some cases it is required of us in order to see the aspect change.[27,28] The interpretive imagination required for seeing the triangle as something that has fallen over is the same type of imagination that is required for us to understand, even if only vaguely, what Wittgenstein means when he says, "Tuesday is lean." We can see that in the case of idiosyncratic uses of words, aspect perception clarifies two things; first, an idiosyncratic use of a word is a secondary use, which requires an antecedent familiarity with the primary use. Second, understanding the way in which an idiosyncratic use of a word is employed requires interpretation.

Second, the construction of metaphor operates in a similar way to idiosyncratic use of words. That is, we, in already understanding the primary meaning of the word, employ it in a different way. In this regard, we "see the meaning as such and such" in the

[26] Ibid.,201.
[27] Ibid.,206.
[28] Wittgenstein uses the example of children who see a chest as a house. He says: "Here is a game played by children: they say that a chest, for example, is a house; and thereupon it is *interpreted* as a house in every detail. A piece of fancy is worked into it… If you knew how to play this game, and, given a particular situation, you exclaimed with special expression "Now it's a house!"— you would be giving expression to the dawning of an aspect". (Ibid. Emphasis added)

specific case. To use an example, if we hear someone say: "We must stand shoulder to shoulder to overcome current hardships!" then we see the meaning of the phrase as something like: "We must work together!" or "We must promote solidarity!"[29] Here, as in the case of idiosyncratic uses of words, we need both to understand the primary meaning before understanding the secondary one, and an element of interpretation is required for us to understand. It is certainly not the case, in either metaphor or idiosyncratic uses of words, that everyone will be able to understand the secondary meaning. As there are different levels of familiarity with language, and varying levels of ability for interpretation, there may be many instances of metaphorical or idiosyncratic uses of a word whose meaning escapes many people.[30]

So, aspect perception elucidates issues concerning understanding idiosyncratic uses of words and the construction of metaphor. It does this by both: 1) demonstrating that we have both primary and secondary senses of words, and that we need to understand— that is, achieve a certain level of familiarity with— the primary sense before we can employ a word in a secondary sense; and, 2) shows that understanding the meaning of a word (especially in the case of secondary senses) sometimes requires interpretation. This, however, is not uncontroversial— I will now address two possible objections to Wittgenstein's view.

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[29] I say "see" rather than "understand" here because of the difference between the two concepts that Wittgenstein notes in his discussion of aspect perception. He says that we can understand that something has multiple aspects without seeing those aspects. (Ibid.,201) Similarly, in the case of metaphor, I would like to say that we could understand that a phrase is meant to be taken as meaning something else, while not understanding that meaning. I use "see" as the combination of both understanding that the phrase is meant to be taken as something else and an interpretation of what that other meaning is meant to be (even when, as in the case above, that meaning is ambiguous).

[30] While it may seem that idiosyncratic uses of words and metaphor are identical according to this discussion, there is at least one fundamental difference. In the case of idiosyncratic uses of words, such as "Tuesday is lean", we cannot express what we mean in any other way; this is not the case with metaphor. For example, if Wittgenstein meant "Tuesday is lean" metaphorically then it would seem as though "Tuesday is meagre" would serve equally well.

IV. Objections, Replies

First, can Wittgenstein's view of idiosyncratic uses of language not be taken as a kind of private language?[31] That is, if the secondary, idiosyncratic use of the word is so distant from the standard use then can we ever be sure of its meaning in the context? If this were the case, then Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect perception as a tool for elucidating the way in which we understand idiosyncratic uses of words would be in direct contradiction to his view that there cannot be a private language. However, it is not the case that idiosyncratic uses of words depend on a private language. If we take the example of "Tuesday is lean, Wednesday is fat," then we can see that the meaning is not hidden from us in the way that it would be in a private language. That is, none of the meanings of the words depend on Wittgenstein's private sensations. He says: "Asked "What do you really mean here by 'fat' and 'lean'?" — I could only explain the meanings in the usual way."[32] We might not understand why Wittgenstein is inclined to describe Tuesday as lean and Wednesday as fat, but that does not stop us from understanding the meaning of the words themselves. This ability to understand the words is sufficient for our being able to say that idiosyncratic uses of words do not depend on a private language.

Second, and more pressingly, it seems as though Wittgenstein's view, that we only understand the meaning of a word through consistent correct application, does not account fully for our understanding of metaphor — even with the additional explanation given by the discussion of aspect perception. That is, if understanding the meaning of a

[31] A private language, for Wittgenstein, would be one in which "the individual words…refer to what can only be known to the person speaking; to his immediate private sensations. So another person cannot understand the language". (Ibid., § 243)
[32] Ibid., 216.

word depends on being able to consistently use it according to the rule that it is governed by, and in metaphorical use of language we employ a secondary meaning of a word which requires that we both understand the primary meaning and interpret correctly in the context, then how can we be said to understand metaphorical uses of words at all? To strengthen this objection to Wittgenstein's view, I will employ a distinction made by George Orwell in his essay *Politics and the English Language*. Orwell outlines three different types of metaphor, only two of which are important here; the first is a newly invented metaphor, which "assists thought by evoking a visual image."[33] The second is a "technically 'dead'" metaphor, which "has in effect *reverted to being an ordinary word*"[34] and can be employed as such.[35] The second type of metaphor is uncontroversial here; if a metaphor is so familiar that we treat it as an ordinary word, then our understanding that metaphor will occur in the usual way — that is, through use. The first type of metaphor, however, is more difficult. If we, as Orwell suggests, should "never use a metaphor… which we are used to seeing in print,"[36] then how can we, on Wittgenstein's model, understand any metaphor of the first type? The problem here is not that we can never understand secondary uses of words, it is rather that it seems difficult to account for understanding completely novel secondary uses.

This problem, however, can be solved by analogy to seeing the possible secondary aspects of an image. If we turn again to the triangle, and try to see it as something that has fallen over, then I believe that we can understand how aspect

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[33] George Orwell, Politics and the English Language in *Why I Write* (London: Penguin Books), 105.
[34] Ibid.,106.
[35] The third type of metaphor Orwell describes is a dying metaphor. These are metaphors that have "lost their evocative power" but have not yet (and perhaps shall never be) reverted to the status of an ordinary word. (Ibid.)
[36] Ibid.,119.

perception does, in fact, explain our understanding metaphorical senses of words. If we admit that we can, though perhaps only with difficulty, view the triangle as something that has fallen over, then we are seeing an aspect of the image that we have (potentially) never seen before.[37] Do we want to say, in this case, that we cannot possibly see the image in the way we are now describing? That is, do we need to be able to consistently see the image as something that has fallen down to be able to say that we now see it in that way? I think that the answer to this question is, unequivocally, "No." If we have a strong enough familiarity with the primary aspect of the image and enough experience with interpretation *in general*, then we need not have ever interpreted the image as an object that has fallen down before. The same is the case with metaphor. We are able to understand completely new metaphors only if we have a strong grasp of the primary senses of the words employed and experience interpreting text. Recall that we need not always understand metaphor, and that we will not always understand the meaning immediately. The dawning of the meaning-aspect of the first type of metaphor does not happen without the use of imagination of some kind. So, we can see that understanding aspect perception is necessary to our understanding of metaphor.

V. Conclusion

I have now demonstrated the importance of aspect perception to understanding the meaning of words in certain cases. This is due to the fact that, in cases of idiosyncratic uses of language and metaphor, we interpret the meaning of words in the same way as we interpret an image with multiple aspects. Important to this understanding is the knowledge that there are both primary and secondary uses of words, that the

[37] I feel that seeing a scalene triangle as an object that has fallen over is sufficiently obscure that, without being directly provoked, we would not interpret the image in that way.

secondary uses are parasitic on the primary uses, and that we interpret meaning in some cases. In addressing two objections to Wittgenstein, it is my hope that I have not only given a clear exposition his view, but also strengthened it.

Works Cited

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, (Upper Saddle River, Prentice-Hall, 1953), Translated by G.E.M Anscombe.

Orwell, George, Politics and the English Language, in *Why I Write*, (London, Penguin Books, 1984).

Appendix:

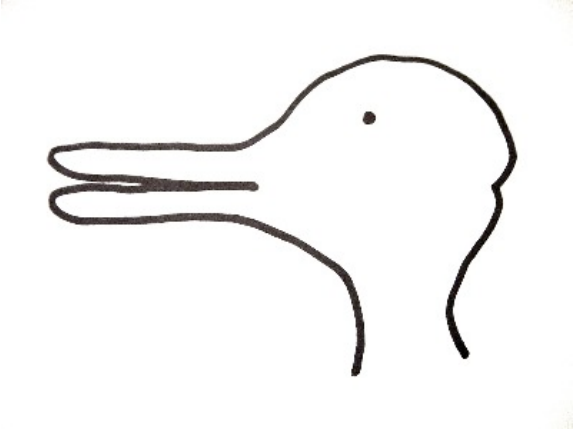

Figure 1: The Duck-Rabbit

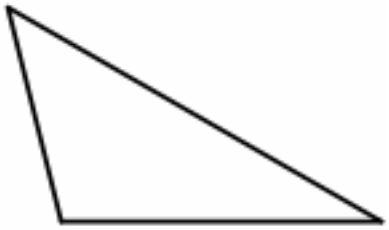

Figure 2: A Scalene Triangle