

Wanting to Say Something

Aspect-Blindness and Language

William Day

Man hält mich auf der Straße oft für blind. (RC III §280)

INTRODUCTION

The mystery of why Wittgenstein takes an interest in the concept of aspect-seeing may be trumped only by the enigma of why he introduces the concept of aspect-blindness. After twenty pages of examining the place of aspect-seeing among our concepts of seeing and thinking, he announces that

the question now arises: Could there be human beings lacking in the capacity to see something *as something*— and what would that be like? What sort of consequences would it have?—Would this defect be comparable to color-blindness or to not having absolute pitch?—We will call it “aspect-blindness”—and will next consider what might be meant by this. (*PI* 213f)

Wittgenstein adds parenthetically that what he has in mind is specifically a “conceptual investigation.” This is his preferred name in Part II for the general method of the *Investigations* that has come to be called, and that he tends to describe in Part I as, grammatical investigations (cf. *PI* §90). But the ensuing discussion of aspect-blindness, which covers no more than a page, does not follow the pattern of other grammatical investigations. Wittgenstein’s interest here seems to outstrip what such an investigation can accomplish. When in other contexts he imagines human beings in some way

different from us, such as the builders in *PI* §2, he does not ask, as he does of the aspect-blind, whether there could *be* such people. More than once he raises questions (will the aspect-blind be able to do such-and-such) that he says he will not try to answer. And his conclusion to the discussion – “Aspect-blindness will be *akin* to the lack of a ‘musical ear’” (*PI* 214c) – is itself a simile, and so (grammatically) implies that he is able to say what it means, to find other words; but explanations are not forthcoming. There is, in short, no final word on which one can rest, at least none that offers the sort of revelatory turn of thought one finds elsewhere in the *Investigations*. Compare, for example, the epigrammatic remark near the end of Part II: “I can know what someone else is thinking, not what I am thinking. It is correct to say ‘I know what you are thinking’, and wrong to say ‘I know what I am thinking’. (A whole cloud of philosophy condensed into a drop of grammar)” (*PI* 222b). With the concept of aspect-blindness it seems Wittgenstein wants to create rather than dissipate a cloud of philosophy.

This has often struck me as the obvious and natural way to begin thinking about Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspect-blindness in the *Investigations*. Yet most commentators on these pages not only begin without such doubts but read the discussion of aspect-blindness as *conclusive* of something. It is no surprise that they do not agree on what the discussion proves, nor agree on so much as what the discussion is about.¹ Is it about the strangeness, the less-than-humanness, of the aspect-blind, or about how the aspect-blind resemble human types we know well? Is Wittgenstein’s intent to explain the experience of aspect-seeing, or is he more interested in the way we normally, unremarkably see things? Is his concern at bottom what, if anything, we are doing in seeing what a picture is a picture of, or what, if anything, we are doing in meaning the words we say?

¹ Compare the discussions of aspect-blindness and meaning-blindness in Rush Rhees, Preface to *BB*; Joachim Schulte, *Experience and Expression: Wittgenstein’s Philosophy of Psychology*, trans. Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (London: Routledge, 1990); Paul Johnston, *Wittgenstein: Rethinking the Inner* (London: Routledge, 1993). Rhees is the only one among these for whom Wittgenstein’s settled attitude towards the possibility of aspect-blindness remains in doubt.

My guiding thought in what follows is that the capacity to be struck by a change of aspect underlies the possibility of (acquiring) human language – and *so too* does aspect-blindness, not as it is suffered continually by the aspect-blind, but as it is experienced endemically by us. We would not speak as we do, nor have the interests and desires that we do, if we did not see or hear aspects of the world that others fail to see or hear, and if we did not fail to see or hear aspects of the world that others see or hear. For that reason we can neither fully imagine aspect-blindness, nor fail to find ourselves imagined, pictured, by it. And this ambivalent reaction to the possibility of aspect-blindness is, I take it, what Wittgenstein asks us to notice, as if it shed light on our condition as creatures who converse. The same conclusion is suggested from the other direction, as it were, by noticing that what we could not but assent to – what we could not see or hear differently – would not be so much as worth saying; and what is not worth saying cannot be meaningfully said. “*Theses in philosophy*,” i.e., claims made in the name of philosophy to which everyone would agree (*PI* §128), are possible only in a world in which everyone is, or has become, aspect-blind. And yet philosophy’s attraction to such a world – a world of perfect, mutual intelligibility – in the face of the seemingly intractable problem of meaning, is merely one manifestation of the no less endemic human failure to take an interest in one’s own way of seeing or hearing things. What Wittgenstein asks of us in this instance, I take it, is not that we notice our ambivalent reaction to some particular possibility, but that we notice *simpliciter*, allow what we see or hear to strike us.

The present essay continues in three sections. In the first I make good my claim that being struck by aspects of the world underlies our ability to acquire language, implying that continual aspect-blindness is unimaginable as a human possibility. Nonetheless, as I argue in the second section, we grow to become inured to aspects of the world, and so likewise grow to overlook the extent to which our “being in the world” is internally related to our seeing, and desiring, aspects. It is in *this* way that aspect-blindness can be seen as natural to us. In the final section I consider how Wittgenstein’s writing, loosely describable as a series of “reminders” (*PI* §§89, 90, 127), in fact models for the reader her forgotten desire to be struck by aspects of the world.

1. COMING TO SPEAK

We can find our way with aspect-blindness most easily if we begin by noting what aspect-blindness is not. The distinguishing characteristic of the aspect-blind is not that there are some aspects the aspect-blind will not see (e.g., the rabbit aspect of the duck-rabbit) or at least recognize (e.g., that the schematic cube represents a cube). The aspect-blind are not even said to be incapable of seeing different aspects of an object at different times: the duck-rabbit can appear to them as a duck at one time and as a rabbit at another. But they will not describe these different aspects as aspects of the same object, for they will not see them (experience them) as *of* the same object. What characterizes aspect-blindness is the failure to say or show that one has been struck by a change of aspect; it is the failure to experience an aspect *dawn*.

This suggests various consequences if we imagine the aspect-blind as a tribe, a people. (Wittgenstein's question is always about *Menschen*, human beings, more than one. His interest in the aspect-blind, as with the builders in *PI* §2, has to do in part with how they would talk to *each other*.) For a community of aspect-blind people, "seeing the same object" would always entail seeing what we would call the same aspect of the object.² Thus the aspect-blind would always understand themselves to agree, where we only usually agree, on the look a (given) thing presents, and a (given) thing would maintain its look. Further, for such a community, seeing what we would call a different aspect of an object would always entail seeing a different object. Thus they would always fail to see, where we only sometimes fail to see, a different aspect appearing to someone else; they could not obey the command, "Now see the figure like *this*" (cf. *PI* 213e). Since the aspect-blind would understand any disagreements over the look that an object presents as evidence that they were seeing different objects, their language-game here would be similar to ours when we speak of seeing hallucinations, dream-images, phantasms, etc. Such objects, in other words, would not exist for them.

² To be more precise: seeing the same object would entail seeing the same aspect of the object for those objects that we would say "have" more than one aspect. Otherwise the aspect-blind, like us, would just see the object. (One doesn't take the cutlery at a meal for cutlery; a fork doesn't have a fork aspect. Cf. *PI* 195b-c.)

In trying to imagine a people who never see objects differently from one another, or such that no object ever struck them differently unless the object itself changed, we should ask not only whether we can imagine a community with the concepts of “seeing” and “object” altered in this way, but whether we can imagine them as having concepts, as speaking to one another, as having things to say. Our interest in these questions lies in their relation or connection to how *we* come to speak to one another, why we should have things to say. In approaching these questions I hope to bring out the naturalness or humanness of aspect-dawning experiences by considering what in my reading is an unremarked implication of such experiences. It is in particular not to be found, to my knowledge, in Wittgenstein’s later writings. But it is prepared by his interest throughout the *Investigations* in the learning of language, particularly when we pair that interest with his observation that aspect-seeing is, like imagining, subject to the will (*PI* 213e). Specifically, I want to suggest that the capacity to “see” “aspects” is a condition of our growing into language, of our coming to speak the same language as our elders, to agree “in language” and “in judgments” and “in form of life” (cf. *PI* §§241–42). Thus while I don’t claim to be explicating here what Wittgenstein thought, I imagine myself to be following along one of his criss-crossing paths of thought.

It is often taken as an implication of the concept of aspect-seeing that the ability to be struck by an aspect presupposes (in some sense I am not confident in characterizing) the ability to see continuously. Thus Stephen Mulhall writes, for example: “The possibility of experiencing aspect-dawning is a function of our general attitude to pictorial symbols when an aspect-change is not in question”;³ “Any particular experience of aspect-dawning, in making us aware that we can see a given entity as a *new* kind of object, thereby highlights the fact that we are *already* regarding it as a particular kind of object.”⁴ The idea seems all but demanded by the “seeing *x* as *y*” schema: One cannot see a *y* (an aspect of something) without an *x* (something continuously or unambiguously *there*, something seen-as). This would mean that one can’t experience the dawning of an aspect before one

³ Mulhall, *On Being in the World*, 31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

has (continuous-seeing) concepts, before one can speak. And yet Wittgenstein is happy to present an example that suggests that we can imagine otherwise (namely, the “double-cross”) (*PI* 207c).⁵

To say that aspect-dawning presupposes continuous seeing goes hand in hand with the thought, which Mulhall is not alone in giving voice to, that the experience of an aspect dawning “is a very specific and relatively rare one.”⁶ Insofar as Mulhall’s pointing this out serves his overriding interest in minimizing the philosophical significance of aspect-dawning experiences,⁷ its motivation is understandable. But it is otherwise not clear why he and others should want to *assert* it, or what their doing so should be taken to mean. “Aspect-dawning is rare” is part of the grammar of “aspect-dawning.” To assert that aspect-dawning is rare seems to me redeemable, at best, by seeing it as an invitation to imagine otherwise, to carry out the conceptual investigation that complements Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspect-blindness. Let us, then, imagine a people for whom aspect-dawning comes as standard equipment, a people who never simply “regard” something as something (cf. *PI* 205e–g) but for whom aspects of a thing are *continually* dawning, aware that no one else, for the most part, is seeing what they see in the way they see it. (*We* might think of this as a state of perpetual hallucination.) Various consequences for the lives of these people suggest themselves, few of which will tempt us to view their heightened sensitivity as a gift. Could they, in particular, be described as agreeing in judgments among themselves (cf. *PI* §242)? It is not clear that they could even so much as have a language, since they could not *name* things: How would someone for whom the aspects of the world are continually in flux attach a label to a thing (cf. *PI* §§15, 26)? To imagine such people simply underscores the grammar of our concept of aspect-dawning: Being struck by an aspect requires that one not be struck continually (in that respect it is like falling in love), and so it implies or anticipates an unequal balance of the familiar and the unfamiliar (in that respect it suggests a kinship to Freud’s concept of the uncanny).

⁵ “One could quite well imagine,” he says, someone reporting the change of aspect of the double-cross by pointing to, say, an isolated black cross, and that this could be imagined “as a primitive reaction in a child even before it could talk” (*PI* 207f).

⁶ Mulhall, *On Being in the World*, 136.

⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 123.

But is that enough to make the grammar of aspect-dawning perspicuous? If we are willing to maintain that creatures who see *only* aspects could not manage to attach a label to a thing, and so could not form a community of speakers, we ought to consider whether the aspect-blind, given the parity in their (dis)ability, could do these things. To arrive at a place from which to consider this question, we can ask how *we* ever come to attach a label to a thing, to speak a first word. The answer will reveal that, notwithstanding the “seeing *x* as *y*” formulation, continuous seeing is not conceptually prior to aspect-seeing.

Imagine a toddler who has just learned his first few (maybe four) words, the words his parents subsequently write down in his baby book, one of which is “ball.” The child reverses phonemes and it comes out “bloh” (at first his parents think he is saying “block”): not an auspicious-sounding step into language, and it may not be right to imagine it as the first step, but it is a step. Now consider the change that has taken place for this child, not only by weighing the changes you can see but by considering the change in the child *through* the concept of seeing – that is, by sketching what you imagine the child now sees. – But isn’t that mistaking an empirical question for a conceptual one? Isn’t it, in fact, like trying to get the result of an experiment by imagining the experiment, and then imagining the result (cf. *PI* §265)? – But as I mean the question “What does the child now see?”, there is no empirical experiment to carry out, at least none that I can imagine. Nor am I forgetting Wittgenstein’s warnings against the conjuring trick of imagining an inner process or state (*PI* §308). What I would *like*, admittedly, is for the child to tell me what has changed for him, beyond what I already know (namely, that he now “says” “ball”) – and of course he can’t tell me. But, in fact, my interest in the child’s “bloh” extends no further than Wittgenstein’s interest in “noticing an aspect” – that is, no further than finding “its place among the concepts of experience” (*PI* 193e). And I take it that the child’s “bloh” *is* the expression of an experience, an exclamation of sorts. (I will simply assert that it is not an assertion, nor an avowal, description, or “perceptual report.” Could it be a command, as the builder’s “block” at *PI* §2 looks to be? I might say this later, perhaps, when the child – whom I now adopt as mine, since he is – utters it loudly and somewhat crossly, and cries if I do not “obey” him. But

at present I'm imagining a time in the child's life when he utters his "bloh" excitedly, sometimes repeatedly, and when my repeating it or something like it back to him – doubtless excitedly, and probably with the ball already at hand – seems response enough.) I understand my interest, in short, to be conceptual.

The toddler, for the first time in his brief life, says "bloh": What else, if anything, has changed? Before he "started to talk," my saying "ball" did not elicit much of a response from him, at least none that I could see. Now not only does he frequently say "bloh" when I say "ball," but he uses "bloh" in ways I can make sense of, not least when he repeats "bloh" over and over, which I understand as a kind of delight, call it the delight of first words. His world, the world he sees and otherwise experiences, now has a ball or balls "in" "it." But didn't it before? Surely the first time he said "bloh" was not the first time he *saw* a ball, as if as soon as he saw one he could see immediately that it *was* one. Like other toddlers, he has been playing with a ball or balls for months before he said "bloh" – reaching for them, grabbing them, putting them in his mouth, tossing them, shrieking when I roll them back to him, etc. On the other hand, to imagine that he was seeing a ball all along would seem to imply that he already had the concept "ball" and lacked only a (our) label for it. And is that any more coherent? It *is* a conception of language – one that Wittgenstein attributes to Augustine (though he has others in mind too, including the early Wittgenstein) and that he comes to criticize in these terms: "Augustine describes the learning of human language as if the child came into a strange country and did not understand the language of the country; that is, as if it already had a language, only not this one. Or again: as if the child could already *think*, only not yet speak. And 'think' would here mean something like 'talk to itself'" (*PI* §32). But "talking to oneself" has its own range of looks, assumptions, and implications, and this child shows none of these. He does not mutter, for instance, but babbles – and not particularly, or ever, *to* himself.

If the child's first "bloh" betokens neither the first time he sees a ball nor the first time he gives a name to an object he has seen all along, then what does it betoken? As I imagine it, it must betoken that the ball or balls he has been playing with (reaching for, putting in his mouth, etc.) and our repeated utterance of the word "ball" – which the child now hears as *one* (sort of) utterance, and as (close to) the

same utterance *he* now makes – together have undergone a change of aspect for him. The ball he sees is not yet the ball that I and his 4-year-old sister see, which we may tell one another is round, red, shiny, the size of a grapefruit, etc. Likewise, or consequently, his “bloh” is not yet our “ball,” nor would it be if the two utterances sounded identical. We become aware of this when we notice how little he can *do* with his word (for now). But I think one can describe the child, in his first tentative or delighted or contented utterances of “bloh,” as “experiencing the meaning” of “ball” (cf. *PI* 214d ff.), by which I mean to say that a word’s meaning begins for him necessarily as the experience of its meaning, as finding a new home in its utterance. So there is something the child can do with his word more readily than we can after all.

The experience of having an aspect dawn, or of being struck by something, or of seeing the familiar in a new light, is thus as intimately and pervasively joined to the human form of life as talking. Rather than assert, with Mulhall and others, that continuous seeing is conceptually prior to aspect-seeing, I find it more felicitous to say that continuous seeing – a taking for granted the furniture of the world – presupposes an ability (interest, desire) to be struck by aspects of the world, to find the face of the world change in answer to one’s gaze.⁸ – Would this mean that aspect-seeing is *conceptually* prior to continuous seeing, or simply that it is developmentally prior, an incidental fact about us, like the tails we grew in the womb? If, impressed by the “seeing *x* as *y*” schema, one insists that aspect-seeing is no more than developmentally prior, then one is probably willing to separate the fact that humans speak from the fact that humans must come to speak.⁹ A willingness to separate here is not unlike the skeptic’s willingness to separate the words we speak from the occasions of their use. But it is part of Wittgenstein’s method of “bring[ing] words back

⁸ No less a thinker than Rousseau in his “On the origin of languages” argued for not unrelated reasons that figurative meaning precedes the literal, that our first utterances are signs of a sudden aspectual vision. (“That is how the figurative word is born before the literal word, when our gaze is held in passionate fascination.”) See *Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann Gottfried Herder: On the Origin of Language*, trans. John H. Moran and Alexander Gode (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 12–13.

⁹ Stanley Cavell’s reading of the opening sections of the *Investigations* is to some extent an unfolding of the thought that “what language is is bound up with our ideas of what acquiring language is.” See Cavell, “Notes and Afterthoughts on the Opening

from their metaphysical to their everyday use" (*PI* §116) that we ask ourselves how we come to learn, or in what contexts we are first at home with, the meaning of a given word. In extending the application of this methodological question to consider in general the contexts in which a repeated sound becomes a first word, I am proposing that the remarks on aspect-seeing continue the preoccupation with the conceptual or grammatical conditions of learning to speak evident in the opening sections of the *Investigations* (cf. *PI* §§5–7, 9–10, 26ff.). It is worth noting in this regard that Wittgenstein's initial example of "noticing an aspect" is the experience of seeing a likeness in a face – an experience whose home for us is, I think we can say, the face of the mother.¹⁰

To return to the condition of the aspect-blind, we should now recognize that among the consequences of aspect-blindness would be (if not the absence of language, then) the inability to grow into language, to learn to speak. Early in his remarks on aspect-blindness Wittgenstein says that he "do[es] not want to settle" the question whether the aspect-blind will be able to notice the similarity between, or the identity of, faces (*PI* 213f) – so that even the question of recognition, as of a mother's face, is left up in the air. This is understandable, since to settle such a question seems more like deciding the aspect-blind's fate than investigating the concept of their possibility. Wittgenstein's ambivalence reminds us that when we examine a concept by inventing forms of life we may not be able to say which (other) facts of nature will be altered or implicated. Yet he adds reassuringly that the aspect-blind "ought to be able to execute such orders as 'Bring me something that looks like *this*.'" This too is understandable, since the aspect-blind have not been conceived as blind to what a thing unambiguously is. But another reason Wittgenstein may want to say this is because executing the order, "Bring me something like this," is enough like what the builder's assistant in *PI* §2 is said to be able to do (e.g., when the builder calls out "Block" or "Slab"). And the

of Wittgenstein's *Investigations*," *Philosophical Passages: Wittgenstein, Emerson, Austin, Derrida*, The Bucknell Lectures in Literary Theory, vol. 12 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 144 ff.

¹⁰ Wittgenstein speaks initially of the likeness between two *different* faces, but he soon mentions, in addition, the experience of seeing a familiar face in the one before me (*PI* 193c) – that is, of seeing someone's face as hers, recognizing her. (Cf. *PI* 197g.)

aspect-blind have not been conceived at the outset as *more* primitive and dull than the builder and his assistant.

But mightn't the aspect-blind be *as* primitive? A curious feature of the language-game of *PI* §2, and a feature typically unremarked, is that the builder's assistant does not speak.¹¹ He could, conceivably, be simply a trained animal, his execution of the builder's orders a kind of circus act. It needn't be an unattractive life: While we may still picture his master, the builder with his four words, as moving about sluggishly or half-wittedly,¹² the builder's assistant may look to us as suddenly carefree in his dumb, dog-like obedience. Could he be, in fact, better off than his master? Lacking language, the builder's assistant simply lacks all human possibilities; the builder, on the other hand, looks to have had human possibilities somehow foreclosed, stopped short. Which of these we find to better approximate the condition of the aspect-blind will depend on whether we picture the aspect-blind as already having a language they could not have learned or acquired (Augustine's picture, the philosopher's ideal) or as simply lacking the prospect of language altogether. Either way, I am suggesting, aspect-blindness appears unimaginable (for now) as a (full, real) possibility for us, creatures who *come to* language.

2. DESIRING ASPECTS

In countering Augustine's description of language acquisition as "grasping" the connection between word and thing, or as "gradually learning to understand" that connection (cf. *PI* §1), the picture according to which acquiring a first word is undergoing a change of aspect describable as experiencing its meaning suggests that learning to talk is

¹¹ When in *The Brown Book* Wittgenstein extends the builder's language along the same lines as he will at *PI* §8 – most notably, by introducing numerals that the assistant must "know by heart" – he says explicitly, "Here *both* the parties use the language by speaking the words" (*BB* 79; my emphasis).

¹² As suggested by Rhees, "Wittgenstein's Builders," in *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1970), 83; Warren Goldfarb, "I Want You to Bring Me a Slab: Remarks on the Opening Sections of the *Philosophical Investigations*," *Synthese* 56 (1983): 269–70; Cavell, "Declining Decline: Wittgenstein as a Philosopher of Culture," *This New Yet Unapproachable America: Lectures after Emerson after Wittgenstein* (Albuquerque, N.M.: Living Batch Press, 1989), 62–64; and Cavell, "Notes and Afterthoughts," 145–47.

conceptually connected to one's (the child's) taking an interest in one's experience, particularly in one's experience of words themselves.¹³ I don't mean here an interest in the utility of words, their being more serviceable for expressing a desire or a state of mind than crying or cooing or thrashing about, as Augustine notes. Rather, I have in mind an interest in whatever changes the dawning of words brings about in the child's desires – changes that themselves must be desired by the child if he is to continue to grow into language. If a child can speak, not only is it safe to say with Rush Rhees that "he has got something to tell you,"¹⁴ but we can assume that he desires what the dawning of words do: He desires the world that his embryonic utterances inevitably constitute. Absent that desire, there is literally nothing he can say.

If "to desire the world that one's utterances inevitably constitute" is understood seriously, with one's full imagination, the question has to arise: Where does this desire in us go? It is a question that leads to unsettled regions of philosophy, where desire tends to arrive with excessive baggage. The question is not about the loss of the child's babbling instinct or about some adult's recovered delight in words, but about the loss of the babbling's immediate offspring, the delight's primogenitor, next to which the adult's delight bears the tint of nostalgia. It is a question about the naturalness for humans, or for a certain stage of the human, to become inured to the aspects of the world, as well as about our constitutional forgetfulness of this. Said otherwise, my question is about our constitutional failure to register that our relation to the world (every feature of that relation, I might say) rests on our desiring aspects (of it). (How this claim sits alongside Stanley Cavell's signature claim that our relation to the world is not one of knowing but of something like accepting or acknowledging¹⁵ will have to await another occasion.) If the experience of having an

¹³ "Taking an interest in one's experience" is Cavell's locution; see Cavell, *Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 12. The importance of this notion for an understanding of Emerson and Thoreau is a central element of Cavell's reading of them and of the tradition of moral perfectionism that he finds exemplified by their writing. See in this regard my "Knowing as Instancing: Jazz Improvisation and Moral Perfectionism," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 58 (Spring 2000): 99–111.

¹⁴ Rhees, "Wittgenstein's Builders," 80.

¹⁵ Cf. Cavell, "The Avoidance of Love: A Reading of *King Lear*," in *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 324;

aspect dawn is as pervasively joined to the human form of life as talking, then why does the child, in growing into language and so coming to continuously-see the furniture of the world – not only its objects but its human attitudes, expressions, exchanges, occupations, preoccupations, ... – why does the child grow out of the interest or desire to be struck by aspects of the world?

Nietzsche, the fearless philosopher *par excellence* at dissecting human desire, seems to dispose of this question early in his career when he says, in effect, that losing interest in our experience is the price we pay for language:

Every concept comes into being by making equivalent that which is non-equivalent. Just as it is certain that no leaf is ever exactly the same as any other leaf, it is equally certain that the concept “leaf” is formed by dropping those individual differences arbitrarily, by forgetting those features which differentiate one thing from another. ... Now, it is true that human beings forget that this is how things are; thus they lie unconsciously in the way we have described, and in accordance with centuries-old habits – and precisely *because of this unconsciousness*, precisely because of this forgetting, they arrive at the feeling of truth. ... As creatures of *reason*, human beings now make their actions subject to the rule of abstractions; they no longer tolerate being swept away by sudden impressions and sensuous perceptions; they now generalize all these impressions first, turning them into cooler, less colorful concepts in order to harness the vehicle of their lives and actions to them. Everything which distinguishes human beings from animals depends on this ability to sublimate sensuous metaphors into a schema, in other words, to dissolve an image into a concept.¹⁶

Nietzsche cannot quite mean what this says, or have in mind some alternative deal that could be struck, since it is literally inconceivable what would be gained by experience, or left of it, if we lost the concept of it. But his suggestion that acquiring concepts (and what he calls the drive to truth) is the beginning of the end of our desire for what strikes us, calls to mind a feature of *PI* II.xi that I take to be no accident, *viz.*, that the bulk of Wittgenstein’s examples of noticing an

The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 241.

¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, ed. Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 145–46.

aspect – aside from those few drawn from experiences of art, which I address briefly at the end of this essay – are objects and activities of childhood. There are puzzle-pictures, flipped figures, games of “What do you see?”, games of make-believe in which, for example, a chest is a house, and lessons in rudimentary arithmetic (“Now take *these* things together!” *PI* 208c). There are also, to be sure, games that children of a certain age will not be able to play – for example, obeying the command to see *this* angle of a triangle as its apex or *this* segment as its base – games for which “the substratum ... is the mastery of a technique” (*PI* 208e). Indeed, with some responses to art – Wittgenstein mentions finding certain themes of Brahms to be extremely Kellerian while being unable to say why they should strike him this way (cf. *LC* 32) – the substratum might rather be called a culture (cf. *LC* 8–11), or “the whole field of our language-games” (*Z* §175; cf. *CV* 51e–52a and *RPP* I §433). I might characterize the lesson of these cases of aspect-seeing by saying: our very conception of our experience, and so the sort of striking something that this or that moment can trigger, is itself transformed by our growing into language, transformed every bit as much as our concept of “ball” or “block” (or “bank” or “Boston” or “baby”) is transformed.

But despite the ways in which our grown-up responses to art, for example, answer to or echo our interest or desire to be struck by aspects of the world, the fact I mean to observe is that we inevitably harden to, or become inured to, that interest. The child who, in growing into language, is learning what to do with such experiences as lay behind his first words, learns equally well to forget such experiences. Perhaps it should be said (taking our cue from Nietzsche’s use of “unconsciously”) that he learns to repress them. After he takes his first steps into language and can say his first several dozen words, there may be no encouragement from those around him for what merely strikes *him*, what then and there may be striking to him alone. When he pronounces one of his words in a non-ordinary context (says “bloh” when I put an ice cube in his hands), I may “correct” him – encourage him to say “ice cube” or “cube” or “cold” – even as I find his “error” understandable, even metaphorically suggestive. One might imagine the child finding this new response to his utterance (my “correcting” him) itself striking. But one cannot say beforehand or in general whether the child will experience these encounters over time as

what we would call encouragement (to our ways of seeing the world) or as admonishment (for not yet having mastered our ways).

I don't mean to stress in these considerations the element of maliciousness (of society, the legislators of language, toward the fledgling or unconventional language-speaker) that seems to reverberate in the young Nietzsche.¹⁷ Perhaps the elders in Augustine's picture can be seen as malicious, indoctrinating him into "the stormy fellowship of human life."¹⁸ Perhaps Nietzsche has them in mind, or someone like them. And certainly, if the child's loss of interest or desire in seeing aspects *is* an instance of repression, it will be tied to something like an experience of malice. (And perhaps ignorance and cluelessness about a child's desires are expressions of malice.) In any event – and I take this to be Nietzsche's point as well – the loss of interest in the world's aspects is no less a part of our natural history than having that interest. What is not a (necessary) part of that natural history – and what makes Nietzsche's observation Nietzschean – is the appreciation that something has been lost.

If the cost of our growing into language is the dissipation of our originary desire for aspects, of our interest in what may here and now strike us alone, then of course this describes our relation to our words no less than to the world. Something like evidence for this can be gleaned from our initial disorientation on reading Wittgenstein's brief discussion (*PI* 216c–g) of the secondary sense of a word: "Given the two ideas 'fat' and 'lean', would you be rather inclined to say that Wednesday was fat and Tuesday lean, or *vice versa*? (I incline decisively towards the former)" (*PI* 216c). Here is a glimpse of our pre- or extra-grammatical life with words.¹⁹ It is almost as if the maturing human, in departing that life, comes to adopt the philosopher's static view of the connection between words and their systematic implications, and begins to imagine that the field of our words has in every instance and in each utterance long since been surveyed. But then, from the standpoint of our loss of interest in our experience, aspect-blindness will seem to us not unimaginable as a human possibility at all, but quite familiar, a kind of fixed literal-mindedness in taking in

¹⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 143.

¹⁸ Augustine, *Confessions* (trans. Albert C. Outler) 1.8.

¹⁹ Cf. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 355.

the world. We will not picture the aspect-blind as hesitant, stumbling, stiff automata,²⁰ but as visibly indistinguishable from us: people we think we have met, or been.²¹ “Anomalies of *this* kind are easy for us to imagine” (PI 214b) because people who have “an altogether different relationship to pictures from ours” (PI 214a) could be, in effect, any one of us at any given time.

As a consequence, and in contradistinction to my conclusion from the last section, I want to suggest that our response to the possibility of aspect-blindness is in fact ambivalent: Aspect-blindness is neither (fully, really) imaginable to us nor (fully, really) foreign to us. This may reflect our ambivalent conception of ourselves as both imaginative and unimaginative, both spirit and flesh. Insofar as we see aspect-blindness as familiar, we thus imagine ourselves, or recognize ourselves, as unimaginative, the all-too-human creatures we see in Nietzsche’s mirror. The suggestion here is not that aspect-seeing is *commensurate* with imagining: unlike imagining, aspect-seeing works with a perception. Still, the lesson that emerges from Wittgenstein’s discussion of the differences among kinds of aspects (PI 207–8) is that seeing a change in aspect requires, at a minimum, that one can imagine something (see especially PI 207b, 207h, and RPP II §508).

But an equally telling connection between aspect-seeing and imagining for our present purpose is that, as noted earlier, both are subject to the will (PI 213e). It follows that our intermittent occasions of finding the world striking are the natural expression of our imagination in the world, or the projection of our imagination on the world: a kind of epitome of our freedom. Should we then notice that Wittgenstein places this observation (the feature shared by imagining and aspect-seeing of being subject to the will) in the *Investigations* immediately before introducing the concept of aspect-blindness (with the words “The question *now* arises: Could there be human beings lacking the capacity to see something *as something* ...”, first emphasis mine), as if his interest in the concept of aspect-blindness were prompted by an interest in willing, or rather in our propensity to relinquish our wills, to make ourselves blind to the aspects of

²⁰ Cf. Mulhall, *On Being in the World*, 89.

²¹ This is the view Joachim Schulte adopts in explicating Wittgenstein’s related notion of meaning-blindness. See Schulte, *Experience and Expression*, 68–70.

things? If we are meant to notice this, then Wittgenstein's apparent reticence to say something conclusive over the following two pages about the possibility of the aspect-blind opens the possibility that this conceptual investigation is meant to lead (gently, not against our will) to considerations of matters of the will. In what remains I will sketch a way of reading the later Wittgenstein that attends to his interest in the connection between his philosophical project and matters of the will.

3. WRITING AND WILLING

I have suggested that Wittgenstein's interest in the concept of aspect-blindness develops out of a preoccupation (found in Part I of the *Investigations*) with our attraction to the familiar philosophical ideal of perfect, mutual intelligibility that is the prize we would gain with the "solution" to the problem of meaning. The image of a community of aspect-blind people answers perfectly to that impulse in philosophy which stipulates the elimination of my part in what I see, my responsiveness to it and my responsibility for it (call this philosophy's antipathy toward aesthetics) – an impulse that asks us finally to relinquish our will. In wanting now to claim that, for the later Wittgenstein, a task of philosophy is to model in one's writing an interest in one's experience, I am guided by three or four comments he makes on the role of the will in that peculiar use of language called philosophical writing. I will set these comments down here, beginning with a summary statement by one of Wittgenstein's biographers:

He often remarked that the problem of writing good philosophy and of thinking well about philosophical problems was one of the will more than of the intellect – the will to resist the temptation to misunderstand, the will to resist superficiality.²²

Lying to oneself about oneself, deceiving yourself about the pretense in your own state of will, must have a harmful influence on [one's] style; for the result will be that you cannot tell what is genuine in the style and what is false. This may explain the falsity of Mahler's style; and it is the same danger that I run myself.

²² Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (New York: Free Press, 1990), 366.

If I perform to myself [think that I'm writing as such a man would], then it's this that the style expresses. And then the style cannot be my own. If you are *unwilling* to know what you are, your writing is a form of deceit.

If anyone is unwilling to descend into himself, because this is too painful, he will remain superficial in his writing.²³

These thoughts, if not their tone or favorite musical whipping-boy, are Nietzschean, and few can answer their bidding. But at present I want to highlight only the following aspect of Wittgenstein's thought: What stands in the way of "knowing what you are" is not only the refusal to look at what you are, but not knowing how or where to look: and arriving at these locales ("descending into yourself") depends on an interest in one's experience. "Lying to oneself about oneself" would not be a threat to philosophical or musical style if it were as easy to spot in oneself as lying about one's age. Spotting it requires a will to self-knowledge, which is not a matter of exerting willpower toward a given goal but of being willing to look for what one is without knowing the cost of finding out. (That was Meno's paradox, and his sticking-point – though of course he didn't know it; and Socrates couldn't tell him.) The peculiar look of Wittgenstein's later style has often been mentioned. Less often do his readers observe the peculiar demands on will and judgment evident in his style, particularly in its unrelenting venting of doubting voices – not only voices of skeptical doubt but other, accusatory voices raising the suspicion that the direction taken by the protagonist at this juncture is no longer one that he continues to will, but is instead a direction he may be finding simply less resistant or more familiar.²⁴ To disregard these demands in reading the *Investigations*, or to regard them as of merely biographical interest, would be like reading Augustine's *Confessions* for merely biographical interest.

If a genuine style rests on a kind of watchfulness for self-deception – not a paranoid suspicion of it, which may itself be a kind of self-deception – then it rests on one's interest or desire to notice, to watch

²³ Quoted in Rhees, "Postscript," *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 174.

²⁴ "Is it a case of both seeing and thinking? Or an amalgam of the two, as I should almost like to say? The question is: *why* does one want to say this?" (*PI* 197h); "I should like to say that what dawns here lasts only as long as I am occupied with the object in a particular way. ('See, it's looking!') – 'I should like to say' – and *is* it

for, one's watchfulness: a kind of double- or aspect-seeing. As with writing, so with reading: one does not know, in taking up a text like the *Investigations*, what the temptation to misunderstand will prove to be, or where the temptation to superficiality will lie, so that one can make preparations to overcome it. (Before the duck-rabbit flips for you the first time, it looks just like a line drawing of a duck, or of a rabbit.) Then how does one come to know how to proceed in reading it? Since Wittgenstein characterizes good philosophical writing as writing that shows "a genuine style," he may think that one comes to recognize this, to know it, in much the same way that one comes to know "the genuineness of expressions" in others:

Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can. Not, however, by taking a course in it, but through "*experience*."—Can someone else be a man's teacher in this? Certainly. From time to time he gives him the right *tip*.—This is what "learning" and "teaching" are like here. ... What is most difficult here is to put this indefiniteness, correctly and unfalsified [i.e., genuinely], into words. (*PI* 227h–i)

Can we conceive the *Investigations* as a series of tips on reading the *Investigations*? We can characterize its writing, in any event, by noting that it does not draw conclusions about matters unseen (the glue that binds world to language, or language to meaning, or speaker to speaker) so much as prepare connections to be seen (a "series of examples" that "can be broken off" [*PI* §133]) while recognizing that seeing the connections asks for a reconstituting way of looking.

As an instance of this, consider what I am asked to see in the following remark from Part II of the *Investigations*: "What is fear? What does 'being afraid' mean? If I wanted to define it at a *single* showing—I should *play-act* fear. Could I also represent hope in this way? Hardly. And what about belief?" (*PI* 188d–e). I am asked to try these questions and answers out on myself, but not only in the way that any philosophical claim asks this of me, to examine and assess its truth – in this instance, by seeing whether I agree that the most salient features of

so?" (*PI* 210d); "But wait! Do I ever really say of an ordinary picture (of a lion) that I see it as a lion? I've certainly never heard that yet. And yet here I've been talking about this kind of seeing!" (*LWI* §§675–76); "But I have kept on saying [e.g., at *PI* 230b] that it's conceivable for our concepts to be different than they are. Was that all nonsense?" (*RC* III §124).

hope cannot be shown by play-acting, as those of fear can. I am certainly also asked to consider whether Wittgenstein's answer to his first question helps to dispel the thought that "I am afraid" principally refers to a state of mind, and whether his second set of questions diminishes the appeal of the thought that "I fear that *x*," "I hope that *x*," and "I believe that *x*" function similarly as propositional attitudes, or that their dissimilarity is that the first two refer to emotive states while the last does not. Beyond weighing Wittgenstein's words against my experience, however, I am invited to weigh my experience in light of his words, to try on a method – Wittgenstein likens it to a therapy (*PI* §133) – for returning to an interest in my experience, in the words I speak and in my part in voicing their justification, when that is required of me. But this method requires that I dissolve or destroy the barriers to my interest in my experience, the (philosophical) problems I have constructed to keep my real interest, and what satisfies my real need, out of my everyday thoughts and speech, out of my sight (cf. *PI* 206a). On the other hand, if I am looking for grounds for our understanding, or rules to which I can appeal, or a theory, whether out of hope or out of fear, then even the remarks from the *Investigations* just quoted will answer to my imagined interest when read a certain way, *viz.*, out of that hope or fear.

But then where does Wittgenstein place his hope that he will be understood? The potential for despair is illustrated in a remark of his that links his deep involvement with music to his well-documented fear or conviction that his teaching would fall on deaf ears and before blind eyes. At the time he was at work on the remarks on aspect-seeing, Wittgenstein told his friend Maurice Drury, "It is impossible for me to say in my book one word about all that music has meant in my life. How then can I hope to be understood?"²⁵ Of course it is possible to make too much of this remark, but one shouldn't be so impressed by that fact that one overlooks the danger of making too little of it. For its tone of despair, to mention its most obvious feature, asks us to take it seriously, however in the end that is to be done.²⁶ Elsewhere I have noted various paths to follow from Wittgenstein's remark

²⁵ M. O'C. Drury, "Conversations with Wittgenstein," in Rhees, ed., *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, 160.

²⁶ It is true that Wittgenstein's remark, as remembered by Drury, could be read as saying that his life with music is important (only) to understanding *him*. But if that is

about the role of the meaning of music to an understanding of the *Investigations*.²⁷ Here I conclude with just *one* important trail: Toward the end of Part I of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein has this: “We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another)” (*PI* §531).

Can we ask how we are asked to understand this, or any other, sentence in the *Investigations*—whether in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same, or whether in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other? And what does it mean, after all, to read a sentence in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other? It means, I take it, to read it with an interest in one’s experience (of it). Can one conceive this as one’s commission in taking up a philosophical text? How can a text ask for that, give the reader the right tip, if finding oneself encouraged to an interest in one’s experience presupposes an interest in one’s experience, a readiness to be struck by what passes before one’s eyes, meaning, here, the words on the page? “It is not impossible that it should fall to the lot of this work, in its poverty and in the darkness of this time, to bring light into one brain or another—but, of course, it is not likely” (*PI* Preface). What is the darkness of this time, if we are not instructed by this remark to reflect on the time of our reading it?²⁸

what one takes it to say, then one must account for the fact (an implication of this particular voicing of despair) that Wittgenstein would care to place the singular hope of his being understood on what is, by most accounts, a work of philosophy.

²⁷ Day, “The Aesthetic Dimension of Wittgenstein’s Later Writings,” unpublished manuscript.

²⁸ I thank Steven Affeldt, Avner Baz, and Victor Krebs for conversations and comments touching on aspects of the present chapter.