
Wittgenstein on Aspect Blindness and Meaning Blindness

Author(s): Ohad Nachtomy and Andreas Blank

Source: *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* / עיון: רבעון פילוסופי, January 2015, כרך 64 (January 2015), pp. 57-76

Published by: S. H. Bergman Center for Philosophical Studies

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24307947>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

S. H. Bergman Center for Philosophical Studies is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Iyyun: The Jerusalem Philosophical Quarterly* / עיון: רבעון פילוסופי

Ohad Nachtomy and Andreas Blank

Wittgenstein on Aspect Blindness and Meaning Blindness

“Who follows a rule has formed a new concept. For a new rule is a new way of seeing things”

Wittgenstein, MS 124:134–135

“It is—in contrast to Koehler—just meaning that I see.”

Wittgenstein, RPP 1:869; MS 134:56; 59–60

Wittgenstein’s remarks on meaning blindness in his writings on the philosophy of psychology from the late 1940s are one of the most intriguing themes in his philosophy. It is no wonder that they have bewildered his commentators for a long time.¹ Did Wittgenstein conceive of meaning blindness as a genuinely possible psychological state, comparable to other mental impairments? Or did he use meaning blindness as a thought experiment—a logically possible scenario—designed to clarify some of our intuitions concerning the concept of meaning and the role experience plays in it or the lack thereof? Are these remarks mere curious marginalia or do they form an essential part of his view of meaning? It is not easy to decide these questions. The question we propose to take up here, however, is a more modest one: How did Wittgenstein conceive of the relation between aspect blindness and meaning blindness? There are a number of places where Wittgenstein says or at least implies that an aspect blind person would be meaning blind.

The connection between meaning blindness and aspect blindness is particularly visible in Wittgenstein’s writings on the philosophy of psychology. However, the full ramifications of this connection become more apparent when they are considered against Wittgenstein’s discussion

¹ Among the many contributions concerning Wittgenstein’s treatment of aspect blindness are Baz 2000, 2010; Day 2010; Eldridge 2010; Floyd 2010; Minar 2010; Mulhall 1990, 2001; O’Shaughnessy 2012; Schulte 1993; Wenzel 2010; Zemach 1995.

of aspect seeing and understanding meaning in his notes from the 1930s and early 1940s.² In what follows, we shall attempt to recover some background remarks that help understanding Wittgenstein's later remarks. With respect to the connection between aspect seeing and forming concepts, we will also draw on material from the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*; and with respect to the connection between aspect seeing and following rules, we will consider some little-known passages from Wittgenstein's manuscripts from the 1940s.

Discussion of Wittgenstein's views on meaning blindness and aspect blindness is quite extensive in recent literature. The interpretation we present here develops Mulhall's (1990, 2001) reading regarding the scope of aspect perception, although we make important qualifications to his reading; our own work on the relation between aspect seeing and concept formation (Nachtomy 1997) and our previous suggestion that rule following presupposes a capacity to see aspects (so that an aspect blind person would be unable to follow rules); as well as Bar-Elli's (2006) reading of the connection between aspect perception and meaning blindness. We shall advance the following thesis: If aspect seeing is required for following rules and hence for using language, we have a straightforward explanation of why Wittgenstein believes that aspect blindness would imply meaning blindness. We argue for this thesis in three steps.

(1) We first argue that the scope of aspect seeing is far broader than usually thought and that much of our normal language-related seeing (though certainly *not* all language-related seeing and certainly not all seeing) involves aspect seeing, so that an aspect blind person would lack something essential for seeing and perceiving the meaning of words and signs, and hence is aptly called meaning blind.

(2) In the second step we argue that aspect seeing plays an important role in language acquisition and concept formation (though here we mainly refer to previous work, see Nachtomy 1997).

(3) In the third step we argue that aspect seeing plays an essential role in rule following—a practice which is clearly fundamental to Wittgenstein's view of language use (and hence to his view of meaning as the use of language).

² On aspect seeing in Wittgenstein's writings from the early 1930s, see Blank 2007, 2008, 2011.

We freely admit that on all these points Wittgenstein's texts are far from decisive. On the other hand, that Wittgenstein calls an aspect blind person a meaning blind is beyond any doubt. This identification begs for an explanation. Our three claims in this paper—regarding the scope of aspect seeing, that aspect seeing is required for language acquisition and for rule following—are admittedly not conclusive but they provide such an explanation.

The paper's additional contribution consists in showing that our reading is supported by some passages from Wittgenstein's unpublished manuscripts. Some of these texts are virtually absent from recent literature on this topic (as well as from Nachomy 1997). Considering these texts, which are admittedly difficult, would contribute to a fuller understanding of the intrinsic (and non-trivial) connection Wittgenstein saw between aspect blindness and meaning blindness.

1. *The Scope of Aspect Blindness*

In close vicinity to his remarks on meaning blindness, there are extensive discussions of aspect blindness related to sophisticated aesthetic capacities (such as being able to appreciate certain features of Romantic piano music). These remarks suggest that meaning blindness—whether a genuine psychological possibility or a thought experiment—would be restricted to similarly sophisticated capacities. But, if so, why does Wittgenstein choose a term—meaning blindness—that seems to relate to a broader scope of phenomena?

In discussing meaning blindness Wittgenstein raises the following question: “how can the absence of an experience in hearing a word be an obstacle to, or influence, *calculating* with words?” (RPP 1:171). In some remarks, he considers the possibility that such an experience plays no role in our ability to play language games. Consider a proposition containing the ambiguous word “bank”—an example to which Wittgenstein returns again and again. Intuitively, one might think that one experiences something different when “bank” means something like a bench than when “bank” refers to a fiscal institution or when it is part of the phrase “river-bank.” But Wittgenstein asks: “Don't all *experiences* of understanding here get pasted over by the usage, the practice of the language game?” (RPP 1:184). If so, Wittgenstein cautions, it would be “entirely misleading to speak of

‘Gestalt blindness’ or ‘meaning blindness’” because we call someone blind who lacks a sensation (*Empfindung*) (RPP 1:189). If what one experiences in hearing a word plays no role in a language game, no experience relevant for understanding meaning can be missing.

Yet, it is not so clear whether Wittgenstein regarded the issue as settled. His long series of remarks on meaning blindness suggests that he considers the possibility that some form of experience may figure among semantic concepts: “The importance of the concept of ‘aspect blindness’ lies in the kinship between seeing an aspect and experiencing the meaning of a word. For we want to ask: ‘What is someone lacking who cannot *experience* the word?’” (LWPP 784; PI 2: xi). The exact role he assigns to experience in understanding meaning, and the scope of meaning blindness, remains, however, rather vague. In fact, it seems that this is precisely what the notion of aspect blindness is supposed to do, that is, examine whether “experiencing the meaning of a word” plays any significant role in our linguistic practices.

In response to this challenge, Joachim Schulte has proposed to restrict Wittgenstein’s notion of meaning blindness to a very narrow range of cases. According to Schulte, meaning blindness applies to sophisticated aesthetic sensitivities alone (1993, 65–74). According to his interpretation, the remark that aspect blindness is akin to the lack of having a ‘musical ear’ (PI 2:1059) is most significant for Wittgenstein’s view. Schulte’s interpretation is well grounded in a number of texts. It is supported, for example, by this passage:

Could one say that meaning blindness would express itself in that one could not say successfully to such a person: “You must hear the word as ..., then you will pronounce the sentence correctly.” This is a directive that one gives when playing a piece of music. “Play this as if it were the answer” ... (RPP 1:247; see LWPP 1:688)

Similarly, Wittgenstein mentions the directive “As if from far away” from Schumann’s *Davidsbündlertänze* as an example of the kind of directive that a meaning blind person would not be able to understand (RPP 1:250). Schulte reads Wittgenstein’s remarks about the lack of certain aesthetic capacities as implying that his discussion of meaning blindness is primarily intended to bring out the absence of such highly specialized abilities.

Eddy Zemach, on the other hand, suggests that the scope of meaning blindness goes beyond the absence of aesthetic capacities and pertains to the inability to experience certain qualia associated with hearing words (1995, 490–491). His interpretation is supported by passages such as this one:

It is, as if the word that I understand had a particular slight aroma, which corresponds to the understanding. As if two words that are well known to me differed not only with respect to their sound or look but also, even if I don't *imagine* anything particular in connection with them, with respect to an atmosphere.—But recall how the names of famous poets and composers seem to have sucked in a peculiar meaning. Such that one can say: the names “Beethoven” and “Mozart” do not only sound differently but they are accompanied by a different *character*. (RPP 1:243; see LWPP 1:726)

Wittgenstein describes a similar phenomenon when he points out that different human beings have more or less strong feelings towards the change of the orthography of a word: “Their feeling is not only piety for the old usage. Someone for whom orthography is only a practical matter is lacking a feeling similar to the feeling the meaning blind would lack” (RPP 2:572). Think in this connection of how you would react to a misspelling of your name. Most of us would not be indifferent even if this does not result in any misunderstanding concerning the reference or even the pronunciations of the name. According to Wittgenstein's remark here, one who is indifferent to such a change in the orthography would be akin to a meaning blind. In a similar vein, Wittgenstein says that a person unable to *experience* the ambiguity of the words involved in a pun would be meaning blind (LWPP 1:711, italics added). This suggests that what a meaning blind would lack is not peculiar and marginal but rather something quite central. One can think here of the difference between the way humans identify letters and characters and the way sophisticated reading programs identify them.

While Zemach's and Schulte's interpretations surely capture an important aspect of what Wittgenstein had in mind, Bar-Elli suggests that Wittgenstein's notion of meaning blindness goes beyond the inability to understand certain nuances in works of art and beyond the inability to experience certain qualia or sensations associated with words. According to his reading, meaning blindness has to do with a conceptual connection that Wittgenstein establishes between aspect perception and experiencing meaning. For example, consider Wittgenstein's remarks about the English words “this,” “that,” “these,” “those,” “will,” and “shall”: “It would be difficult to give rules for the use of these words ... Their use is felt [*empfunden*], as it were, as a physiognomy” (RPP 1:654). This suggests that these words (words we would not consider as clear example of ambiguous words) too are experienced in a particular way that relates to our very capacity (or incapacity) to master their usage. Bar-Elli has emphasized that the experience Wittgenstein has in mind here

is an “objective” feature of the usage of words: some experiences not only accompany the usage of words but also play a constitutive role for the usage of words (2006, 224–230). A manuscript from 1947 supports this reading where Wittgenstein suggests that experiencing meaning and seeing aspects are similar: “The case of the ‘experienced meaning’ is akin with seeing a figure as this or that. We must describe this conceptual kinship; we don’t say that in both cases we have to do with the same” (MS 135:85).

Wittgenstein holds here that experiencing meaning and seeing aspects are not identical. Perhaps what he is suggesting is that experiencing meaning and seeing aspects are related, such that the ability of seeing aspects is a necessary condition for using signs and more generally for learning a language as a system of signs: “Anyone who cannot understand and learn to use the words ‘to *see* the sign as an arrow’ —that’s whom I call ‘meaning blind’. It will make no sense to tell him ‘you must try to *see* it as an arrow’ and one won’t be able to help him in *that* way” (RPP 1:344). This is a passage that we would like to stress for our own reading. A meaning blind *cannot* “learn to use the words ‘to *see* the sign as an arrow’ ” (ibid.). This passage suggests that meaning blindness would not be restricted to refined aesthetic capacities or to the capacity of experiencing qualia; rather, meaning blindness would limit our ways of using signs in a far more fundamental way. If a meaning blind is unable to see a sign as an arrow, she would also be unable to use the sign in the way we usually do, e.g., look at the sign of an arrow, see in which direction it points, or to use it to direct someone which way to go. This example illustrates the significance of the inability of seeing a certain drawing as a sign (as an arrow in this case), and how the inability to see aspects would prevent making drawings or signs become meaningful. If this is right, then it looks like the scope of meaning blindness is broader than that of refined aesthetic judgments.

In the next sections, we attempt to show that contextualizing Wittgenstein’s remarks from the late 1940s with the help of material from his notebooks from the 1930s and early 1940s helps clarifying the relation between aspect perception and meaning. Looking into this material suggests that, according to Wittgenstein’s views in the 1930s and early and mid-1940s, aspect seeing plays an important role in Wittgenstein’s views of forming concepts and in following rules—two features that are clearly central to Wittgenstein’s view of understanding and meaning. First, we turn to show the role of aspect perception in Wittgenstein’s discussion of concept formation.

2. *The Acute and the Chronic Phases of Aspect Seeing*

Wittgenstein writes, “I must distinguish between ‘continuous seeing’ of an aspect and the ‘dawning’ of an aspect” (PI 2:194). In his *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, he puts this point as follows: “Seeing, hearing *this* as a variant of *that*. Here there is a moment at which I *think* of B at the sight of A, where the seeing is, so to speak, acute and then again the time in which it is chronic” (RPP 1:508). When we are struck by a new aspect or when we notice an aspect change, our seeing of an aspect is clearly in an acute phase. When a new aspect is dawning, we make a new comparison with an object or concept that we did not notice earlier, e.g., that a (rabbit) drawing could be also seen as a duck. Aspect seeing becomes continuous when we are seeing the same aspect time and again, so that the seeing it becomes a matter of course, chronic, so to speak. At this phase, we are not usually aware that we are seeing an aspect. We are not normally seeing a picture of a person as a picture/person but as a person. Wittgenstein’s distinction between the acute and the chronic phases of aspect seeing—a distinction that sheds some light on the scope of aspect seeing as well—is often overlooked. Here we point out the role it plays in concept formation and language acquisition.

Wittgenstein’s discussion in *Philosophical Investigations*, part II, xi, begins by distinguishing “two uses of the word ‘see’”:

The one: “What do you see there?”—“I see *this*” (and then a description, a drawing, a copy). The other: “I see the likeness between these two faces”...


I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another. I *see* that it has not changed; and yet I see it differently. I call this experience “noticing an aspect.” (PI 193)

When “I contemplate a face, and then suddenly notice its likeness to another” I make a comparison and a similarity judgment. Making comparisons and noticing similarities is closely related to the distinction between the chronic and the acute phase of aspect perception. As Wittgenstein says, “In the temporal sense the aspect is only the kind of way in which we again and again see the picture” (RPP 1:864; see RPP 1:1022). We often see a character or a sign (or hear a word or a musical theme) in a chronic phase, that is, under a certain aspect, in accordance with certain usage, related to other characters or objects.

But ordinarily we are also *unaware* of this assimilated relation between a

character (or a sign) and the aspect under which we see it.³ Thus it seems that Wittgenstein's examples of aspect dawning (e.g., as when the duck-rabbit drawing *strikes* us *as* a rabbit rather than as a duck) are meant to draw our attention, by way of contrast, to the way we ordinarily see drawings or signs under-an-aspect continuously. Wittgenstein is drawing our attention to an aspect dawning in the acute phase by using examples of aspect-*change*. In this way, he seeks to make us realize the extent to which, in ordinary and routine seeing, such as in reading, much of what we simply call 'seeing' may involve aspect seeing—aspect seeing of which we are unaware. Wittgenstein states this explicitly: "We become conscious of the aspect only when it changes" (RPP 1:1034). He is also pointing out that other aspects we have not noticed may be related to the drawing (or the musical theme) as well, so that the same drawing can be seen in various, though conceptually articulated, ways.

Let us draw attention to another feature of aspect seeing related to acute aspect seeing, namely, that it is voluntary. Wittgenstein writes: "*Seeing* an aspect is a voluntary act. We can tell someone: Now look at it like *this*. Try again to see the similarity. Listen to the theme *this way*" (LWPP 1:451). The point is that we *can* attempt to change the way in which one sees the duck-rabbit, or hears a certain musical theme at will. The role played by the will in changing a perceived aspect is linked to the role played by the context for seeing a figure or hearing a theme according to a certain aspect. One of the ways in which aspect seeing differs from mere perception depends on the crucial role the context plays in aspect seeing. For example, in the *Lectures on Philosophical Psychology* Wittgenstein remarks:

 Anybody would call this three things; not 17, say. I can say, "Look at it as cogs pointing up or as cogs pointing down." There could be no command "See his shirt as blue." My commands give you a context for the drawing. (WLPP 111).

The context and the changing of aspects at will are clearly connected here: a command provides a context for seeing the drawing as cogs pointing up or pointing down. But not any command can make one see an aspect because not any command provides a suitable context. Nor any thing could be subject to alternative ways of seeing, as the shirt example illustrates. In other words,

³ Such a reading originates with Mulhall 1990, 30; 136. The same point is made in Mulhall 2001, 162–163. For a discussion of the importance of the experience of aspect-change for the ability of seeing aspects, see also Bar-Elli 2006, 234–237.

there are significant constraints on the aspects one could see. We would not see the above drawing as 17 things. As Wittgenstein notes, “you only ‘see the duck rabbit aspects’ if you are already conversant with the shapes of these two animals” (PI 2:207). Background knowledge of the way concepts are related is clearly required in order to be able to see certain aspects. In this sense, aspect perception seems to presuppose that such an aspect corresponds to some conception we have (RPP 1:518).

The subtle interplay between acute and chronic phases of aspect seeing strongly supports the view that Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspect seeing is not merely about special cases of dual-aspect pictures; rather, it suggests that Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspect seeing purports to show that our ordinary notion of seeing and perceiving pictures and signs is connected with learning to see certain aspects and assimilating them into our ordinary ways of seeing. At the same time, one must be cautious not to overgeneralize here and claim that any seeing involves aspect seeing (as the example above clearly rules out). It is perhaps for such reasons that Wittgenstein thinks that seeing is far more complex than we usually take it to be. In Wittgenstein’s words, “We find certain things about seeing puzzling because we do not find the whole business of seeing puzzling enough” (PI 2:212). Or again: “The concept of ‘seeing’ makes a tangled impression. Well, it is tangled” (PI 2:200).

But how is it tangled? Aspect change in examples like the duck-rabbit would seem puzzling partly because we do not realize that much of what we call ‘seeing’ involves continuous aspect seeing. But let us not lose sight of the fact that aspect seeing involves seeing. The aspect may change while what we see (call it the image on the retina, if you like) remains the same. Likewise, we fail to realize that continuous aspect seeing presupposes a phase of acute aspect seeing or, to put it in other terms, that we learn to see signs, pictures, and words under certain aspects.⁴ If we understand that much of our normal seeing (in activities such as reading, for example) involves continuous aspect seeing, we will not find aspect changes so puzzling. But it is through considering aspect change that we can come to appreciate the scope of ordinary and routine practice of continuous aspect seeing.

Since an aspect blind person cannot experience the dawning of an aspect (or, more generally, the acute moment of aspect seeing), the words ‘to see

⁴ This point has also been emphasized by Eldridge 2010, 172; see also, Day 2010, 206.

the sign as an arrow' could make no sense to such a person. For the same reason, commending an aspect blind person to see a sign *as* an arrow would be pointless. An aspect blind person lacks the *ability* to learn to see the drawing *as* an arrow. As the phrase 'aspect blind' suggests, such a person lacks the capacity to see aspects and hence cannot change the way he sees a sign and see it as something else (e.g., → as pointing). A complete inability to see aspects in the acute stage would also be destructive to our normal linguistic practices and especially the practices of language acquisition. In *Wittgenstein's Lectures on Philosophical Psychology 1946–1947*, he states that the meaning blind is "lacking the experience of transition of aspect" (WLPP 108).

This seems to be in tension with remarks that play down the role of experience, such as the following comments from a manuscript from 1933:

[T]he system of language does not belong to the category of an experience. The typical experience in using a system is not the system. (MS 115:11)

When we shrug, the mental experiences—what one could call the experiences of meaning—are not essentially different from those when uttering a word or a sentence: "maybe—," "I don't know," "God knows," etc. (MS 115:39)

If an aspect blind person lacks only the experience of aspect change, perhaps she does not lack so much. In this regard, aspect blindness might indeed apply to fine aesthetic cases. But if an aspect blind person lacks the ability to perceive and note aspect change, regardless of what goes on in her mind at the time, then it seems that she would lack something much more fundamental, namely, a necessary condition for understanding and using a language.

This is suggested in a curious analogy Wittgenstein draws between the coming of meaning into one's mind and a dream: "If I compare the coming of meaning into one's mind to a dream, then our talk is ordinarily dreamless. The meaning-blind man would then be one who would always talk dreamlessly" (RPP 1:232). This analogy is certainly not transparent. But, on our reading of this passage, the coming of meaning corresponds to our learning to see certain aspects associated with signs, that is, to our forming our ordinary ways of seeing, as in learning to *see* this ▲ *as* pointing, and as pointing upwards, rather than sideways. The "coming of meaning," however, pertains primarily to the acute moments of aspect seeing, exemplified by the dawning of an aspect. If such aspects "harden" into rules that guide our linguistic practices, we continuously see and make similarity judgments *according to*

these aspects. Moreover, we learn to do so as a matter of course. In virtue of such acquired aspect seeing we routinely identify the same figures in pictures, the same orders in signs, the same letters in different fonts, and so on.

If a person is aspect blind so that she cannot see different aspects, she would be unable to see a sign in a different way and it is questionable whether she would be able to see a sign as meaning something at all. It makes sense, therefore to call such a person meaning blind. As Wittgenstein says, "It will make no sense to tell him 'you must try to *see* it as an arrow' and one won't be able to help him in *that way*" (RPP 1:344). If it makes no sense to tell a person to try and see different aspects of a drawing, it seems to follow that such a person lacks the very ability required to see something as something else. This severe case of aspect blindness would imply that seeing something under an aspect by relating it to a different context does not apply to such a person. In other words, if an aspect blind person cannot experience the acute stage of aspect change, and thus cannot learn to see something under a certain aspect, it would make no sense to attribute continuous *aspect seeing* to him either. In fact, in such a severe case of aspect blindness, it would not make sense to say that one sees under a certain aspect at all. Furthermore, the implication seems to be that, if he cannot learn to see in different ways, i.e., cannot change his way of seeing, "meaning never comes into his mind." This reading provides a straightforward answer to the question why Wittgenstein calls such a person both aspect blind and meaning blind.

Peter Geach's notes from Wittgenstein's lectures in 1946-47 indicate that Wittgenstein connects the acute phase of aspect seeing with forming new conceptual connections. Geach reports the following remark about the ambiguous duck-rabbit figure:

This is obviously a matter of meaning, it isn't that a real duck looks like X and a real rabbit like Y and this changes from X to Y and back. Nor even that an unambiguous picture of a duck looks like X, and an unambiguous picture of a rabbit like Y, and this changes between X and Y. (WLPP 104)

Seeing the connection between the duck-rabbit drawing and, say, rabbits relies on making a similarity judgment concerning the conventional way we describe and represent rabbits. Seeing such an aspect indicates that the connection between the drawing and what it represents (rabbits) has become part of our linguistic practice. This is why Wittgenstein compares aspect

seeing with understanding the meaning of a linguistic sign. The aspects we see in the drawing are ways in which we represent ducks and rabbits. Such aspects are not a matter of mere visual similarity but involve conventions of representation, which play a role in both ambiguous and unambiguous drawings.

Another example Wittgenstein gives for showing that aspect seeing cannot come about without a “conceptual explanation” (*begriffliche Erklärung*) is the figure of a cross which can be seen as a cross lying on the ground, a cross standing upright, or as a diagonal cross leaning to one side (RPP 2:381). Wittgenstein emphasizes the role of concepts in aspect seeing in other remarks as well. He writes: “Sometimes the conceptual is dominant in an aspect. That is to say: Sometimes the experience of an aspect can be expressed only through a conceptual explanation. And this explanation can take many different forms” (LWPP 1:582). He also maintains that, in cases when the conceptual element is dominant, aspect seeing is related to “a question of the fixing of concepts [*eine Frage der Begriffsbestimmung*]” (LWPP 1:579; 2:16). On another occasion, Wittgenstein states flatly: “there is no aspect which is not (also) a conception” (RPP 1:518).

Let us illustrate this claim. When we see an aspect, we are seeing something *as* something else: e.g., this drawing as a triangle, or as a wedge, or as pointing to the right. In this example, one aspect corresponds to the concept of a triangle; one to that of a wedge; one to the concept of pointing (see also RPP 1:27 and 524). These passages make it evident that, for Wittgenstein, aspect perception has a conceptual element as well as a perceptual one. With the examples of aspect change Wittgenstein shows that there is more than one way of seeing a figure and that we can *learn* to see a figure in a certain way among others—a way which is associated with the aspect under which we normally see it in a given context. If so, much of our ways of seeing and hearing signs, drawings, and other linguistic characters and sounds, could be acquired through the normal practices of language acquisition.

3. *Seeing Aspects and Following Rules*

We emphasized above the importance of the acute phase of aspect perception in relation to language acquisition: without being able to learn to see under an aspect (in the acute phase) we would not be able to see similarities (in the chronic phase) as we routinely do in common linguistic practices such as

reading, counting, and calculating. We now turn to develop and substantiate our suggestion by making the connection between aspect seeing and rule following more explicit. We suggest that following a sign, say, an arrow expressed thus: ‘→’ requires that we shall be able to see each mark as falling under the same aspect. In turn, seeing such sameness presupposes that our ways of seeing have been formed so that we habitually see ‘→’ as pointing to the right. This proposal implies that, in order for one to grasp such a rule, and to make the requisite similarity judgment on each case, one has to form a criterion for identifying the mark as an arrow (i.e., as pointing).

According to Wittgenstein, such criteria acquire a use of rules for making subsequent similarity judgments. In using such a rule we come to ordinarily *see* under *that* aspect. In this way, we move into the chronic phase of aspect seeing and routinely *see* according to a certain aspect. For example, before one learns to add, the addition sign in ‘2 + 2’ might seem like two lines crossed; but once one acquires the technique of adding numbers, one’s way of seeing has been trained so that, once one sees “2 + 2” (in certain circumstances, of course), one immediately sees the “+” *as* an addition sign. We could say that the adding technique has been assimilated into our ways of seeing and reacting; it has become part of our “second nature” in the sense that it comes to characterize the way we routinely see the sign and act accordingly. When a certain way of seeing becomes a habit and part of our second nature, we no longer need to interpret the sign or deliberate what we are to do—we simply go on “blindly.” This describes the normal situation in which our eyes are shut in face of doubt. While a doubt is possible, normally it does not occur to us because we are habituated into a certain way of seeing. This is behind Wittgenstein’s famous paradox of rule following. While various applications are logically compatible with a rule (even such as a plus function) the practice of actually following rules is fixed in certain ways. Our point here is that the fixing of certain (rather than other) ways of following rules can be described in terms of aspect seeing and the shift from the acute to the chronic phase.

Wittgenstein discusses the connection between aspect seeing and following rules throughout his notes from the 1930s and 1940s. In his notebooks from the early 1930s, for instance, we find the following passage:

I make for myself a plan in order to walk according to it ... It does not suffice in order to understand the plan that I see the drawing and see where I stand and the (possible) similarity between the landscape and the plan. I also must know what it means to

follow a plan. Perhaps I have learnt this through actually having followed plans in the past. But of this I cannot use the fact but only something that I see in it.⁵ As I take for myself a rule out of⁶ the incipient series $1+1/1!+1/3!+1/5!+\dots$ (WA 3.43.6)⁷

When we are presented with some samples of a mathematical series, we might “see” the rule of the series or we may need to work it out. To put it differently, deciphering the rule from a limited number of samples involves our seeing the examples as a pattern generated by a certain rule. This point is evident in the following passage as well:

What does recognizing a law [*Gesetz*] consist in? Obviously, this process actually exists. I show to someone the series $2x, 4x^2, 6x^4, 8x^8$, and he says, “yes, now I know how to continue, I see the law.” (Perhaps he had conjectured another law after the first two members and was surprised when I wrote down the third member, then he saw a new law.) (WA 3.129.4)

What is remarkable about this passage is that, when we are presented with additional members of the same series, our way of seeing how to continue the series can change, such that we begin to “see” the examples as compatible with a different rule (see PI 144). In this way, following a rule can be closely related to our way of seeing. In fact, in the early 1930s, Wittgenstein seems to regard the capacity to see something as a rule as the hallmark of arithmetic: “because a rule is only what I see as a rule [*was ich als Regel sehe*], in arithmetic nothing can arise that I would be unable to understand” (WA 2.70.9). In his notebooks from the early 1930s, following rules is not only characterized as central for understanding arithmetic but also for understanding a language. For example, Wittgenstein remarks about a projected book on which he was working between 1930 and 1932: “I believe, it was the main thought (or at least *one* thought) of my book that one also has to be *guided* by the word ‘red’ ” (WA 3.129.8). This is why he states: “I regard ‘meaning something’ and ‘following a rule’ as synonymous” (WA 3.169.2). Here, the connection between following rules and meaning something is made explicit. If our practice of following rules is related to the formation of our ways of seeing through aspect perception, then our linguistic practices (as meaningful ones) are also related to the shaping of our ways of seeing through aspect perception.

⁵ “In it” is underlined by Wittgenstein with a wavy line perhaps to indicate that he was not sure about the wording.

⁶ First variant: “read a rule out of.”

⁷ Translations from WA and the Bergen edition of Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass* are our own.

An examination of manuscripts shows that there is an important and little explored strand of thought in Wittgenstein's later philosophy that connects following rules with ways of seeing. In a notebook from 1941, Wittgenstein discusses the way in which we derive a rule from going through a particular proof. Wittgenstein gives the following example: Imagine that you want to find out the result of 8×9 . One possible proof procedure consists in drawing eight rows of nine dots each and then counting the number of dots by pushing a chess figure along the rows of dots. Such a procedure, as Wittgenstein puts it, shows "one way" in which 8×9 can have the result 72 (MS 164:8). As he notes, at first "the examination has been experimental. Now it is being conceived as a rule. And the proof is the *picture* of an examination" (MS 164:4; cf. RFM 51). A certain way of seeing is fixed in a picture and becomes crucial for justifying a rule: "when this picture justifies the prediction—i.e., when you only have to see it and are convinced that a process will take place in this and that way—naturally the picture also justifies the rule" (MS 164:5). Seeing the proof in this way also leads to seeing other events in a particular way:

[F]rom the picture I only derive a rule ... Of course, the picture does not show that this and that happens. It only shows that what happens can be conceived [*aufgefasst*] in this way ... [T]he picture does not show me that something happens but that whatever happens can be seen [*angesehen*] in this way. (MS 164:10–11)

Thus, if a proof serves to form a rule, we see other events according to this rule—more precisely, we conceive them as being in accordance with this rule or, as it may happen, as not in accordance with that rule. In these remarks, proofs are ways in which our ways of seeing are fixed and thus serve for forming conceptual connections. As he notes, this "must" shows that someone "has adopted a concept" (MS 164:19); and this is how Wittgenstein characterizes such a situation: "This 'must' means a circle. I decide to look at [*ansehen*] things in this way" (MS 164:18).

Later in the same manuscript, something similar characterizes seeing a law (*Gesetz*) in a segment of a mathematical series:

When I write down a segment of a series for you and you then see [*siehst*] this lawfulness [*Gesetzmäßigkeit*] in it, one can call this a fact of experience, a psychological fact. But, when you have seen [*erblickt*] this law in it, it is no longer a fact of experience that you continue the series in this way.

But why isn't it a fact of experience: for, isn't "to see [*erblicken*] this in it" the same as: to continue it in this way?

Only in this sense can one say that it is not a fact of experience that at this stage one declares the step to be the one that corresponds to the expression of the rule.

Thus you say: “According to the rule that I see in this series, this is the way to continue.” Not according to experience! Rather: this just is the sense of this rule. (MS 164:76–77)

What is crucial for Wittgenstein is the difference between seeing a series when this way of seeing is understood as an empirical, psychological fact, and seeing a series when this way of seeing is understood as what defines continuing the series, that is, as a prescription for action. This is why a certain way of seeing becomes constitutive of the sense we associate with the rule: “You give an extension to the rule” (MS 164:77).

In a 1944 manuscript, Wittgenstein takes up these ideas again. Here, too, he draws a close connection between the notions of following rules, forming concepts, and ways of seeing: “Who follows a rule has formed a new concept. For a new rule is a new way of seeing things” (MS 124:134–135). Wittgenstein describes seeing a segment of the series as follows: “I see [*erblicke*] something in it—similar to the figure in the puzzle picture. And when I see it, I say: ‘this is all I need’ ” (MS 124:186). Wittgenstein uses this passage again in the *Zettel* (Z 277), where he places it immediately after the enigmatic passage that appears in PI 229: “I believe that I perceive something drawn very fine in a segment of a series, a characteristic design, which only needs the addition of ‘and so on’ in order to reach to infinity.” Read against the background of the material from the 1941 and 1944 manuscripts, this remark may well be understood as referring to aspect perception.

In the 1941 manuscript, Wittgenstein connects seeing sameness and following a rule: “Acting according to a rule presupposes recognizing some uniformity” (MS 164:135). In the 1944 manuscript, he works out this idea: “Doing the same” is connected with “following a rule” ...

One does not feel that one always has to be attentive to a hint given by a rule. On the contrary. We are not curious about what the rule will tell us now; rather, it always tells us the same and we do what it tells us.

One could say: we look at [*ansehen*] what we are doing in following a rule under the perspective [*Gesichtspunkt*] of *what is always the same*. (MS 124:159–160; Wittgenstein’s emphasis)

One is reminded here of Wittgenstein’s remark in the *Philosophical Investigations* (PI 225), where he notes that the usage of the word “rule” and that of the word “same” are interwoven. In fact, the same remark is already found in the 1944 manuscript (MS 124:162). The 1944 manuscript goes beyond the

Philosophical Investigations in placing the remark in the context of discussing the capacities required for following rules. According to Wittgenstein, the same capacity is involved in our practices of forming concepts and following rules: a capacity of seeing similarity or sameness in different things. Because aspect seeing involves not only different ways in which parts of an object are organized but also seeing different relations of similarity or sameness, aspect seeing plays a fundamental role in following rules. In the 1941 manuscript Wittgenstein states: “following a rule is at the ground of our language game” and “characterizes what we call a description” (MS 164:81).

If aspect seeing is required for following rules and hence for using language, we have a straightforward explanation why Wittgenstein believes that aspect blindness would imply meaning blindness. An inability to see aspects would deeply affect the ability to learn and understand a language because without it one would be unable to form and follow rules. For this reason, a person who lacks the capacity to see aspects would be meaning blind. This might well be the reason that, in Wittgenstein’s notes from the late 1940s, the notions of aspect blindness and meaning blindness are so closely connected. Indeed, Wittgenstein uses these terms—aspect blindness and meaning blindness—interchangeably.

4. Conclusion

As we have seen, in Wittgenstein’s late thought aspect blindness (or *Gestalt* blindness) and meaning blindness are closely related, so that aspect blindness would imply a rather severe case of meaning blindness. Whether aspect blindness corresponds to a genuine psychological condition or not is a question that goes beyond the scope of this paper. Still, it is worth pointing out that there is a host of new studies on related phenomena, such as the inability to recognize faces, which would be fascinating for philosophers to examine.⁸ It is all the more fascinating that such a phenomenon is related to the capacity of language acquisition and lack thereof. What matters for Wittgenstein, however, is not so much whether cases of aspect blindness actually occur but rather what the concept of such blindness can tell us about the connections between the concepts of aspect seeing and understanding the meaning of signs and language. In the picture we have drawn, the role aspect

⁸ See the extensive description of Face-Blindness (Prosopagnosia) in Sacks 2010, esp. 104–105.

perception plays in language acquisition (concept formation) and its practice (rule following) is rather important.

Wittgenstein's attitude towards the role experience plays in this picture remains, however, less clear. As the passages from MS 115 clearly show, from about 1933 Wittgenstein was extremely reluctant to characterize understanding and meaning in terms of any particular experiences that accompany the use of signs. But as RPP 1:184 and 189 show, Wittgenstein was also intrigued by the role experience plays in our linguistic practices and it is not unlikely that he was examining this role through the notion of aspect seeing and aspect blindness. This indicates that his continued interest in the concept of meaning blindness is, after all, meant to describe a sense in which a particular kind of experience—that akin to aspect perception—continues to play a role in our linguistic practices.

Are these simply two incompatible strands in Wittgenstein's later thought? Not necessarily. Recall the distinction emphasized by Bar-Elli between experiences that merely accompany the use of signs and experiences that are constitutive of the use of signs. The former kind of experiences is clearly excluded by Wittgenstein from the scope of his investigations. It belongs to what he regards as "psychological investigation"—the kind of investigation that he sets his own investigations apart from again and again (see, e.g., PI 2:193 and 230). By contrast, if the experiences of aspect perception relevant for concept formation and rule following are understood as constitutive of criteria of sameness, they can be understood as playing a role that differs from the causal and developmental perspective on experiences typical of psychology. As the passages from MS 164 show, experiences of this kind function in a different way: How the law in a given segment of series is seen is a kind of experience akin to aspect perception; but then the law that is seen is not treated as a fact of experience but rather determines what counts as continuing the series in the same way. Emphasizing this function of experience in following rules (and, thereby, in forming concepts) may be compatible with Wittgenstein's insistence that his method is not a psychological method. If so, our exploration of the connection between meaning blindness and aspect blindness may indicate a sense in which the concept of experience has a more significant presence in Wittgenstein's later philosophy than is often realized.

Ohad Nachtomy, Bar-Ilan University

Andreas Blank, University of Paderborn

References

Works by Wittgenstein

- PI *Philosophical Investigations*. 1953. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1976.
- RFM *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Ed. G. H. von Wright, R. Rhees, G. E. M. Anscombe. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 1967.
- RPP *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*. 2 vols. Oxford: Blackwell, 1980.
- LWPP *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*. 2 vols. Ed. G. H. von Wright. Trans. C. G. Luckhardt. Oxford: Blackwell, 1982.
- WLPP *Wittgenstein's Lectures on Philosophical Psychology: 1946-47*. Notes by P. T. Geach. Ed. P. T. Geach. New York: Harvester, 1988.
- WA *Wiener Ausgabe*. Ed. M. Nedo. Vienna: Springer, 1993–.
- MS *Wittgenstein's Nachlass. The Bergen Electronic Edition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. Cited according to MS number.

Other Works

- Bar-Elli, G. 2006. "Wittgenstein on the Experience of Meaning and the Meaning of Music," *Philosophical Investigations* 29:217–249.
- Baz, A. 2000. "What's the Point of Seeing Aspects?" *Philosophical Investigations* 23:97–122.
- Baz, A. 2010. "On Learning from Wittgenstein; or What Does it Take to See the Grammar of Seeing Aspects?" in Day & Krebs, eds., 2010, pp. 227–248.
- Blank, A. 2007. "Wittgenstein on Expectation, Action, and Internal Relations, 1930–1932," *Inquiry* 50:270–287.
- Blank, A. 2008. "Wittgenstein on Colours and Logical Multiplicities, 1930–1932," *Dialogue* 47: 311–329.
- Blank, A. 2011. "Wittgenstein on Verification and Seeing-As, 1930–1932," *Inquiry* 54:614–632.
- Day, W. 2010. "Wanting to Say Something: Aspect-Blindness and Language," in Day & Krebs, eds., 2010, pp. 204–224.
- Day, W. & V. J. Krebs, eds. 2010. *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eldridge, R. 2010. "Wittgenstein on Aspect-Seeing, the Nature of Discursive Consciousness, and the Experience of Agency," in Day & Krebs, eds., 2010, pp. 162–182.
- Floyd, F. 2010. "On Being Surprised: Wittgenstein on Aspect-Perception, Logic, and Mathematics," in Day & Krebs, eds., 2010, pp. 314–337.

- Minar, E. 2010. "The Philosophical Significance of Meaning-Blindness," in Day & Krebs, eds., 2010, pp. 183–203.
- Mulhall, S. 1990. *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Mulhall, S. 2001. *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- O'Shaugnessy, B. 2012. "Seeing an Aspect and Seeing Under an Aspect," in J. Ellis & D. Guevara, eds., *Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nachtomy, O. 1997. "Wittgenstein on Forming Concepts and Seeing Aspects," *Iyyun* 46:267–291.
- Sacks, O. 2010. *The Mind's Eye*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Schulte, J. 1993. *Experience and Expression: Wittgenstein's Philosophy of Psychology*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Wenzel, C. H. 2010. "On Wittgenstein's Notion of Meaning-Blindness: Its Subjective, Objective, and Aesthetic Aspects," *Philosophical Investigations* 33:201–219.
- Zemach, E. M. 1995. "Meaning in Wittgenstein's Late Philosophy," *The Monist* 78:480–495.