

Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* Lecture 15

1. Wittgenstein opens *PI* II, xi with a distinction between two ways in which one can be said to 'see' an object and an argument that they *are* distinct. The first kind of seeing is what happens when you see two faces; the second kind of seeing is what happens when you see a *likeness* between (as for example when you see a family resemblance). But why are they two *kinds* of seeing? Because a man may be able to copy them both perfectly well without seeing the likeness: so in one sense he sees them perfectly well. But there is still something about them that he hasn't seen—their likeness (*PI* p.193.2). So what happens when *you* see their likeness cannot be the sort of seeing that our man does perfectly—it must be another kind of seeing. And coming to see something in this second sense is what Wittgenstein calls the noticing, or the dawning, of an aspect (*PI* p. 193.3, p. 194.2).
2. The most prominent examples of the second kind of seeing are cases when we see something as something. Thus one might see the picture on p. 193 as a box; clearly one is then 'seeing' in the second sense because you might copy the drawing perfectly accurately even though this aspect of it eludes you. Wittgenstein makes a similar point about this experience as he had already made about sensations of bodily motion (*PI* 625-6): no available description of it is any more direct than the one I just gave i.e. it is not as though it has any intrinsic nature specifiable independently of three-dimensional physical objects (*PI* pp. 193-4). But I don't think he intends to make that point about *all* instances of aspect perception—see *PI* p. 207.6 (the 'primitive reaction') for an example going the other way.
3. The discussion of seeing-as focuses initially on cases where the aspect seems to change before our eyes, at first surprisingly and then often at will. The best-known example is what Wittgenstein calls the duck-rabbit. The confusing thing about this case is that the picture seems to *look* different when we see it as a duck or as a rabbit; but on the other hand we also want to say that we *see* that the picture is *unchanged*. Now clearly the thing on the page before me does *not* change—'so what changes is the organization of the visual impression'. Here we are thinking of an image that the object produces in you. 'What is produced in me is a sort of copy, something that in its turn can be looked at, can be before one; almost something like a *materialization*' (*PI* p. 199.7)
4. Wittgenstein raises two objections to this solution. The first is that even if there is a visual impression, *it* doesn't change in any way when the aspect changes. For if one drew one's visual impression both before and after the change of aspect one would draw the same thing twice (*PI* p. 196.2).
5. The second objection is the 'organization' argument at *PI* p. 196.6. In order to understand this argument you need to know that by a 'copy' Wittgenstein means a two-dimensional representation of what one

sees and by a 'model' he means a three-dimensional one. Now suppose that the visual image has 'organization' that you see in the same way as you see its shape and colour. If somebody is aware of only one aspect of the schematic cube and we ask him to show us what he sees he may draw a copy. If we then ask him to make a model of it he will do so: but he will think that this is a pointless further exercise. It follows that if the organization is part of the visual image then the organization is revealed in a copy as much as in a model. But now consider somebody who is aware of *two* aspects and presently sees only one, the same one as the first man. *He* will regard the specification of a model as essential to showing what he sees even when we already have a copy. So it looks as though the organization of the second man's visual image is *not* revealed in the copy after all. But we were supposing that they both had the same visual image; for after all they see the same aspect of the schematic cube. This is a contradiction and 'by itself wrecks the comparison of "organization" with colour and shape in visual impressions' (*PI* p. 196.7).

6. Wittgenstein now turns to the connection between what we see in the second sense and how we are inclined to *describe* or to *reproduce* what we see (*PI* 198.3). The second is a criterion for the first. Thus the fact that we naturally describe what we see by three-dimensional gestures is evidence that we see three dimensionally, not two-dimensionally. It is quite unnatural for us to give two-dimensional verbal or pictorial descriptions—hence 'the queerness of children's drawings' (*PI* p. 198.4). The same point applies to written script and to facial expressions. Thus we see a face as smiling and not just as having a certain shape: for it is harder to mimic it when it is upside down. And we see a cursive English sequence as a *word* not a shape. For its reverse is harder to copy than it is (*PI* p. 198.5-7).
7. I don't think that the first of these points would have disturbed Berkeley's contention that we do not see depth. For his claim concerned—or should have concerned—seeing in *another* sense: the sense in which what you see depends only on what happens on your retina. His best argument for saying that we do not see depth is that the retina is bidimensional and so cannot inform us of depth (see the start of his *New Theory of Vision*). But this involves a notion of 'seeing' that has little to do with Wittgenstein's second sense of seeing; and it does raise a real problem. Nor does the observation that we exploit a three-dimensional tactile space to characterize the visual one get us any closer to a solution (see further W.V. Quine, *The Roots of Reference* s1).
8. It is very easy to get the feeling that what Wittgenstein is describing is not *really* seeing but only something that is like it in certain ways: if you like a derivative or second-rate seeing. This is only natural if you are in the grip of the idea that what you see is entirely revealed in your copy of it. But there is really no reason to restrict seeing to that: 'seeing' is as elastic a concept as 'description of what you see'. And both of these

are family resemblance concepts (*PI* 200.1).

9. Wittgenstein also appears to suggest that seeing-as that is of relevance to aesthetics. If a picture of a galloping horse is any good then it is not only that you see it and realize that it is *meant* to be of a galloping horse; you have to see it as a galloping horse. 'Is it superstition to think I see the horse galloping in the picture?—And does my visual impression gallop too?' (*PI* 202.4). To see the horse galloping is to find a certain description of it coming naturally to one (cf. the 'tally ho!' remark: *RPP* I, 874).