

Wittgenstein *Philosophical Investigations* Lecture 16

1. At 214.4ff. Wittgenstein describes the similarity between seeing something as something and the phenomenon of *experiencing the meaning* of a word. As an example of the latter: you can say the word 'bank' and mean by it a river-bank or the place where you keep your money (cf. *PI* p. 215.7). Or again, you might fail to experience the intended meaning of a word, as when we use English words to stand in for one another in a code (*PI* p. 214.6).
2. Now when he speaks of 'experiencing the meaning' of a word he is not retracting his earlier claim that linguistic understanding is not a special experience (*PI* 155; p. 181.3). For that would clearly be wrong. Any experience that we want to call 'experiencing the meaning' of a word might e.g. accompany one's use of the word but it is not the intention with which one used it—and *that* is what settles how you understood it (*PI* p. 181.1). Again, a word has meaning only in the context of a sentence—but the meaning of a sentence is not some sort of medley of what you experience when you 'experience the meaning' of its words (*PI* p. 181.3). It is rather as though he is using the words 'meaning' and 'understanding' in a novel sense: but even that is not right, because it implies an arbitrariness that was not there. The description of the phenomenon as 'experience of *meaning*' seems to force itself upon us (*PI* 532).
3. There are two clear analogies with aspect perception. First: experiencing a word in a certain way is something that can dawn on one or can be lost, in the way that an aspect can dawn on one or be lost: for instance when you repeat a word until it becomes a mere sound (*PI* 214.4b). The meaning of the word in one sense remains the same; but in another sense something of its meaning has been lost. Second: we can imagine that people are blind to this phenomenon in the same way as we can imagine somebody's being 'aspect-blind' (*PI* 214.4a). It is this second point that especially interests Wittgenstein. Somebody could be unable to experience the meaning of a word (and yet he could still *use* it just as we do). What would he be missing?
4. In order to get clear on this we must first note three points about the experienced meaning of a word. First: the criterion for how we experience a word is given by our inclinations to use it in contexts outside its normal ones. Thus it says something about our understanding of 'Tuesday' and 'Wednesday' that we are inclined to say that the first is lean, the second fat (*PI* 216.3); or we say that some vowels are darker than others (*Brown Book* 136). We say that the note E is *higher* than C or *sharper* than it—it would be unnatural to call a higher note flatter. (Indeed the phrase 'experience of meaning' itself illustrates the phenomenon it denotes: see the last sentence of s2 above). Second: this use of the word is *not* just metaphorical—for it is not as though we could say what the metaphor meant in more *literal* terms (*PI* 216.7). And third: these uses are *derivative*: one could not find this departure from their ordinary use a natural one unless one had

already mastered the ordinary use itself. That is why Wittgenstein is inclined to speak of a primary and a secondary meaning (*PI* 216.5).

5. Now it seems to be Wittgenstein's view that there are three especially important regions of language in which this phenomenon is operative. The first is in aesthetic cases: we use vocabulary in a secondary sense to describe music (as e.g. light-hearted or as profound). It is not just that we have *arbitrarily* taken over these words to characterize a piece of music—for only these words will do. The second case is perhaps more interesting: it is in their secondary sense that we use words for physical activities to describe (what we then think of as) mental ones. Thus 'calculating in the head': here we are using 'calculating' in a secondary or parasitic sense. Only if you know what calculation on paper is can you grasp the notion of 'calculating in the head' in the way we do (*PI* 216.6, 220.5; cf. *PI* 364). And third: we use it to apply sensation-words to inanimate objects. But here too this is parasitic upon its application to *people*. 'We do indeed say of an inanimate thing that it is in pain. But this use of the concept is a secondary one. Imagine a case in which people ascribed pain *only* to inanimate things; pitied *only* dolls!' (*PI* 282).
6. So now we can see what the meaning-blind person is blind to. He will not respond to his training in the use of words in the way that we do. In particular, he will not find the secondary uses of a word natural in the way that we do. Thus on being taught the primary meaning of 'calculation' it will seem to him an arbitrary extension of the word that we speak of 'calculation in the head'—perhaps he would rather say that the answer to the sum just comes in the manner of a dream. Similar points will apply to our use of 'pain' as applied to dolls or of 'sharp' and 'flat' as applied to musical notes. In short whole areas of our language will appear to him as Esperanto does to us. 'The feeling of disgust we get if we utter an invented word with invented derivative syllables. The word is cold, lacking in associations, and yet it plays at being "Language"' (*CV* 52).
7. In attempting to summarize Wittgenstein's influence we can divide his later doctrine into two components: his attitude towards philosophy in general and his treatment of particular subjects. With regard to the first his views are not widely accepted—the most important contemporary philosopher who thinks, like him, that philosophical questions need to be quieted rather than answered, also thinks, unlike him, that this can be done systematically (I mean McDowell). But with regard to the second, his treatments of rule-following and private language in particular have proved exceptionally fertile. It is probably also true that there is much in the later work that we are yet to fathom.