

WITTGENSTEIN *PHILOSOPHICAL INVESTIGATIONS* LECTURE 5

1. The 'cube' argument (*PI* 139; cf. 35, 86c). What comes before your mind when you grasp the meaning of the word 'cube'? Well, it might be a picture: but in whatever sense one pattern of use can be said to 'fit' a picture, so can another. (This is particularly graphic in the cube case because there it depends on one's method of projection: *PI* 139d).
2. But then why *do* we say that you grasp it in a flash? Our concept of meaning synthesizes two features that might come apart. One is that people know what 'cube' means if they can e.g. draw one. The other is that their grasp is decisively manifested through competent usage. But these criteria could come apart; and if they did, *our* concepts of 'meaning' and 'understanding' would lose their point. (Compare a concept like 'square'. We normally have tactile as well as visual criteria for applying it; but what would happen if they came apart?) That is the point of the 'cheese' argument: see *PI* 142 and the associated note.
3. There follows a more elaborate discussion where one is asked to continue a numerical sequence. At first W. is interested in the difference between the case where the learner makes systematic mistakes—where he understands *something* only not what we intended—and the case where his mistakes are random. The point is that the line between these kinds of mistake is not sharp.
4. But how can that be? Isn't it that when you have got it right you have grasped the right *formula*, and when you make a systematic error you have grasped the wrong formula, and in the random case you haven't grasped anything at all? For don't we derive the sequence from the formula? That gets us no further: if there is a problem with deriving a sequence from its initial segment then there is a problem with deriving it from its formula (*PI* 146b).
5. But of course the sequence is infinite and my use of it can only ever be finite: so there must be some difference between my understanding of the sequence and any particular set of applications. At this point it is natural to say that understanding is a *dispositional* mental state: an actual state of my mind (or brain) that underlies the truths of (perhaps infinitely many) subjunctives e.g. 'If I had been asked to name the such-and-such member of the series I'd have said so-and-so'. W.'s response is that if any such state is to be identified with understanding we ought to have some other way to identify it (*PI* 149). Otherwise all you are doing is explaining the fact that somebody behaves in such and such way by saying *just* that he has a mental state disposing him to behave in that way.
6. But we *do* have another way of identifying such a state: it is the experience of 'grasping in a flash' (or so you might object). W. treats this illusion at length in the subsequent discussion of 'reading' (which in this context means something like sight-reading a score). Cf. the cube: there he was attacking only the idea that the conscious state is an awareness of an image that guides me. Here he is attacking the

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general idea that what produces my behaviour is available to conscious experience.

7. He considers somebody who learns to read and gets a few things right early on. The teacher thinks that he isn't reading yet: but not much later he gets everything right and clearly *is* reading. Was the teacher wrong in his initial judgment? There need be no answer to that question (*PI* 157a; cf. a game need not be bound everywhere by rules at *PI* 84). So when did he begin to read and stop just mouthing? But how can there be any question here? Reading is something you do; and there isn't any doubt about what he *did*.
8. But we *are* ignorant about what went on in his brain. So couldn't it be that you are reading when the right connections are made in your brain? *PI* 158 discusses that. The passage does *not* doubt that your brain causes your behaviour. But detailed knowledge of the brain's workings need not settle when he was reading. For the concept just leaves this open; there is as much need for semantic decision here as there was when we sought a behavioural or sensory definition (*PI* 157b, c). What W. finds interesting is our *a priori* confidence that there *is* such a 'reading' connection: it indicates how deeply rooted is 'a certain picture of things'.
9. Now W. returns to the thought that there is a characteristic experience of reading (*PI* 159). He argues that no such experience is either necessary or sufficient for it. Not *necessary* because one can really *read* something whilst feeling that one is merely repeating what one has off by heart: *PI* 160a; see also *PI* 168. Not sufficient because one could have all the characteristic sensations of reading but yet not *be* reading: *PI* 160b (though he also says that some people *would* call this 'reading').
10. Do we *derive* the sounds from the words? We do distinguish deriving the sound from the word and just saying what comes to you. This distinction is *behavioural*. We say that the learner is 'deriving' the sound from the words when e.g. looks things up in a table and what he says is a function of what is written in the part of the table that he consults, and this is in turn a function of the words that he saw (*PI* 162b).
11. But there must be more to 'deriving' than in this special case of it! For one often derives without a table: isn't there something in virtue of which *all* such episodes count as deriving? No. It is a family resemblance concept, and when we remove what is particular about particular instances of it, thinking to find some common mental element that lay behind them, we ended up with nothing. 'So we stripped those particular coverings off; but then deriving itself disappeared.—In order to find the real artichoke, we divested it of its leaves' (*PI* 164).