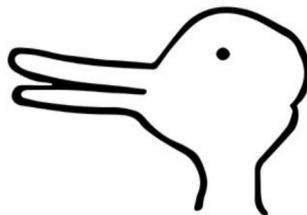


## ASPECT PERCEPTION AS A CASE OF INTERPRETATION

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Philosophy of Psychology was an area of major concern and interest for Wittgenstein in the final years of his life. The phenomenon of aspect-perception found repeated mention in his writings and lectures during this period. Wittgenstein

discusses aspect perception extensively in the second half of the *Philosophical Investigations*<sup>1</sup> as well as in his volumes entitled *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*<sup>2</sup>, *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*<sup>3</sup> and *Lectures on Philosophical Psychology 1946-47*<sup>4</sup>. In this paper I aim to present the arguments for accepting that aspect perception involves interpretation. Some of the Wittgenstein scholars such as Stephen Mulhall or Ray Monk are hesitant in admitting this. I will follow Wittgenstein in exploring his understanding of the notion of interpretation as well as the involvement of interpretation in aspect perception. In doing so I will refer to the way some of his writing is interpreted as vouching for a non-interpretationist position and comment accordingly.



A duck-rabbit figure has two aspects: a duck aspect and a rabbit aspect. When someone suddenly notices the duck aspect in the figure after seeing it as a picture of a rabbit, there is a change of aspect. When there is a change of aspect and the picture seems altered. Where is that alteration grounded? What has changed to reveal this new aspect? Ludwig Wittgenstein investigates whether the change is in my impression or my point of view (PI, p. 195). In his effort to understand the

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, 1953. PI, henceforth.

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume I*. Eds. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. Wright, Tr. G.E.M. Anscombe; *Volume II*. Eds. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, Tr. C.G. Luckhardt and M.A. E. Aue, Blackwell, 1980. RPP I and RPP II, henceforth.

<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Last Writing on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume I*. Eds. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, Tr. C.G. Luckhardt and M.A. E. Aue, Blackwell, 1982; *Volume II*. Eds. Eds. G. H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, Tr. C.G. Luckhardt and M.A. E. Aue, Blackwell, 1992. LW I and LW II, henceforth.

<sup>4</sup> P. T. Geach (ed.), Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Philosophical Psychology 1946-47*, Harvester Wheatsheaf. 1988. LPP henceforth.

phenomenon Wittgenstein considers two explanations, both of which he finds unacceptable.

### **Explanation 1**

One may attempt to understand the phenomenon of aspect perception physiologically by linking the aspects to certain movements of the eyeball. The change of aspect may be ascribed to a jump from one pattern of eyeball movement to another. However, Wittgenstein says that the very fact that such an explanation needs to be imagined proves that that's not the way we understand the phenomenon. For we have a concept regarding such seeing without such an explanation. To tag on such a physiological explanation to the phenomenon would amount to re-definition of that concept, 'a new physiological criterion for seeing. And this can screen the old problem from view, but not solve it.' (PI, p. 212)

### **Explanation 2**

The second explanation that he considers is along the Gestalt School line. It tries to resolve the paradox by grounding the change in what we see, the visual impression. The figure/object acquires an organization which it didn't appear to have previously (PI, 196b). This explanation assumes visual impressions to be inner entities of some sort, a position that Wittgenstein identifies as his general target in this portion of the PI. The somewhat queer phenomenon of seeing this way or that surely makes its first appearance when someone recognizes that the optical picture in one sense remains the same, while something else, which one might call "conception", may change. (RPP I 27)

My suggestion is that the line that Wittgenstein is sympathetic to in general is the interpretationist one which understands the change of aspect in terms of change in interpretation of the given. His method does not allow for a fully formulated explanation of the phenomenon. However, he makes extensive comments in this regard, some positively pointing towards the characters of the phenomenon that he considers to be significant, and some negative, revealing the incongruities in particular ways of thinking about them. From such comments, a certain Wittgensteinian position can be constructed. That position I believe would be pro-interpretationist. Hence I argue that aspect perception according to Wittgenstein

involves interpretation. ...we can also *see* the illustration now as one thing now as another. - So we interpret it and *see* it as we *interpret* it. (PI p.193) This is the first time he mentions interpretation in the context of aspect perception in *Philosophical Investigations*. Using an illustrative figure, he points out that it could be imagined that in a textbook, for instance, the relevant caption tells us how to see one. The embedding information guides seeing ‘the illustration now as one thing now as another’. The different aspects are stumbled upon when the figure is *interpreted* differently. Then he goes on to add the description of what is got immediately, i.e. of the visual experience, by means of an interpretation – is an indirect description. “I see the figure as a box” means: I have a particular visual experience which I have found that I always have when I interpret the figure as a box or when I look at a box. But if it meant this I ought to know. I ought to be able to refer to the experience directly, and not only indirectly. (As I can speak of red without calling it the colour of blood.) (PI p.194e)

Here, Wittgenstein seems to question the interpretationist stand by raising the issue that only if we can give a direct description does it make sense to talk about there being an indirect one. Mulhall picks up the line and argues that aspect-perception does not involve interpretation because in it there is a direct perception of the aspect, and hence that there is no scope for interpretation (2001 p. 249). In aspect perception, it would make sense to say that it is an interpretation, i.e. indirect perception, only if one could also give a direct description of it. A case of aspect perception is not like seeing something red and then interpreting it as the colour of blood (PI, 194). I do not see an object X as a cat, *I just see the cat*. I see the cube just as I see a red circle. But do we really need to be aware of the X independently of Y for Y to be an interpretation? I discuss this in the next section.

Moreover, Mulhall points out that ‘...it is definitive of such experiences that the mode of representing the perceived change is not one of a number of possible ways of describing it, but is rather felt to be the only possible expression of our visual perception...’ (2001 p.249) There is no experience of the activity of interpreting involved in my perception of the duck. When there is an aspect change, I see a rabbit in the place of a duck. I just find myself in the state of seeing a rabbit. However, I will argue later, that the activity of interpretation may not always be experienced and

the state of seeing may presuppose such an activity logically, not just temporarily. The fulcrum of this discussion is the notion of interpretation which I look at in the next section.

### **Interpretation: The Narrow and the Wide Sense**

‘To interpret is to think, to do something; seeing is a state’. (PI p.212e)

‘When we interpret we form hypotheses, which may prove false’. (PI p.212e)

According to Wittgenstein, interpretation is an activity, it is to think, to do something. It is an activity which involves making a hypothesis that may turn out to be false. My claim is that these two parameters are satisfied in every case of seeing. Seeing is a state, as Wittgenstein mentions. But it also involves an act; an act of interpreting that is internal to the seeing. We do report using such phrases as ‘I *saw* the rabbit’, which stress more on the act aspect rather than on being in a certain state. We are often praised for seeing something first as ‘She was the first one to see the tiger in the woods’. Here she must have done something in seeing the tiger to be praised. Yet her description of her experience may be proved false later on. It might be found out that the thing she saw was not actually a tiger. These cases display that seeing involves a certain interpretation of the given object which is not just the result of attending for there might have been lots of people attending to the happenings in the woods. But again it seems to be a case of directly seeing the tiger not involving seeing something and then so as to interpret it as the tiger. This calls for understanding interpretation in a wider sense than the one ascribed to Wittgenstein.

It is but common to point out that interpretation as the term has been used by Wittgenstein to refer to a conscious activity, an active engagement with that purpose in mind. Interpretation as an activity may be taken as analogous to breathing, which happens most of the time below the level of conscious participation but which may be brought up to that level if required. When asked by the Doctor, we may control and pay attention to our breathing process, but that does not mean that we do not breathe in and out rest of the time. In fact, if we were always aware of the act of breathing then that would be a source of useless distraction. Similarly, the interpretational process involved in perception does rise up to the level of the consciousness in exceptional cases

It is significant to note that interpretation may be understood in a narrow and a wide sense following Wittgenstein. In the narrow sense, it stands for the conscious **act** of coming to grips with the given, for instance interpreting a film according to a new theory. In the wide sense, it means the **unconscious processes of** conceptualisation and categorisation involved in any perception. Budd points out that ‘there are ways in which thoughts can be active in the mind in looking at a figure that do not amount to interpreting the figure (in Wittgenstein’s sense)’ (1989 p.178) i.e. in the narrow sense specified above. My contention is that, understood in the wider sense, it is constitutive of perception in general, while in the narrower sense it may be involved in perception, at times.

### **The case against aspect perception as involving interpretation**

The problem with the objections is the failure to notice the wider sense of interpretation present in Wittgenstein. It has been argued by Mulhall (2001) that

**(P1)** Wittgenstein understands ‘interpretation’ in the narrow sense, as a conscious deliberate act .

**(P2)** aspect perception does not involve any such act;

Therefore, **(C)** aspect perception does not involve interpretation.

In this argument, P1 and P2 are both false. Wittgenstein does not understand ‘interpretation’ only in the narrow sense and aspect perception does involve interpretation not just always in the wide sense but also in the narrow sense. Hence, **(C)** is not true, and aspect perception does involve interpretation.

### **Against P1:**

Here I explain the reason for thinking that Wittgenstein understands interpretation in a wider sense as well. Wittgenstein clearly states that ‘interpreting is a kind of thinking; and often it brings about a sudden change of aspect’. (LW I 179) He states further that the thinking is essential to ‘dawning of the aspect’. Several passages in LW I and RPP II speak about the connection between aspect perception and thought. Wittgenstein questions ‘Now when the aspect dawns, can I separate a visual experience from a thought – experience? – If you separate them the dawning of the aspect seems to vanish’. (LWI §564) Also, he says that ‘...Seeing a figure with this interpretation is a kind of thinking of the interpretation. ...I see an interpretation

and an interpretation is a thought'. (RPP II 360) But how is it possible to *see* an object according to an *interpretation*? – The question represents it as a queer fact; as if something were being forced into a form it did not really fit. But no squeezing, no forcing took place here. (PI p.200e)

What we need to note is that the interpretation is not external to the seeing. It is internal to it. The interpretation is not forced on to a seen. That's why we do not have an X available which can then be externally interpreted as Y. Seeing itself is constituted conceptually. The interpretation is not indirect, but actually the primary expression of the experience. The question whether what is involved is a seeing or an act of interpreting arises because an interpretation becomes an expression of experience. And the interpretation is not an indirect description; no, it is the primary expression of the experience. (RPP I 20) In fact, the interpretation/thought is not separate from the experience of seeing. The experience of seeing is clothed in interpretation. 'Can I say that seeing aspects is *related* to interpreting? – My inclination was indeed to say "It is as if I *saw* an *interpretation*". Well, the expression of this seeing is related to the expression of interpreting'. (LW I 179) And what about the double cross? Again, it is seeing according to an interpretation. Seeing *as*. (LW II p.15e) A concept forces itself on one. (PI p.204e)

Mulhall does not concern himself with the possibility of interpretation in the wider sense being involved in aspect perception. When I say that interpretation is ubiquitous what I mean is that in the cases of *seeing*, as well as seeing-as, perception depends logically, not just temporally on our memory, and our other cognitive abilities. "You only 'see the duck and rabbit aspects' if you are already conversant with the shapes of those two animals" (PI, 207). Seeing presupposes mastery of the concepts. The interpretation that I claim to be part of the perception is not a volitional conscious activity. However, it is an activity in which we engage necessarily in perceiving.

There seem to be certain incongruities in the non-interpretative picture of aspect perception, for instance, in the phenomenon of aspect-blindness. How is it that among two persons, one is able to perceive a likeness between two figures while the other is not? The fact that someone is aspect-blind while someone else is able to

perceive a new aspect reveals the importance of the subjective element in the perceptual process. Just standing passively in front of a figure is not sufficient to see it as a duck. There needs to be an input from the perceiver, an active engagement with the picture. Hence an interpretative subjective element is necessarily linked to aspect perception. One wants to ask of seeing an aspect: “Is it seeing? Is it thinking?” The aspect is subject to the will: this by itself relates it to thinking. (RPP II 544)

Let’s consider, for instance, that if someone had told me that there was the shape of Homer’s face hiding in a certain mesh of lines, would I have been able to decipher it? No one would have succeeded perhaps without a previous idea of how Homer looked like. Hence, to grasp a particular object in a figure one needs to have a concept of the object which provides the perspective on the mesh of lines. The given is interpreted in terms of the available concepts. Hence though it seems that the experience is direct, actually it is mediated. The interpretation is so fundamentally constitutive of the perception that its seepage, as a rule, goes unnoticed. We do not get to know the complex neuropsychological processes that interact with our conceptual framework to produce the visual perception of the rabbit in the lines. This is similar to the case of our language usage, which we are all able to do without always being able to explain the rules or the grammar behind it. However, later reflection reveals an activity of interpretation of the given in terms of our conceptual repertoire as conceptually necessary though at times experientially unavailable for any perception. ‘...it (interpretation) also incorporates itself straight away in what is seen...One might also say “I do not merely *interpret* the figure, but I clothe it with the interpretation”’. (RPP I 33)

Wittgenstein, I would argue, accepts the role of interpretation, understood in this transcendental sense<sup>5</sup>, as the very condition of any perception for he recognises the importance of thought in the flashing of an aspect. According to him, it is half visual experience and half thought (*PI*, 197). As quoted above Wittgenstein thinks that our seeing is clothed in interpretation. He clearly points out that dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other

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<sup>5</sup> In a sense analogous to that of Kant who credited understanding and sensibility with equal importance.

objects. The seeing or noticing of an aspect as well as imagining are dependent on the will of the spectator. Looking may not always involve seeing. One may be physiologically supplied with data without really interpreting it and be unaware about some of the aspects of the thing.

### **Against P2:**

Seeing an aspect and imagining are subject to the will. There is such an order as “Imagine *this*”, and also: “Now see the figure like *this*”; but not: “Now see this leaf green”. (PI p.213e) In the cases of aspect perception, we do *experience* moments of confusion, of mere blankness, a desperate need to organise the lines into a *known* shape, *trying to read the picture in a specific way* especially after being informed that there is a definite shape hiding there in those lines. And then all of a sudden we *see* the shape of the duck. The perception seems miraculous and one’s ability to perceive the duck inexplicable. Yet I have somehow interacted with the picture to make it meaningful.

*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*, etc. But does that make seeing a voluntary act? Isn’t it rather the way you look at something that causes this seeing? For example, I can see the model of the cube in *this way* if I direct my glance right at *these* edges. When I do this the aspect suddenly changes. Here I *know* how to *bring this about*. Yes, it is true that at times we move straight on to the object. But aspect perception is not always without effort or direct. Wittgenstein does point out the similarity between the concept of an aspect and that of an image and goes on to say that “Seeing an aspect and imagining are subject to the will. There is such an order as “Imagine this”, and also: “Now see the figure like this” (PI, 213). On being informed about another aspect of a figure, one may try to *see*, but that seeing may not always be easy and at times unsuccessful for a particular person. The observer may have to really put in some effort. Some clues like ‘see those marks at the top as the ear of the rabbit’ may be helpful at this time. That may get one on the right track to the face in the puzzle picture. So in cases of aspect perception one does need to put in some effort at times. There is an experience of interpreting. One does see the mesh of lines, which become meaningful as the face. The fact that the switch is dependent upon the will is one of the reasons why Budd thinks that in aspect perception, what is

seen is merely interpreted differently (p.94). What adds to his contention is the significant non-difference of the 'optical picture' or the 'visual picture' which is aspect invariant. The seen doesn't change the *seeing* changes because of the seen being interpreted differently. We can produce a change of aspect, and it can also occur against our will. Like our gaze, it can follow our will. (LW 612)

One may ask, what about the ordinary cases of perception? If we consider the case when I see the knife on the table, there is no confusion, no inner struggle to recognise the thing as a knife. I see the knife or once I have recognised the duck in the duck-rabbit picture, I straight away see the duck. The argument against the interpretational nature of aspect perception relies on the directness of the experience. Though a differentiation is made between *seeing* and *seeing-as/interpretation* in terms of one being a state and the other being an activity, the realisation of the state presupposes the activity. *Seeing* is always *seeing as*. The lack of experience of seeing-as does not nullify the fact that *there is an X* which one *sees as* a cat because one has learnt to identify such things in that way.