

## Introduction

The following monograph draws on, and from, work on aspect perception that I've done over the past twenty years or so and published in eight papers that are very different from each other – not only in terms of their focus and emphases, but also in terms of their perspective and approach. For a while, I had toyed with the idea of turning my work on aspects into a monograph but was reluctant to do so, fearing that the dialectical nature of the work – the ways in which it is tied to particular conversations with particular interlocutors and rooted in particular moments of my philosophical development and the particular interests of those moments – would thereby be distorted. Now that the eight papers – all more or less substantively revised and expanded from their originally published version – have come out in a collection (Baz 2020), I have felt ready to do the exercise of distilling my work on aspects into this short monograph on Wittgenstein on aspect perception, which I hope the readers will find useful. I do feel that thirty years after the publication of Stephen Mulhall's insightful and rightfully influential *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects*, the philosophical discussion of aspect perception – in Wittgenstein and more generally – stands in need of refocusing. Only time will tell whether this short monograph succeeds in refocusing it – if only by provoking others to articulate their disagreements with it. But I am, in any case, grateful to David Stern and to Cambridge University Press for the invitation to write it.

The aim of this Element is to introduce readers to what the later Wittgenstein calls “aspects”, and to some of the most basic questions that have arisen in the literature about Wittgensteinian aspects and their significance.<sup>1</sup>

Section 1 will offer both a *grammatical* characterization and a *phenomenological* characterization of Wittgensteinian aspects. It will be emphasized that though Wittgenstein himself was suspicious of phenomenology and sometimes even presented his grammatical investigation as an antidote to what he saw as the pitfalls of phenomenology, both sorts of characterization are important for an understanding of what he calls “aspects”, and for a proper appreciation of the significance of aspect perception.

Section 2 will challenge the widespread tendency – exhibited by Strawson, Wollheim, and others – to identify Wittgensteinian aspects with, or in terms of, *concepts*. It will be argued that on any of the most common ways of understanding “concept”, or our concept of *concept*, that identification is misguided, and distorts both the grammar and the phenomenology of aspect perception. The

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<sup>1</sup> I speak of *Wittgensteinian* aspects, because I believe that the perception of what Wittgenstein calls “aspects” – even though it takes a variety of forms and manifests itself in a variety of contexts – is more specific than what some of his interpreters have made it out to be.

basic point will be that Wittgensteinian aspects are *not general* as concepts essentially are and are *not separable* from the objects perceived under them in the way that concepts are.

In Section 3, I will propose that while not having the generality of concepts, and while being inseparable – grammatically and phenomenologically – from the things perceived under them, Wittgensteinian aspects nonetheless connect the things perceived under them with other things. The connection, I will propose, is perceptual and internal, in the sense that how one thing presents itself to us perceptually – its perceived “physiognomy” – is not separable from its perceived relation to other things.

Sections 4 and 5 will address the idea – to be found in Strawson, Wollheim, Mulhall, Searle, and others – that there is a *continuous* version to the perception of aspects, and that, indeed, all (normal) human perception may aptly be understood as the perception of aspects. It will be argued in Section 4 that the textual basis for attributing that idea to Wittgenstein is weak, and that there is much textual evidence against that attribution. The idea of continuous aspect perception, it will then be argued in Section 5, fails to recognize the *indeterminacy* of the phenomenal world – by which I mean, the world *as perceived and responded to* prior to being *thought*, or thought or talked *about*, and so prior to being *conceptualized*. The dawning of Wittgensteinian aspects, whether solicited or unsolicited, willed or unwilled, it will be proposed, is the necessarily passing introduction of (relative) determinacy into the phenomenal world – a momentary taking hold of things, perceptually.

Section 6 will address the question of the significance of aspect perception: what, if anything, does the perception of Wittgensteinian aspects reveal about (normal) human perception *as such*? It will be proposed that it reveals the role we play in bringing about and sustaining the unity and sense of the phenomenal world; and it also reveals our capacity for more or less playful, more or less creative, projection of perceivable sense onto some given object, or situation.

In the Appendix, I will say something about what I see as the limitations of the Wittgensteinian grammatical investigation, as those limitations make themselves manifest in Wittgenstein’s remarks on aspects.

## 1 The Grammar and Phenomenology of Wittgensteinian Aspects

I begin with what I take Wittgenstein to mean by “seeing (perceiving) something as something” or “seeing (perceiving) an aspect”. The first few remarks of Section xi of part II of the *Investigations* are a good place to seek initial orientation:

*Wittgenstein on Aspect Perception*

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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 a likeness between these two faces” – where the man I say this to may be seeing the faces as clearly as I do myself.

The importance of this is the difference in category between the two ‘objects’ of sight.

The one man might make an accurate drawing of the two faces, and the other notice in the drawing the likeness which the former did not see.

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” (Wittgenstein 2009b (hereafter ‘PPF’), 111–3, translation amended).

The first thing to note, even before we draw on the basis of these remarks an understanding of what Wittgenstein means by “seeing-as” or by “aspect”, is that he characterizes his subject matter both *grammatically* – in the Wittgensteinian sense of that term – and *phenomenologically*. On the one hand, he talks about two *uses of the word* “see”, and gives an initial and partial characterization of those two uses. This is in line with his later philosophical practice. At the root of any number of traditional philosophical difficulties, Wittgenstein identified the tendency to suppose that our words – including philosophically troublesome words such as “see”, “understand”, “know”, “think”, “mean”, “intend”, “pain”, and so on – ‘name objects’, or, as contemporary analytic philosophers like to say, ‘refer to (denote) items in the world’; and accordingly to suppose that the best way to become clear about the meaning of those words, or the concepts they embody, is to identify and study those ‘objects’ directly – that is, not by way of an investigation of the use of those words.<sup>2</sup> What Wittgenstein tries to get us to see is that the model, or picture, of ‘object and designation’ (Wittgenstein 2009a (hereafter ‘PI’), 293) is misguided and misleading when it comes to such words, and that what we end up producing, when we attempt to elucidate the nature of the “objects” to which they are supposed to refer, are philosophically constructed chimeras – ‘structures of air’, as he puts it (PI, 118) – that we erect by the light of questionable or confused theoretical commitments, and on the basis of ‘pictures’ that we have formed for ourselves of those “objects”.

Wittgenstein’s appeal to the *use* of philosophically troublesome words, or to what he calls their ‘grammar’, is an antidote to the tendencies and the

<sup>2</sup> In Baz (2017a), I argue, following Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, against this prevailing conception of language, which (I argue) has underwritten the philosophical “method of cases” and hence a significant portion of the work produced within mainstream analytic philosophy in the past fifty years or so.

philosophical idleness or emptiness they lead to. In the remarks on aspects, he repeatedly urges his reader (or himself) not to try to understand aspect perception by way of introspection of what happens in or to us when we see an aspect (see PPF, 241; and Wittgenstein 1980a (hereafter ‘RPPI’), 1011). ‘*Forget*’, he urges his reader (or himself), ‘forget that you have these experiences yourself’ (Wittgenstein 1980b (hereafter ‘RPPII’, 531). ‘Don’t try to analyze the experience within yourself’ (PPF, 188; see also PPF, 204). ‘The question’, he writes, ‘is not *what happens here* [that is, when someone tells me: “Now I am seeing *this* point as the apex of the triangle”, AB], but rather: how one may use that statement’ (RPPI, 315). Wittgenstein reorients his reader’s attention away from his or her own experience and toward the use of relevant words – here, first and foremost, the words with which the experience of noticing an aspect may aptly and naturally be voiced. To attain clarity about the seeing of aspects – or for that matter about any other ‘concept of experience (*Erfahrungsbegriff*)’ (PPF, 115) – we need to do more than just remind ourselves of particular isolated forms of words that may be used to describe or otherwise give voice to our experience. We need also to remind ourselves of ‘the occasion and purpose’ of these phrases (PPF, 311). ‘It is necessary to get down to the application’ (PPF, 165), to ask oneself ‘What does anyone tell me by saying “Now I see it as . . . ”? What consequences has this piece of communication? What can I do with it?’ (PPF, 176, translation amended). In my experience, commentators on Wittgenstein’s remarks on aspect perception have tended to lose contact with his subject matter, and to get themselves confused, as a result of failing to heed this Wittgensteinian call altogether. The use of the relevant terms, and the language-game(s) within which they have their sense, have often been neglected in favor of theoretical commitments and ambitions, which are often sustained by misleading pictures.<sup>3</sup>

Before offering a grammatical characterization of Wittgensteinian aspects, I must note that Wittgenstein introduces the notion of “aspect” by way of the experience of *noticing* an aspect, of suddenly *being struck* by an aspect. And it might be tempting to suppose, as any number of readers of Wittgenstein’s remarks on aspects have supposed, that Wittgensteinian aspects may also be, and regularly are, perceived continuously, and that Wittgenstein finds the experience of aspect *dawning* or *lighting up* interesting, and focuses on it, only because it brings to light in a dramatic fashion the reality of continuous

<sup>3</sup> Thus, for example, Severin Schroeder writes: ‘[W]henver something is seen (and not only looked at inanely or absent-mindedly) *some* aspect of it must be noticed, be it only certain shapes or colours’ (2010, 366). But how exactly, or in what sense, is the color of an object or its shape an *aspect*? Surely not in Wittgenstein’s sense. And why are aspects, *thus* understood, philosophically interesting?

aspect perception as our normal perceptual relation to things.<sup>4</sup> As against this common reading of Wittgenstein, I will argue, in Section 4, that Wittgensteinian aspects can *only dawn*, as he himself puts it. An aspect is perceived only as long as we attend to the object in a particular way; and our attention is, at least normally, shifting and unstable. For this reason, the following grammatical elucidation of Wittgensteinian aspects is a grammatical elucidation of *dawning* aspects; it follows Wittgenstein's express aim of elucidating the concept of *noticing an aspect* and *its* place 'among the concepts of experience' (PPF, 115).

What then can we say about the grammar of (dawning) Wittgensteinian aspects? Taking our initial bearing from the opening remarks of PPF, section xi, cited at the opening of this section, we could say at least the following. To begin with, aspects are contrasted with 'objects of sight' of a different 'category'. What are these *other* objects of sight? A red circle over there would be one example (PPF, 121), a knife and a fork would be another example (PPF, 122), a conventional picture of a lion yet another (PPF, 203). Another type of object of sight that Wittgenstein contrasts with aspects is 'a property of the object' (PPF, 247). In short, aspects contrast with what is objectively there to be seen, where what is objectively there to be seen may be determined, and *known* to be there, from a third-person perspective, and independently of any(one's) particular perceptual *experience* of it. In contrast, someone may look at an object, see everything there is to see about it – in the first, objective sense of "see" – and yet fail to see (second sense) an aspect that may be seen by another. For this reason, it may aptly be said that aspects 'teach us nothing about the external world' (RPPI, 899). This last remark, while illuminating, has to be taken with caution, however, for it is going to matter what one understands by "teaching something" and by "the external world". In particular, the tendency to think that if the aspect is not objective (part or feature of "the external world" objectively understood) it must be subjective ("inner", metaphysically private) needs to be resisted; for it may be that one important lesson to be learned from the phenomenon, or set of related phenomena, of aspect perception is precisely that this traditional dichotomy is at least sometimes misguided and misleading. Given the common philosophical understanding of "objective" and "subjective", or "external" and "internal", the Wittgensteinian aspect is, importantly, neither: it is genuinely perceived, and sharable with others, but, at the same time, is not independent of its perceivers, or of its being perceived. In this, I will propose in

<sup>4</sup> This particular reading of Wittgenstein was first proposed in Stephen Mulhall's influential *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (Mulhall 1990); but the idea that "continuous aspect perception" characterizes normal human perception may already be found in Peter Strawson's 'Imagination and Perception' (Strawson 1982 (1971)). The idea may also be found in Richard Wollheim's *Art and Its Objects* (1980). It will be discussed in Sections 4 and 5.

Section 6, the aspect announces the phenomenal world, and its distinction from the world as objectively construed.

The objects of sight with which aspects contrast may be described and often will be described (or otherwise represented) in order to *inform* someone else who for some reason is not in a position to see (or otherwise perceive) them – in order to teach her, precisely, something about the world as it is independently of any (particular person’s) *experience* of it. The other person, in Wittgenstein’s remark, asks ‘What do you see *there?*’; and unless she is testing our eyesight or linguistic competence, she is asking because she cannot, for some more or less contingent reason, see for herself. By contrast, the person with whom we seek to share what we see when we see an aspect would normally be standing there with us and seeing as clearly as we do the object (the face, for example) in which we see the aspect (its likeness to some other face). Indeed, as Wittgenstein says, she could even make an (objectively) accurate representation of the object while failing to see the aspect.

In giving voice to the seeing of an aspect, we accordingly normally seek, not to ‘inform the other person’ but rather, as Wittgenstein puts it, to come in contact with, or ‘find’, the other (RPPI, 874). In everyday, natural contexts – as opposed to the artificial ones of the lab or classroom – the seeing of aspects makes for a particular type of opportunity for seeking intimacy with others, or putting it to the test. Like beauty, at least as understood by Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Wittgensteinian aspects are importantly characterized by the possibility that a fully competent speaker (and perceiver) may fail to see (or otherwise perceive) them even though she sees (first sense) as well as anyone else the objects in which they are seen, and by the particular sense it makes to *call upon* such a person to see them.<sup>5</sup>

This last point is connected with another feature of aspects: their being ‘subject to the will’ (see RPPI, 899 and 976; and RPII, 545). Wittgensteinian aspects are subject to the will not so much, or primarily, in the sense that we can see them at will, but precisely in the sense that it makes sense both to call upon another person to see them and to *try* to see this or that particular aspect (PPF, 256). In the natural course of everyday experience, however, Wittgensteinian aspects normally dawn on us uninvited – except for when the invitation comes from another person – and even, sometimes, against our will (LWI, 612). They strike us. And yet we know *we* had something to do with their dawning, for we know that the objective world – the world that may be defined by its independence from any(one’s) particular experience of it – has not changed, and that no new element of *that* world was revealed to us in the dawning of the aspect. In

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Kant (2000), Prussian Academy Edition page numbers 211–19 and 279ff.

this way, I will later suggest, the dawning of Wittgensteinian aspects reveals that the world as pre-reflectively perceived and responded to is not the world as thought (or talked) about in objective terms.

So much, for now, by way of grammatical characterization of what Wittgenstein calls ‘aspects’. All of this Wittgensteinian grammar notwithstanding, the dawning (or noticing) of a Wittgensteinian aspect – unlike thinking, or knowing, or intending, or understanding, or meaning, or reading, or following ... this or that – *is*, first and foremost and essentially, a perceptual *experience* with a distinct phenomenology. Wittgenstein in no way denies this – indeed, that the dawning of a Wittgensteinian aspect is a particular sort of perceptual experience is *part of its grammar* (cf. PPF, 113). The later Wittgenstein was, however, generally suspicious of phenomenology, and skeptical of its capacity to lead to philosophical enlightenment. As I’ve already noted, this suspicion and skepticism comes out clearly and explicitly in his remarks on aspects, when he calls upon his readers to forget that they have such experiences themselves and to think about aspect perception from a third-person perspective. As I have already noted, and as I have argued at length elsewhere,<sup>6</sup> Wittgenstein’s mistrust of phenomenology, and the shift to the third-person perspective, are well motivated, and serve him well, when it comes to the sorts of concepts, and phenomena, on which he focuses in the first part of the *Investigations*: understanding, learning, meaning (one’s words one way or another), thinking, naming, reading, following a rule, intending, and so on; and they are also useful in elucidating the *concept* of (noticing an) aspect and its place among our concepts of experience. But, for reasons that will be discussed in the Appendix, I believe that Wittgenstein’s general approach serves him less well, and sometimes leads him astray, when it comes to the *experience* of aspect dawning and its relation to other moments, features, and dimensions of our perceptual experience. The philosophical danger of being misled, or handicapped, by confining oneself to Wittgensteinian grammar is no less real, I believe, than the danger of getting confused, and lost, as result of its neglect. When it comes to aspect perception and to perception more generally, the Wittgensteinian grammatical-conceptual investigation should be complemented by properly executed phenomenology, and vice versa. And, as Merleau-Ponty has taught us, the phenomenal world is not private or inner; and the phenomenological recovery and elucidation of pre-reflective perceptual experience, even as it aims to recover and elucidate *our* perceptual experience, need not be based on *introspection* (Merleau-Ponty 1996/

<sup>6</sup> Baz (2011).

2012, 57/57–8)<sup>7</sup> – of which Wittgenstein was rightly suspicious – but may rather proceed on the basis of well-established empirical findings (cf. PP, 57/58 and 72/74). That we see something under *this* rather than *that* aspect, for example, or that a new aspect has just dawned on us, will normally show in how we respond to the thing and conduct ourselves in relation to it. And if someone cannot effect aspect-shifts for themselves – as Wittgenstein’s ‘aspect-blind’, and many on the autistic spectrum, cannot – that too will show in their behavior, and will have far-reaching, empirically establishable consequences.

The phenomenology of noticing an aspect is fairly easy to give an initial characterization of, though no characterization would be much good to anyone not already familiar with the experience, and any form of words with which the experience might be characterized could also be understood in such ways that it would not aptly characterize the experience. When we notice an aspect, everything changes and yet nothing changes (see RPPII, 474). We *see* (in the objective sense of that word, the first of the two uses of it that Wittgenstein speaks of) that the object has not changed, and yet we see it differently (in what Wittgenstein refers to as the second use of “see”). We know, and see (first sense), that the object’s objective features have remained unchanged, but its perceived physiognomy or overall expression *has* changed for us, and changed *wholly*. Aspect dawning thus brings out the *gestalt*, or *holistic*, nature of the world as pre-reflectively perceived – the internal relation between its elements, wherein the perceived significance of any element of the perceptual field is not independent of the perceived significance of other elements, and of the perceived significance of the whole. I’ll say more about this in Section 3.

There is an important sense in which the aspect – unlike an objective property of the object – is *un-detachable* from the experience, or from the object-*as-experienced*.<sup>8</sup> Another way of putting that point, which will become important for us later on, is that to perceive an object under an aspect is not the same as applying a concept to it, which, being *general*, is separate from the particular object and from our particular experience of it. Objects of sight of the first category, Wittgenstein tells us, can be described (or otherwise represented) objectively: I may tell you that what I see is a knife and fork, or that the object I see is red, and thereby tell you exactly what I see – in the first sense of “see”;

<sup>7</sup> References to the *Phenomenology of Perception* will henceforth be given by ‘PP’, with the page number of the pre-2002 editions of the Colin Smith translation, followed (as in the present case) by the page number of the 2012 Donald Landes translation. I will mostly be following the Smith’s translation, amending it in accordance with Landes’s translation whenever the latter seems superior.

<sup>8</sup> This, I suggest in Baz (2011), is why Wittgenstein found aspect perception useful for elucidating the “intransitive” sense, as he calls it, of “a quite particular”, in the *Brown Book*.



and, if all goes well, you may thereby come to know *what* I see (first sense) as well as I do, and to be able to rightfully inform others about that object, even though you have not yourself perceived it. By contrast, if you want to know what I see when I see a Wittgensteinian aspect, or see some *x as y*, you need to look at *x* – or anyway at *some x* – and see *it as y* (or *recall* the experience of seeing some *x as y*). In this way, Wittgensteinian aspects illustrate what Merleau-Ponty describes as a physiognomic meaning, or sense, that *clings* what has it (PP, 147/148). In Section 6, I will suggest that it is precisely in bringing out, or dramatizing, *that* level of pre-conceptual, pre-objective sense-perception, that the dawning of Wittgensteinian aspects reveals something fundamental about human (and possibly not just human) perception. I will also say why that level of perception is not aptly thought of as continuous aspect perception.

The grammatical-phenomenological characterization I have just given of Wittgensteinian aspects is fairly specific; and yet it allows for quite a range of cases that differ from each other in more or less significant ways. Let me mention some of them: seeing a similarity between two faces, or some face *as* some other; seeing the duck-rabbit as a duck or as a rabbit; seeing a figure such as the famous Necker cube as oriented one way or another in space, relative to the perceiver; seeing the double-cross as a white cross against a black background, or vice versa; seeing a triangle – either drawn or “real” (three-dimensional) – as pointing in this or that direction, or as hanging from its apex, or as having fallen over ... (PPF, 162); seeing a face in a puzzle-picture; seeing a sphere in a picture as floating in the air (PPF, 169); seeing a W as an upside-down M and seeing the letter F as facing right, or left (see RPPII, 464–5); there’s the aspect we may be said to see when something strikes us in a picture of a running horse and we exclaim ‘It’s running!’ (RPPI, 874; see also PPF, 175); hearing a piece of music as plaintive (PPF, 229) or as solemn (PPF, 233), or hearing a bar as an introduction (PPF, 178); there is the experience in which ‘everything strikes us as unreal’ (RPPI, 125–6), which may be taken to represent a whole range of what could be called “aspects of mood”; and one could think of other sorts of perceptual “objects” that seem to fit the grammatical-phenomenological characterization I have given of Wittgensteinian aspects.

One important thing to note is that in some of the cases, the aspect corresponds to no objective judgment – what the object is seen *as* is not something that (in a different context perhaps) it could be seen, or known, to *be*. What, for example, would it be, or mean, for the letter F to *objectively be* facing right, or left? Moreover, even where we could think of an objective judgment that might be thought to correspond to the aspect – given a suitable context, the duck-rabbit could actually serve as a picture of a rabbit, or of a duck, and the Necker cube

could be (meant to be taken as) an illustration of a cube going *this* (rather than that) way; a triangular wooden block that stands on its longest side could actually have fallen over (it might be that it is *supposed* to stand on its shortest side), and a drawn triangle might (be meant to) represent a triangle that has fallen over; there might actually *be* an objectively establishable similarity between two faces; and so on – no such judgment need be made by the perceiver of the aspect; and in the typical case, the perceiver of the aspect makes it clear that what she sees the object *as* is *not* necessarily something that she takes it to *be*. This is why we normally *invite* the other to see the aspect, and why we do not take her to be *mistaken* (or literally blind) if she cannot see the aspect we see. This is going to matter when we examine, in Section 2, the recurrent idea that aspects may be identified with, or in terms of, empirical concepts.

Another important thing to note is that aspects may be seen in non-ambiguous figures: for an aspect to dawn on us, there need not be, and often there is not, two (or more) competing, determinate aspects under which the object may be seen. This is one place where over-focusing on ambiguous figures such as the duck-rabbit or the Necker cube has led some readers of Wittgenstein astray, it seems to me. There is no clear, determinate aspect that competes with the similarity of one face to another, for example, and which that similarity, when it strikes us, might plausibly be thought to have replaced. Similarly, if you ask me to look at a face – whether depicted, photographed, or flesh and blood – and describe (what strikes me as) its expression, and I do, that does not mean that whenever I look at that or any other face, I see it as having some determinate expression or another. And even in cases where it seems that there are two or more determinate aspects under which an object may be seen, that does not mean that we must be seeing that object under one of them whenever we look at that object. For example, if you invite me to see, and say, which way the letter F is facing, and I look and it strikes me that it is facing right (say), that does *not* mean that *every time* I see the letter F I see it as facing right, or else as facing left. This will become important for us in Sections 4 and 5, when we ask what sense can be given to the recurrent idea that all (normal) seeing is seeing-as – that everything we see, at least normally, is seen under some particular, determinate aspect or another.

## 2 Aspects and Concepts

It has seemed obvious to many readers of Wittgenstein that what he calls ‘aspects’ may aptly be identified with, or in terms of, concepts, so that in the formula “perceiving *x* as *y*”, “*y*” stands for a *concept*, or is to be understood in terms of one – namely, the *concept* (of) *y*. This idea has sometimes been combined with