

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*
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Lecture IX: §§155 - 184

Starting in §156, Wittgenstein interpolates a discussion of reading. He means reading aloud from written characters, not necessarily with understanding: deriving sounds from marks on paper. Why this interpolation? He is simplifying both in order to have a more manageable case and in order to get at something central to the more complex case. The case has the following features:

- Reading in this sense is a mental notion; it does involve the mind.
- Reading in this sense is a lower-level notion than understanding is; there is no question about whether talk of temporality makes sense, since reading is a particular act, thus with a (reasonably definite) onset and termination.
- There is less distance between the manifestations and "the reading itself;" it looks less problematic than understanding here.
- There is no question of content; questions of understanding are inextricably bound up with questions about the meanings of words. In the case of understanding, one cannot clearly separate "the language side" from "the mind side." That issue is irrelevant to reading.
- There is no question of something issuing in infinitely many possible applications.

So if grammatical features emerge from our investigation that lead us away from some idea of definite mental processes, then surely in the more complicated case of understanding, we will see that there has been a misconstrual of the grammar too. We will get away from the idea in the more complicated case if we can slough it off in the simpler case. He wants to show that even here, matters are much less straightforward than one might have thought. Again, "it disperses the fog..."

But there is another side of this, which emerges in the second half of the passages on reading: the idea of reading as deriving sounds from a text is connected to ideas about understanding. On the "process model" Wittgenstein is attacking, we "read off" from our understanding our "internal text." This is a manifestation of the applications' "flowing from" the state of understanding, justified by it. If the grammar of reading shows, then, that it is a non-localizable notion, if it has the features of intricacy, variegation, and spread, then we would need to wonder about

what model we had in mind in thinking about understanding. This is particularly clear when Wittgenstein talks of "deriving the sounds from the marks" (e.g., in §162), and when he talk of the marks as "guiding us." This is just the suspect model of understanding. So if we cast out the notion of deriving in the case of reading, where we have a text in front of us, then so much the worse for philosophical ways of talking about deriving or guiding in the case of understanding. Characterizations of understanding as that from which the use of words is derived start to look over-inflated or empty.

Now what does he do with it? The most compelling things he does are the same sorts of things that we saw him do with understanding: he elicits an appreciation that this seemingly straightforward notion is not so straightforward after all. Here, though, he is making a contrast between the sense in which it is straightforward (we all know when we are reading and when not) and the sense in which it is *not* straightforward (when it is construed on the model of a definite state).

Wittgenstein points to the fact that there are different ways of reading: attentively, haltingly, phonetically, etc. There is nothing in consciousness of which we are directly aware that runs through the different cases. Now consider cases in which a judgment is at issue whether there really is reading going on. We need to think about what enters into these ascriptions. Even here we get a "spread effect:" the reader may have memorized the words, or guessed them from the context, or made random mistakes, or guessed from the initial letter what the word is, etc. By bringing up all of those examples, Wittgenstein thinks that we will see that there is an indefinite number of transitional cases, and that we will appreciate the complexity of the criteria that we use to judge. We may consider all sorts of things: what is actually happening, the reader's voice, the fluency, the cadence, the eye movement, the future fluency, the nature of the text, etc. Sometimes there is no answer whether the reader is reading or not; sometimes the answer depends in odd ways on us (whether we will judge a reader to be randomly groping for words may depend on whether we can discern a pattern in what she is doing).

All of this is meant to point to the idea that any insistence that there is a definite answer to "Is the reader reading?" and the insistence that goes along with it — that the appearance that the answer is indeterminate is just a consequence of our lack of acuity in determining whether the thing is there or not — all invoke or bespeak a

certain construal of what goes on in reading, a construal that exceeds the facts. The difference in the cases, the "spread effect," raises the question why we think that there is one state of reading common to all of the cases. If we think that there is, then how does it link up with the actual criteria we use in ascribing reading to the reader? — The points are more vivid in this case than in the case of understanding, because the case appears (at first blush, at any rate) to be simpler.

Wittgenstein has good, vivid examples of how the spread effect shows up in the putative connection between state-or-process and the criteria we actually use. He discusses the difference between reading from a normally used text and a made-up script. He wonders what we would use to judge whether a person is using a set of marks as a made-up script rather than putting marks on paper and making up sounds as she goes along. When do we call it "reading?" This brings up all sorts of criteria that are rather different from the ordinary case. Wittgenstein is trying to get us to see that there are lots of questions about how much, or what we have to bring in each case, or what counts as criteria; and if we think of reading as a definite state, then does that mean that anything at issue in any one case somehow must be implicitly operative in another case? — That is a ludicrous idea. What is at issue in, say, judging that someone is using a made-up script as something from which he will read, versus doing something else, is not at all what is going on in a normal case of reading from an English text. And it would be odd to insist that it must be going on unconsciously. Similarly, what is it to judge someone to be reading from phonetic marks, or from Chinese ideographs? Wittgenstein thinks that we will readily see the heterogeneity here, and so we will have little temptation to say that all the criteria operative in any one case *must* be operative in the straightforward case.

Wittgenstein does depict one move as the central move against this, against the idea of the spread of our criteria as telling against the "definite-state-or-process" view. This is the idea that what is at stake is the *conscious* act of reading.

Wittgenstein says at §159 that we might want to find a basis for our judgments of reading, of what is ascribed in ascribing reading, in the occurrent mental phenomena: what is going on in the "passing show" of the reader's mind. What Wittgenstein does, fairly typically, in §159 is to base that objection on the certainty of self-ascription. The Interlocutor says in §159: "A man surely knows whether he is reading or only pretending to read!" Now let us take for granted this surety of self-ascription. The idea is that because the agent typically has no doubt whether she is

reading or not, we are entitled to suppose that there is a conscious act of reading. A third person might need all of these criteria; there might be a spread effect, etc.; but the *reader* knows whether she is reading. That shows, according to the Interlocutor, that there is something common to all cases of reading, namely this conscious act.

Wittgenstein is trying to get us to see that the level of mental phenomena on which we do have an independent grasp do *not* yield this conscious act of reading. There is no common set of sensations that accompany reading. There are characteristic sensations that may be present in some cases, but there is no one sensation — nothing on which we have an independent grasp in "the passing show" which is the act of reading. Wittgenstein wants to get us to see that, not so much by a grammatical investigation, but just by introspection (phenomenologically, if you like).

All of what Wittgenstein is doing is meant to counter the push to think of reading as the definite mental thing that goes on in me. But one always wants to object that there is one thing: a matter of deriving sounds from text. It is just part of the definition of 'reading'. In response, as Wittgenstein says at the end of §182, do not think that a definition helps: it just throws us back to the character of the definiens, what "deriving" is. So, starting at §162, Wittgenstein focuses on the operative notion of deriving, and then we get back to questions of understanding, since deriving will be juxtaposed with the notion of "flowing from."

What, then, of deriving? Wittgenstein is willing to allow that there is "something common" to all cases of reading, viz., deriving sounds from script. But the idea that deriving will get us closer to "the thing at stake" is a non-starter. The notion of deriving is itself a "spread" notion. Wittgenstein is trying to avoid any hypostasis of the thing that is the influence of the marks on us. Here he engages, in a rare moment, in a discussion of causal notions. We have expressions like 'The script causes us to utter these sounds'. Now, it may not be *wrong* to say that, in some circumstances, the words on paper are causing me to say something. But Wittgenstein wants to be very careful about causal notions; for we are too prone to fall into the "crossing of pictures." We think that we are using 'cause' in these circumstances in the same way in which we use it in scientific, physical contexts. The sections in which Wittgenstein is suggesting this have to bear a fair amount of weight, and it is unclear whether they are up to it. It is a crucial issue: the use of

causal notions in describing all of these matters — understanding, reading, deriving — is something in which we (analytic philosophers in the year 2001) automatically engage. It is something about which Wittgenstein is suspicious — and rightly so — but I find him not thorough enough on the issue. The question is to unearth (a) whether these uses of 'cause' are free from objection, and (b) where they have the potential of sending us off in the wrong direction. To show a lack of fit with the more scientific ways of talking about causes, Wittgenstein attempts to base, phenomenologically, what we say about these matters on what we feel we notice when we derive sounds from script. He is trying to be diagnostic in examining our use of causal locutions, to see what leads us astray. (See §§161-4.)

It is the same lesson: we use the notion in particular circumstances, with particular marks and features. In each case the marks go beyond the fact that the person emits some sounds: but *how* they go beyond that fact is given by what we look at in the particular case in justifying the judgment that the speaker derives the sound from the script. This is to get us to see that the *content* of the notion of deriving a copy from the original arises from the particular circumstances. From considering these, we are meant to see that there is no *core* — no *thing* that is "the influence of the words on us," no thing that is "the deriving." (At §164, Wittgenstein uses the analogy of the artichoke. That is a terrible analogy: for when you peel away the leaves of the artichoke you get the best part, the heart of the artichoke. But Wittgenstein's point is precisely that there is no heart. We would be better off replacing the artichoke with an onion. When you peel away the layers of an onion, you are left with nothing. But that is no cause for weeping.) If you reject the onion, and you look for some thing to ground your talk of deriving, then you will be driven back inside the head: the characteristic experience of reading, say.

One of the reasons that Wittgenstein does not go on more about our use of causal notions is that he has the *Interlocutor* pass too quickly to some idea of our feeling of being caused. Wittgenstein's diagnosis of what is moving us goes too quickly to this, which eases his burden of showing that that use of 'cause' does not fit with our ordinary notion. It is not that we have a notion of causal connection that is independent of our notion of reading, whose presence we look for in *this* case. To talk of a connection here is to say no more than that we are reading. Wittgenstein is trying to get us to see that nothing that we can describe meets the demand that we lay down in what we seek — the hypostatized "guiding" or "influence," which

answers to what we are ascribing in ascribing "being guided by the text." The lesson here is that we seek to characterize the situation by way of the description "You say this because that is what is written." In *that* sense, the words guide you. The temptation is to take that as a description of your experience; and then, lacking any particular item in the experience that answers to the description, we take it as a description of what must lie beyond the experiences in some deeper sense. That is what Wittgenstein is getting at when he says, at §177, "When I reflect on what I experience in such a case I look at it through the medium of the concept 'because' (or 'influence' or 'cause' or 'connexion')." We are drawn to call them experiences of the guiding or deriving only because the notions are already in place at the start. But that provides no anchor for a notion of a definite thing. (§177 is meant, then, to be quite crucial.)

Let us now return to considering understanding. The objection to Wittgenstein's "no-process" view that people find most plausible at present, starts from elsewhere, viz., what is claimed to be a scientific viewpoint. The objection says something like this: It is up to science (especially neurobiology) to tell us whether understanding is a definite process or not. Surely it is at least conceivable that future empirical research will discover such definite states or processes of understanding, reading, meaning, etc. There's nothing that precludes the possibility that we will find "understanding neurons." And if that is so, then all that Wittgenstein is doing in urging this "no-process" view is doing a kind of a priori anti-science, or at least, he is betting on the failure of certain empirical hypotheses. (It is essential to the force of this objection that it has as a starting point a definite notion of state and process. After all, we all agree that there are neural states and kinds of apparatus.) That's the objection. My paper "Wittgenstein, Mind, and Scientism" is devoted to it, but I will go over the chief considerations in lecture.

Wittgenstein can be painted into this corner — as arguing that a certain scientific hypothesis will fail — then that looks very bad for him. That, after all, is inconsonant with his general philosophical viewpoint, which is anxious to avoid a priori speculation. He constantly attacks a priori conceptions of how things "must" be. (That's brought out very well in Cora Diamond's "Introduction" to her book *The Realistic Spirit*.) Thus, it would be very odd if Wittgenstein were engaging in a priori argument against the success of science. It would also align Wittgenstein, at this level of description, with various forms of philosophy that are, if not downright

laughable, then at least repugnant. (Think of the a priori arguments against Copernicus of the late Scholastics, or of the a priori arguments of early 20th century German idealists against Relativity.) Of course, those were attempted a priori arguments against theories that had some scientific backing; now, though, we are talking about a priori arguments against the possibility of scientific results that are still quite speculative. But we still don't want to paint Wittgenstein into this corner. To do so would be just to make him too anti-scientific.

One problem, though, is that Wittgenstein was, personally in some sense disposed against the scientific. His general views tend to be rather hostile to modern science. This appears even in his early work, including the *Tractatus* : see 6.371: "The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena." It's harder to imagine a more anti-scientific sentence. (There are also allied sentiments in 6.4312, and in 6.52: "Even when all scientific questions are answered, the problems of life remain untouched." And also see the Foreword to *Philosophical Remarks* , 1930.)

But I would prefer to say that Wittgenstein is (not anti-scientific but) anti-*scientistic* . He opposes scientism, the notion that all questions can be treated, and eventually solved, by empirical science, that it is clear what those questions are, and that empirical science is the model for knowledge and clarity everywhere. Scientism is the view that science is the measure of all things, so to speak.