

Meaning and Understanding

Jason Bridges
University of Chicago

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1. Two roles for meaning and understanding

A teacher orders a student, ‘Add two’ (PI §185). The order means that the student is to write down the arithmetic sequence that begins with two and then proceeds by twos. The student understands this, and she writes down the correct sequence up to the point at which the teacher indicates she can stop.

In this scene we see meaning and understanding at work, playing roles that they play familiarly and ubiquitously in our everyday life with language. It is natural to look to philosophy for deeper insight into what these roles are and how meaning and understanding are able to play them. A central theme of the much-discussed sections §§138-242 of *Philosophical Investigations*, and of related remarks elsewhere in Wittgenstein’s later writings, is how easy it is for us to be led astray as we seek this deeper insight: how prone we are to fall into difficulty and confusion, and to lose our grip on the familiar phenomena whose depths we had sought to plumb.

What roles are at issue? Here is one. In writing down 2, 4, 6, 8 and so on, the student responds to the order *correctly*. Had she written down another sequence—beginning, say, with 2, 8 and 16—her response would have been incorrect. What makes it the case that writing down the first of these series counts as a correct response and that writing down the second does not? A natural answer to this question is that it is the order’s meaning: that it is because the order means that the student is to write down the sequence beginning with two and then proceeding by twos that the student must produce some initial portion of that very sequence if she is to execute the

order aright. As Wittgenstein's interlocutor puts a thought in this vicinity, 'The right step is the one that accords with the order—as it was *meant*' (PI §186).

An order to produce an arithmetic sequence provides a particularly sharp example of a phenomenon that appears to obtain much more generally: the meaning of an expression or utterance contributes to the determination of correct and incorrect, right and wrong, ways to use or respond to it. A meaningful item's meaning helps to fix a norm, a standard of correctness, in the use of, or response to, the item. This norm-fixing power of meaning—what we might call meaning's *normativity*—seems to be essential to it. Knowledge of the meaning of an assertion, for example, seems impossible without some knowledge of the circumstances under which it would be right to make it.

It is widely recognized that Wittgenstein is interested in the thought that meaning is normative, and that he sees grave problems in what the interlocutor wants to say—and by extension, what *we* want to say, for the interlocutor is supposed to be our proxy—about how meaning inhabits its normative role. Wittgenstein's treatment of our difficulties in making sense of the normativity of meaning has been the central focus of the post-Kripkean (1982) literature on PI §§138-242 (for early touchstones, see Wright, 1984; McDowell, 1984; Boghossian, 1989). Work in this vein has been highly visible, and has spawned an interest in the normativity of meaning as such, quite apart from the question of the interpretation of Wittgenstein. 'The normativity of meaning' now labels a subfield in the philosophy of language, whose mandate is to explore the nature and structure of the normative role of meaning in the context of contemporary thinking about semantics and pragmatics. (See Wikforss, 2001, for an influential early treatment; Hattiangadi, 2007, for a book-length discussion; and Ginsborg, 2011, for an incisive review of Hattiangadi.)

I said that the scene from PI §185 illustrates work done not just by meaning but by understanding. Indeed, Wittgenstein discusses understanding in PI §§138-242 at least as much as he discusses meaning. What issues are at stake in his treatment of understanding? One plausible candidate is, again, normativity. Just as we may speak of the student's response as being in accord (or conflict) with the order's meaning, so we may speak of that response as being in accord (or conflict) with her understanding of the order's meaning. In light of this observation, it might look tempting to organize our reading of Wittgenstein's treatment of understanding around the issue of normativity (see, e.g., McDowell, 1998a). But while Wittgenstein is certainly concerned with difficulties in our achieving a satisfactory view of how understanding can bear normatively on use, it would be a serious mistake to suppose that this is the only relationship between understanding and use our grasp of which is under scrutiny in this region of the *Investigations*.

Consider the following remark:

Perhaps you will say here: to have got the system (or, again, to understand it) can't consist in continuing the series up to *this* or *that* number: *that* is only applying one's understanding. The understanding itself is a state which is the *source* of the correct use.
(PI §146)

It is not, or not simply, a thought about normativity that is the focus here. The interlocutor objects to the proposition that understanding the series of natural numbers consists in continuing the series up to some point or other, on the ground that this overlooks the distinction between understanding and 'applying one's understanding'. And the idea that understanding is something we might 'apply' cannot be analyzed simply in terms of the idea that understanding bears normatively on our use. In particular, applying one's understanding of the series cannot just be a

matter of producing a series that is in accord with one's understanding. Consider the distinction between following a rule and merely acting in accordance with a rule (cf. PG p.101, BB p.13). Following the rule for the Fibonacci series, I write down, '1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13'. What I have written is in accord with any number of rules for arithmetical series. But I am following only one: the rule for the Fibonacci series. Analogously, the student's writing down, '2, 4, 6, 8' in response to the order accords with any number of possible understandings of the order's meaning. But the student is not thereby 'applying' all of these different understandings. The interlocutor's suggestion, brought to bear on this case, is that the student is applying one particular understanding, namely, the understanding of the order she in fact has at the time she gives her response.

What does it add to the observation that a person's behavior accords with a certain understanding of an order that she is applying that understanding of the order? Whatever else we might want to say about it, it is clear that the additional ingredient has an explanatory aspect. To say that the student is applying a certain understanding of the order in responding to it is to offer an explanation of her response; it is to say that she responds to the order as she does *because* she understands the order in that particular way. It is this *explanatory* role that the interlocutor endeavors to capture in speaking of understanding as the 'source' of use.

Perhaps owing to its preoccupation with normativity, the secondary literature on PI §§138-242 and related regions of the later work has generally failed to recognize that Wittgenstein is as concerned with the explanatory role of understanding as he is with the normative role of meaning and understanding (though see Haase, 2009, for a noteworthy exception). To correct for this imbalance, I will in this chapter press on the scales the other way. I will sketch out a dialectic between Wittgenstein and his interlocutor centered on the

explanatory role of understanding. We will see that various elements in the text become clearer when viewed in this light.

As I implied above, the proximate cause of the secondary literature's intense focus on normativity is Kripke (1982). But that the book has had this influence shows that it itself has been subject to an unduly narrow reading. Kripke's skeptical argument, as with the Wittgensteinian material that is its inspiration, is as much concerned with the explanatory role of understanding as it is with the normativity of meaning. A further goal of this chapter is to provide the material for a fresh engagement with Kripke's seminal text.

2. The guidance conception of understanding

What is it to apply your understanding of the meaning of an expression or utterance when you use or respond to it? The interlocutor has a single underlying idea about how to answer this question, which he offers in a variety of guises throughout PI §§138-242. His master thought is that applying one's understanding is a matter of being guided by an item in one's mind. To understand an expression's or utterance's meaning is to have an item in your mind that you can consult when you need to use or respond to the expression or utterance, and that will then show you how to proceed. Let us call this idea the *guidance conception* of understanding (cf. Stroud, 1996).

Consider the proposal that 'what really comes before our mind when we *understand* a word' is a 'picture' (PI §139). For example, 'when you hear the word "cube"', a 'drawing of a cube' comes 'before your mind' (PI §139). Let us say you are participating in an object-identification task: various things are placed before you in succession, and you are told to point at something if and only if it is a 'cube'. An object is presented that is not a cube—say, a

triangular prism—and you refrain from pointing at it. Why? It looks like a perfectly good answer to this question that the word ‘cube’ called to your mind a picture of a cube, and it was evident to you that ‘this use of the word [i.e. pointing to the prism] doesn’t fit the picture’ (PI §139). The interlocutor’s thought is that it is in such transactions with inner or mental guides that the application of understanding consists.

We noted in the previous section that the idea of applying one’s understanding, like the idea of following a rule, has an explanatory aspect. There is at least this to be said for the guidance conception: the form of explanation to which it connects the application of understanding is one that is familiar and unmysterious. We do often, in everyday life, explain people’s performances by citing their consultations with guides, with items that show or tell them what to do. In PI §1, for example, the shopkeeper chooses the right color of apple because he consults a chart of color samples. It is true that the consultation the interlocutor envisions is not with a physical object but with an item ‘before the mind’. But we *can* consult and be guided by such items. If I am asked to determine whether it is appropriate to apply to a given object a word for a shade like ‘royal blue’ or ‘teal’, it can certainly help me to bring to mind images of objects that have been previously presented to me as representatives of the meanings of these words—say, an image of a certain sweater.

In the interlocutor’s proposal about ‘cube’, the mental item that one is said to consult is an image of the object or kind of object for which the word stands. The example just mentioned suggests a closely related proposal for color-words: that these words call to mind images of objects that are samples of the appropriate shades and colors (see PI §239). But there are less pictorial ways to develop the idea of inner guidance. In the case of the math teacher’s order, the interlocutor suggests that the student has an image, not of the sequence of numbers she is

supposed to embark upon writing down (after all, the sequence is infinitely long), but of an ‘algebraic formula’, and that she is then able to determine what to write through a ‘derivation’ from that formula (PI §146). Elsewhere he shifts away from visual imagery entirely, and suggests that one might hear an ‘inner voice’ telling one what to do, which one then ‘obeys’ (PI §213). And no doubt there are other possibilities: what we need to fill out the conception for a given kind of expression or utterance are mental items that we can make sense of, in some way or another, as potential guides in the use of or response to expressions or utterances of the kind.

But however the conception is spelled out, it is hopeless, and its hopelessness is a central message of this region of the *Investigations*. The problem turns on the following simple point: an item cannot succeed in guiding you a particular way, in showing you to do some particular thing, unless you understand it to show you that. The shopkeeper’s color chart, with its juxtaposition of the word ‘red’ and a sample of red, cannot guide the shopkeeper to grab red apples unless he understands it to have that significance. A parallel point goes for any object, be it physical or mental, that is to instruct or direct one to proceed in some particular way: the object can play that role only if you understand it to provide those instructions or directions. As Wittgenstein says of the ‘inner voice’, ‘if it can guide me right, it can also guide me wrong’ (PI §213). And we may add, it can fail to guide me at all. Which of these eventualities obtains will depend upon what, if anything, I understand the inner voice to be telling me to do.

The point can be put this way: if the guidance conception were correct about the connection between use and understanding that obtains when a subject applies her understanding, then that connection would depend upon the subject’s having a *second-order* understanding, an understanding of the inner item whose presence constitutes her original understanding. And this circumstance raises an obvious question: how are we to conceive the

role of the second-order understanding in bringing about the subject's uses and responses? In particular, does the second-order understanding *guide* the subject's responses to the item constituting her first-order understanding?

Neither a positive nor a negative answer to this question is satisfactory. If the proponent of the guidance conception answers no, then while his conception implies a role for a second-order state of understanding in facilitating the competent use of language, it provides no account of the way in which that state fulfills that role. And yet the point of the guidance conception was to illuminate the role of understanding in facilitating performances. If we see a need for such an account, why should the need not be as pressing with respect to the understanding of mental guides as it is with respect to the understanding of public expressions and utterances? The guidance conception, if applied only to first-order states of understanding, seems just to contrive to push the locus of our puzzlement further inward and so out of view.

But on the other hand, if the proponent of the guidance conception answers yes, then he is faced with a regress. The item constituting the subject's second-order understanding can guide her to a particular response to the item constituting her first-order understanding only if she understands it as doing so. Thus a third-order understanding comes into play. And our question simply recurs. (See PI §239 for a concise articulation of the dilemma just traced.)

Faced with this difficulty, there is a temptation to suppose that mental items are different from their external counterparts in just the way needed to prevent a regress. The temptation, in other words, is to think that we can posit mental guides without being saddled by questions about second-order understandings. Mental guides are special. Perhaps we seek to capture their specialness by holding that they are 'self-interpreting' (Fogelin, 2009, p.19). Or we say, as does Wittgenstein when confronted with the observation that the same mental picture might be taken

to speak either for or against applying ‘cube’ to a triangular prism, ‘I should have thought that the picture forced a particular use on me,’ with the elaboration that he had thought the forcing or ‘compulsion’ at stake here to be not ‘psychological’ but ‘logical’ (PI §140). Talk of logical compulsion or self interpretation attempts to express the idea that a mental guide provides for its own understanding, thereby relieving the subject of the burden of doing the understanding herself.

As Wittgenstein realizes, the ‘thought’ that tempts him is not even false: there is no genuine idea here but only the illusion of one. (PI §140 goes on: ‘How could I think that? What did I think?’, and finds no satisfactory answer to the second of these questions.) If an item is to bear on a person’s use of ‘cube’ by showing *her* how to apply it, then *she* must grasp what she is being shown. There is no getting around the fact that her understanding the item in this way will be a state of her. And so there is no getting around the fact that when we conceive the relationship between the mental item and the subject’s performance as one of guidance, we are committed to the presence of a second-order state of understanding on the part of the subject. To insist that the mental item interprets itself, or provides for its own understanding, is in effect an attempt to sidestep this simple point of logic. It is to claim that the subject both understands the item (because she is guided by it) and doesn’t understand the item (because the item does the work of understanding itself). However special the mind may be, it cannot be as special as to serve as a locus of logically-contradictory states of affairs.

3. Mind as mechanism

Why does Wittgenstein spend so much time on the guidance conception? The interlocutor’s seemingly inexhaustible penchant for promoting that conception must speak to Wittgenstein’s

sense of the appeal, even inevitability, that the conception has for us when we reflect philosophically on the role of understanding in explaining performance. But what is supposed to be the source of the appeal? In this section and the next I offer an answer to this question.

Wittgenstein tell us that when the interlocutor conceives the relationship between the student's understanding and her performance on the model of a 'derivation of a series from its formula'—which we have noted to be a version of the guidance conception—she is supposing that '[t]he understanding is a state which is the *SOURCE* of the correct use' (PI §146). I quoted this remark in the first section as evidence of the interlocutor's conviction that the understanding stands in an explanatory, and not just normative, relationship to use. But it is now important for us to register that Wittgenstein does not mean the interlocutor's remark merely to assert the existence of an explanatory relationship between understanding and use; it is meant further to gesture toward a particular way of viewing the nature of the explanatory relationship that obtains between them.

Wittgenstein expands upon this view a few passages later: 'If one says that knowing the ABC is a state of the mind, one is thinking of a state of a mental apparatus (perhaps of the brain) by means of which we explain the manifestations of that knowledge' (PI §149). For the interlocutor, one's knowledge or understanding is to be seen as a state of a 'mental apparatus', and as explaining one's uses and responses as 'manifestations'. Wittgenstein does not speak of a mental 'apparatus' [*apparats*] elsewhere. But the talk of an apparatus is clearly a terminological variant on his frequent ascriptions to the interlocutor of an inclination to posit the existence of mental 'mechanisms' (see, in addition to the examples cited below, PI §157, §613, §689; BB p.40, p.97; see also the closely related talk of the mind as a 'medium' at PI §102, §109,

§308; Z §273; BB p.3, p.5, p.43). For Wittgenstein, the interlocutor's attachment to the guidance conception is one manifestation of this inclination.

What is involved in thinking of understanding as a state of a mental apparatus or mechanism? The crucial point is that if we are to conceive understanding in this way, then 'there ought to be two different criteria for such a state: a knowledge of the construction of the apparatus, quite apart from what it does' (PI §149; see also BB p.118, PG p.104). That is to say, it belongs to the concept of an apparatus or mechanism that it is possible to characterize a component of an apparatus in two ways, either in relation to what the apparatus does or in relation to the way in which the apparatus is constructed. To take a familiar example, we might characterize a carburetor in terms of its contribution to an engine's work of burning fuel to produce motion (namely, its mixing fuel and air and sending it on to the combustion chamber) or in terms of its physical characteristics (e.g., its shape, the alloys of which it is composed.). Let us call the distinction here exemplified as that between characterizations at the level of *activity* and characterizations at the level of *construction*. Wittgenstein's point is that if we are to make good on our vision of the understanding as a state of a mechanism, we must find both construction-level and activity-level characterizations of that state.

The parenthetical bit in the above quotation—'a state of a mental apparatus (perhaps of the brain)' might seem to indicate that the interlocutor is open to viewing the mind as a physical mechanism, with construction-level characterizations of its states to be couched in physical (e.g., neurophysiological) terms. But that is not the interlocutor's usual orientation (cf. Goldfarb, 1992). On the contrary, when he is struck by the 'curious effects' that the 'mechanism of the mind' seems capable of producing, he is inclined rather to suppose 'no physical mechanism

could behave in this way' (BB p.5). He thus seeks to understand the processes of the mind as exercises of a purely 'psychical mechanism' (BB p.12).

Now, the idea of a non-physical mechanism might seem a complete non-starter, suggesting configurations in some wispy spiritual material. And sometimes Wittgenstein does ascribe such a vision to his interlocutor: 'If one says that thought is a mental activity, or an activity of the mind, one thinks of the mind as a cloudy gaseous medium in which many things can happen which cannot occur in a different sphere, and from which many things can be expected that are otherwise not possible' (PG p.100). But if we interpret the idea of mechanism at a certain degree of abstraction, we can make better sense of what it could be to understand the mind as a non-physical mechanism, and we can see in particular why Wittgenstein regards the guidance conception as an attempt to understand the mind in this way. The crucial point is that we should hear the requirement of 'knowledge of the construction of the apparatus' (PI §149) as at a bottom a demand for *context-independent* characterizations of the apparatus's states and processes.

To elaborate: when we give activity-level characterizations of the states and processes of an object whose activity interests us, our characterizations will often relate the object to the environment in which it is situated. This will be so, for example, if our characterizations refer to interactions between the object and other particulars; it will also be so if the characterizations place what the object does in the context of larger systems or patterns of activity, involving other goings on in the world around it. In such cases, the concepts we bring to bear in specifying the object's activity will be such that recognizing those concepts to apply to the object and its doings will involve recognizing the object to stand in certain relationships to elements in its surroundings. The call for a 'construction'-level characterization of a mechanism should be

understood as a call for an alternative set of concepts applicable to the object's states and processes, concepts whose suitability for such application we can recognize *without* our needing to bring into view the way in which the object is related to its surroundings. The aim, in other words, is to find characterizations of these states and processes such that we can abstract from the context in which the object is embedded—such that we can, as it were, blot out the world around the object—and still be in a position to make sense of, and see the applicability of, these characterizations.

To construe the mind as a mechanism is thus, as the passage just quoted from PG says, to think of it as a 'sphere', as a self-standing realm. But the form of self-standing-ness that is at stake is not fundamentally spatial or material (or pseudo-spatial and pseudo-material, as in talk of a gaseous medium): it is conceptual. What is self-standing, in the first instance, is our *understanding* of the states and processes of the object when we are conceptualizing them at the level of 'construction'. When we describe the student as responding to the teacher's order by writing out the correct series, we obviously do not satisfy the context-independence requirement. For we locate her activity in a complex context, involving both social interaction with a particular other person and participation in ongoing linguistic practices. A mechanistic account of the role of the student's understanding in facilitating her response will seek to bring the state of understanding into view for us in a way that does not depend upon our grasp of these larger circumstances of the student's activity. The hope is that we will then be able, on the basis of the characterizations, to gain a distinctive kind of insight into the mental processes that provide for the student's successful participation in the communicative interaction with the teacher. The aim of interpreting complex nexuses of activity through analysis into independently explicable mechanisms is a regulative ideal in many of our most fruitful ways of explaining what goes on in

the world; it can be very tempting to suppose that we should seek such illumination into the activity of the mind as well.

Framing the idea of mechanism in terms of this abstract explanatory ideal, we can grasp why Wittgenstein regards the guidance conception as an attempt to treat the mind as a mechanism. The conception holds that a state of understanding is constituted by an item in the mind capable of guiding your performance. When you act upon your understanding, you consult the relevant item, and it shows you what to do. Now, on every variant of the conception the interlocutor proposes, the posited guiding item is what people tend to call a ‘mental image’—a presence in the sensory or perceptual imagination. This is not a coincidence; it is internal to the conception. We cannot make sense of the idea of a consultation with an inner guide without having recourse to the quasi-perceptual relationship in which a subject stands to her mental images. The conception requires us to find inner items that can be intelligibly understood as showing or telling us things, and the quasi-perceptual presentness of a mental image—the mode of presentness that can make it seem appealing to say of an image that ‘it comes before the mind’s eye’ (PI §56)—fits it uniquely for that role.

At the same time, it is the imagistic character of the hypothesized understanding-constituting items that can make the guidance conception seem like an attractive candidate for a mechanistic treatment of the states and processes of the mind that involve understanding. If we think of the student’s state of understanding as constituted by the occurrence in her mind of an image—say, of the formula ‘ $x+2$ ’—we have access to a way of thinking about that state that does not depend upon our grasp of the context of the teacher’s and student’s interaction. Moreover, there is a tempting picture of mental imagery according to which we need essentially *no* context in view in order to make sense of a person as having a certain image. On this picture,

concepts of the enjoyment of mental imagery are atomistic: our recognizing them to apply does not depend upon our recognizing the subject to satisfy other concepts (at least outside of a very small circle). One way of arriving at this picture is to suppose that we know what it is to have a certain image immediately from our own case, and that to conceive someone else as having a comparable image then requires nothing more than conceiving her as having what we have. This kind of thought is, of course, equally tempting in the case of sensation.¹ If we allow the concept of sentience to encompass not just sensation and perception but exercises of the sensory and perceptual imagination, then we have an attractive way of locating the guidance conception in a long-standing empiricist tradition: that of attempting to explain sapience (as exemplified by, say, the student's competent response to the teacher) in terms of sentience.

This atomistic picture comes under severe criticism later in the *Investigations*, first with respect to sensation and then with respect to images.² But we do not in fact need to appreciate the untenability of that picture to see that the guidance conception fails in its aim at providing a mechanistic treatment of the application of understanding. For even if we were to grant that the guidance conception satisfies the context-independence requirement in its characterizations of states of understanding, the question would remain how we are to understand its treatment of the explanatory relationship between such states and the subject's performances. And as we have already seen, this treatment is subject to a regress; it presupposes the very nexus for which it is supposed to account.

¹ At the limit, the thought that we need no conceptual background for making sense of applications of a given concept shades into the thought that our confrontation with the relevant phenomenon involves no conceptualization at all. Here we are in the territory of the Myth of the Given. For an interpretation of Wittgenstein's treatment of sensation that casts Wittgenstein as targeting a Mythical conception of sensation, see McDowell (1998b).

² For the case of images, see the sections beginning around PI §361. The idea that we can straightaway make sense of supposing that a chair speaks to itself (PI §361) is a natural outgrowth of the thought that we know what it is to have images from our own case, and can then simply project the having of them onto another object. Wittgenstein's general prescription for avoiding such confusions—'One ought to ask, not what images are or what happens when one imagines anything, but how the word "imagination" is used' (PI §370)—applies to imagery an analogue to his point, discussed below, about the importance of keeping in view the 'context' or 'circumstances' in which we say a person understands.

The guidance conception is just one stab at a mechanistic treatment of the mind. We might take the lesson of its failure to be that we should seek a different such treatment. But that is not the moral Wittgenstein wants us to draw: he wants us to give up the search for mental mechanisms entirely. Consider the following passage from *Philosophical Grammar*:

The problem that concerns us could be summed up roughly thus: ‘Must one see an image of the colour blue in one’s mind whenever one reads the word “blue” with understanding?’ People have often asked this question and have commonly answered no; they have concluded from this answer that the characteristic process of understanding is just a different process which we’ve not yet grasped. [...] Well, ‘Understanding’ is not the name of a single process accompanying reading or hearing, but of more or less interrelated processes against a background, or in a context, of facts of a particular kind, viz. the actual use of a learnt language or languages. (PG p.74)

The realization that understanding a word needn’t involve an image coming before one’s mind when one hears or reads the word should not prompt us to look for a different ‘characteristic process of understanding’. Rather, it should prompt us to take seriously the observation that understanding takes place against a ‘background’ or ‘context’, comprising such facts as ‘the actual use of a learnt language’. Wittgenstein’s exposition implies that acknowledgement of the importance of this ‘background’ stands in opposition to the search for a ‘characteristic process of understanding’. To search for such a process, then, must be to seek a way of conceptualizing understanding that does not depend upon our grasp of the role of the background; it must be to seek concepts capable of providing context-independent characterizations of states and processes of understanding. To give up the search for the ‘characteristic process’ is just to give up the attempt to arrive at a mechanistic account of the operations of understanding.

The same dialectic is traced, if a bit less explicitly, in the more well-known remark PI 154. There Wittgenstein cautions against construing your coming to understand the principle of a series as a process that takes place ‘behind or side by side’ a formula’s for the series occurring to you. To construe understanding in this way would be to miss that it is a complex context of ‘particular circumstances’ that makes it intelligible to suppose that you come to understand when the formula occurs to you. Here again, what is at stake in the rhetoric to which the interlocutor is drawn but which Wittgenstein wishes to resist—in this case, talk of a mental process that occurs ‘behind or side by side’ imaginative presences—is the impulse to seek a context-independent, mechanistic account of understanding.

4. Rationality and guidance

The move that I credited to Wittgenstein at the end of the previous section might strike a contemporary philosopher as unconvincing. Why should the moral of the defeat of the guidance conception be that we should abandon the search for mechanistic accounts of the mind entirely? This can look like a huge leap. In particular, Wittgenstein’s failure to seriously consider the prospect of treating the mind as a physical mechanism might, with the benefit of hindsight, seem a serious lacuna. Contemporary mainstream philosophy of mind conceives itself as a part of cognitive science, with the project of cognitive science being to explain mental phenomena in terms of computational processes whose implementation in neural activity is in principle possible (if empirically very difficult) to describe. The development of cognitive science is one of the great intellectual achievements of recent decades. In light of this, the idea that the mere untenability of the guidance conception should force us to give up the search for ‘the characteristic process of understanding’ might seem to epitomize the scientific no-nothingism

that Burge (2010) argues was endemic in 20th-century philosophy of mind and epistemology. And indeed, Burge faults the later Wittgenstein in particular as a bad influence on the tradition: ‘His emphasis [...] on the complex background to any linguistic references led others to seek in linguistic usage a basis for understanding the representational aspects of experience, indeed of all objectivity’ (2010, p.128). This linguistic orientation is one prominent manifestation of the 20th century ‘hyper-intellectualism’ (2010, pp.13, 27) that, in Burge’s view, made a clear-eyed appreciation of the perceptual basis of objective thought impossible—with contemporary vision science now providing the needed corrective.

In fact the interlocutor’s (and Wittgenstein’s) relative lack of interest in the potential fruits of the psychological sciences is not a sign of ignorance or antipathy to science, but of insight into the nature of the interlocutor’s explanatory project.

The interlocutor’s topic is the role of understanding in explaining performance. In particular, he wants to give a mechanistic account of the role ascribed to understanding in our ordinary, everyday appeals to understanding in the explanation of people’s uses of and responses to language. Let us now register two related features of that role that we have not yet had occasion to consider explicitly. When we cite a person’s understanding of meaning to explain her uses of, or responses to, meaningful items, we typically do so in the service of representing her uses and responses as *rational* and *self-conscious*. Suppose that while we are building an IKEA bookshelf, you ask why I attached a certain board to the base using a certain screw, and I answer that that is what I understand the instructions to say to do at this stage. It will be natural for you to understand me as portraying myself as having a reason, a justification, for doing what I did, and as explaining my action in terms of that reason or justification: I am telling you that I acted as I did *for* the reason that the instructions said to do so. I thus represent my action as an exercise

of rationality, of the capacity to respond to reasons. What role is here played by my understanding of the instructions? Since the reason my explanation represents me as acting on is a function of what the instructions mean, my appreciation of this reason depends upon my grasp, my understanding, of that meaning. The role of my understanding of the instruction's meaning is to bring the reason into view for me. It thus necessary for the *self-consciousness* of my exercise of rationality: to my knowing myself to be acting for a reason provided by the meaning of the instructions.

The explanatory nexus into which the interlocutor wishes to achieve insight is one in which the subject does what she does because of her recognition of a justification she has for doing that. The interlocutor wants to find a context-independent way of identifying the states and processes involved in this nexus, but he does not want to thereby lose sight of the elements of self-consciousness and justification. Precisely not: his aim is to capture these elements in the workings of a mechanism.

It is in virtue of this aim that the guidance conception can seem uniquely attractive. First, as we have already noted, concepts of mental imagery can appear to possess a highly atomic character, and hence to enable the framing of context-independent specifications of mental states. But second, the concept of possession of a mental image incorporates the idea of self-knowledge: it is part of the idea of having, e.g., a certain visual image that I know myself to be having it. And third, the concept of guidance, of being shown or told how to do something, introduces an element of justification: when one is shown or told how to do something, one is thereby given a reason for proceeding in a particular way. Of course, our appreciation of this reason depends upon our understanding of what we are being shown or told to do, and it is just this point that ensnares the guidance conception in a regress. But if we have not yet thought through the

conception with enough clarity to see the inevitability of regress, then in light of the three points just listed, the conception can seem to provide a satisfying mechanistic analysis of just the explanatory nexus we are trying to understand. It is much less obvious how, starting with naturalistic characterizations of states of the brain, we could work our way up to capturing the elements of self-consciousness and rationality that are definitive of this nexus.

If the appeal of the guidance conception, as an account of acting on an understanding of meaning, lies in its apparent potential to show how self-consciousness and rationality can be incorporated into the workings of a mental mechanism, then we should expect the interlocutor to find it tempting in a wider range of cases—indeed, perhaps, in the case of any exercise of self-conscious rationality. It is in this light that we should view the lengthy set of remarks on reading—glossed as ‘the activity of rendering out loud what is written or printed’—that Wittgenstein interpolates into his discussion of the student’s understanding of the teacher’s order. Since Wittgenstein is explicit that understanding the meaning of what one is reading is not essential to reading as he wants to conceive it, the placement of these remarks can seem puzzling, and it is perhaps for that reason that they have received comparatively little attention in the secondary literature. A brief examination of their purport will help to reinforce the interpretation I have offered here of Wittgenstein’s concerns in PI §§138-242.

The discussion of reading is largely given over to querying what role the idea of a felt experience of ‘influence’ or ‘guidance’ should play in our reflections on the nature of the activity of reading aloud. The first point to note for our purposes is that Wittgenstein is explicitly concerned with the question of whether such an experience might be connected to the self-conscious rationality of the activity of reading aloud:

One might [...] say, I feel that the letters are the reason why I read such-and-such. For if someone asks me ‘Why do you read such-and-such?’—I justify my reading by the letters which are there.

This justification, however, was something that I said, or thought: what does it mean to say that I feel it? I should like to say: when I read I feel a kind of *influence* of the letters working on me. (PI §169)

We can tease apart two thoughts under scrutiny here. One is that the written letters provide my reason for reading aloud what I do, a reason I recognize myself to have and can articulate if asked to do so. My saying what I do is an exercise of self-conscious rationality, in which the written letters provide the justification I have, and know myself to have, for what I say. The second thought is that I *feel* this reason or justification as I read aloud, a feeling that can be characterized as that of ‘a kind of influence of the letters working on me.’

Wittgenstein does not reject the first of these thoughts. To the contrary: he allows that we do say and think that we acted for a reason provided by the letters, and there is no indication that he regards us as mistaken for saying or thinking this. It is rather the second thought that is his target:

[The thought] that we felt the influence of the letters on us when reading [...] appeals to us especially when we make a point of reading slowly—perhaps in order to see what does happen when we read. When we, so to speak, quite intentionally let ourselves be *guided* by the letters. But this ‘letting myself be guided’ in turn only consists in my looking carefully at the letters—and perhaps excluding certain other thoughts. (PI §170)

The feeling of being guided or influenced by the letters—which is supposed to constitute our awareness of the letters providing us with a reason—seems most apparent when we intentionally

‘let ourselves be guided’ by what is written. But letting oneself be guided the letters, Wittgenstein tells us, just consists in looking at the letters carefully and ignoring distractions. The evident implication is that any special ‘feeling’ to be found when we ‘let ourselves be guided’ must just be a matter of what it feels like to look at something carefully, to focus one’s attention.

Wittgenstein clearly regards this observation as undermining the point of our initial appeal to the distinctive ‘feeling’ of guidance. Why does it do so? What, indeed, was the point of the appeal? The answer is that we had hoped that the feeling of guidance constituted awareness of a ‘mechanism’ that effects the transition from our seeing the written letters to our speaking them aloud:

We imagine that a feeling enables us to perceive as it were a connecting mechanism between the look of the word and the sound that we utter. For when I speak of the experiences of being influenced, of causal connexion, of being guided, that is really meant to imply that I as it were feel the movement of the lever which connects seeing the letters with speaking. (PI §170)

Once we realize that the feeling of guidance is just the feeling of paying close attention to something and related phenomena, we are supposed to see that it is not plausibly understood as constituting a peek at the workings of a ‘connecting mechanism’.

Let us draw all these points together. Reading words aloud is an exercise of self-conscious rationality. The words on the page justify my saying what I do, and it is because of my recognition of the justification they provide me that I act. The interlocutor wants to account for this explanatory relationship mechanistically, but he wants to do so in a way that captures the self-conscious rationality in play. So he imagines a ‘connecting mechanism’ his access to which

is not third-personal and theoretical—as it would be if we were positing some physical, say computational, process mediating the transition from perception to performance—but first-personal and experiential—a matter of his felt awareness of the letters he sees guiding what he says. The appeal to the experience of being guided by the letters is meant to play a role analogous to the appeal to images in the case of the guidance conception of understanding. In both cases, the aim is to identify items in the realm of sentience that constitute processes of sapience—or as we can now say, of self-conscious rationality. In both cases, finally, Wittgenstein traces the failure of the attempt to an insufficient appreciation of the multiplicity of circumstances that we must have in view to grasp the phenomena at issue (see PI §172-173).

5. Kripke on rationality and guidance

Kripke (1982) has played a decisive role in shaping the literature on Wittgenstein's remarks on meaning and understanding. The skeptical paradox outlined in that book is almost always read as centered on the question of how to account for the normativity of meaning. As I mentioned at the outset, this interpretive assumption is at the root of the great interest in the normativity of meaning in recent decades.

There is no question that Kripke's skeptic has the normativity of meaning in view: he criticizes various candidate accounts of the constitution of meaning, such as dispositionalism, on the ground that they fail to accommodate normativity. But the exposition of the skeptical paradox is complicated and multifaceted. Intertwined with the examination of our various failed attempts to provide for normativity is an additional thread of skeptical thought whose concern at its core is to establish our inability to account for the *explanatory* role that we ordinarily suppose a person's grasp of meaning to play. I have suggested that this role should be understood in terms

of the contribution of the subject's understanding of meaning to her exercise of self-conscious rationality in using and responding to expressions and utterances. And I have argued that the interlocutor is attracted to the guidance conception because it seems to provide a way of gaining a distinctive kind of insight into the workings of self-conscious rationality in such cases. In this closing section, I will show that Kripke's skeptic shares just this commitment of Wittgenstein's interlocutor. Indeed, the Kripkean skeptic's commitment to the guidance conception is absolute: he believes the failure of the conception to provide a satisfactory account of the putative rational-explanatory role of understanding implies that it cannot in fact play this role.

To see that Kripke, at least some of the time, frames the skeptical paradox as concerned with the rational-explanatory role of our grasp of meaning, consider the following passage:

Almost all of us unhesitatingly produce the answer '125' when asked for the sum of 68 and 57, without any thought to the theoretical possibility that a quus-like rule might have been appropriate! And we do so without justification. Of course, if asked why we said '125', most of us will say that we added 8 and 7 to get 15, that we put down 5 and carried 1 and so on. But then, what will we say if asked why we 'carried' as we do? Might our past intention not have been that 'carry' meant *quarry*, where to 'quarry' is ...? The entire point of the sceptical argument is that ultimately we reach a level where we act without any reason in terms of which we can justify our action. We act unhesitatingly but *blindly* (1982, p.87, ellipsis in original).

The question with which the skeptical argument is here said to be concerned is 'why we said '125''. This is an explanatory question about an action of ours; it asks why we responded as we did when presented with a certain problem framed using '+'. The import of the skeptical argument, as here represented, is that what we are inclined to say in answer to this question does

not have the substance we credit to it. We think we can explain why we said ‘125’ by identifying our reasons for giving that response, reasons we recognize ourselves to possess in virtue of understanding the terms in which the original arithmetical problem was posed to us. But as Kripke sees it, this attempt at explanation does not succeed. For it prompts a further explanatory question, one now targeting our understanding of the terms in which we couched our explanation. Whatever we say in response to this question will raise another question along the same lines, *ad infinitum*. The implication of this regress is that ‘ultimately we reach a level where we act without any reason in terms of which we can justify our action.’ At this level, we act ‘blindly’: we do not act for any justifying reasons furnished by our knowledge of the meaning of ‘+’ or other relevant expressions. That our action is blind in this sense is ‘the entire point of the skeptical argument’. (In this paragraph I follow Bridges, forthcoming.)

It is in relation to the idea that grasp of meaning can put us in touch with reasons, reasons upon which we may then self-consciously act, that we should hear remarks such as, ‘The sceptic argues that when I answered “125” to the problem “68+57”, my answer was an unjustified leap in the dark’ (1982, p.15). To take an unjustified leap in the dark is to act while lacking a justification, a reason, for which one thus acts. The skeptic is here represented as arguing that I do not have a reason for answering as I do, and so *a fortiori*, that I do not have an understanding or grasp of the problem’s meaning that furnishes me with awareness of such a reason. Of course, our ordinary presumption is that we do have such reasons for using and responding to expressions and utterances as we do. That is why the claim to the contrary amounts to a kind of skepticism.

How does Kripke’s skeptic get to the conclusion that linguistic uses and responses are invariably unjustified stabs in the dark? Here is not the place to reconstruct the skeptic’s line of

thought in detail. What matters for present purposes is one feature of this line of thought: that it rests on an assimilation of acting for a reason provided by one's grasp of meaning to being guided by an item that constitutes one's grasp of the meaning. In the course of his discussion of dispositionalism, for example, Kripke writes, 'So it does seem that a dispositional account misconceives the sceptic's problem—to find a past fact that justifies my present response. As a candidate for a "fact" that determines what I mean, it fails to satisfy the basic condition on such a candidate stressed above on p.11, that it should tell me what I ought to do in each instance' (1982, p.24). Here the demand to state the reason for which I give my response gets transmuted, without comment, into the requirement that we identify an item that 'tells' me what to do.

This is not an isolated instance, and cannot be dismissed as a rhetorical flourish. The idea that there must be an item in my mind that in some sense or another *shows* me how I am to proceed is everywhere present in the exposition of the skeptical paradox, and our inability to find any regress-proof candidates for this item is precisely what motivates the skeptical conclusion.

For example:

Sometimes when I have contemplated the [skeptical paradox], I have had something of an eerie feeling. Even now as I write, I feel confident that there is something in my mind—the meaning I attach to the 'plus' sign—that instructs me what I ought to do in all future cases [...] But when I concentrate on what is now in my mind, what instructions can be found there? How can I be said to be acting on the basis of these instructions when I act in the future? [...] To say that there is a general rule in my mind that tells me how to add in the future is only to throw the problem back on to other rules that also seem to be given only in terms of finitely many cases. What can there be in my mind that I make use

of when I act in the future? It seems the entire idea of meaning vanishes into thin air (1982, pp.21-22).

The parallel between Kripke's skeptic and Wittgenstein's interlocutor that emerges here is striking. It suggests that the real source of meaning skepticism lies in a deep commitment to our uncovering a mechanistic basis for any supposed exercise of self-conscious rationality. As a corollary, it suggests that we can defeat the specter of meaning skepticism if we can come to see why such an account does not have to be possible.

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JASON BRIDGES