

Review of Day and Krebs (Eds.) *Seeing Wittgenstein Anew*, CUP, 2010. Paperback, 393pp.
ISBN: 978-0-521-54732-1

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This bold new collection of essays by a luminous group of philosophers begins with the editors announcing that the goals of the work are two-fold; first of all to address itself towards the “conspicuous blind spot” (xiii) in Wittgenstein studies that is the failure to engage with his remarks on aspect-seeing, and secondly, in so doing to uncover via the light of these passages new possibilities for seeing Wittgenstein’s work. This is not, though, the promise of the discovery of a ‘fourth Wittgenstein’, or an attempt to realign these passages with Wittgenstein’s other works on psychology (perhaps following Hacker and Schulte’s decision to rename part II in their new edition of the *Investigations* ‘Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment’). Rather, Day and Krebs hope that in coming to grips with the essays here and the texts of Wittgenstein’s to which they refer, one will see the *Investigations* as a whole in a new light – in fact, that one will see it not in a single light but as a kaleidoscope of differing readings, branching off in different directions and with each reading in turn excluding others. The dizzying prospect on offer herein is that rather than taking a new way of seeing Wittgenstein’s work as its achievement, one will rather achieve an *ability* continually to see Wittgenstein anew, to find ‘new inexhaustible meanings’ in his texts.

The sixteen essays herein are divided into four groups. The first grouping, containing essays by Batkin, Laugier, Gould and Cavell, is entitled ‘Aspects of Seeing-as’. The second section, ‘Aspects and the Self’ is further subdivided into two essays on ‘Self-knowledge’ (by Hagberg and Krebs) and two on ‘Problems of Mind’ (Cerbone and Eldbridge). The third section, entitled ‘Aspects and Language’ contains essays by Minar and Day. The fourth section, ‘Aspects and Method’ is again subdivided into ‘Therapy’ (Baz, Mulhall and Affeldt) and ‘Seeing Connections’ (Cioffi, Floyd, Bearn and Day).

It is impossible in a brief review such as this to do justice to so wide-ranging a collection. I will therefore confine myself to giving a very brief overview of some of the main topics touched upon. But much of the work’s value rests in its variety and the fact that it resists easy paraphrase.

Throughout the book, a huge variety of diverse perceptual-cum-imaginative experiences are discussed. These include: seeing a fork on a table, seeing cracks on a wall as a landscape, hearing a melody as a variation on another, seeing a ball drawn from an urn as an instance of a probability schema, seeing a duck-rabbit picture as a duck, hearing language in the speech of a foreigner, seeing our treatment of animals as a holocaust, seeing a blueprint as the design for a machine, feeling the word ‘Tuesday’ to be lean, seeing a rabbit running through a distant field, feeling the sand beneath your toes. And the list goes on.

The heterogeneity of these cases presents a challenge for someone inclined to give a neat theoretical account of the nature of perception, and the distinction between what is there to be seen on the one hand, and what is projected onto what is seen, on the other. A general contention that runs through the work as a whole is that through reflection on these examples, and what we are inclined to say about them, we will come to see that there is no single criterion for what counts as a genuine perceptual experience, unaffected by distortions

from the contribution of the self. This opens the way for the thought that no general account (such as those given by empiricists or transcendental idealists) of ‘*the* role of the subject in perception’ will be correct, because the imagination and conceptual powers of the perceiver relate in multifarious different ways to the content of what is seen. As Hagberg puts it, a “general, overarching criterion for genuine seeing is perhaps something we could *stipulate*, but not something we could *discover* within the fabric of our experience.” (108)

Accordingly, we determine what counts as an imposition of subjectivity onto the world not by studying the nature of the perceptual experience itself, conceived of as an isolated act, but by critically reflecting on the manner in which the individual is drawn to act on the basis of that experience, and whether acting in that way could be credited as ‘responding to how things (really) are’.

Another lesson learned in consideration of these cases is that the content of what is seen stands in an internal relation to the abilities and actions of the perceptual subject. Thus, to see a duck-rabbit as a duck is to ‘place’ the duck-rabbit picture in a similarity relation to ducks, and other pictures of ducks, and a criterion for having placed the drawing in this manner is to create such a grouping. One shows what one is seeing when one sees it as a duck by drawing other ducks, and someone without any such ability could not be credited as having seen the aspect. This in turn undermines a philosophical picture of agents who act on the basis of what they see, where the content of what is seen is prior to and independent of any ability to act in one way or another.

The thought that our responses may in some contexts be constitutive of what is seen is especially important in both ethics and aesthetics. Batkin’s interesting study of Wittgenstein and Wolheim concludes that “without our acts of judgement and criticism, without declaring our position and stance, [the artist’s] work will remain ordinary for us, will fail to yield its significance as *art*.” (39) In a similar vein, Krebs argues that to grasp an internal connection is to ‘sharpen one’s eye’ to the possible arrangements and relations between objects in the world, suggesting that the study of aesthetics is centrally important to the question of how we perceive the world, and to concomitant philosophical problems of the nature of representation. Cavell’s paper ‘A Touch of Words’ alights on this issue, by continuing his discussion of JM Coetzee’s character Elizabeth Costello. Costello is someone whose perceptions of everyday life make her unhinged. One thing that we learn from her example is that the difficulty of seeing similarities in the commonplace may be manifest not only in actions but also in inability and inaction. Costello’s failure to participate in the rituals of everyday life expose her struggle to acknowledge the internal relation that she sees between our enjoyment and the suffering of animals by which it is bought. Concurrently, as alluded to in Cavell’s title, her attempt to express that difficulty in language relies for its success on her audience not only understanding, but also being touched by, her words. And being so touched is itself a further aspect of the phenomenon of aspect-seeing.

While no doubt Costello’s response is not commonplace, she is responding to ordinary, everyday facts. It is part of Cavell’s concern, and of the contributors as a whole, to undermine the blasé notion of the ‘ordinary’ perceptual experience, when that is taken to present no difficulties and to represent ‘pure’ perception. Opinions diverge, however, about what the difficulties of the everyday are, and how ubiquitous the phenomena of seeing aspects in fact are.

Thus the exchange between Baz and Mulhall (with Gould's paper closely related) turns around how we are to explain cases of aspect-seeing, and what it would mean to dissolve its 'paradox'; when the duck aspect of a duck-rabbit dawns on me, I see the picture as something completely different, and yet I also see that it hasn't changed at all. Mulhall contends that our sense that everything about the picture has changed when its aspect dawns "can be seen as an unusually extreme expression of our general tendency to regard a picture of a rabbit as being as different from a picture of a duck as a rabbit is from a duck... and hence is to be understood as part of [our] general relation to pictures." (265)

Nevertheless in the list of perceptual cases I presented above, that of seeing a fork on a table stands out from the rest, by virtue of the fact that, as Wittgenstein notes, when one sees a fork one does not see it *as a fork*. (PI II xi) That suggests that we should not suppose that ordinary perceptual experiences are open to the phenomenon of aspect-seeing. Furthermore, it seems that there is a primary sense of perception where what is perceived is not perceived under an aspect, and that this sense is a necessary precondition of the aspect-dawning experience. In order to see a duck-rabbit *as a duck*, or hear a melody *as a variation*, one must be able simply *to see* a duck, or *to hear* a variation.

In that sense there are basic perceptual experiences, but it doesn't follow from this that what is ordinarily seen has no capacity to surprise. Baz claims that the dawning of aspects is a necessary condition of being perceptually acquainted with the world and that "the continual danger... is that, in succumbing to habitual and convenient ways of treating, or regarding, things, we will lose our ability to *see* them." (248)

In this context, the 'enormous danger' of making a multitude of fine-grained distinctions that Wittgenstein warns of (PI 200) is that in making these distinctions we lose track of the ubiquity of these experiences, and the dangers and possibilities presented by them. But even the question of what those possibilities are is open to question. Bearn urges that we merely *enjoy* the 'labyrinthine metaphysics of experience' disclosed in the multitude of multi-faceted experiences available to human beings. The point of philosophy is to aim at "riding delirious desires, becoming beautiful. Becoming becoming." (356) Making a different, though related, point in his discussion of experiences or events that puzzle us and that we feel a need to place (such as the Beltane fire rituals as described Frazer's *Golden Bough*), Cioffi says that the 'volatility' of aspects leaves us with a problem which we express as a lack of understanding, but which is really a demand simply to be reconciled to a difficult fact. He asks, in rhetorical mode:

"What does someone disabled by grief come to know or understand when he finally resumes his responsibilities to the living? Can his ameliorated condition be said to consist in his having learned something? We can always insist that when a shoe stops pinching, the foot has learned something. But to what end? The illusion [is] that there is a question to be answered..." (309)

If we accept this claim then foreclosed is the hope that from these experiences we might learn something about the world, that our understanding of reality might be challenged and deepened. No doubt it is an appropriate corrective to over-rationalisation to remind oneself that experiences are in the first instance to be felt rather than reflected on. But, this reviewer

would insist, it nevertheless remains true that in the case of the loss of a loved one, the continued attempt to understand that loss *is a mode of suffering it*, and to say that this pursuit is directed at an end which is not only unattainable but is in fact illusory, is to deny the possibility that experiences such as these could deepen our understanding of the world and our place in it. That is a form of scepticism. The purpose of heuristic overviews, for Cioffi, is thus (I should like to say ‘merely’) to cure discomfort caused by these kinds of experiences, much as a dog walking in circles eventually finds peace by lying down. Here, there are obvious and instructive parallels with the debate over whether Wittgenstein’s method is a form of ‘therapy’ which aims at curing patients of their peculiar philosophical discomfort.

The prospects for a therapeutic approach to Wittgenstein’s texts is the subject of Affeld’s paper. He argues that Wittgenstein is attempting to transform human nature by exposing our tendencies towards philosophy and quietening them. Thus, Wittgenstein reveals that the Freudian method is (not wrong, but) incomplete because the urge to utter “philosophical emptiness” is a peculiar kind of drive which “only such methods as Wittgenstein’s can reveal and treat”. (p.287; footnote 26) No doubt this suggestion requires further elaboration and defence. One obvious problem is that a psychoanalyst or psychiatrist might be inclined to take up the challenge, and it does not seem to be an a priori truth (or, indeed, true) to claim that the drive to philosophy cannot be ‘alleviated’ by the application of either 20th century talking cures or 21st century tranquillisers.

Other papers in the volume expand on these themes and others in novel and arresting ways. Cerbone argues that Wittgenstein’s writings on pictures shows the poverty of materialism about the mind, by revealing how a fixation on certain pictures (and failing to see them as mere pictures) can lead to the idea that in the face there is to be discerned “only the outward effects of the workings of the brain, a set of “data” pointing inward toward the “lump of stuff” “pulsing away” within the skull, rather than a translucent, transparent medium through which the soul is made manifest.” (161) Floyd’s fascinating discussion connects Wittgenstein’s writings on probability and mathematics with puzzle pictures, drawing on works as early as the 1914 notebooks. What she has to say will be of great interest to scholars of the philosophies of probability and logic. Hagberg’s paper connects Wittgenstein’s undermining of the too-easy dichotomy between projection and perception to Iris Murdoch’s discussion of autobiography and the fixity of one’s past.

As should be apparent, there is much more to this exciting collection than there is space here to mention, let alone discuss. The papers taken as a whole represent a substantial and original contribution not only to Wittgenstein studies, but also to the philosophy of perception and much else besides. The breadth and depth of the volume means it should be of immediate and enduring interest to philosophers of all persuasions.