

Seeing Through, Seeing Beyond, Seeing As: Wittgenstein and the Grammar of Vision

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Abstract

Philosophical clarification in Wittgenstein is frequently articulated through visual metaphors. Across his writings, philosophy is said to enable us to “see connexions”, to recognize aspects, and to free ourselves from misleading pictures embedded in language. Such expressions suggest that philosophical understanding emerges through a transformation in how phenomena are perceived within linguistic practices.

This paper argues that Wittgenstein’s reflections on vision articulate a genuine grammar of vision.

Rather than advancing a theory of perception, Wittgenstein examines how meaning becomes intelligible within forms of life. I reconstruct three interconnected modes of vision across his work: *seeing through*, *seeing beyond*, and *seeing as*.

These modes correspond respectively to the logical transparency of representation in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, the contextual conception of meaning developed in the later philosophy, and the phenomenon of aspect-perception analyzed in the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Together, they define a methodological framework in which philosophical insight arises through a reconfiguration of perspective rather than through theoretical explanation.

By reconstructing these three modes of vision, the paper shows that Wittgenstein’s philosophy can be read as a sustained reflection on the conditions under which meaning becomes visible within shared practices. This interpretation clarifies the methodological role of visual orientation in Wittgenstein’s philosophy.

1. Philosophy and the Transformation of Vision

Visual metaphors occupy a distinctive place in Wittgenstein’s philosophical writings. Wittgenstein’s philosophical vocabulary repeatedly mobilizes visual notions such as “seeing connexions” (PI 2009: §122), “aspect blindness” (PI 2009: 213-214^e), “dawning of an aspect” (PI 2009: 194; 2o6c), “perspicuous representation” (PI 2009: § 122), and being *held captive by a picture* (PI 2009: §115). These expressions function as methodological indicators of philosophical clarification.

Wittgenstein repeatedly characterizes philosophical clarification as a matter of learning to look at language and its use differently. “Don’t think, but look!” (PI 2009: §66) expresses the methodological orientation underlying many of his

later investigations. Philosophy rearranges what is already familiar so that overlooked connections become visible (PI 2009: §122). Philosophical problems arise not from a lack of empirical knowledge but from distortions in our understanding of language. Philosophy responds to these confusions by reorganizing our view of linguistic practices.

Wittgenstein insists that philosophical clarification does not uncover hidden entities or structures. “Nothing is hidden” (PI 2009: §435): philosophical difficulty arises when language leads us to overlook what already lies before our eyes. He also frequently characterizes philosophical clarification as arranging what is already familiar so that grammatical relations and connections between uses become visible (PI 2009: §122). Philosophical problems arise when these relations are obscured by misleading pictures embedded in language. The ‘phenomena’ at issue here are primarily linguistic and conceptual: patterns of use, grammatical relations, perceptual configurations, and the forms of organization through which meaning becomes visible within ordinary practices.

The importance of visual metaphors in Wittgenstein’s philosophy has often been noted. These expressions, however, play a systematic methodological role within Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Wittgenstein’s reflections on language and perception articulate what may be called a grammar of vision: a set of conceptual conditions under which something becomes visible as meaningful within linguistic practices. By ‘grammar of vision’ I mean an investigation of the conditions under which something becomes intelligible within linguistic and perceptual practices. The expression extends Wittgenstein’s grammatical method to the field of vision: seeing is approached as a practice embedded in forms of life and regulated by learned criteria of use. This grammatical orientation is consistent with Hacker’s interpretation of Wittgensteinian grammar as determining “what makes sense” rather than describing the world (Hacker 2021). Grammar, in this sense, establishes the conditions under which phenomena become intelligible within linguistic practices. A similar emphasis on conceptual reorientation appears in Cora Diamond’s account of Wittgenstein’s “realistic spirit”. As Diamond argues, philosophical clarification aims not at providing a final explanatory theory but at transforming our sense of what requires explanation in the first place: “What I call the realistic spirit aims not to provide that sort of understanding but to change our idea that it is

what we seek” (Diamond 1991: IX). Philosophical investigation, therefore, involves “a change of method: attending to what we do” (Diamond 1991: 5).

This interpretation allows us to reconstruct three distinct modes of seeing across Wittgenstein’s writings. The first emerges in the *Tractatus*, where language functions as a transparent medium through which the structure of reality becomes visible. The second appears in the later philosophy, where understanding requires attention to the contextual use of words within forms of life. The third is explored in Wittgenstein’s analysis of aspect-seeing, where perception itself is shown to involve conceptual organization.

For heuristic purposes, these three dimensions of Wittgenstein’s reflections on vision may be reconstructed as seeing through, seeing beyond, and seeing as. Together, they illuminate Wittgenstein’s broader philosophical method: philosophy clarifies our understanding by transforming the way phenomena appear within our conceptual field.

Recent discussions have increasingly emphasized the role of visual orientation in Wittgenstein’s philosophical method. Marie McGinn argues that clarification in Wittgenstein aims at achieving “the kind of understanding that comes from seeing the particular, concrete case in the right light” (McGinn 1997: 29) rather than at constructing explanatory theories. Joachim Schulte and Hans-Johann Glock similarly characterize Wittgenstein’s later philosophy as a descriptive activity directed toward perspicuous representation and grammatical overview (Schulte 1996: 113; Glock 1996: 305). Cora Diamond’s anti-theoretical reading further radicalizes this approach by suggesting that philosophical clarification transforms our sense of what requires explanation in the first place, dissolving the impulse toward metaphysical theorizing rather than replacing it with another doctrine (Diamond 1991: 16). Kristóf Nyíri, moreover, has argued that Wittgenstein should be understood as “a precursor of the iconic turn” (Nyíri 2019: 8) insofar as visual forms themselves can function as vehicles of conceptual understanding. Together, these interpretations suggest that Wittgensteinian clarification operates through a reorganization of perspective that renders grammatical relations visible.

The present paper develops these insights by proposing that Wittgenstein’s reflections on vision can be understood as articulating a *grammar of vision*.

Rather than treating visual metaphors as merely illustrative, I argue that they reveal a methodological framework linking the picture theory of the *Tractatus*, the grammatical investigations of the later philosophy, and the analysis of aspect perception.

2. Seeing Through: Logical Transparency in the *Tractatus*

The early Wittgenstein conceives language as a system of representation grounded in logical form. According to the picture theory developed in the *Tractatus*, a proposition represents a possible state of affairs because its elements are arranged in a structure that corresponds to the arrangement of objects in the world. Wittgenstein states: “We make to ourselves pictures of facts” (TLP 1922: 2.1).

A picture represents reality not through visual resemblance but through structural correspondence. The elements of the picture stand in relations that mirror the relations between objects in the represented situation. Wittgenstein illustrates this relation with the example of a model used in a courtroom to reconstruct a traffic accident (TB 1979: 29.9.1914). The model does not visually resemble the actual event, yet it represents the accident because the spatial relations among its elements correspond to those among the vehicles involved.

The key concept underlying this theory is logical form. Logical form cannot itself be represented in language, but shows itself in the functioning of meaningful propositions. Wittgenstein formulates this point succinctly: “What can be shown cannot be said” (TLP 1922: 4.1212). The logical structure that makes representation possible is therefore not an additional fact about the world but a condition for the possibility of meaningful discourse. To understand a proposition is to grasp the structural relation between language and reality that makes representation possible. Logical form constitutes the condition under which propositions can meaningfully represent possible states of affairs. In this sense, ‘seeing through’ designates the recognition of the formal conditions that make representation possible. These conditions are shown in the functioning of meaningful propositions rather than explicitly represented. ‘Seeing through’ therefore designates the capacity to recognize the representational role of language without mistaking grammatical form for

metaphysical structure. Philosophical clarification consists in making visible the conditions under which propositions can meaningfully depict possible states of affairs.

This conception of representation can be described as a form of seeing through. The point is not to look behind language, but to grasp the logic by which language represents. Logical structure operates like a lens that allows us to perceive the organization of reality through language. The philosopher's task is to clarify this structure by eliminating confusions produced by the misuse of language.

In the *Tractatus*, philosophical clarification therefore takes the form of logical analysis. By revealing the structure underlying meaningful propositions, philosophy enables us to see the boundaries between sense and nonsense. Once these boundaries are clearly displayed, many traditional philosophical problems dissolve.

Although Wittgenstein later abandons the picture theory, the idea that philosophical understanding involves a transformation in how things become visible remains central to his thought. What changes is not the importance of clarity but the philosophical method through which such clarity is achieved.

3. Seeing Beyond: Grammar and the Context of Use

In the later philosophy, Wittgenstein rejects the idea that language possesses a single underlying logical structure. Instead, he turns from logical form to the investigation of language in use. Words acquire meaning through their role within specific activities embedded in forms of life. "Forms of life" designate the shared practical and cultural background within which linguistic expressions acquire intelligibility and criteria of use (PI 2009: §19). Here, 'forms of life' is used in a minimal sense as the background of shared practices that make rule-following, meaning, and understanding possible.

Wittgenstein famously writes: "For a large class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word 'meaning' it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (PI 2009: §43). Rather than analyzing the logical form of propositions, philosophy must examine how expressions function within everyday practices. Philosophical confusions arise when words are detached from the contexts in which they normally operate. When

philosophers attempt to identify the essence of concepts such as meaning, knowledge, or mind, they often overlook the variety of ways in which these words are used. The result is the illusion that language refers to hidden entities or processes requiring theoretical explanation.

Wittgenstein's method is therefore descriptive rather than explanatory. Philosophical clarification consists of providing an overview of the different ways expressions are used in language. By examining concrete cases, the philosopher reveals patterns that were previously obscured.

This process involves a shift in perspective. To understand a concept, we must learn to see beyond the surface form of words and attend to the practices in which they function. Seeing beyond means moving from isolated expressions to the practices in which they acquire meaning.

Wittgenstein describes the aim of philosophical investigation as producing a "perspicuous representation" of language (PI 2009: §122). Such a representation arranges phenomena so that their relations become visible. Perspicuous representation does not uncover hidden structures but arranges what is already familiar so that grammatical relations become surveyable. The philosopher clarifies the grammar governing our linguistic practices.

This mode of philosophical clarification can therefore be described as seeing beyond. Instead of focusing on abstract structures, we learn to perceive the broader context in which language is embedded. Philosophical understanding emerges when we recognize connections that were previously hidden by misleading pictures of language.

4. Seeing As: Aspect Perception and Conceptual Organization

A third dimension of Wittgenstein's reflection on vision appears in his discussion of aspect perception. In the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein examines ambiguous figures such as the well-known duck-rabbit drawing (Jastrow 1899). Such figures can be perceived in different ways without any change in their physical structure.

Wittgenstein distinguishes between noticing an aspect and continuously seeing it. Once a new aspect has been noticed, it may become integrated into our habitual perception: we no longer experience a sudden shift but instead

perceive the object immediately under that aspect. This phenomenon illustrates how conceptual understanding becomes sedimented within perception itself. Seeing-as is therefore not merely an episodic experience but part of the background competence through which we navigate the world. Wittgenstein describes aspect perception through the possibility of seeing the same figure under different aspects - seeing the figure “*as something*” (PI 2009: 213), and through expressions such as “seeing as” (PI 2009: 197) and “the dawning of an aspect” (PI 2009: 206^c). At one moment, the figure appears as a duck; at another, as a rabbit. The visual stimulus remains unchanged, yet our perception shifts. The point is not that perception is always interpretive in the same way, but that, in aspect-seeing, Wittgenstein shows how conceptual capacities can enter into what is seen. Aspect perception thus demonstrates that seeing is inseparable from interpretation. This interdependence between perception and conceptual organization becomes especially clear in Wittgenstein’s description of aspect-dawning. Wittgenstein characterizes the emergence of an aspect as a process that ‘dawns’ upon us, underscoring the shift in conceptual organization rather than the introduction of a novel sensory datum. The shift concerns the organization through which the object is perceived.

For this reason, aspect perception should not be understood merely as a psychological curiosity: it acquires methodological significance within philosophical clarification. Several interpreters have argued that aspect-seeing performs a methodological function within Wittgenstein’s philosophy. Aspect perception is explicitly interpreted as a philosophical method capable of producing conceptual reorientation rather than empirical discovery (Agam-Segal 2012). Similarly, seeing-as should not be understood as a purely mental act but as an activity embedded in different forms of attention and practices of seeing (Fortuna 2017). As Fortuna notes, “the aspect is subject to the will: this by itself relates it to thinking. [...] seeing-as should not be considered as a mental act [...] but rather as an activity which can assume different forms” (Fortuna 2017: 220).

From this perspective, the significance of aspect perception lies not primarily in visual psychology but in its capacity to model philosophical clarification itself. Aspect-seeing reorganizes the conditions under which the object

becomes intelligible within a context of meaning. As Wittgenstein's examples suggest, a figure may suddenly appear differently not because new information has been added, but because attention has been reorganized. Aspect change, therefore, illustrates how philosophical insight may occur through a transformation of perspective rather than through theoretical explanation or the acquisition of new data. A problem that once appeared puzzling may suddenly become trivial when we adopt a different perspective. The philosopher's task is to bring about such transformations of vision. Seeing as thus represents a further dimension of Wittgenstein's grammar of vision. It highlights the dynamic relation between perception and conceptual interpretation. Understanding also involves learning to perceive structures and contexts under new aspects.

5. Philosophical Method and the Grammar of Vision

The three modes of vision discussed above illuminate a common methodological orientation across Wittgenstein's philosophy. Although his views on language change significantly between the *Tractatus* and the later writings, the aim of philosophical clarification remains constant: to transform the way we perceive linguistic phenomena. This continuity should not obscure the decisive criticisms Wittgenstein later directs against the assumptions of the *Tractatus* (PI 2009: §90; §§114-115). The continuity I wish to emphasize is therefore methodological rather than doctrinal. While the early Wittgenstein seeks logical clarity through the analysis of representation, the later philosophy abandons the idea of an underlying logical essence. It turns instead toward the descriptive investigation of language in use.

In the *Tractatus*, clarity arises through the recognition of logical structure. By seeing through the transparency of representation, we understand how language depicts possible states of affairs. Here, transparency means that representation is understood through its logical form; in the later work, this ideal is reconfigured as grammatical perspicuity rather than preserved unchanged.

In the later philosophy, understanding emerges when we see beyond abstract formulations and attend to the contextual use of words within forms of life. Finally, the analysis of aspect perception shows how conceptual change can occur when we learn to see something as something.

Understanding Wittgenstein's philosophy in these terms also clarifies the broader significance of his philosophical method. Philosophical investigation does not aim at discovering hidden entities or theoretical structures, but at reorganizing how phenomena become visible within our practices. The task of philosophy is therefore not explanatory but orientational: it brings into view connections that were previously overlooked.

Interpreting Wittgenstein's philosophy as a grammar of vision highlights the continuity underlying these different approaches: philosophy clarifies our practices by rendering overlooked connections visible. In this sense, Wittgenstein's philosophy can be understood as a sustained reflection on the conditions under which something becomes visible as meaningful within our shared forms of life.

Conclusion: Vision and Philosophical Clarification

Interpreting Wittgenstein's philosophy as a grammar of vision highlights a deep continuity across his work: seeing through (*Tractatus*), beyond (grammar/forms of life), and as (aspect perception) as complementary methods for rearranging phenomena until connections become visible.

Understanding Wittgenstein's work in these terms underscores the methodological role of visual orientation in philosophical inquiry. Philosophical problems often arise because we are held captive by misleading pictures embedded in language. The philosopher's task is to release us from these pictures by enabling us to see our practices in a new light. Philosophical clarification ultimately consists not in discovering hidden truths, but in learning to see differently: to recognize grammatical relations, rearrange perspectives, and perceive familiar phenomena under new aspects.

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