

## THE CONCEPT OF "SEEING-AS" IN WITTGENSTEIN'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION\*

### 1. Introduction

Almost all that is recorded of what Wittgenstein said about religion in his later period is contained in students' notes of three unsystematic, tightly packed and intriguingly obscure lectures.<sup>1</sup> These notes are so compressed that they need to be systematically unpacked with the help of the standard apparatus of Wittgensteinian concepts before their significance can be assessed. There have been a number of attempts to do this in recent years and all of them have exploited the crucial concepts of "language-games" and "forms of life".<sup>2</sup> But none of these expositions has drawn on the equally fundamental and relevant Wittgensteinian concept of "seeing-as". In this paper I shall present and expound Wittgenstein's remarks involving this concept (in so far as they bear on his philosophy of religion), show how the concept has been developed and used by two philosophers of science, and point out how the concept has general application so it can be seen to underlie, and indeed to underlie, Wittgenstein's remarks on religious belief. In Wittgenstein's approach we are confronted with the paradox of an unbeliever (i. e., Wittgenstein himself) energetically arguing in support of the legitimacy of religious belief. It is above all the concept of seeing-as that dissipates this paradox — and without recourse to a Protagorean relativism.

Wittgenstein's lectures on religion must be seen against the background of Positivist verificationism that held the field at the time they were delivered. The Positivists' position was simple and clear: unless some sort of verification or checking of propositions against reality is possible, there is nothing to prevent wholesale irresponsibility of utterance — and it was their contention that religious beliefs exemplified this irresponsibility. This concept of "reality", against which beliefs are supposed to be checked, is illuminated by Wittgenstein's remarks on seeing-as,

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and shown to be a far more variable notion than was assumed by the Positivists and by traditional philosophy generally.

## 2. Wittgenstein's Remarks on Seeing-as .

A common-sense notion is that it is our perceptions that provide us with the touchstone that decides whether particular assertions are acceptable. But a realization that there are complexities which are smothered in this formulation is discernible in Kant's complaint that "Psychologists have hitherto failed to realize that imagination is a necessary ingredient of perception itself".<sup>3</sup> Psychologists have moved on since then, and it is generally accepted by them today that preparatory *sets* influence what we see.<sup>4</sup> Kant's special use of "imagination", some aspects of the psychological notion of a set, the notion that we subsume what we see under concepts (i. e., describe them in particular ways), and the idea of theoretical explanations are all closely related. The relations between this group of notions and the content of our perceptions is what I shall consider.

Kant, it would seem, used "imagination" to cover the human capacity that infuses the actual or great perception of a persisting object as an object of a particular kind, with past or merely possible perceptions of the same sort of object.<sup>5</sup> No doubt, imagination has, along with understanding, a more general function of (in Kantian terminology) synthesizing the manifold of intuitions, so that a coherent picture of the world emerges. But, as Strawson puts it, imagination, by linking actual perception with non-actual (i. e., past or possible) perceptions gives the actual perception the character it has.<sup>6</sup> This is a historical foreshadowing of Wittgenstein's seminal discussion in the early part of the *Investigations*, II, Section XI.

In the course of examining what it means to *see* something, Wittgenstein says :

You could imagine the illustration



appearing in several places in a book, a textbook for instance. In the relevant text something different is in

question every time : here a glass cube, there an inverted open box, there a wire frame of that shape, there three boards forming a solid angle. Each time the text supplies the interpretation of the illustration.

But we can also *see* the illustration now as one thing, now as another. — — — So we interpret it, and *see* it as we *interpret* it.

Here perhaps we should like to reply :

The description of what is got immediately, i. e., of the visual experience by means of an interpretation — — is an indirect description. "I see the figure as a box" means : I have a particular visual experience which I have found that I always have when I interpret the figure as a box or when I look at a box. But if it meant this I ought to know it. I ought to be able to refer to the experience directly, and not only indirectly. (As I can speak of red without calling it the colour of blood.)

I shall call the following figure, derived from Jastrow, the duck-rabbit. It can be seen as a rabbit's head or as a duck's. And I must distinguish between the 'con-



tinuous seeing' of an aspect and the 'dawning' of an aspect.

The picture might have been shown me, and I never have seen anything but a rabbit in it. (Pl. II. p. 193-194)

After introducing the idea of a picture-object, Wittgenstein continues :

I should not have answered the question "What do you see here ?" by saying : "Now I am seeing it as a picture-rabbit". I should simply have described my perception : just as if I had said "I see a red circle over there." — —

Nevertheless someone else could have said of me :  
 "He is seeing the figure as a picture-rabbit." (PI. II.  
 p. 194)

But from seeing it as a picture-rabbit, one may suddenly see it as a picture-duck. Seen *this* way the head has not the slightest similarity to the head seen the other way—yet they are congruent. The report of this change of aspect "is the expression of a *new* perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged." (PI. II. p. 169) Wittgenstein's remarks are discursive. He suggests that the change is a change of *organisation*, which is not itself an element in the picture (PI. II. p. 196); that there is no *one genuine* description in such cases (PI. II. p. 200); that custom and upbringing may have a hand in the circumstances that a picture could produce an effect on one person but not on another (PI. II. p. 201). He goes on to ask whether seeing something *as* one thing rather than another is a *genuine* visual experience, and then answers, "Here it is *difficult* to see that what is at issue is the fixing of concepts. A *concept* forces itself on one" (PI. II. p. 204). "Hence the flashing of an aspect on us seems half visual experience, half thought" (PI. II. p. 197). He makes the observation, "You only 'see the duck and rabbit aspects' if you are already conversant with the shapes of those two animals" (PI. II. p. 207), and that the shift between the multiple ways of seeing one picture is based on "the mastery of a technique" (PI. II. p. 208).

I have selected and paraphrased remarks that concern our theme, from a discussion by Wittgenstein of considerably wider scope, but even so, neither their drift nor their import for our study may be obvious. In the following section I shall gloss them, primarily using Norwood Russell Hanson's and Thomas Kuhn's working out of these ideas.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. Developments and Illustrations of the notion of Seeing-as

Hanson considers the case of two scientists who have different theories in a particular field. They both look at certain crucial data, data that might be expected to resolve the difference between them. But their reports of their observations also show differences. The question that arises is : Do both of them, who

have normal eyesight and are looking at the same spot, see the same thing? This situation is illustrated in many confrontations in both contemporary and past science. But here is an imaginary circumstance, chosen for its vividness and simplicity :

Let us consider Johannes Kepler : imagine him on a hill watching the dawn. With him is Tycho Brahe. Kepler regarded the sun as fixed : it was the earth that moved. But Tycho followed Ptolemy and Aristotle in this much at least : the earth was fixed and all other celestial bodies moved around it. *Do Kepler and Tycho see the same thing in the east at dawn ?*<sup>8</sup>

The traditional answer is that they *do* indeed see the same thing; but, it is said, they *interpret* their data differently.<sup>9</sup> This notion of observational data as the ultimate court of appeal was, of course, the corner-stone of positivism. The ideal observer was supposed to be as neutrally objective as a reliable camera or tape-recorder. Only subsequently was this data required to be worked on, and interpreted in terms of a theory.

Though this view is unsound and gives a false account of the nature of observation in science or anywhere else, it is not absurd; it does have enough substance in it to justify our asking where it went wrong.

The opposing scientists ( Tycho and Kepler in Hanson's example ) *do*, in a sense, see the same things : they have retinal and auditory and tactile reactions to identical or similar external stimuli. But we need to remember that retinal reactions are only physical states, whereas seeing is an experience. As Hanson puts it :



People, not their eyes, see. Cameras, and eye-balls, are blind. Attempts to locate within the organs of sight ( or within the neurological reticulum behind the eyes ) some nameable called 'seeing' may be dismissed. That Kepler and Tycho do, or do not, see the same thing cannot be supported by reference to the physical states of their retinas, optic nerves or visual cortices : there is more to seeing than meets the eye-ball.<sup>10</sup>




The quotation from Wittgenstein (PI. II. p. 193)<sup>11</sup> showed how one figure could be *seen as* different things. It is a temptation to suppose that such *seeings-as* are composite experiences consisting of a visual component and an interpretative element. A student looks at a contour map and sees only lines on paper, but a cartographer sees a picture of a terrain. With training, the student's vision is transformed and he too sees the countryside represented before him. Does he, after years of surveying, first see unintelligible lines which he subsequently interprets as altitudes? Do we, in reading a page, see the meaningless marks that an infant sees, and then organise them into words? Does the astronomer see the metal pipe that the villager sees, and then proceed to identify it as a telescope? I think it would be generally agreed that there is ordinarily no temporal gap between sensation and conceptualisation. They are as inseparable as warp-and-woof in fabric or form-and-matter in a vase; "one does not first soak up an optical pattern and then clamp an interpretation onto it."<sup>12</sup> It might be suggested that interpretation is an instantaneous process and so there is no temporal division between seeing and *seeing-as*; but of this proposal Hanson says:






Instantaneous interpretation hails from the same Limbo that produced unsensed sensibilia, unconscious inference incorrigible statements and negative facts. These are notions philosophers force on the world to preserve some pet epistemological or metaphysical theory<sup>13</sup>.

Wittgenstein had shown that a given object can be seen in more than one way. Hanson supplements Wittgenstein's material with a number of examples of ambiguous, reversible and puzzle pictures that appear in standard psychology textbooks. Instances of perceptual gestalt switches are used either as analogies or as simplified examples of how the human mind works in perception. Hanson also provides a wealth of illustrations from scientific life and practice to show how knowledge and theory influence how one sees an object. I shall briefly describe two additional psychological experiments of the same genre (also taken from introductory texts on psychology) that, I think, go a little further than Hanson's examples in throwing light on the concept of perception.



In one experiment<sup>14</sup> different observers were briefly shown, one at a time, through a tachistoscope, figures like , ,

. After each exposure, the subject was required to make a reproduction of what he had seen. When subjects had been told that the figure  would be a pair of glasses, they tended to see something like this : . Other subjects shown the same figure under similar conditions, but told that they would be shown a dumb-bell, often draw reproductions like this :

. The second of the original figures shown above tended to be seen either as  or  according to whether the subject was told to expect a canoe or a kidney bean. Similarly the third figure was perceived as a ship's wheel  or 

the sun. Obviously the subjects' expectations affected what they saw by selecting from and modifying the original data. (Let us bear in mind that concepts, theories and world-views create particular expectations.)

The second experiment<sup>15</sup> that I shall describe is referred to by Thomas Kuhn<sup>16</sup> with a purpose overlapping mine. Playing cards were shown one by one, and the subject was required to identify the card exposed. But among the cards exposed there were some incongruous ones, such as a black six of hearts or a red four of spades. Initially most subjects assimilated the anomalous cards to normal cards which their antecedent knowledge of playing cards led them to expect. Nearly all the subjects at the beginning said that the red four of spades was either a black four of spades (ignoring the colour) or a red four of hearts (ignoring the shape). But once the subjects realised that anomalous cards were also being shown they made no more mistakes. It is plain that what people see depends in part on the expectations their knowledge gives them. (Some subjects showed signs of distress at the anomalies and Kuhn suggests that this is similar to what happens when the theories one is committed to, break down.<sup>17</sup> We might see the distress as also similar to that felt at the loss of religious faith.)

These experiments deal with perceptual contents that are artificial and trivial, but the principle suggested by the results has far-reaching implications. Our perceptions can be transformed by our antecedent expectations. Our major theoretical beliefs, our general world-view, provide a wide-ranging and deeply-held system of expectations and cannot but influence what we perceive. Kuhn propounds this thesis in a powerful, if controversial, form :

Examining the record of past research from the vantage of contemporary historiography, the historian of science may be tempted to explain that when paradigms change, the world itself changes with them. Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions, scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before. It is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to another planet where familiar objects are seen in a different light and are joined by unfamiliar ones as well. Of course, nothing of quite that sort does occur; there is no geographical transplantation; outside the laboratory everyday affairs continue as before. Nevertheless, paradigm changes do cause scientists to see the world of their research-engagement differently. In so far as their only recourse to that world is through what they see and do, we may want to say that after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world.

Kuhn's replacement of his concept of "paradigms" in science by more specifically defined notions<sup>18</sup> and his general toning-down of his sharp distinction between "normal" and "revolutionary" science,<sup>19</sup> do not involve the disavowal of his notion that the scientist's perception of the world is changed with a radical theoretical change. After giving some examples of the sort of psychological experiments described above, he says :

Surveying the rich experimental literature from which these examples are drawn makes one suspect that something like a paradigm is prerequisite to perception itself.



What a man sees depends both upon what he looks at and also upon what his previous visual-conceptual experience has taught him to see. In the absence of such training there can only be, in William James's phrase, "a bloomin' buzzin' confusion."<sup>20</sup>

### 3. Generalization and re-orientation of the concept

Wittgenstein provided the general basis for the Hanson-Kuhn formulation of this view of the relation between theoretical background and the perception of facts. What I want to do in concluding this section is to emphasise the general applicability of this thesis, and point to its relevance in the sphere of religion.

Firstly, the thesis that one's theoretical presuppositions influence one's perceptions has the corollary that two or more persons can only be said to see the same thing if they share a cognitive and theoretical background. The Aristotelians and Galileo both looked at swinging objects; the former saw them as bodies in constrained fall, the latter saw pendulums.<sup>21</sup> And so the "proponents of competing paradigms are always at least slightly at cross purposes".<sup>22</sup> Neither side will grant all the empirical data or the non-empirical assumptions that the other needs to make its case.<sup>23</sup> Agreement and fruitful disagreement are only within the "normality" of shared outlooks, which in turn permit reference to stably describable data.

Secondly, the thesis that Hanson and Kuhn apply to the world of science, can be made entirely general and applied at all levels of experience. At the organic level, our sense organs, developed under evolutionary pressures, select and organise the stimuli that impinge on them, in the interests of survival and well-being. At the broadly human or cultural level, the form of life followed, and the language associated with that form, influence what we perceive in a way that broadly works for the preservation of that form. (This is ethnocentricity, or the recourse to the values and assumptions of one's own culture to condemn conflicting cultures by.) Elements of this cultural form become part of the subliminal heritage of the community, the "common-sense" of that society or the "absolute presuppositions"<sup>24</sup>

of the age and group. Superimposed on this form are the self-conscious or explicitly defined religious, aesthetic and scientific beliefs, which take the common-sense of that society for granted, but which create expectations, and so influence perception, at a new level. There is traffic between these two levels: some religious, aesthetic or scientific beliefs may be absorbed into common-sense, or common-sense may itself surrender some of its constituents in deference to these beliefs. The Kuhnian version of the theory-moulds-experience thesis is applied to various periods within science so that the adherents of opposing schools are said to have seen things differently; but the thesis equally fits different schools of art or different specific religions. But here, I think, the parallel must stop. It would be absurd to suppose that one particular religion replaces another in a way similar to one scientific world-view replacing another, or that conflicting aesthetic movements appeal to "facts" in the manner of opposing scientific traditions.

Wittgenstein does not explicitly apply the concept of seeing-as in his account of religious belief given in the *Lectures and Conversations* (LC), but I think we would be justified in regarding it as implicit in much that he there says. He opens his course of lectures by claiming that the believer and unbeliever do not really contradict each other as they inhabit "entirely different planes" (LC. p. 53). He goes on to say that a religious person's beliefs induce him to take events in his life as rewards or punishments (LC. p. 54), to regard even obviously dishonest manipulations as the occasion of God's revelation (LC. p. 61), to accept a dream as evidence of an apocalyptic event (LC. p. 61). When Wittgenstein says that it is not necessarily unreasonable for the unbeliever to offer the sort of evidence he does in support of his beliefs (LC. p. 58), it seems plain that Wittgenstein regards the believer as seeing or experiencing things differently from the unbeliever. To see an illness as a punishment is to see it differently from one who sees it as a random attack by microbes. A believer who sees it as retribution could reasonably use an illness following a delinquency as evidence of divine action to the world. The believer can thus be said to inhabit a different world from the unbeliever's.<sup>25</sup> I would submit that much that is

distinctive in the Wittgensteinian philosophy of religion stems from latent pervasiveness of his concept of seeing-as.

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### NOTES

1. Published in *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, Ed. Cyril Barrett, Berkeley : University of California Press, 1967, pp. 53-72.

2. Eg., W. D. Hudson, *Wittgenstein and Religious Belief*, London : Macmillan, 1975; Allen Keightley, *Wittgenstein, Grammar and God*, London : Epworth Press, 1976; D. Z. Phillips, *Faith and Philosophical Enquiry*, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970; Patrick Sherry, *Religion, Truth and Language-games*, London : Macmillan, 1977.

3. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. Kemp Smith, London : Macmillan, 1933, A 120 (footnote).

4. N. L. Munn, *Introduction to Psychology*, Boston : Houghton Mifflin Co., 1962, p. 402f.

5. See P. Strawson, "Imagination and Perception", *Experience and Theory*, ed. Foster and Swanson, London : Duckworth, 1970.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44.

7. In N. R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery*, Cambridge : The University Press, 1958 rpt. 1969, Chap. 1. and "Observation and Interpretation" in *Philosophy of Science*, V. O. A. Forum Lectures, Madras : Higginbothams, 1969, pp. 66-74.

8. N. R. Hanson, *Patterns of Discovery*, p. 5. ( See Zettel, 215.)

9. Hanson gives sixteen references of eminent thinkers from Berkeley onwards who have taken this position. *Ibid.* Appendix pp. 176-177.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

11. Page 128.

12. Hanson, "Observation and Interpretation," p. 68.

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 68-69.

14. L. Carmichael, H. F. Hogan and A. A. Walter, "An Experimental Study of the Effect of Language on the Reproduction of Visually Received Form," *J. Exper. Psychol.*, 1932, 15, 73-86. Described in N. L. Munn. *Introduction to Psychology*, Boston : Houghton Mifflin Co., 1962, pp. 402-403,

15. J. S. Bruner and L. J. Postman, "On the perception of incongruity : a paradigm", *J. Pers.*, 18 : 206-23. Described in E. R. Hilgard, *Introduction to Psychology*, New York : Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962, pp. 212-13.
16. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chap. VI. Chicago : The University Press, 1962 (Rpt. Phoenix Edn. 1964).
17. *Ibid.*, p. 63-64.
18. Kuhn, "Second Thoughts on Paradigms". *The Structure of Scientific Theories*, ed. Patrick Suppe. Urbana : University of Illinois Press, 1974, p. 462ff. Even if "paradigm" is too ambiguous a concept to use in explanation of scientific change, it could be useful in the philosophy of religion.
19. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (2nd edn.), postscript.
20. Kuhn, 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions' (1st edn.), p. 112.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 93 and p. 130.
24. To use Collingwood's term from *An Essay on Metaphysics*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1940, p. 31 f.
25. Was this concept implicit even in the *Tractatus*? See para 6.43.