

Some Reflections on Seeing-as, Metaphor-Grasping and Imagining

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1. *Metaphor-Grasping as Seeing-as*

Here are some things I take to be uncontroversial about grasping a metaphor. In a metaphor, in the simplest case, two things are juxtaposed, X and Y. I will stick to the hackneyed philosopher's example of Romeo's utterance that *Juliet is the sun*. X (Juliet) is "framed" in terms of the thought of Y (the sun), which means that features of Y (the sun) become apparent to one as being shared by X (Juliet), in a way that is revelatory. One's thought of X (Juliet) is now focused upon the properties shared with Y (the sun), or other affinities between the two entities. In a genuinely interesting metaphor, there is a creative role for the thinker in finding new, shared properties and affinities, beyond the obvious ones.

It has become commonplace to describe the sort of understanding one gets from successfully grasping a metaphor as «seeing-as» or «seeing an aspect» (see Hester [1966]; Gaut [1997]; Camp [2008] and [2009]). Perhaps this is because there are some *prima facie* grammatical similarities between seeing-as and metaphor-grasping. Seeing-as, in what I take to be a central case – the duck-rabbit – involves two elements: the object X (the ambiguous figure) and some further object Y (a duck, or a rabbit), where, we might say, at least loosely, that X and Y are brought together in some intertwined way in thought. Equally, speaking intentionally vaguely at this stage, a metaphor also presents two elements: an object X (e.g. Juliet) and some further entity Y (e.g. the sun), consideration of which "together", in an intertwined way, is supposed to illuminate some feature of the former.

But is the connection made between seeing-as and metaphor-grasping anything more than a suggestive analogy? In this paper I want to examine this question. I am not

a Wittgenstein scholar, and my aim here is not to work out whether metaphor-grasping would count as seeing-as *for Wittgenstein*, given his other theoretical commitments. My aim is only to consider whether it seems reasonable from a relatively theory-neutral background to do so, given some of the points made by Wittgenstein about seeing-as. Certainly the people who make the claim that metaphor-grasping is a kind of seeing-as are not doing so from a particularly Wittgensteinian position, though they may be influenced by him in their conception of seeing-as.

I assume there are at least three positions open to us here:

1. There are similarities between central cases of seeing-as, and metaphor-grasping, and that those similarities are reason enough to extend the concept of «seeing-as» to include metaphor-grasping.
2. There are similarities between central cases of seeing-as, and metaphor-grasping, but that these are not numerous or important enough to license extending the concept of seeing-as to metaphor-grasping.
3. There are no similarities between central cases of seeing-as, and metaphor-grasping.

3. is obviously false. My aim in this article is not to pronounce in favour of either 1. or 2., but only that 1. is not straightforwardly or obviously to be accepted. That is, I do not claim here that 1. is false but only suggest that it is not obviously true.

2. *Bringing a New Concept*

I suspect that one reason it seems natural to think of metaphor-grasping as a kind of seeing-as is that Wittgenstein describes «bringing a new concept» as central to many cases of seeing-as, (e.g. RPP, I; though not all – see LW, § 701; PI, p. 207; RPP, II, § 496); for instance, as one sees a duck in the duck/rabbit ambiguous figure, one brings the concept of a duck to what one sees. Meanwhile, it seems *prima facie* true that «bringing a new concept» is centrally involved in metaphor-grasping too: a new concept (e.g. the sun) is brought to bear on the thought of some other object (Juliet). A problem, however, is that on further scrutiny, it is not obvious that «seeing-as» involves «bringing a new concept» at all; or if it does, its doing so is different in important ways from the way in which metaphor-grasping does so.

As is noted by Baz (2000): 110, under a certain conception of seeing, we bring concepts to all that we see. That is, in recognizing objects around us in the course of perceptual experience, the concepts of those objects are employed. This is not to say that linguistic concepts are employed in visual experience: I can, presumably, see a duck in a

duck-pond without having the linguistic concept of a duck; and vice versa. What is employed in seeing a duck in a duck-pond is rather something like a «recognitional» concept in the sense introduced by Brian Loar:

Simple such judgements have the form: the object (event, situation) *a* is one of that kind, where the cognitive backing for the predicate is just a recognitional disposition, i.e. a disposition to classify objects (events, situations) together, that often but not inevitably is linked with a specific imaginative capacity. [...] [S]uch recognitional concepts can be cognitively independent of referentially equivalent concepts whose roles are determined by some background theory [...] so that no information about *x* couched in the latter terms on its own enables one to make a judgement exercising a recognitional/imaginative concept. (Loar [1990]: 87)

Now, if recognitional concepts are applied in all visual experience, it does not seem an especially significant fact that they are applied in the course of central cases of seeing-as. In seeing an ambiguous figure as a duck, arguably the recognitional concept *duck* is applied, just as in seeing a duck in a duckpond, it is applied. (Of course one might deny this and say that rather the recognitional concept *cartoon duck* is applied – this would not affect my point).

In response to this sort of worry, Baz interprets what Wittgenstein has in mind as being our *actively* bringing a *new* (to us) concept to what is seen, so that it is «not our usual, obvious way of seeing» (2000): 111. Among other things, for Baz this supposedly explains why, as Wittgenstein also remarks, the aspect «lasts only as long as I am occupied with the object in a particular way» (Wittgenstein [1953] (PI, p. 210d) (i.e. for as long as I am actively bringing the concept).

But this seems to me unconvincing. That experience of an aspect «lasts only as long as I am occupied with the object in a particular way» is not a special feature of aspects, explicable by the fact that a new, surprising concept is being actively brought, but rather seems to be a feature of all seeing which involves recognitional concepts: one's awareness of an object or feature of an object, in terms of the type to which one recognizes it as belonging, lasts only as long as one's attention is turned to that fact. Meanwhile, not even in all the central cases of seeing-as cited by Wittgenstein need there be anything which departs from «our usual, obvious way of seeing»: I might, for instance, habitually see the duck/rabbit as a duck; and to see it as either a duck or a rabbit is hardly startling or revelatory, either to the perceiver or to anyone else, once the first encounter with the figure is passed. Equally, to see four dots as grouped in a particular way, or to see a figure as a three-dimensional cube, or a plane figure, or to see the resemblance between two entities, *might* strike the perceiver as unobvious and «new» but is equally

likely to strike her as unexceptional and easily achieved. (It is true that Wittgenstein places great importance on the «dawning» of an aspect upon the perceiver in seeing-as, as I'll discuss in a later section; but even so, I don't think it makes sense to equate «dawning» with «experiencing as new and unobvious»).

So, in sum, there is no significant sense in which seeing-as in particular, as opposed to all perceptual experience, involves «bringing a concept» in a way that might license a strong analogy between seeing-as and metaphor-grasping – even if we grant that metaphor-grasping involves «bringing a new concept» to an object, something I have taken for granted here¹.

3. Duration, Instantaneity, Apt Expression

In this section I will focus more briefly on a cluster of features, picked out by Wittgenstein or commentators as present to central cases of seeing-as, which are shared both by seeing-as and the grasping of a metaphor. Yet I will argue that none of these similarities in themselves provide any special grounds for granting that metaphor-grasping is a form of seeing-as.

First: to see X as Y, or to successfully grasp a metaphor “X is Y”, is in each case, in some ways at least, to be in a state that happens to one rather than something one directly brings about. Wittgenstein makes the point with respect to seeing-as: «To interpret is to think, to do something; seeing is a state» (PI, xii, p. 212).

The same seems true of successful metaphor-grasping: it is at least to some extent something that happens to one, rather than something one does.

Second, both seeing X as Y (LPP, § 330) and the grasping of a metaphor “X is Y” have a duration in time. As Roger Scruton puts it with respect to seeing-as, undoubtedly influenced by Wittgenstein in this matter:

there is the property of precise duration: it is possible to “clock” the perception of an aspect in the way that it is possible to “clock” a sensation. (Scruton [1974]: 110)

¹ A further point of difference between seeing-as and metaphor-grasping in this respect is that in metaphor-grasping, *two* concepts are *consciously* brought together so that one is directly aware of both of them, simultaneously: whereas in seeing-as, there need be only direct awareness of one concept. For instance, as I look at the duck-rabbit, my way of being aware of the ambiguous figure is indirectly through my direct awareness of the duck it represents; it is not that I am directly aware of the ambiguous figure *and* directly aware of the duck, simultaneously.

Equally, one's grasping of the metaphor *Juliet is the sun* can have a duration through time, that one is aware of as one thinks it.

Third, what is seen, in seeing-as, is instantaneously present to one, rather than indirectly read off or inferred. And, according to Wittgenstein, the experience of seeing X as Y is not more naturally described by some other description which does not mention Y: its most ready expression is the description in terms of which it first and instantaneously occurs to one (namely, a Y-involving one).

The first thing to jump to my eye in this picture is there are two hexagons. (PI, xii, p. 204)

I think he would have given this description at once in answer to the question "What are you seeing?", nor would he have treated it as one among several possibilities. (*ibid.*)

Much of this is also true of metaphor, I take it. Where one grasps a metaphor, its content, or if one prefers, its non-cognitive effects, are experienced as instantaneously present to one, rather than indirectly inferred. Moreover, a very natural way of expressing what it is one grasps is simply to (re-)utter the metaphorical description. Indeed, some have gone so far as to endorse what has been called the "Indispensability Thesis", namely:

We use at least some metaphors to think, to express, to communicate, or to discover what cannot be thought, expressed, communicated or discovered without metaphor. (Grant [2010]: 255; Grant in fact rejects this thesis.)

However, none of these similarities in themselves provide any special grounds for granting that metaphor-grasping is a form of seeing-as. This is because, insofar as they occur in both seeing-as and metaphor-grasping, this seem to be in virtue of each of these counting as *experiences, tout court*, rather than for more local and hence significant reasons. Experiences are things that happen to one; they have a duration, insofar as they emerge from the flow of general experience. And very often their descriptions seem to involve reference to the thing experienced: there is no more natural or direct description of what I experience, when I experience the colour blue, than "blue"; ditto for pain. I do not think these points, as they stand, specially license any extension of the concept of seeing-as to metaphor-grasping.

4. *Dawning Awareness*

Another way in which understanding metaphor seems to resemble seeing-as is that in both cases there is a «dawning»: the noticing of a feature of an object where previously

ignorance/non-awareness of that property was a psychological possibility for the thinker in question (see LW, I, §169; LW, I, §173; LW, I, §429; RPP, II, §540). One suddenly, perhaps temporarily, sees the ambiguous figure as a duck, whereas previously one had seen a rabbit; or as a black cross, instead of a white one; or one suddenly notices the resemblance between two things previously experienced as unfamiliar. Equally, in grasping a metaphor is thought to be involve the (temporary) dawning of a new perspective on an entity, which brings fresh awareness of certain of its features in a different light (Camp [2008]: 2).

This seems about right. However, two things should be noted. The first is that neither all seeing-as, nor all metaphor-grasping, involves dawning. I may habitually see the figure as a duck and feel no surprise when I do; equally, I may habitually think of Juliet as the sun, etc. Second, it should also be noted that this dawning awareness of a feature of an object, of which one was previously ignorant, is also a feature of much non-metaphorical and non-visual understanding too. Any shift of attention that reveals some property or relation, that you might in other circumstances overlook, so that you perceive the object without that property, looks like this. Indeed, at times Wittgenstein apparently allows that even “basic” features of objects such as their colour and shape may be things of which awareness suddenly dawns. There is a sense in which one sees colour and shape of objects continuously, but equally, one might intelligibly say:

Just now I looked at the shape but not the colour. (PI, xi, p. 211)

Someone tells me: “I looked at the flower, but was thinking of something else and was not conscious of its colour”. Do I understand this? – I can imagine a significant context, say his going on: “Then I suddenly saw it, and realized it was the one which...”.

Or if I had turned away then, I could not have said what colour it was. (*ibid.*)

So: the fact of dawning awareness of a feature of an object, of which one was previously unaware, does not *in itself* license our thinking of there being a particularly close or special relation between seeing-as and metaphor-grasping, since it is prevalent in so many other non-metaphorical cases too.

5. *Quasi-Subjectivity*

Another feature of seeing-as alluded to by Wittgenstein is the quasi-subjective nature of what is seen. Many remarks of his suggest that there is something less than objective about aspects; for instance,

What I perceive in the dawning of an aspect is not a property of the object, but an internal relation between it and other objects. (PI xii, p. 212)

He also tells us that they don't teach us "about the external world". (RPP, I, §899)

One reading of such claims is that aspects are not real properties of objects, but merely projected subjectively onto them. This seems to be the interpretation of Baz ([2000]: 110). Other commentators have disagreed (Schroeder [2009]: 360).

Without wanting to pronounce on the issue, it seems to me an open question what the metaphysical status of aspects are, which is not settled by any remarks of Wittgenstein. One might, for instance, argue that aspects, perhaps like other secondary properties of objects, can be analysed dispositionally (e.g. the "duck" aspect of the duck/rabbit might be analysed as the property of disposing viewers to have a visual impression as of a duck, in the right circumstances). If this were right, then such aspects need not be subjective: they may depend on particular viewers for their actualization, but not their bare existence. I do not present this as a thesis to be endorsed: I merely note that it would take much discussion before it were established that aspects were genuinely subjective or quasi-subjective.

Equally, one might argue that the features of objects to which successful metaphors draw attention are subjective projections onto those objects; or alternatively argue that they too are dispositional and so in some sense objective. It might be argued, for instance, that Juliet has the property of disposing thinkers to think of her as the sun in the right circumstances. (Obviously these are not the only alternatives). The point at issue is that without discussion, we do not yet have any special grounds to think of a close important connection between seeing-as and metaphor-grasping in this matter. Central cases of aspect-seeing are not obviously subjective or quasi-subjective; and nor are cases of metaphor-grasping.

In the spirit of Wittgenstein's remarks, what *does* seem uncontroversially true of both ordinary aspect-seeing and metaphor-grasping is that, with respect to particular examples, the experience of neither need be psychologically possible for everyone, and in fact may be actually available only to a few; and nor does the mere fact of experiencing either seeing X as Y, or metaphorically grasping X as Y, denote any change in the properties of the object. (Even if aspects were objectively possessed dispositions of objects to produce certain visual impressions, then their actualization of those dispositions, with respect to a given perceiver or thinker, would not change the object's nature).

One might suggest that an important ground for Wittgenstein's remarks on the quasi-subjectivity of aspect seeing remains unexamined: namely, the fact that aspect-seeing is «subject to the will». Indeed, he explicitly ties the two together in places (e.g. RPP, I, §899).

If something appears blue to me, I cannot see it as red, and it makes no sense to say "See it as red", whereas it does make sense to say "See it as...". (*ibid*)

Now, one cannot directly choose what aspects one sees in an object, in an unrestricted way, so clearly Wittgenstein can't mean that. Instead perhaps he means that, of two or three possible choices, one can directly choose which aspect one sees. But this seems false too, baldly stated, since one might be "aspect-blind" without various relevant abilities – so the claim must be that, *with the requisite abilities*, one can choose, of two or three available choices, directly, which aspect one sees.

Yet even this seems false with respect to many central examples of seeing-as.: those which do not involve not ambiguous figures. For instance, whether one suddenly notices a resemblance between two faces or not, or suddenly recognizes a previously unfamiliar object or person, or sees a horse in a picture as galloping, does not seem something under direct voluntary control in any sense.

Because of these sorts of difficulties, some have read the claim that seeing-as is subject to the will as «grammatical» rather than «psychological», i.e. it makes sense to say "now see the figure like this" (Baz [2000]: 109 citing PI, p. 213e). However, this seems to me a weak reading: for if it is genuinely psychologically impossible for someone to choose to see a resemblance, then it makes no sense to ask them to ("see the man as resembling a bicycle"). Meanwhile, once a resemblance is seen and noticed, one cannot voluntarily un-see it (that is, move back to the experience one had, prior to the noticing).

Moreover, even in cases such as ambiguous figures, where (let's accept) one can voluntarily change the aspect one sees, this is compatible with the dispositional account I proffered for the sake of argument earlier. In such cases, the story would go, one voluntarily changes which experience one actually has; but that is compatible with the disposition to produce such experiences remaining constant and unalterable by any particular person's will.

I conclude that there is no clear sense in which both seeing-as and metaphor-grasping are distinctively quasi-subjective in some way; and so this does not help the case for classifying the latter a variety of the former.

6. Imagery and Imagination

The last reason to be considered here, for possibly legitimizing the categorization of metaphor-grasping as seeing-as, is that both involve the imagination in distinctive ways.

One view might be that both seeing-as and metaphor-grasping involve the consideration of *images* (seeing-as being understood as the having of a kind of image). That metaphor-grasping involves a relation to an image is the line taken by Hester (1966²). According to him, to think or utter a metaphor “A is B” is to have an image of A as B.

However, as Moran (1989) has demonstrated, metaphor-grasping need not be imagistic³. Not every metaphor has even an image attached: this applies to the sort of case previously cited, where neither A nor B are visible things. Second, Moran points out that metaphors are «semantically articulate» in a way images are not; they have parts which perform different functions, and they direct us to thinking of one thing (X. the primary locus of thought) in terms of another (Y). In contrast, pictures «can’t tell us what is to be imagined as what»; if Juliet is imaged (somehow) as the sun, then the sun is imaged as Juliet. Third, images are determinate; while the meaning of metaphor is open-ended: no image could contain everything that a metaphor expresses.

Instead of considering the having of imagery, it might be argued that what importantly binds central cases of seeing-as and metaphor-grasping is that both involve imagining some X as Y. I shall finish by considering this suggestion.

Are there good reasons, first, to think of seeing-as as involving imagining?

Clearly on no account of seeing e.g. ambiguous figure X as duck Y is it plausible to say that one imagines *that* (*de dicto*) there is a some sort of composite object: a picture-X-which-is-also-a-duck-Y. Rather the most plausible construal of the claim is that in seeing the figure as a duck, one imagines of the figure (*de re*), that it is a duck.

One thing to say immediately is that this, if true at all, only seems to apply to certain forms of seeing-as; it does not, for instance, obviously apply to the noticing of resemblances. When I see person X as resembling Y, I do not obviously imagine of X that it is Y. (A second thing to say is that it seems to me that “imagining of X that it is Y” is not a plausible way to analyse the imaginative relation involved in picture-viewing generally: I

² Moran (1989) traces its roots in Aristotle, Hegel and Ricoeur

³ This is not to deny that there are features of metaphor-grasping in common with the having of an image, and indeed, with seeing-as in central cases: such as duration, instantaneity etc. But these are shared in virtue of all three counting as phenomenologically discrete experiences. See discussion in section 3 above.

prefer to construe it as simply involving imagining that there is a Y (Stock [2008]). However, I will accept the account on the table for the sake of argument).

Accepting however for the sake of argument that many central cases of seeing-as involve *de re* imagining, we can now ask: in grasping the metaphor “X is Y”, does one imagine of X that it is Y? Positive assent is given by Walton (1993), who argues that in stating a metaphor, the speaker pretends to assert its literal truth. This involves treating X as a “prop” in an imaginative game of make-believe, where one imagines of that prop (X) that it is a Y. So in stating “Juliet is the sun”, one imagines, of Juliet, that she is the sun (etc.).

Equally, Gaut (1997) argues that in e.g. seeing a whale as an abandoned child, there must be imagination involved, on the grounds that «the thought is not asserted...». «[...] I do not believe that the whale really is an abandoned child’ (235). Equally, he argues, in saying that, metaphorically, a Kandinsky painting is teeming with life, this counts as imaginative seeing-as because we do not believe «the painting really possesses the quality of aliveness» (236).

It is true that in grasping the metaphor “X is Y” one does not believe that X is Y, or not literally anyway. But this does not show that one imagines that X is Y, since the absence of positive belief that X is Y does not entail imagining, on its own (e.g. where I sarcastically exclaim “you are really clever”, the fact I don’t believe it does not entail I imagine it). In any case, to say that metaphor-grasping involves imagining in this way seems wrong in light of a number of objections made by Camp (2009). Most important among them, when I pretend that X is Y, or imagine of X that it is Y, the focus seems to be on Y, and only upon the prop X derivatively – X is a prop for thoughts of Y. Indeed, insofar as conscious awareness and mental attention goes, there need be none on X *as such* at all (where I imagine of some mud that it is a pie, I need have no conscious focus on the mud *as such*; in fact to do so would interfere with the game). Whereas: in metaphor, conversely, it seems that the focus is on X and only derivatively on Y; but equally, there must be awareness of both, simultaneously. (Camp [2009]: 113).

So thinking of Juliet as the sun seems a different process from imagining *de re* of Juliet, that she is the sun. Does this show that imagination is not involved at all? Camp suggests not, arguing that there is still reason to think that imagining is involved, albeit in a different way to that involved in pretence/ imagining *de re*.

Metaphor-grasping, she suggests, still employs a «variety of literary imagination» (2009).

But why should we grant this? Her own grounds seem to license only the thought that metaphor-grasping is *imaginative*, not that it involves *imagining* ([2009]: 116 and footnote). If this is the right reading, then such points do not license the thought that imagining is involved in metaphor-grasping at all. For to do something imaginatively (e.g. to attend to objects imaginatively, or to notice their properties imaginatively) does not mean that one imagines anything. I might make a hat, or care for a relative imaginatively etc. Its use seems only to indicate qualities such as sensitivity, novelty, ability and so on, in an agent or in her practice, rather than any particular mental process that is simultaneously occurring.

We can perhaps agree, at least, that both seeing-as and metaphor-grasping involves representing to oneself *a state of affairs*, where the consideration of that state of affairs does not involve any commitment to that state of affairs being the case, or not (see Moran [1989]: metaphors, like mental images, are «indifferent to grammatical mood» in that their effects do not depend on their being literally asserted, and persist even when they are denied). To think of Juliet as the sun is to represent to oneself a state of affairs involving Juliet and her sun-like features, where the consideration of that state of affairs does not involve any commitment to that state of affairs being the case, just as, perhaps, to see X as Y is not to commit to X being Y. In other words, in both cases, there seems to be something very like the imaginative entertaining of a state of affairs, without commitment either to its assertion or negation.

However, for our purposes, the relevant point is: even if this is a feature present in both seeing-as and metaphor-grasping, this entertaining of non-asserted content is not any special feature of either seeing-as or metaphor-grasping: it looks present in any thought about alternative possibilities, and in counterfactual reasoning generally. If I consider the possibility of state of affairs x, or y, or z, as such, then the fact that it is or is not the case that x, or y, or z is irrelevant to me. If I am trying to work out what would happen, if X was the case, then it is not important to me that X is or is not actually the case. So here again, we don't seem to have an especially close link between seeing-as and metaphor-grasping that is not more generally present in a lot of other mental activity too.

7. Conclusion

My remarks in this paper have been mostly negative. I have suggested that many of the conscious or half-conscious reasons for which one might characterize metaphor-

grasping as a species of seeing-as, do not in fact obviously legitimate that move. This leaves the burden of proof upon those who would treat metaphor-grasping as a species of seeing-as to show that it is a literally true or in some other way an informative claim, rather than a loose analogy, or even itself a metaphor. However, I have not positively established that this cannot be done: not least because it is very unclear, partly for reasons made famous by Wittgenstein himself, how many similarities there have to be between two entities, and of what kind, before they are reasonably counted as belonging to the same category under some description.

Abbreviations of Titles of Wittgenstein's Works Cited

- PI: *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe, 2nd ed., Blackwell, Oxford 1958
- RPP, I: *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. I, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, Blackwell, Oxford 1980.
- RPP, II: *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. II, ed. G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, Blackwell, Oxford 1980.
- LW: *Last Writings on the Philosophy of Psychology*, ed. G. H. von Wright and H. Nyman, Blackwell, Oxford 1982.
- LPP : *Wittgenstein's Lectures on Philosophical Psychology 1946-47*, notes by P.T. Geach, K.J. Shah and A.C. Jackson, Harvester, London 1988.

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