

6. 'The light in other people's faces'

Descartes writes: 'I suppose the body to be nothing but a statue or machine made of earth'. He also suggests that anyone who has some knowledge of the workings of man made machines, and some knowledge of the internal workings of the human body, will think likewise; that is to say, they 'will regard this body as a machine which, having been made by the hands of God, is incomparably better ordered than any machine that can be devised by man, and contains in itself movements more wonderful than those in any such machine'.¹

I would like you now to read some remarks by the twentieth century philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. While reading these, I would like you to ask yourself what Wittgenstein might think of the claim that 'the body is a machine'. Make a note of any points that strike you.

218. I interpret words; yes--but do I also interpret looks? Do I interpret a facial expression as threatening or kind?--That *may* happen.

Suppose I said: "It is not enough to perceive the threatening face, I have to interpret it."--Someone whips out a knife at me and I say "I conceive that as a threat."

219. We don't understand Chinese gestures any more than Chinese sentences.

220. Consciousness in another's face. Look into someone else's face, and see the consciousness in it, and a particular *shade* of consciousness. You see on it, in it, joy, indifference, interest, excitement, torpor and so on. The light in other people's faces.

Do you look into *yourself* in order to recognize the fury in *his* face? It is there as clearly as in your own breast.

(And what do we want to say now? That someone else's face stimulates me to imitate it, and that I therefore feel little movements and muscle-contractions in my own face and *mean* the sum of these? Nonsense. Nonsense,--because you are making assumptions instead of simply describing. If your head is haunted by explanations here, you are neglecting to remind yourself of the most important facts.)

221. "Consciousness is as clear in his face and behaviour, as in myself."

222. We do not see the human eye as a receiver, it appears not to let anything in, but to send something out. The ear receives; the eye looks. (It casts glances, it flashes, radiates, gleams.) One can terrify with one's eyes, not with one's ear or nose. When you see the eye you see something going out from it. You see the look in the eye.

223. "If you only shake free from your physiological prejudices, you will find nothing queer about the fact that the glance of the eye can be seen too." For I also say that I see the look that you cast at someone else. And if someone wanted to correct me and say that I don't really *see* it, I should take that for pure stupidity.

¹ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part V.

On the other hand I have not *made any admissions* by using that manner of speaking, and I should contradict anyone who told me I saw the glance 'just the way' I see the shape and colour of the eye.

For 'naïve language', that is to say our naïve, normal way of expressing ourselves, does not contain any theory of seeing--does not show you a *theory* but only a *concept* of seeing.

224. Get a human being to give angry, proud, ironical looks; and now veil the face so that only the eyes remain uncovered--in which the whole expression seemed concentrated: their expression is now surprisingly *ambiguous*.

225. "We *see* emotion."--As opposed to what?--We do not see facial contortions and make inferences from them (like a doctor framing a diagnosis) to joy, grief, boredom. We describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give any other description of the features.--Grief, one would like to say, is personified in the face.

This belongs to the concept of emotion.

[Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel* 218-225]

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Wittgenstein, as you can see, has a very distinctive style of writing. One has to learn how to read him; and among the things that one has to learn is the different roles that quotation marks play in his writing. For example, sometimes he uses them to mark something that we may be tempted to say but which he thinks is a confusion. That is pretty clearly going on in section 218 ('Suppose I said: "It is not enough to perceive the threatening face, I have to interpret it."—'). But the following are, I am sure, different: "Consciousness is as clear in his face and behaviour, as in myself" (221), "If you only shake free from your physiological prejudices, you will find nothing queer about the fact that the glance of the eye can be seen too" (223). These are, I think, things that Wittgenstein feels tempted to say – and that, on reflection, he judges to be just right.

What is he pointing to with the phrase 'physiological prejudices'? I think we could read this as: 'the prejudice that it is the description of a face in physiological terms that captures what can, strictly speaking, be seen in it'. I hope that, in the light of the discussion of the previous section of this module, you have some sense of what is at issue here. I there spoke of a description of a human face in terms of the geometrical arrangement of facial flesh: this, I think, being the same as, or at least very close to, what Wittgenstein means by 'physiological' terms. And I contrasted this with a description of that same face in terms of the expression on it. The contrast is between, for example, a description of the form 'The corners of her mouth rose by .35 cms, the pupils of her eyes enlarged, ...', and one of the form 'Her face lit up with joy'. Wittgenstein's central idea in the above remarks is, surely, that it is a prejudice to suppose that descriptions of the former, as opposed to the latter, kind are the ones that capture what I really see when I look at another's face.

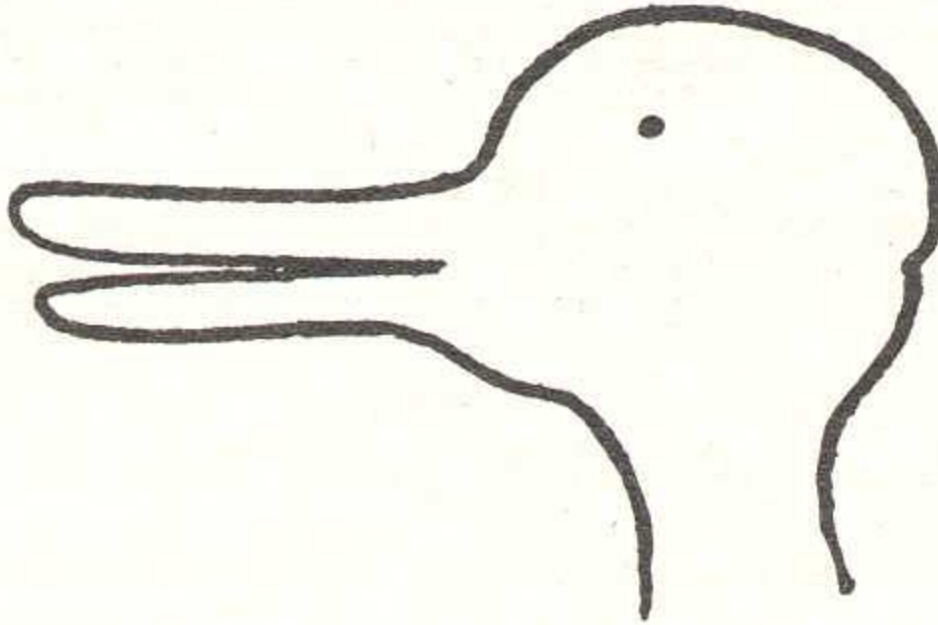
I asked you what, on the basis of the above remarks, you suppose Wittgenstein might think of Descartes' claim that 'the body is a machine'. I think he would regard it as, in part, a manifestation of that prejudice. It is true that in speaking as he does Descartes centrally had in mind the mechanisms that *underlie* the movements to be observed on the surface of a human body. This, however, goes hand in hand with the idea that what is to be observed on the surface is, as I expressed it, *movements*. The human body in motion is simply one among all the other moving object in the material world. And these movements – the risings of the corners of her mouth and so on, as opposed to her face lighting up with joy – are what I actually *see* when I observe another.

The idea that I need some special form of justification for thinking that some of the creatures that I see around me have thoughts, feelings and so on is dependent on this – Descartes' - way of thinking of the human (or animal) body. We suppose that what we *really* see when we look at another is simply matter in motion: that a *strict* description of what is seen would be a description in terms of the 'language of physics' or 'physiology'. And that is to say: a strict description of what we actually *see* would be one that leaves completely open all questions about the person's 'mental state'. On this view, we should say, for example, not 'He said that it was time to go', but 'The sounds "It is time to go" came from his mouth'; for the former description introduces claims about what he *meant* in producing these sounds. We should say, not 'Her face lit up with joy', but 'The corners of her mouth rose by .35 cms'; for the former description, quite illegitimately on this view, imports the mental term 'joy' into a description of the behaviour. Now if what we strictly speaking *see* is such as to leave open the question of whether this is a *person* – a being that has thoughts and feelings - the question inevitably arises: what justification do we ever have for moving from what we actually see to conclusions about the other's mental states?

Our normal, everyday, descriptions of the behaviour of others leave no room for that quite general gap between 'descriptions of behaviour' and 'descriptions of mental states'. But can our normal descriptions be taken at face value? (And, incidentally, what is '*face* value'?) Do I really *see* joy in the other's face, or *hear* the anger in his voice? Certainly we talk in these ways. But are not these ways of speaking elliptical? Must we not agree that, in contrast with what Wittgenstein writes, what I actually *see* is simply certain movements of facial flesh, which I *interpret* as an expression of joy?

Consider an analogy. On a piece of paper there is a pattern of dots in which I clearly 'see' a house. Do I really *see* the house, or do I merely see the dots, which I then interpret as being a picture of a house? Well, someone might see the dots and yet not see the house. (I am assuming that the picture is not so clear that the house immediately hits everyone in the face.) It does not follow that the one who 'sees' the house is not really *seeing* the house: that he really only sees the dots which he then *interprets* as being a picture of a house. Indeed, it is clear, I think, that that description will not do. For we can imagine someone who interprets this as a picture of a house, but simply cannot see it in that way. Perhaps he has been reliably informed that this artist always does houses like that; and so, if asked, he will say with complete confidence that it is a picture of a house. Yet, for the life of him, he cannot *see* a house in the dots.

If you are not clear what I mean by the phrase 'see a house in the dots' consider the following drawing:



What do you see: a duck or a rabbit? *Both* are there to be seen in the picture. But at any one time one only *sees* one of them. (Wittgenstein has a fascinating discussion of issues raised by this example. See his *Philosophical Investigations*, Part II section xi.)

The point of this digression about houses, ducks and rabbits has simply been to raise a doubt about the way in which Descartes suggests we must think of the body. On a view, such as his, that regards the world of spatial-temporal objects as, fundamentally, a world of matter in motion – a world to be described in terms of the language of physics - we do not, strictly speaking, *see* the joy in another's face, the anger in another's eyes, and so on; we do not, strictly speaking, *see* people laughing at jokes or writhing in agony. We are asked to agree that whenever our description of another involves terms that 'imply mentality', we are going beyond a pure description of what we see: going beyond a pure description of their behaviour. It is suggested that in all such cases we are placing an interpretation on, or drawing an inference from, what we actually see. But not only do we not *have* to describe the matter in that way; on the face of it such descriptions of the situation are simply wrong. For example, we can imagine someone interpreting another's look as being one of anger, or inferring from the other's look that he is angry, and yet not, for the life of her, being able to see the anger in the other's look. As with the dots and the house, her interpretation is grounded in her prior knowledge that this is the (perhaps rather eccentric) way in which *his* anger finds expression. Now *that* is not our normal (or, at any rate, not our *only*) situation in relation to the emotional expressions of others.

We can, perhaps, imagine a more radical case than this: a case of someone who, to adopt a term of Wittgenstein's, is aspect blind in this area. The following extract from a

paper by Oliver Sacks, in which he discusses the condition of an autistic woman, may give some feeling for what a more radical case could be like:

I was struck by the enormous difference, the gulf, between Temple's immediate, intuitive recognition of animal moods and signs and her extraordinary difficulties understanding human beings, their codes and signals, the way they conduct themselves. One cannot say that she is devoid of feeling or has a fundamental lack of sympathy. On the contrary, her sense of animals' moods and feelings is so strong that these almost take possession of her, overwhelm her at times. She feels she can have sympathy for what is physical or physiological - for an animal's pain or terror - but lacks empathy for people's states of mind and perspectives. When she was younger, she was hardly able to interpret even the simplest expressions of emotion; she learned to 'decode' them later Temple had longed for friends at school and would have been totally, fiercely loyal to a friend (for two or three years, she had an imaginary friend), but there was something about the way she talked, the way she acted, that seemed to alienate others Something was going on between the other kids, something swift, subtle, constantly changing - an exchange of meanings, a negotiation, a swiftness of understanding so remarkable that sometimes she wondered if they were all telepathic. She is now aware of the existence of these social signals. She can infer them, she says, but she herself cannot perceive them, cannot participate in this magical communication directly²
...

This is a striking passage - as is Sacks' whole discussion of this woman's life. While I am far from clear just how her condition should be described, we can, perhaps, safely say that she does not see the *expression* in the faces and behaviour of other human beings. (As we can imagine someone who, try as he might, cannot see the rabbit in the duck-rabbit figure.) She can 'infer' from what she does see that the other is afraid, angry or friendly; but she cannot, as we can, 'perceive' the fear, anger or friendliness in the other's features.

Unlike Temple, most of us can (at least much of the time) *see* the joy in another's face, *see* the anger in the other's eyes, *see* people laughing at jokes and writhing in agony, and so on. We do not see flesh - 'a body' - moving in certain ways, and on the basis of this 'infer' that there is here a joyful person, or 'interpret' this as a person in pain. I *see* the joy in her face. I *see* the pain in her grimaces and hear it in her cries. At least, that is the way in which Wittgenstein invites us to put it. And as a characterization of our experience of the bodies of others Wittgenstein's way of expressing the matter *feels* right. To bring out the full force of his point, however, we need to link this with another strand in his thinking:

We describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give any other description of the features.

² Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (London: Picador, 1995), pp 256-60

Think of the recognition of *facial expressions*. Or of the description of facial expressions--which does not consist in giving the measurements of the face! Think, too, how one can imitate a man's face without seeing one's own in a mirror.

One can terrify with one's eyes.

It is a help here to remember that it is a primitive reaction to tend, to treat, the part that hurts when someone else is in pain; and not merely when oneself is--and so to pay attention to other people's pain-behaviour, as one does *not* pay attention to one's own pain behaviour.

But what is the word "primitive" meant to say here? Presumably that this sort of behaviour is *pre-linguistic*: that a language-game is based *on it*, that it is the prototype of a way of thinking and not the result of thought.

My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul.³

In these passages Wittgenstein gives central place to the ways in which we characteristically *respond* to the behaviour of others: where the word 'respond' includes things that we feel, things that we do, and things that we say. When you ask me to describe another's face what comes most easily and naturally to me is a description in terms of the expression – say of joy or fear – on it. If you ask me to imitate another's face I may be able to do so in the sense of reproducing the expression on it, but have no idea what geometrical arrangement was needed to do this. (I did not need to know that I must arrange my eyebrows in an arched, rather than a straight but sloping fashion, in order to reproduce the expression – even though that was precisely what was needed.) My immediate, unreflective, reaction to what I see when I look into the other's eyes may be terror. My immediate, unreflective, reaction to her groans, her contorted face, and the way she grabs her injured hand, may be pity and an attempt to help or comfort her. Again, we spontaneously respond to what we see *as to* a smile: we are warmed by it, feel more at ease with her, respond to it with a smile, and so on. All of this goes with the fact that asked to describe another's behaviour in terms other than these – in terms, for example, of the 'ways in which her body moved' – we would generally find ourselves struggling. We would find ourselves struggling because it is not as described in these other terms – it is not as geometrical movements of a body – that another's behaviour is generally of interest to us or moves us.

'I see the joy in her face'. 'I see the pain in her grimaces'. I said that this way of expressing the matter *feels* right. The above discussion is an attempt to take that a bit further. The difference between us and Temple, who does not see the expression in other faces⁴, is seen in the fact that, in a host of ways, our immediate reactions to others – in feelings, words and actions – embodies a recognition of what is to be seen in their faces.

³ Wittgenstein. The second and last paragraphs are from *Philosophical Investigations*, section 285 and page 178. The remainder are from *Zettel*, sections 225, 222 and 540-1.

⁴ Rather: in other *human* faces. One of the things that particularly strikes Sacks is her great sensitivity in reading the expressive behaviour of non-human creatures.

And if, at this point, it is replied: 'No matter what our reactions are, joy and pain are not there to be seen', we will need to ask: what basis is there for that judgement? The insistence that these things are not there to be seen appears to be no more than a dogmatic – undefended – clinging to the idea that the 'scientific' description of the body captures it as it really is.

In what sense can it be said that the bodily being that I see when I look at another is, in itself, a 'physical object', no different in fundamental kind, but only in its distinctive complexity, from any other? Well, we can agree that we can, with considerable effort and for limited periods, see the other in that way. Wittgenstein tries to capture the experience.⁵ He compares it with the way in which one might see the cross-pieces of a window as a swastika. We must think here of a quite ordinary window, with, perhaps, four panes of glass. By focusing one's attention in a certain way, by, so to speak, mentally highlighting particular portions of the cross-pieces, one might see a swastika in the frame. Is there a swastika there to be seen? While there is, perhaps, no straightforward answer to that question, it is, I take it, clear that the fact that one *can* see, and describe, the window in this way does not at all show that that is the way in which the window *is to be seen*, and *is to be described*. Someone who, whenever he saw such windows, saw swastikas would, we might reasonably think, be someone in need of help. Similarly, the fact that one *can* see, and describe, another in terms of the geometrical motions of matter does not at all show that that is the way in which the other *is to be seen*, and *is to be described*. It does not show that when we see the other in that way we see her as she *really* is. And so when Descartes invites us to 'regard the human body as a machine' we may accept that this is something that can be done, and yet, with a clear conscience, reject the invitation to adopt it as a general policy.

I have, following Wittgenstein, given a central place in this discussion to the human *face*. This is not accidental: the face is, one might say, the primary locus of bodily expression. The contrast between two ways of seeing another, and between two ways of describing what we see, does, however, equally apply to other forms of behaviour. Consider, for example: 'He checkmated her in 5 moves', 'He got divorced', 'She voted for the motion', 'He opened the window', 'She scored a goal', 'She waved goodbye'. These everyday descriptions of human behaviour are of a quite different form from descriptions in terms of movements of matter: 'The fingers of his right hand converged on the piece of wood, and the whole hand moved north-east at 3 mph', or whatever. Most of us, most of the time, would be hard pressed to see or describe another's behaviour in the latter terms. What generally strikes us in another's behaviour, what is of interest to us, is not, as such, how, in the geometrical sense, her body moved, but, rather, what she *did*. And while there is *some* connection between how her body moved and what, in this sense, she did, the connection is not of a simple form that would, for example, entail that if the bodies of two people moved in a similar way then they did similar things. In the absence of a chessboard and pieces, bodily movements identical to those of the chess player would not be a checkmating; and there is an indefinite range of quite different bodily movements that might, given the right circumstances, be involved in scoring a goal or getting divorced.

⁵ See *Philosophical Investigations*, 420.

Conclusion: science and ‘matter’

How, in the light of the above, would you respond to the question: Is the human body a material thing?

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This question is, of course, close to one I asked earlier about the idea that the body is a machine. I would respond to the present question like this. If by the term 'material thing' we mean 'thing of a kind that has weight, height, and so on' then the human body is, indeed, a material thing. We must, however, distinguish that way of taking the term from the following: 'thing of a kind that is appropriately described in terms of the language of physics', or 'thing of a kind such that all of its important features can be captured in that language', or 'thing of a kind that is, in itself, appropriately treated as we treat a highly complex material object such as a watch or fountain'. If *these* are what is meant when someone speaks of something as a 'material thing' then we should deny that the human body – what we see when we see another human being, or touch when we touch another human being – is a material thing.

One of the least fortunate, and most resilient, legacies of the scientific and philosophical revolution of the seventeenth century is the idea that the world⁶ as it *really* is – the world as it is *in itself* – is the world as described by physical science. On this view, while we may 'find' lots of other things in that world – colours and tastes, cruelty and kindness, smiles and angry glances – these are not, strictly speaking, there to be found: they are, perhaps, projected onto the world by us. The idea of 'the body as machine' that is formally articulated by Descartes, and which still has a firm grip on much of our thinking about human beings, is one of the central planks of this legacy. The discussion of this section has drawn on Wittgenstein in an attempt to challenge that idea. I have mentioned here the central place that he gives to the ways in which we *respond* to the behaviour of others. In the next section I want to develop this theme in Wittgenstein further: using it to challenge the strongly negative view of the body that we have been handed down by certain strands in the philosophical and religious traditions.

Reading

While there is a sense in which most of Wittgenstein's later writing is relevant to the theme of this module, for discussions that bear on it in a particularly direct way I recommend: *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraphs 281-8, 357-61, 412-27, Part II sections iv and v; *Zettel*, paragraphs 528-74. In the secondary literature, accessible discussions of this Wittgenstein's treatment of this topic can be found in Oswald Hanfling, *Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy* ch 5, Marie McGinn, *Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations* ch 4, and Fergus Kerr, *Theology After Wittgenstein* ch 6.

⁶ At least, the world that we encounter in sense experience: the world of objects that can be seen and touched.