
WITTGENSTEIN ON ACCORD*

BY

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Abstract: The paper deals with the interpretation of Wittgenstein's views on the power of occurrent mental states to sort objects or states of affairs as in accord or in conflict with them, as presented in the rule-following passages of the *Philosophical Investigations*. I shall argue first that the readings advanced by Saul Kripke and John McDowell fail to provide a satisfactory construal of Wittgenstein's treatment of a platonist account of this phenomenon, according to which the sorting power of occurrent mental states is to be explained by reference to the mind's ability to grasp universals. I contend that the argument that Kripke extracts from Wittgenstein's discussion doesn't succeed in undermining the platonist position. Then I argue that McDowell's reading exhibits a more serious shortcoming: the position that he ascribes to Wittgenstein is indistinguishable from the platonist account. Then I put forward a proposal as to how to articulate the relationship between Wittgenstein's views and the platonist position.

When I opened the fridge this morning, I discovered that I was out of food, and decided to go to the supermarket. It is natural to think of such instances of belief acquisition and intention formation as occurrent mental states – things that happened in my mind at a specific time, shortly after I opened the fridge door. Like other intentional states, these episodes have to be capable of sorting objects or states of affairs as in accord or conflict with them. Only certain states of affairs would accord with the belief that I have acquired, and only certain sequences of behaviour would accord with the intention that I have formed.

The applicability of the notion of accord in this context is one of the central themes of the sections of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* that are generally seen as the core of the book.¹ The issue comes up first in the discussion of instantaneous understanding in §§138–142. “We understand,” Wittgenstein writes, “the meaning of a word when we hear

or say it; we grasp it in a flash" (§138). This occurrent intentional state is supposed to sort uses of the word as in accord or in conflict with it, but Wittgenstein questions this possibility: "Can what we grasp *in a flash*," he asks, "accord with a use, fit or fail to fit it? And how can what is present to us in an instant, what comes before our mind in an instant, fit *a use*?" (§139). After §142, the discussion focuses on a different aspect of the problem, but from §185 the notion of accord takes centre stage again. In these sections, the problem is raised for other occurrent intentional states, such as the act of meaning the order 'add 2' in a certain way or the act of intending to play chess. In §198 the notion of rule is introduced, and the problem of accord is raised in terms of it, as the question of how a rule (that I grasp) can sort possible courses of action as in accord or in conflict with it.² The problem of accord is raised again in the private-language passages (§§258 ff.), where Wittgenstein considers whether an act of inner ostension can sort (token) sensations as in accord or in conflict with it.

These passages have received widely diverging interpretations over the last two decades. There is, however, one point on which commentators agree: Wittgenstein rejects and seeks to undermine a platonist account, according to which the sorting power of occurrent mental states is to be explained by reference to the mind's ability to grasp universals. In this paper I shall be concerned with the interpretation of Wittgenstein's views on the sorting power of occurrent mental states, as presented in these passages. I shall argue first that the readings advanced by Saul Kripke and John McDowell fail to provide a satisfactory account of Wittgenstein's treatment of platonism. In §1, I shall contend that the argument that Kripke extracts from Wittgenstein's discussion doesn't succeed in undermining the platonist position. Then, in §2, I shall argue that McDowell's reading exhibits a more serious shortcoming: the position that he ascribes to Wittgenstein is indistinguishable from the platonist account. In §3 I put forward a proposal as to how to articulate the relationship between Wittgenstein's views and the platonist position.

1. *Kripke's Wittgenstein and Platonism*

What is the outcome of Wittgenstein's discussion of the sorting power of occurrent mental states? According to Saul Kripke's influential reading of these passages of the *Investigations*, one of Wittgenstein's main goals is to argue that occurrent mental states can have no such power – they cannot sort objects or states of affairs as in accord or in conflict with them.³ Kripke focuses his discussion on the idea that an occurrent mental state could make it the case that I intend to use the symbol '+' to denote the addition function. An occurrent mental state that played this role would have to be capable of sorting my subsequent responses involving the symbol as

in accord or in conflict with it. In particular, it would have to be the case that for every problem of the form ' $m + n$ ', where ' m ' and ' n ' are numerals, only one answer would be in accord with that occurrent mental state.

It is natural to suppose that the occurrent mental state that plays this role would have to consist in my giving myself directions regarding the use of the symbol. But once we consider what directions I could have actually given myself, Kripke contends, we realise that they cannot have that sorting power. Kripke considers two basic proposals as to the form that these directions could have taken. First, they could have consisted in a list of examples, of the form ' $m + n = p$ '. But this won't do. For I could only have given myself a finite list of examples. Hence there will be infinitely many problems of the form ' $m + n$ ' the answer to which is not to be found on the list. For each such problem, the list will fail to single out a unique answer as the one that accords with it. And we cannot boost the sorting power of the list by stipulating that every problem should be answered according to the function exemplified by the triples on the list, as infinitely many different arithmetical functions satisfy this description.

The second proposal that Kripke considers is that the instructions that I gave myself took the form of an algorithm. But this won't do either. For such directions would amount to specifying the correct answer to each problem of the form ' $m + n$ ' in terms of other signs. The correct use of these could, in turn, be specified in terms of yet other signs. But, eventually, this process must stop – with signs whose correct use has been specified only by a finite list of examples. This is, as Kripke points out, the thrust of Wittgenstein's remarks on a rule for interpreting a rule.⁴

Kripke concludes that no directions that I could have given myself single out a unique answer to each problem of the form ' $m + n$ ' as the one that accords with them. But giving myself directions for the use of the symbol '+' is the only plausible candidate for an occurrent mental state that singles out the correct answers to these problems. Hence, no occurrent mental state can have this sorting power. This result is supposed to apply throughout language. An occurrent mental state, Kripke concludes, cannot sort my uses of any linguistic expression as in accord or in conflict with it.⁵

There is a possible solution to the problem that Kripke's initial discussion seems to overlook. One way in which an occurrent mental state could succeed in sorting objects or states of affairs as in accord or in conflict with it is by involving grasp of an item in whose nature it is to effect this sorting. Universals are supposed to have this feature. Thus, e.g., it is of the essence of the property *square*⁶ to sort objects according to whether they exemplify it. Hence, if the mind had the power to grasp universals, if universals could be "present to the mind", these acts of grasping would be capable of sorting objects as in accord or in conflict with them. The act of grasping the property *square* would be in accord with those objects

that exemplify the property, and in conflict with those that don't. The act of grasping would, in this way, inherit its sorting power from the item grasped.

We can obtain from this approach a strategy for explaining how an occurrent mental state could constitute my intention to use a word in a certain way, as it would enable us to explain how occurrent mental states could have the sorting power that such intentions require. We can see this strategy at work in an account of the notion of predicate satisfaction, on which I shall concentrate in what follows. On this account, predicates are satisfied by some objects and not by others by virtue of the fact that they are associated with properties, in such a way that each predicate is satisfied precisely by the objects that instantiate the property with which the predicate is associated. Thus, e.g., the predicate 'square' is satisfied by square things because it is associated with the property *square*, which is instantiated precisely by those things. These pairings of predicates with properties are established, on this account, by mental episodes in which the mind grasps a property and connects it with a predicate. Thus, my referential intentions with respect to the predicate 'square' would arise from a conscious act in which I decide to pair the predicate with the property in such a way that the satisfaction conditions of the predicate, as I mean it, are determined by the instantiation conditions of the property. This conscious act would have the power to sort my subsequent applications of the predicate as in accord or in conflict with it. An application of the predicate would be in accord with the mental act just in case the object of predication instantiates the property that the act associates with the predicate. Interpretation could be construed along similar lines. I could grasp the property *square* and link it with the predicate 'square', as you mean it, thereby interpreting each of your ascriptions of the predicate to an object as correct or incorrect depending on whether the object instantiates the property.⁷ Once I have linked a property in this way with one of my predicates or with one of yours, I can bring the property to consciousness again to determine whether it is present in or absent from the objects that I go on to encounter. This would enable me to decide whether 'square', as I mean it, or as I think you mean it, is satisfied by a given object, and my verdict would be justified by my conscious access to the property. I shall refer to this account of predicate satisfaction as the *platonist account*.⁸

The proponent of the platonist account should not be expected to claim that we can have conscious access to the properties associated with all our predicates. He would probably restrict his claim to a small class of properties, perhaps those like properties of shape and colour that the empiricist tradition treats as basic. He would then try to explain our access to other properties as derived from our grasp of those that we can bring to consciousness, perhaps by invoking the theoretical links between the predicates associated with the two kinds of property. In what follows,

I shall leave this complication aside and concentrate on cases in which the platonist would see his approach as directly applicable.

Those for whom the notion of a universal being present to the mind is hopelessly obscure won't see much merit in the platonist account, since it is in terms of this notion that the platonist explains how predicates are connected with the properties that determine their satisfaction conditions and how predicate ascriptions are justified. However, our goal is not to decide whether the platonist account is correct, but to determine on what grounds Wittgenstein rejected the position and how his own views differed from it.

Clearly, if the platonist account were viable, the conclusion of Kripke's argument would have to be rejected. An occurrent mental state would be capable of sorting applications of a predicate as in accord or in conflict with it. In Kripke's initial presentation of the argument, the possibility of solving the problem along platonist lines is completely overlooked. He considers the possibility of grounding the notion of accord on items that are present to the mind, but the items that he treats as possible candidates do not include universals. They can be individual instances of the range of things to be sorted, such as specific responses to '+'-problems, words, such as a sentence describing an addition algorithm, or mental images, such as a mental sample of green. The addition function or the property *green* are not counted among the things that can be present to the mind. And the argument rests crucially on this exclusion. For a sentence describing an algorithm may single out a set of triples only under a certain interpretation, but an arithmetical function does so "of its own accord". And a colour sample may single out a set of objects only under a certain interpretation, but it is in the nature of a colour property to single out a unique set of objects. Only if universals can be legitimately excluded from the range of items that can be present to the mind will Kripke's argument successfully establish that occurrent mental states cannot have the sorting power that intentionality calls for.

Kripke addresses this gap in the argument in the last two pages of his presentation of the sceptical paradox, where he considers a Fregean solution to the problem. The proposal explains how an occurrent mental state can be in accord with precisely one answer to each '+'-problem by invoking the notion of the *sense* of the symbol '+', conceived as an objective entity with the following pair of features: on the one hand, it is in its nature to single out a unique set of triples. On the other, the mind is capable of grasping it. The Fregean picture adds to this an account of how a subject can grasp a sense, namely "by virtue of having an appropriate idea in his mind".⁹ "The idea", Kripke explains, "is a 'subjective' mental entity, private to each individual and different in different minds".¹⁰ It is this account of how senses are grasped that renders the proposal vulnerable to Kripke's original argument, for it raises the question of "how the

existence in my mind of any mental entity or idea can *constitute* ‘grasping’ any particular sense rather than another”.¹¹ Thus, Kripke concludes that, for Wittgenstein, this proposal:

is largely an unhelpful evasion of the problem of how our finite minds can give rules that are supposed to apply to an infinity of cases. Platonic objects may be self-interpreting, or rather, they may need no interpretation; but ultimately there must be some mental entity involved that raises the sceptical problem.¹²

Even when considering the Fregean proposal, Kripke is disregarding the possibility that a universal could be directly present to the mind. According to the Fregean proposal, senses are grasped “by proxy”, by being suitably related to an idea that is present to the mind.

In sum, Kripke’s argument doesn’t so much refute the platonist account as presuppose that it is not a viable option. For the argument rests on the implicit assumption that universals cannot be counted among the items that can be genuinely present to the mind. Since Kripke nowhere presents the conclusion of the argument as conditional on this assumption, we are entitled to conclude that he is simply accepting it as correct.¹³

2. *McDowell’s Wittgenstein and Platonism*

John McDowell has clearly identified this assumption as lying at the heart of Kripke’s dialectic. He characterises it as a conception of the mind according to which it is “populated exclusively with items that, considered in themselves, do not sort things outside the mind, including specifically bits of behavior, into those that are correct or incorrect in light of those items”.¹⁴ According to McDowell, this conception provides a crucial premise in Kripke’s argument, to which he refers as the *master thesis*:

the thesis that whatever a person has in her mind, it is only by virtue of being interpreted in one of various possible ways that it can impose a sorting of extra-mental items into those that accord with it and those that do not.¹⁵

Only with the master thesis in place can the regress of interpretations argument undermine the idea that mental episodes can have the sorting power that is needed “not just in connection with grasp of meaning but in connection with intentionality in general”.¹⁶

As we have seen, Kripke could hardly take exception to this characterisation of his argument. McDowell’s disagreement with Kripke concerns rather the point of what McDowell describes as Wittgenstein’s “manipulation of the regress of interpretations”.¹⁷ McDowell agrees that something like the argument that Kripke develops can be found in Wittgenstein’s discussion of the notion of accord. But whereas Kripke portrays Wittgenstein

as urging us to accept the conclusion of the argument, McDowell suggests that “the thrust of Wittgenstein’s reflections is to cast doubt on the master thesis”.¹⁸

The regress of interpretations is supposed to achieve this by showing that the master thesis has consequences that make it “stand revealed as quite counterintuitive”.¹⁹ The regress of interpretations shows that the master thesis makes certain philosophical questions look urgent: “questions like ‘How is meaning possible?’ or more generally ‘How is intentionality possible?’”,²⁰ that the master thesis “makes it seem difficult to accommodate meaning and intentionality in our picture of how things are”.²¹ According to McDowell, it would be uncharacteristic of Wittgenstein to accept these as real problems. But the regress of interpretations shows that if the master thesis were correct, these problems would be very real indeed. Hence the Wittgensteinian reaction to the regress of interpretations is to conclude that the master thesis must rest on a mistake.

We are not, however, in a position to accept this outcome. We are in the grip of a way of thinking that makes the master thesis seem compulsory. We won’t be capable of rejecting the master thesis until we provide a “diagnostic deconstruction”²² of this way of thinking. The Wittgensteinian lesson to learn from the regress of interpretations is that this diagnostic deconstruction is needed:

we need a diagnosis of why we are inclined to fall into the peculiar assumption, crystallized in the master thesis, that makes such questions look pressing. Given a satisfactory diagnosis, the inclination should evaporate, and the questions should fall away. The right response [. . .] is [. . .] to lay bare how uncompulsory it is to think in that way.²³

Once this diagnostic deconstruction is provided we will be able to disarm the threat posed by the regress by discarding the master thesis.²⁴

But not everyone suffers from the disease that McDowell, on Wittgenstein’s behalf, urges us to diagnose. The platonist is certainly not in the grip of the way of thinking that makes the master thesis seem compulsory. In fact, we can expect the platonist to agree wholeheartedly with McDowell’s claim that “the right response [. . .] is to realize that we ought not to suppose we have to start with something that just ‘stands there’”.²⁵ If we do, as the regress of interpretations shows, we will be incapable of recovering the notion of accord that intentionality requires. The platonist will recognise in McDowell’s Wittgenstein’s proposals the central tenet of his approach to intentionality: that I can have in mind “something to whose very identity [a] normative link to the objective world is essential”.²⁶ A universal would be such a thing. Hence the Wittgensteinian position that McDowell is putting forward seems to pave the way for the point of view that the platonist has defended all along. The platonist himself won’t

need the diagnostic deconstruction that Wittgenstein calls for, but he would certainly welcome it, as it would remove all resistance to his account of intentionality. Once the deconstruction is provided, those who now reject the mind's ability to grasp universals will finally see their objections exposed as ungrounded: "There seemed to be problems about the normative reach of meaning, but since they depended on a thesis that we have no reason to accept, they stand revealed as illusory".²⁷

To be sure, McDowell and McDowell's Wittgenstein will see the platonist as an unwelcome ally. According to McDowell, "an image of meaning as a collection of super-hard rails with which our minds engage when we come to understand anything"²⁸ figures in Wittgenstein's text as a target. Wittgenstein's reflections attack, as McDowell puts it in an earlier paper, the supposition that "meanings take care of themselves, needing, as it were, no help from us",²⁹ that being governed by the constraints imposed by a meaningful utterance is "being led, in some occult way, by an autonomous meaning (the super-rigid machinery)".³⁰

It isn't hard to recognise the platonist account in this position which, according to McDowell, Wittgenstein repudiates.³¹ It is not McDowell's intention to advocate the platonist account, let alone to enlist Wittgenstein in its defence. One can't deny, however, that the point of view that he endorses would remove what many have seen as the main obstacle to the platonist account. For platonism won't be an option so long as we think that the things that can be present to the mind do not include items that can autonomously sort objects or states of affairs as in accord or in conflict with them.³² It is on these grounds that, on Kripke's interpretation, Wittgenstein would rule out the platonist account. McDowell's Wittgenstein, by contrast, cannot avail himself of this anti-platonist weapon.

This is not to say, however, that McDowell's Wittgenstein sees platonism as unassailable. According to McDowell, platonism succumbs to a different aspect of Wittgenstein's dialectic. McDowell sees the image of meaning as a collection of super-hard rails as of a piece with the idea that "we can start on the regress but bring it to a harmless stop by conceiving meaning as 'the last interpretation'".³³ The platonist is portrayed as subscribing to the master thesis but failing to accept its consequences. He starts with something that just "stands there", and then tries to bring accord into the picture with the idea of the last interpretation of this normatively impotent item – an interpretation that doesn't itself need to be interpreted. Against this, McDowell urges us "to realize that we ought not to suppose we have to start with something that just 'stands there'".³⁴

The manoeuvre that McDowell attributes to the platonist is certainly hopeless, but we are entitled to wonder whether the platonist would have any inclination to go down that route. In fact, nothing would seem more foreign to the platonist approach than starting with something that just

“stands there”. What the platonist proposes is precisely to start with a universal, an item that already sorts objects as in accord or in conflict with it, or, in McDowell’s words, “an item to whose very identity a normative link to the objective world is essential”. The platonist doesn’t accept the master thesis. He doesn’t need to stop the regress with a final interpretation because for him the regress doesn’t get started: accord is in the platonist picture from the outset. The aspect of Wittgenstein’s dialectic that McDowell wields against the platonist approach appears totally powerless against this position.

This leaves McDowell in a position that, I surmise, he would find unpalatable. He considers the platonist approach unacceptable, and he finds in Wittgenstein the same hostility. However, with his rejection of the master thesis, he gives up the tool with which Kripke sees Wittgenstein as blocking the platonist account. McDowell then tries to substitute an alternative anti-platonist strategy, but the move is ineffectual, as it rests on saddling the platonist with a point of view that he wouldn’t be in the least tempted to accept. Hence McDowell fails to find in Wittgenstein adequate support for his rejection of platonism. He portrays Wittgenstein as rejecting both the master thesis and the platonist account, and takes this to be a viable option. But he fails to show how, once the master thesis has been given up, platonism can be resisted.

In fact, McDowell’s construal of Wittgenstein’s views faces a more fundamental worry. He hasn’t merely failed to find in Wittgenstein’s discussion adequate support for his rejection of platonism. He hasn’t succeeded either in explaining how the position that he attributes to Wittgenstein differs from platonism. McDowell characterises the contrast as turning on the question of whether the regress of interpretations gets started. As we have seen, he portrays the platonist as starting on the regress and then hoping to bring it to a harmless stop with the idea of the last interpretation, whereas for McDowell’s Wittgenstein we shouldn’t even start on the regress. But we have also seen that the platonist can be expected to place himself on the side of the divide which, according to McDowell, Wittgenstein occupies. If the contrast between McDowell’s Wittgenstein and the platonist is supposed to turn on their views on this issue, their positions appear totally indistinguishable. McDowell’s Wittgenstein hasn’t just failed to undermine platonism. He has also failed to formulate an intelligible alternative.

3. *Wittgenstein and Platonism*

These considerations may detract from the appeal of the position that McDowell attributes to Wittgenstein, but they have no direct bearing on the correctness of this attribution. The exegetical issue turns on how to

construe Wittgenstein's attitude to the thought that I can have in mind an item with sorting power – something to whose very identity a normative link to the objective world is essential. The main difficulty that we face when we try to answer this question is that in the passages of the *Investigations* with which we are concerned Wittgenstein displays two seemingly conflicting attitudes towards this thought. His initial verdict is openly hostile. When I understand the word 'cube' what is present to the mind certainly exerts what Wittgenstein calls a *psychological compulsion* (§140). What is present to the mind forces a particular application on me in the sense that I feel inclined to take that application as correct. But if what is present to the mind on that occasion is an item with sorting power, in addition to the psychological compulsion there has to be what he calls a *logical compulsion*. The item will have to single out an application as correct independently of how I feel inclined to respond, so that my inclination can then be described as *guided* by the constraint imposed by the item that I grasp. In §140, Wittgenstein rejects this description of the situation. "We are", he writes, "at most under a psychological, not a logical, compulsion". The fact that he is making this claim in the context of a discussion of the idea that what comes before the mind when I understand the word 'cube' is a mental image may make it seem compatible with McDowell's reading. On this reading, Wittgenstein's point would be that the master thesis makes the idea of logical compulsion impossible, as a picture cannot exert it. But his point doesn't seem to be just that pictures, in particular, do not exert a logical compulsion. He seems to object to the very idea of logical compulsion:

Then what sort of mistake did I make; was it what we should like to express by saying: I should have thought the picture forced a particular use on me?

Thus expressed, the mistake would be to think that the picture exerts a logical compulsion. But he continues:

How could I think that? What *did* I think? Is there such a thing as a picture, or something like a picture, that forces a particular application on us; so that my mistake lay in confusing one picture with another?³⁵

Here Wittgenstein seems to be casting doubt on the meaningfulness of the idea of logical compulsion. Logical compulsion is not something I am familiar with in other cases but a mental picture does not deliver. We haven't really encountered, Wittgenstein seems to suggest, that which we find missing in mental pictures. The point is reinforced by the last sentence of the paragraph. If we express ourselves by saying that we are at most under a psychological, not a logical, compulsion, he points out ironically, "it looks quite as if we knew of two kinds of case".

This theme reappears in the next set of sections, after §185, dealing with the notion of accord. The claim that understanding a word generates a logical compulsion is presented again in §191:

“It is as if we could grasp the whole use of a word in a flash”. Like *what* e.g.? – Can’t the use – in a certain sense – be grasped in a flash? And in *what* sense can it not? – The point is, that it is as if we could “grasp it in a flash” in yet another and more direct sense than that.

Wittgenstein seems to be trying to convince his interlocutor that he should rest content with psychological compulsion. When we understand a word, we develop a propensity to use it in a certain way. This is the sense in which the use of the word can be uncontroversially grasped in a flash. But we are still tempted to think that there is a more direct connection between the act of understanding the word and some of its uses – a connection that is not mediated by how I feel inclined to use the word. But once again Wittgenstein dismisses this temptation as futile. For we don’t really understand that which we are tempted to say:

But have you a model for this? No. It is just that this expression suggests itself to us. As the result of the crossing of different pictures.

192. You have no model of this superlative fact, but you are seduced into using a super-expression. (It might be called a philosophical superlative.)

These passages seem to express an unreserved hostility to the idea that an act of understanding can generate a logical compulsion, and, *a fortiori*, to the claim that what is present to the mind when we understand a word can sort its uses as in accord or in conflict with it. But in later sections the discussion takes what seems, in light of these passages, a surprising turn.

§§193 and 194 interrupt the discussion of understanding with an examination of the idea of “the machine as symbolizing its action”. The issues raised in this connection are clearly parallel to the problems under consideration in the discussion of understanding in which these two sections are inserted. We are tempted to think that our understanding of a word determines a sorting of its uses not only causally (by making us feel inclined to use the word in certain ways, and not in others), but also in a more direct sense. Similarly, there is a contrast between the way in which we take a machine to determine its action when we are concerned with predicting its actual behaviour and when we use it to symbolize a given way of moving. In the former case, we need to take into account the possibility of the parts of the machine “bending, breaking off, melting, and so on”, whereas in the latter case these possibilities can be ignored: a machine can symbolize a way of moving even though it could move in different ways. This generates a temptation to think that the machine-as-symbol determines the action it symbolizes in a more direct way than the actual machine:

when we reflect that the machine could also have moved differently it may look as if the way it moves must be contained in the machine-as-symbol far more determinately than in the actual machine. As if it were not enough for the movements in question to be empirically determined in advance, but they had to be really – in a mysterious sense – already present. (§193)

At this point, we might expect a restatement of the challenge in §191: “But have you a model for this?” However, we get something completely different:

And it is quite true: the movement of the machine-as-symbol is predetermined in a different sense from that in which the movement of any given actual machine is predetermined. (Ibid.)

The idea that the machine-as-symbol determines an action in a more direct way than the actual machine is, after all, perfectly in order.

This move is translated to the case of understanding when the issue is taken up again in §195:

“But I don’t mean that what I do now (in grasping a sense) determines the future use *causally* and as a matter of experience, but that in a *queer* way, the use itself is in some sense present.” – But of course it is, “in *some* sense”! Really the only thing wrong with what you say is the expression “in a queer way”. The rest is all right; and the sentence only seems queer when one imagines a different language-game for it from the one in which we actually use it.³⁶

These passages are hard to square with an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s views according to which he is opposed to the idea that the act of understanding a word can sort its uses as in accord or in conflict with it. Wittgenstein is saying that it is all right to think of the use of a word as already present in the act of grasping its meaning, and not just in the causal sense of generating a propensity to use the word in certain ways. One could try to make these passages compatible with the rejection of the sorting power of acts of understanding by suggesting that even though it would be all right to say that the use is present in the act of grasping, what this sentence asserts is not a fact. I shall not go into this, but the strategy doesn’t seem in principle very promising, as McDowell is surely right when he points out that “a separation of the question whether something is a fact from the question whether some assertoric utterance would be correct seems foreign to the later Wittgenstein”.³⁷ It would be just as hard to reconcile these passages with a position that rejects the idea that understanding is a matter of having something in mind, and looks elsewhere for the facts that ground the notion of accord that intentionality requires.³⁸ Given that Wittgenstein is concerned from the outset with grasp of meaning as a conscious episode, his claim that the use of a word can be present in the act of grasping its meaning can only be

interpreted as concerning the conscious episode in which the meaning of the word is grasped. The only natural way to accommodate these passages is to interpret Wittgenstein as wanting to save the idea that what is present to the mind when I grasp the meaning of a word can sort its uses as in accord or in conflict with it.

This outcome would seem to vindicate McDowell's construal of Wittgenstein's views. Wittgenstein had earlier seemed to reject the sorting power of acts of understanding, but he now seems to distance himself from that position, as he declares that there is nothing wrong after all with the idea that the act of understanding a word can sort possible uses of it independently of my responses, that what is present to the mind when I understand a word can exert a logical compulsion on my uses of it. It would seem that the only way to make sense of this shift is to conclude, with McDowell, that the rejection of the sorting power of acts of understanding that we find in the earlier passages should not be read as expressing Wittgenstein's views – that it is only a step in his overall argument for the conclusion that this rejection is ultimately ungrounded.

However, this reading would be an important distortion of Wittgenstein's intentions. It presupposes that the view that is endorsed in the later passages is identical with the view that the earlier passages had seemed to reject. But to the suggestion in §195 that the use itself is already present in the act of understanding, Wittgenstein pointedly replies: "But of course it is, 'in *some* sense!'" The implication is that there are two different ways of understanding the claim that items with sorting power can be present to the mind, and that while, in one sense, the claim is perfectly in order, there is another sense in which the claim is objectionable. It is reasonable to assume that the version of the claim which is not all right is the version that comes under attack in the earlier passages, and that what he is doing now is not to cancel those attacks, but to point out that there is a different version of the claim to which they don't apply.

How do the two versions of the claim differ? We can get a clue to the nature of the contrast from the following section:

196. In our failure to understand the use of a word we take it as the expression of a queer *process*. (As we think of time as a queer medium, or the mind as a queer kind of being.)

If we read this as a remark on the word 'understanding', on the notion of grasp of a sorting item, Wittgenstein's suggestion is that the notion is objectionable if we think of it as denoting a process, and, presumably, that once we abandon this thought the notion would be perfectly in order:

"It is as if we could grasp the whole use of a word in a flash". – And that is just what we say we do. That is to say: we sometimes describe what we do in these words. (§197)³⁹

This enables us to provide a preliminary formulation of the contrast between the two versions of the claim that items with sorting power can be present to the mind. The objectionable version would be the claim that there is a process that can be identified with grasp of a sorting item. The acceptable version would be that we can grasp sorting items, but there isn't a process with which this grasp can be identified.

We can shed some light on the contrast if we look at the sections between §143 and §184 in which the discussion of accord is interrupted by a detailed examination of the conception of understanding as a process. In §151 Wittgenstein considers the phenomenon of understanding a numerical series as "something that makes its appearance in a moment", and proposes: "so let us try and see what it is that makes its appearance here". He goes on to enumerate various mental processes from whose presence we would conclude that the subject has understood the series, from thinking of an algebraic formula to the sensation "of a light quick intake of breath, as when one is slightly startled". Then he asks: "But are the processes which I have described here *understanding*?" (§152), and he answers the question in the negative, on the grounds that it is perfectly possible that each of these processes takes place and the subject should nevertheless not understand:

'He understands' must have more in it than: the formula occurs to him. And equally, more than any of those more or less characteristic *accompaniments* or manifestations of understanding. (Ibid.)

One reaction to this situation would be to think of the subject's understanding as a *different* process, occurring behind or side by side with these accompaniments: "We are trying to get hold of the mental process of understanding which seems to be hidden behind those coarser and therefore more readily visible accompaniments" (§153). The idea would be to maintain that, in addition to thinking of the formula or having the sensation "that's easy!", another process takes place when the subject understands the series: he grasps the infinite series itself, or an item that determines, of its own accord, which number occupies each position.

But this is not, Wittgenstein claims, the only possible reaction to this situation:

But wait – if 'Now I understand the principle' does not mean the same as 'The formula . . . occurs to me' (or 'I say the formula', 'I write it down', etc.) – does it follow from this that I employ the sentence 'Now I understand . . .' or 'Now I can go on' as a description of a process occurring behind or side by side with that of saying the formula?

If there has to be anything "behind the utterance of the formula" it is *particular circumstances*, which justify me in saying I can go on – when the formula occurs to me.

Try not to think of understanding as a “mental process” at all. – For *that* is the expression which confuses you. But ask yourself: in what sort of case, in what kind of circumstances, do we say, “Now I know how to go on”, when, that is, the formula *has* occurred to me? –

In the sense in which there are processes (including mental processes) which are characteristic of understanding, understanding is not a mental process. (§154)

The second reaction which Wittgenstein is now presenting and endorsing is to give up the idea that understanding is a further process – to accept that the processes that we think of as manifestations of understanding are the only processes that make their appearance when the subject understands the series, and to treat the notion of understanding as grounded in the circumstances on the basis of which we decide whether the subject has understood:

155. Thus what I wanted to say was: when he suddenly knew how to go on, when he understood the principle, then possibly he had a special experience – and if he is asked: “What was it? What took place when you suddenly grasped the principle?” perhaps he would describe it much as we described it above – but for us it is *the circumstances* under which he had such and such an experience that justify him in saying in such a case that he understands, that he knows how to go on.

We can apply these considerations to the understanding of the contrast between the two senses of the claim that the mind can grasp sorting objects that §195 seems to presuppose. In the first sense of the claim, grasping a sorting object is a process that takes place in a subject’s mind side by side with the other, ‘coarser’ processes, which we treat as manifestations of understanding. The mind’s powers include the ability to bring to consciousness a mental image of a square object or an algebraic formula, but also the ability to bring to consciousness the property *square* itself, or an arithmetical function. The two types of process are normally coinstantiated, and that is why we think of the former as manifestations of the latter. But it is also possible for the coarser process to occur in the absence of the more subtle one. The subject can, on occasion, bring to consciousness a mental image of a square object but not the property *square*, or a formula but not a function. And it is only when the more subtle processes are present that understanding and other intentional phenomena appear. The notion of accord that intentionality requires arises from the sorting power of the objects that are present to the mind on those occasions.

In the second sense of the claim, understanding and other intentional phenomena are not processes that occur side by side with the coarser ones. The mind is capable of bringing to consciousness mental images, formulae, etc. – the things by which, according to the master thesis, the mind is populated. It is not capable also of any sort of conscious engagement

with properties, functions and other sorting objects. There is nothing wrong, however, with saying that the conscious episode in which I grasp the meaning of a word can sort uses of the word as in accord or in conflict with it, or that the sorting is effected by the item grasped in that episode. But these claims are not to be thought of as asserting the presence of specific mental processes. It is just that, in some circumstances, we treat the presence of the coarser mental processes (the only ones there are) as bestowing on a conscious episode the character of grasp of a sorting item. And there is nothing wrong with that, even though in other circumstances the same processes could be present but it would be wrong to describe what goes on in those terms.⁴⁰

These considerations support a characterisation of Wittgenstein's views that differs from McDowell's in important respects. On the interpretation that I am recommending, Wittgenstein's attitude towards the claim that the mind can grasp sorting objects would combine a rejection of the first of these senses of the claim with an endorsement of the second. On this interpretation, accommodating the passages in which he endorses the claim would not require explaining away the hostility that he appears to display in earlier passages. For the target of those attacks is not the sense of the claim that he is later vindicating. After endorsing the second sense of the claim, Wittgenstein remains committed to the rejection of the first.

And it is in terms of this rejection that I propose to construe Wittgenstein's opposition to platonism. Thus, in opposing platonism, Wittgenstein would be rejecting the idea that there are mental processes in which the subject gains conscious access to universals, and hence the possibility of explaining predicate satisfaction by reference to the predicate-universal pairings that these processes would effect.

In ascribing these views to Wittgenstein, I am not claiming that they can result in a stable position. I would like to end by indicating two challenges faced by the project of construing a position along these lines. The first family of difficulties concerns the interpretation of the version of the claim that the mind can grasp sorting items which, on the reading that I am recommending, Wittgenstein would accept. One might be tempted to understand it as the claim that intentional facts are to be construed as facts about the subject's mental state plus the external circumstances – that whether, say, a subject has understood a number series is determined by whether certain circumstances obtain. But Wittgenstein's rejection of this approach is unambiguous. The statement 'Now I can go on' is not, Wittgenstein tells us, "only short for a description of all the circumstances which constitute the scene for our language-game" (§179). And again: "we must be on our guard against thinking that there is some *totality* of conditions corresponding to the nature of each case" (§183). Construing the point of view that Wittgenstein advocates as an intelligible position would be a very substantial task. In fact, it might not be feasible without

going beyond what he actually said, and perhaps abandoning some aspects of his thought. The second family of difficulties concerns the compatibility of the acceptance of the second version of the claim with the rejection of the first version. The danger is that, once we reject the existence of mental processes in which we become aware of sorting items, it will become impossible to recover the idea that there is nothing wrong with speaking of uses of a word as in accord or in conflict with the conscious episodes that we want to construe as acts of understanding.⁴¹

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NOTES

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¹ Translated by G.E.M Anscombe, 3rd edition, Oxford: Blackwell, 1967. References to Part I of the *Philosophical Investigations* are given by paragraph number in the main text.

² Formulating the problem of accord in terms of rules tends to hide the fact that Wittgenstein is primarily concerned with the applicability of the notion of accord to occurrent mental states. It is worth noting in this connection that, of the hundred or so sections of the *Philosophical Investigations* commonly known as the rule-following considerations, sixty sections go by before rules are even mentioned.

³ Saul Kripke (1982). *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language* Oxford: Blackwell.

⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ The claim that occurrent mental states cannot sort uses of a linguistic expression as correct or incorrect is only a preliminary result in Kripke's overall argument for the claim that *nothing* can effect this sorting. He goes on to argue that dispositions fare no better than occurrent mental states (cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 22ff.). I shall not be concerned here with this aspect of Kripke's dialectic.

⁶ I shall use italicized adjectives as names of the properties corresponding to them.

⁷ While my pairings of properties with my own predicates are stipulations, my pairings of properties with your predicates are hypotheses concerning your stipulative pairings, and a full account of predicate interpretation along these lines would have to explain how these hypotheses can be justified.

⁸ The platonist account is a version of the account of predicate extension that Mark Wilson draws from the works of Frege and Russell. "[Frege and Russell] held", Wilson writes, "that an intermediate entity exists which forges a bond between predicate and set [the extension of the predicate]. These Platonic go-betweens were called 'senses' by Frege and 'universals' by Russell" (Mark Wilson (1982). "Predicate Meets Property", *The Philosophical Review*, 91, p. 555). On Wilson's reading, Frege and Russell assigned to these entities the main roles that the platonist account assigns to properties: "The speaker's 'grasp' of the universal provides a necessary condition for his understanding of the predicate" (*ibid.*), and "[o]n its own, the attribute determines a set of objects in the world as extension" (*ibid.*).

⁹ *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, p. 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Ibid.¹² Ibid.

¹³ It could be argued that I have failed to take account of a line of reasoning implicit in Kripke's characterisation of the problem that the platonist evades as "the problem of how our *finite* minds can give rules that are supposed to apply to an *infinity* of cases" (my italics). This could be construed as suggesting that the reason why the sense of the sign '+' can't be present to the mind is that an item that determines an infinity of applications cannot be present to a finite mind. It is not clear to me that Kripke is advancing this line of reasoning. In any case it is hard to see how an argument along these lines could succeed in undermining the platonist position. The finitude of a mind imposes an obvious limitation on the amount of information that it can obtain from the items that come before it, but not, in principle, on the amount of information that the items that come before it can contain. A finite mind can only take notice of finitely many of the applications determined by a sense that is present to it. But if it can do this with a sense that determines finitely many applications, there is no obvious reason why it shouldn't be able to do it with a sense that determines infinitely many.

¹⁴ John McDowell (1992). "Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy", in P. A. French, T. E. Uehling and H. K. Wettstein (eds.), *Midwest Studies in Philosophy, Volume XVII: The Wittgenstein Legacy*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, p. 41.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 45. Notice that, when formulated in these terms, the master thesis allows the mind to contain objects that sort *mental* items as in accord or in conflict with them without needing to be interpreted. This means that the master thesis would not enable us to bring the regress of interpretations to bear on the possibility of a private language. I suspect that we shouldn't attach much importance to this aspect of McDowell's formulation.

¹⁶ Ibid.¹⁷ Ibid., p. 47.¹⁸ Ibid., p. 45.¹⁹ Ibid., p. 46.²⁰ Ibid., p. 47.²¹ Ibid.²² Ibid., p. 51.²³ Ibid., p. 47.²⁴ Cf. Ibid., p. 48.²⁵ Ibid., p. 47.²⁶ Ibid., p. 46.²⁷ Ibid., pp. 48–49.²⁸ Ibid., p. 47.²⁹ McDowell, J. (1984). "Wittgenstein on Following a Rule", *Synthese* 58, p. 351.³⁰ Ibid., p. 352.

³¹ McDowell also uses the label 'platonism' in this connection. Cf. "Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy", p. 48.

³² Notice that the master thesis poses no threat to the claim that the satisfaction conditions of each predicate are determined by the instantiation conditions of a property to which the predicate bears a certain relation. It only puts pressure on the position that combines this claim with the thought that we can bring properties to consciousness in order to pair them with our predicates and to determine whether they are present in objects. The platonist could in principle accept the master thesis without giving up the first ingredient of his position.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 47.

³⁵ “Confusing one picture with another” is Anscombe’s translation of “eine Verwechslung”

³⁶ Cf. §141, where this move is anticipated.

³⁷ “Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy”, p. 51.

³⁸ The “straight” solution that McDowell considers and rejects would be a version of this position. Cf. Ibid., §§5–6. The form of platonism considered in fn. 32 above would be another version of this position.

³⁹ Cf. §§321, 693.

⁴⁰ The converse situation could also obtain: “We can also imagine the case where nothing at all occurred in B’s mind except that he suddenly said ‘Now I know how to go on’ – perhaps with a feeling of relief; and that he did in fact go on working out the series without using the formula. And in this case too we should say – in certain circumstances – that he did know how to go on” (§179).

⁴¹ For a discussion of this second challenge, see my (2000) “Realism Detranscendentalized”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 8, pp. 63–88.

