Coming into the world, coming into language, reading the world
Venir au monde, venir au langage, lire le monde

Paul Standish

First, I consider the way that the baby or infant comes into the human world. What is it to be in the world? What do we mean by "world"? These questions cannot be addressed adequately without consideration of the nature of language and the way the very young child comes into language. I extend this, second, with reference to what Thoreau calls "the father-tongue"—that is, a more self-conscious, more questioning relation to the words with which we speak to one another and think. This sometimes faltering, more pensive and reflective relation connects to a third area of concern. What is it to learn to read? What is reading? In the child's entry into practices of reading—including the reading of picture-books—narrative, thematization, and interpretation play essential roles. These three parts together shift the ways that autonomy and development are to be understood and emphasise the nature and importance of human expression. They show how we find ourselves in expression.

Premièrement, je considère la manière dont le bébé ou le nourrisson entre dans le monde humain. Qu'est-ce qu'être au monde ? Qu'entend-on par « monde » ? Ces questions ne peuvent être abordées de manière adéquate sans tenir compte de la nature du langage et de la manière dont le très jeune enfant vient au langage. J'étends cela, deuxièmement, en faisant référence à ce que Thoreau appelle « la langue paternelle »—c'est-à-dire une relation plus consciente et plus interrogatrice aux mots avec lesquels nous nous parlons et pensons. Cette relation parfois hésitante, plus pensive et réfléchie, rejoint un troisième domaine de préoccupation. Qu'est-ce qu'apprendre à lire ? Qu'est-ce que lire ? Dans l'entrée de l'enfant dans les pratiques de lecture—y compris la lecture de livres d'images—le récit, la thématisation et l'interprétation jouent des rôles essentiels. Ensemble, ces trois parties modifient la manière dont l'autonomie et le développement doivent être compris et soulignent la nature et l'importance de l'expression humaine. Ils montrent comment nous nous trouvons dans l'expression.

How does a human being come into the world? The obvious answer is that this is a biological process, and it would be absurd to deny this. But so far this does nothing to separate the human baby from the babies of animals of different species. It is possible of course to separate out the class of mammals, as the biologist surely can do. But still the distinctions remain at the level of physical functioning and its explanation.

A further step is taken if we think of the development of human beings in relation to social processes. Similarities especially to other types of mammals will be apparent: these may range from practices of protecting and nurturing the young to forms of cooperation and play. Similarities in communication may seem evident too, though a closer look at these quickly reveals substantial differences. At first sight, the differences may be matters of degree. Moreover, there are some methods of communication in which some species are developed to a greater extent than human beings. Nevertheless, the word 'communication' perhaps falls short of what is commonly thought of as language. A more accurate understanding of language reveals the gulf that exists between animal forms of communication and the nature of human language. Providing a richer picture of this will be a major concern of the present discussion. For the moment, however, let one particular point be made.

Communication amongst animals seems essential to their social and cooperative patterns of behaviour, as it is amongst human beings. The nature of animal signs is such that they are (potentially at least) functional and efficient, and in some of the higher animals, at least, these signs have extraordinary qualities. The signs are passed from generation to generation, and the patterns of social behaviour are sustained. They are sustained, and yet they do not develop. The social behaviour of an animal group remains the same over thousands of years. Consider by contrast the social behaviour of human beings. It is blatantly obvious that this changes dramatically. A baby lion is born. As with all animals, the baby comes into a habitat, an ecology that can sustain its life. As with human beings, the lion's habitat is a social environment. As with that of human beings, the social environment of the lion is rich with signs.

But the means of communication of lions is of a different order from that of human beings. There is always a danger of anthropomorphism when thinking about animals. Let's reserve the word 'language' for human beings. The signs that lions use are functional, but they go nowhere. The signs that human beings use open a world. But do lions *have* a world? When we said that the baby lion comes into the world, we weren't making a mistake: it's not that we should have said 'the baby lion comes into a social habitat'. But what we meant was that the baby lion comes into the world with you and me—that is, the world with its nature programmes on tv, its safari parks and zoos, its model lions, and stories about lions, the world with its towns and cities, its temples and churches, its science and arts, its internet and social media, its calendars and archives, and its plans and forecasts, its projects and fantasies. You will see from this long list that our present seems to be nothing like the lion's present. It is a present that already involves memories of the past and anticipations of the future. How else do you make sense of where you are now? How else could this present moment for you come to be?

On a darker note, there is a sense in which the animal seems to be absorbed in its natural world, whereas the human being (remembering, anticipating, projecting possibilities) is always in some degree dislocated. In fact, the Garden of Eden myth is helpful as a way of conceiving of this. In

Michelangelo's celebrated depiction, *The Expulsion from Paradise*[1], for example, we see, on the left, Adam and Eve in their Edenic state, in a kind of seamless, unmediated, animal absorption in what they are doing. But then, comic-strip fashion, the eye moves from left to right, and we see them taking the forbidden fruit, and then being cast out. The fruit is from the tree of knowledge, which we can also see, I suggest, as the tree of language. This gives them self-consciousness (shame at their nakedness, awareness of their difference) and a new separation from the world. Of course it is through the mediation of language that they come to reflect on their condition. Heidegger describes the human condition as *unheimlich*, which is usually translated as 'uncanny' or, perhaps, 'strange' or 'estranged', but which we can also think of as a being-not-at-home. The point perhaps is that when you are at home, it is not quite like in the family photos or the Hollywood movies: you are at home and not-at-home. You love to be absorbed in things, but—unlike the experience of the animal—your absorption is intermittently interrupted and is, in any case, doubled, as it were, by a consciousness of or reflection on what you are doing. We are not just eating but aware of ourselves eating. Hence, we are not self-contained in our experience but continually broken open by it.

This, then, is what it is to have a world. Let us go further with the question of how we come into this. Consider the opening of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In fact, the book begins not with Wittgenstein's own words but with a paragraph taken from Augustine, from his *Confessions* (I.8):

> When grown-ups named some object and at the same time turned towards it, I perceived this, and I grasped that the thing was signified by the sound they uttered, since they meant to point it out. This, however, I gathered from their gestures, the natural language of all peoples, the language that by means of facial expression and the play of eyes, of the movements of the limbs and the tone of voice, indicates the affections of the soul when it desires, or clings to, or rejects, or recoils from, something. In this way, little by little, I learnt to understand what things the words, which I heard uttered in their respective places in various sentences, signified. And once I got my tongue around these signs, I used them to express my wishes.

So he begins not in his own words but in response to the words of another. What he has to say is that these words from Augustine give us a particular picture of the essence of human language: that the words in language name objects, and sentences are combinations of such names. But what, he asks, about different kinds of word? We don't just have nouns, like 'table', 'chair', 'bread', but also words like 'big', 'yellow', 'five', 'but', 'although', 'because'... These do not name objects. Augustine's account seems more plausible in the context of second-language acquisition: we can certainly imagine picking up bits of an unfamiliar language through processes of pointing and naming. But how, at the earliest stages, does the small child even know what naming or

[1] The fresco was produced between 1508-1512 as the central ceiling vault of the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican in Rome.

pointing (or things!) are? How does the child come into these social and cultural processes? Wittgenstein goes on to ask the reader to do the following:

> Now think of the following use of language: I send someone shopping. I give him a slip of paper marked 'five red apples'. He takes the slip to the shopkeeper, who opens the drawer marked 'apples'; then he looks up the word 'red' in a chart and finds a colour sample next to it; then he says the series of elementary number-words — I assume that he knows them by heart — up to the word 'five', and for each number-word he takes an apple of the same colour as the sample out of the drawer. —— It is in this and similar ways that one operates with words. —— 'But how does he know where and how he is ——to look up the word 'red' and what he is to do with the word 'five'?' —— Well, I assume that he acts as I have described. Explanations come to an end somewhere. But what is the meaning of the word 'five'? No such thing was in question here, only how the word 'five' is used. (§1)

In this example—a kind of thought-experiment, if you like—we find familiar processes of classification and ordering, but the context seems absurd. While such processes might be in place in more complicated cases, when they are described, here, in this apparently everyday example, the effect is simply bizarre. From this disturbance of habitual assumptions about how language 'works', Wittgenstein leads the reader to an idea that becomes central to his work: the language-game. It is important that the connection of language with games is not intended to suggest anything trivial or merely playful. Neither is it simply about how we use words to communicate. It is intended to show the embedding of words in practices and in the fabric of human experience. Moreover, the implicit analogy is designed to draw attention to language's variety. Think of the variety of games in the ordinary sense: tennis, squash, rugby, show-jumping, tennis, badminton, chess, draughts, go, poker, guessing-games, word-games, patience, and dressing-up games. While these can be grouped in a way that relates some to others, there is no common factor to all. There is no essence to what a game is, and this further weakens the idea that words represent things or qualities of things. Yet we have no real difficulty in using the word 'games', and neither do children. Wittgenstein draws out the analogy with the following words:

> Consider the variety of language-games in the following examples, and in others
>
> > Giving orders, and acting on them —
> > Describing an object by its appearance, or by its measurements —
> > Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) —
> > Reporting an event —
> > Speculating about the event —
> > Forming and testing a hypothesis —
> > Presenting the results of an experiment in tables and diagrams —
> > Making up a story; and reading one —
> > Acting in a play —

Singing rounds —
Guessing riddles —
Cracking a joke; telling one —
Solving a problem in applied arithmetic —
Translating from one language into another —
Requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying. (§23)

It is important that this list is open-ended, we can easily think of further examples that might extend the list. Think for a moment of what it is to look at family photographs with a young child—of the way you will turn the pages or swipe the screen, the things you will point out, the kind of things you will say, and how you will expect the child to respond. The child is listening to you, and perhaps asking questions sometimes and in the process they are learning this practice from you.

In fact, the *Investigations* contains numerous examples of what it is for someone to come into a practice in these ways, to learn how it is to go on, not so much by following a rule rigidly but through knowing how to go on in a way that others will recognise as appropriate or meaningful in some way. In Stanley Cavell's 'Excursus on Wittgenstein's Vision of Language', in *The Claim of Reason* (1979), he emphasizes the way that a word does not exist in a fixed correlation with a thing but is projected into new contexts. Of course, we have clear examples of this in such cases as that of 'mouse' becoming the name not just for the animal but for the instrument with which you move the cursor on your computer screen. But Cavell demonstrates that this projection applies not just to special cases such as this, where the new usage is a deliberately contrived innovation, but more pervasively to the way that words are used. Possibility for new usage inheres in the very nature of a word, which further unsettles the idea that a word has a singular stable meaning.

Cavell describes his daughter when she is perhaps about two years old and has just learned the word 'kitty'. She strokes the cat and says 'kitty, kitty'. But then she sees a dog in the street and points and says 'kitty'. She sees a woman wearing a fox-fur stole, and again, as she points, says the words 'kitty, kitty'. A fur rug on the floor goes by the same name. Of course, in a sense she has got the word wrong, and in due course she will bring her usage into line with that of adults. But what she is doing is more important than this 'mistake' in that she has realized that this word can be applied to related things. She has got the word wrong but is making connections to other furry things, in ways that no doubt will raise a smile amongst the adults. Suppose that instead she were to say 'kitty' when confronted with a glass of water or a balloon or a motorbike: then the adults' affectionate smile might turn to one of embarrassed puzzlement and concern. But she is not doing this. The connections that she makes are meaningful, and they have their own coherence. They are the structures of meaning in which imagination thrives, the creativity that is the engine of culture. 'What did she learn,' Cavell asks, 'in order to do that? *What had she learned having done it?*':

> If she had never made such leaps, she would never have walked into speech. Having made it, meadows of communication can grow for us. Where you leap to depends on where you stand. When, later, she picks

> up a gas bill and says 'Here's a letter', or when, hearing a piece of music we've listened to together many times, she asks 'Who's Beethoven?', or when she points to the television coverage of the Democratic National Convention and asks 'What are you watching?', I may realize we are not ready to walk certain places together. (Cavell 1979 : 172)

Imagine a slightly older child. It is Hallowe'en, and someone points to an object and says 'pumpkin'. 'Pumpkin,' he says, 'pumpkin, pumpkin, pumpkin, pumpkin.' Why is this strange large orange object called a 'pumpkin'? And this strange sound opens chains of association. Is this because it looks like something that is pumped up? Is it connected with Mr Popkin, who lives next door? The routes of association are never closed.

Later, and more conventionally, Cavell provides examples of phrases drawing on the everyday word 'feed', where:

> 'feed the cat' connects with . . .
> 'feed the meter', with . . .
> 'feed in the film', and with . . .
> 'feed his pride' (*ibid.* : 181)

A standard response here might be that the sense of 'feeding' in 'feeding the cat' is literal whereas in the other cases it is metaphorical. But that tidy differentiation covers over the subtle inflections in the various uses, and the way that these metaphors become absorbed into the ordinary flow of our language. Furthermore, that classification's notion of literalness is apt to reinforce the idea of a direct linking of sign and thing, once again of signs as primarily representational. The limited and misleading idea of representation discussed above combines here with the suppression, in notions of literalness, of the dynamic, mobile, and indeed projective nature of the sign.

Coming into language does involve becoming familiar with and following rules of various kinds. Early interpretations of Wittgenstein tended to assume that the *Investigations* demonstrated that the child needed to be made to conform, even to be 'broken in' (Wittgenstein uses the word *abrichten* at times), to those patterns of speech and behaviour that were extant in its community. This, however, is to move too fast with the idea of rule-following. It implies that the kinds of rules or patterns that characterise natural languages are immutable and rigid, and this imparts a vision of culture and education that is conservative and conformist. It is helpful here, then, to contrast rigid rule-following with the looser notion of following a pattern or, better still, the idea of *knowing how to go on*. The familiar pattern 2, 4, 6, 8 seems naturally enough to lead to the sequence 10, 12, 14, 16, but it might also admit of variants and still make sense. For example, 2, 4, 6, 8, 11, 14, 17, 20 or 2, 4, 6, 8, 4, 16, 36, 64. Or even: 2, 4, 6, 8, Bach, 10, 12, 14, 16, Mozart, 18, 20, 22, 24, Sibelius. . . The point, in these progressive variants, is that other members of the community would most probably be able to figure out what was going on—that is, the pattern or sense of these new moves in the sequence. If a child enters into this game and writes '2, 4, 6, 8, elephant, 192, ice-cream, &*)(^, Tuesday. . .', we may (rightly) be at a loss as to what is going on. Analogies in music and art are important here. Bach's *Goldberg*

Variations takes a simple opening tune and chord progression and then develops 30 variations on this initial pattern. John Coltrane's performances of *My Favourite Things* take a familiar sentimental song and then reworks it through extraordinary variations of tempo and tone, turning it into something of a quite different emotional range and force, but never losing contact with the starting point. In visual forms of art, Wassily Kandinsky writes of the repetition of marks and their variation as fundamental to the work's meaningfulness.

But these examples, drawn from the arts, should not be taken to be confining the significance of theme and variation to art. The point extends through our ordinary exchanges with one another, through the variety of forms of conversation. This is a signal feature of what has become known as 'ordinary language philosophy', associated originally with J.L. Austin but developed in these respects especially in the work of Cavell. Yet again, however, we can turn the clock back, now most of two centuries, to the thinking of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Conversation, Emerson tells us, is a game of circles, with each new speaker emancipating us from the last speaker, each taking their turn, each doing their (as it were, theatrical) turn, and then giving way to the next, releasing us to new possibilities of the human:

> When each new speaker strikes a new light, emancipates us from the oppression of the last speaker, to oppress us with the greatness and exclusiveness of his own thought, then yields us to another redeemer, we seem to recover our rights, to become men. ('Circles' in Emerson 1983 : 408)

We are to imagine, I take it, a group of friends talking in some excitement to one another, where each is eager to have their say, each imagines they have the answer and that they in some way can impress! Emerson evokes this with gentle satire (of 'emancipation', 'greatness and exclusiveness', 'another redeemer'), but the humour belies a more serious point: it *is* in our conversation with others that are to be found the best prospects for democracy and for the morality and worth of our individual lives. Redemption will not come from a *deus ex machina* but from within our ordinary relationships to other people. It is not that God has disappeared from the scene. As Emmanuel Levinas more or less puts it, the relation to God lies in the relation to other human beings (1990). The point is that meaning is sustained and extended in these variations of pattern, and sensitivity to the possibilities of such variation and projection is crucial to the child's coming into human meaning-making and, hence, language itself.

It was said above that animal signs are functional and efficient but, in a sense, go nowhere—that is, for all their extraordinary richness and variety, they do not open to association and connection, and hence to new thinking, in the manner that human signs do. By contrast, human signs seem burdened throughout by an openness of interpretation, which invites the thought that we can never really know what someone means. Does this not, we might be inclined to ask, open the door to scepticism? Should we not, therefore, long for a language that did not admit of ambiguity and openness of interpretation in the way that natural languages do? This is a thought

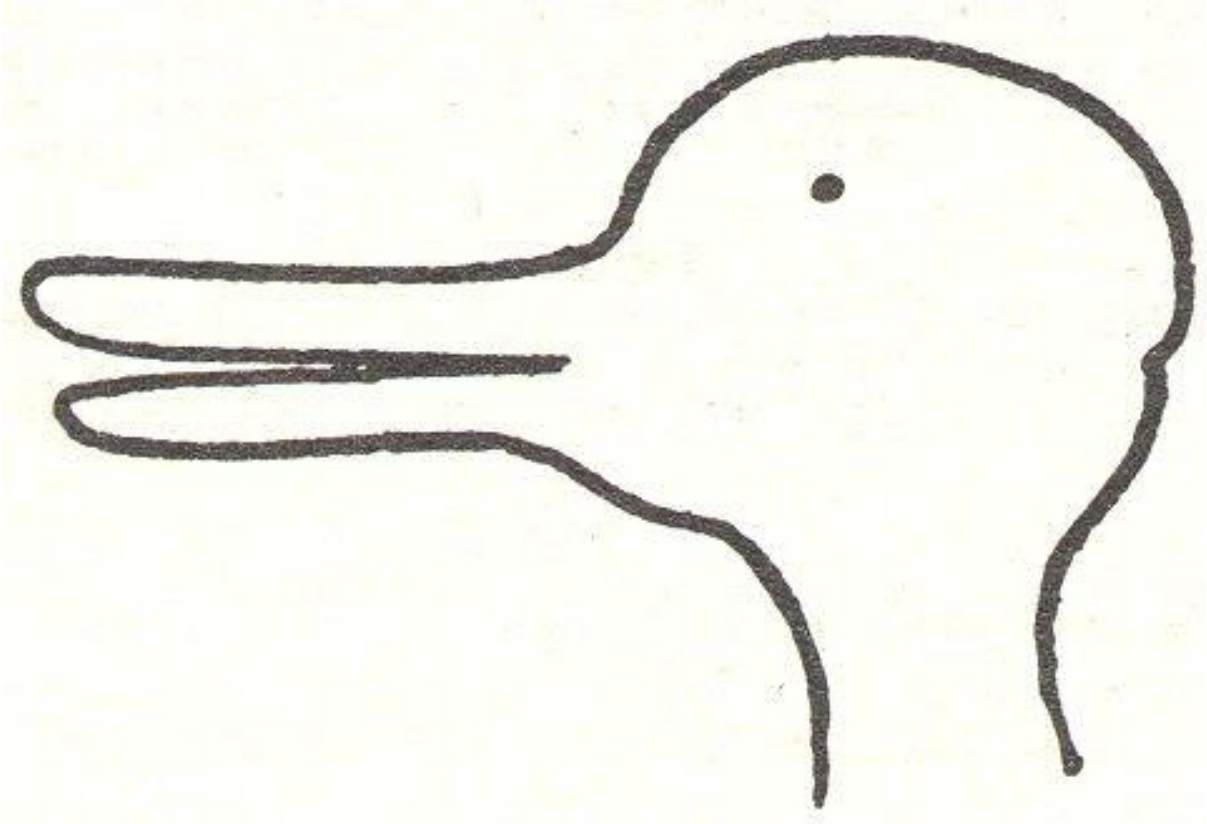
towards which philosophers have sometimes been drawn, and it is one that is widespread in the faith that is placed in the algorithms of computer programs and the prospects of Artificial Intelligence. An algorithm is characterised by the setting out of steps in a procedure in the most efficient order and with no possibility of ambiguity or interpretation. So much of our modern world, including the machine I am using to write this, relies on algorithms, and the extraordinary advances in technology they have enabled are indeed breath-taking. But these advances occur against the background of the hurly-burly of ordinary human interaction, in which the dynamism and projection of language is given full rein, and it is within this that that they have purpose and meaning. The openness to interpretation, the availability of the sign to new uses and new meaning, our everyday uncertainties and misunderstandings—these may indeed fuel the anxieties of scepticism, but in fact they are the very source of our imagination, creativity, and culture, the very source of human meaning-making.

Almost a century before Wittgenstein, Emerson writes: 'I take this evanescence and lubricity of all objects, which lets them slip through our fingers then when we clutch hardest, to be the most unhandsome part of our condition' (Emerson 1983 : 473). The moral is surely that we should not clutch so hard but instead become more accepting of our *condition*. The 'unhandsome' part of our condition points to a problem in the way we handle things: we have this urge to grab things firmly, when in fact we need a lighter touch. The exercise of judgement and imagination are at the heart of this condition, and they demand that we use them well. And possibility is indeed a part of the way the world comes to light: it is precisely the opening within which mistakes can be made, within which we can follow the rule, and within which we can go on in unforeseen ways. Within the shaping of the child's earliest behaviour there is an operation of the imagination in which possibility comes to light. The attempt to shut this down—say, by replacing human beings with machines designed not (desirably) to remove the drudgery of repetitive factory labour but (disastrously) to replace the 'unreliability' and unpredictability of human social interaction with algorithms—amounts to a denial of the human, of our problems and of our best possibilities. It is not necessary to enter into dystopian science fiction to demonstrate the point. Education's seemingly irreversible slide into the nihilism of performativity, with its insistence on learning objectives, efficient delivery, competition and targets, reveals the dangers on a daily basis—reveals it, that is, so long as the thinking of the teachers themselves has not already been absorbed into the system.

The conception of teaching and learning that inheres in performativity is dominated by ideas of linear development, along the lines promoted by programmed learning. There is a place for such learning. I want to find out how to use spreadsheets, and so I follow an online, step-by-step course that teaches me how to manage rows, columns, and cells, and how to construct the appropriate formulae for the calculations I need. But this is a limited exercise with fairly clear objectives, and it is surely of instrumental rather than intrinsic value. There is no problem with this until it is assumed that the efficient means of learning outlined here can be scaled up to provide the structures for teaching and learning more generally. Most practising teachers

will quickly recognise ways in which good teaching and learning exceed such formal and mechanistic structures, and I shall not labour the point by providing further examples here. But let me turn instead to an evocative way in which Wittgenstein extends the point.

Late in the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein considers the following figure, which was used by the psychologist Joseph Jastrow after its publication in 1892 in *Fliegende Blätter*, a German humorous magazine (Wittgenstein 2009 : PPF §118[2]).



With reference to the strange experience of seeing first the duck and then the rabbit (or vice versa), Wittgenstein speaks of the shifting of aspects. In both cases one is seeing the same lines on the page or screen, but the way they are seen, what they amount to, is quite different. The significance of the lines is understood holistically, and what the whole *is* is ambiguous between these two possibilities, duck and rabbit. It is an important feature of the drawing that you cannot see both images at the same time. There is a *Gestalt* shift between the two. Wittgenstein entertains also the possibility that someone might be 'aspect-blind', failing to see one or the other of the figures. Of course, his interest in this case is not just a matter of fascination with puzzle-pictures or even just with the nature of visual perception. He ponders the way that someone might be morally blind to a situation, appreciating it from one point of view but failing to understand it otherwise. Such problems and challenges run through the humanities and the arts, where the interpretation or reading

[2] 'PPF' is the now standard reference to what was formerly called Part 2 of the *Investigations*. The revised translation of 2009 presents this as 'Philosophy of Psychology—A Fragment'.

of a situation, and where imagination and criticism, are of the essence; and it is important that these qualities are not absent from the sciences, where sometimes it is crucially the ability to interpret the apparent evidence in new ways, from a different point of view, that makes the breakthrough—a procedure rather unlike the pattern of hypothesis-test-result that science is popularly imagined to comprise.

Wittgenstein writes of seeing timidity in a face, and the following words perhaps show something of what is at stake:

> §231. We react to the visual impression differently from someone who does not recognize it as timid (in the *full* sense of the word).—But I do *not* want to say here that we feel this reaction in our muscles and joints and that this is the 'sensing'.—No, what we have here is a modified concept of *sensation*.
>
> §232. One might say of someone that he was blind to the *expression* of a face. Would his eyesight on that account be defective?
>
> But this is, of course, not simply a question for physiology. Here the physiological is a symbol of the logical. (*Investigations* : PPF)

This 'modified concept of sensation' to which Wittgenstein appeals is not an invocation of some technical sense of the term but rather a more accurate way of understanding what 'sensation', 'sense', and 'feeling' ordinarily refer to. Rightly understood, our senses are not the receptors for 'sense data' (say, light rays striking the retina) but responses that are meaningful. The visual impression of timidity depends upon a holistic response that takes in the context in which the person is seen, on the kinds of behaviour that are associated with timidity (though these would themselves be dependent upon a variety of contextual factors), and on the structures of relationship and behaviour within which, in the particular society in question, timidity would find expression. Given all this, it should become clear that any tidy separation of feeling and reason can only stand in the way of understanding. And this point is related, I think, to what I said earlier about the blurred boundary between literal and metaphorical senses of an expression. Consider Wittgenstein's poignant remarks in the following:

> §26. But how about an expression like this: 'When you said that, I understood it in my heart'? In saying which, one points to one's heart. And doesn't one *mean* this gesture? Of course, one means it. Or is one aware of using a *mere* picture. Certainly not.—It is not a picture that we choose, not a simile, yet it is a graphic expression. (PPF)

Of course, we can do some biology and explain that the heart is an organ of the body that functions as a kind of pump, and so on. But it would be a mistake to think that this is somehow more fundamental or more accurate than the way the heart is commonly understood—that is, as connected with the emotions, with love, anger, faithfulness, courage, with fear and for that matter with timidity itself. There is nothing there to deny that it is a pump,

but these connections give a better, more rounded sense of how we come to understand the heart and of what a heart is.

It is fruitful in the light of these considerations to consider something of what Wittgenstein says about reading. The several pages he devotes to the topic are committed to dispelling or weakening some of the assumptions that we might be tempted to make in respect of what is, now at least, a commonplace feature of our experience. What is it to read, and what is it to learn to read? At a first glance, the first of these questions may seem like a straightforward matter. But imagine a person reading out loud sentences in a foreign language that she does not understand, and reading them with sufficient accuracy—the written language is phonetic and in a script she is familiar with—for a native speaker easily to understand what she is saying. Is this person reading or not? What of the person who holds up a book, perhaps a religious text in a service, and appears to be reading the words from the page but in fact knows them by heart? What of the fact that advanced readers can often take their cues from the first syllable, the shape of the word, and the context, in contrast to the person who accurately figures out what words the letters make up and goes through them slowly? Now when I introduced the example of the person reading the text she does not understand, I did not really hesitate to say that she *was reading* the sentences, and yet it will often be said that reading properly involves understanding. It is not difficult to see the way that examples of similar cases might proliferate, and it is appropriate, rather than stipulating how things *must be*, to accept that

> there is a continuous series of transitional cases between that in which a person repeats from memory what he is supposed be reading, and that in which he spells out every word without being helped at all by guessing from the context or knowing by heart. (Wittgenstein : PPF, §161)

Wittgenstein's point is not that what counts as reading does not matter but that *what matters* is likely to be different in the different cases. Rather than looking for some clear-cut definition, our attention should be turned to this variety.

His remarks are also levelled against the widespread assumption that what counts as truly reading is a matter of whether certain mechanisms in the brain have been set up. In education, assumptions of this kind have generated a somewhat legislative approach to reading and the 'stages' the child goes through. The broad thrust of the points made above about reading is that this is likely to dull sensitivity to the ways in which a child may come to read. The general lesson to be learned from Wittgenstein here is that if you want to understand an aspect of human practice, it is better not to narrow down and, as it were, squint at the problem in order to identify its essential features, but rather to consider the way the relevant words are actually used. Children do not need special lessons in order to come into this variety of usage; and it may not help them if they are told that *this* is a 'literal' and *that* a 'metaphorical' use.

How far, however, are these thoughts helpful when it comes to the vehement debates in some countries over the virtues of 'look-and-say' as opposed to 'phonetic' approaches to the teaching of reading (see Davis, 2013,

2017)? For a start, it needs to be acknowledged that such controversies are bound to have a linguistically-specific character in some degree. While the purchase of that debate on the teaching of reading English script is clear, this is less so in relation to a more phonetic language such as Italian, and perhaps not relevant at all in the case of a pictographic language such as Mandarin. And, it might be added, it is not clear how adequate these debates are to those new forms of reading that are required by social media—especially in its more pictographic forms, including Instagram and Snapchat, not to mention the new interest that has developed in *manga*. The main point here, however, is that the debates in question have often been stymied by the commitment of the protagonists to a theoretical doctrine: the realities of the classroom have needed a more pragmatic, context-sensitive approach. And in fact that greater pragmatism opens onto the way that ability is better understood as a growing capacity that extends through interpretation and criticism, potentially throughout a person's life.

Such a thought is prominent in the thinking of Emerson's friend and fellow New England philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, whose most famous book, *Walden*, devotes a chapter to the topic of reading. Thoreau's focus is not so much on early steps in reading but rather on the integral part that reading plays in our progressive coming into language. He expresses this provocatively:

> Books must be read as deliberately and earnestly as they were written. It is not enough to be able to speak the language of that nation by which they are written, for there is a memorable interval between the spoken and the written language, the language heard and the language read. The one is commonly transitory, a sound, a tongue, a dialect merely, almost brutish, and we learn it unconsciously, like the brutes, of our mothers. The other is the maturity and experience of that; if that is our mother tongue, this is our father tongue, a reserved and select expression, too significant to be heard by the ear, which we must be born again in order to speak. (Thoreau 1986 : 146)

What we have here is a realisation of the curious blurring of the passive and the active in reading, a sense of the priority of reception but then the importance of intelligent response. The word 'brutish' does not have its modern connotations of violence and savagery but refers rather to the animal-like aspects of our natural coming into language in our early lives, simply through exposure; similarly, the emphasis is not on masculinity but rather on the already-gendered, generally unquestioned, and perhaps too familiar idea of the mother tongue, which the complementary idea of the father tongue partially subverts.

I think Thoreau is referring to an aspect of our relation to language that becomes more prominent in the self-consciousness of adolescence but that is also there, flickering at least, in the experience of the young child's 'kitty, kitty, kitty' or 'pumpkin, pumpkin, pumpkin'. Think of this, then, as a vital tension in our relation to words, between a necessarily unquestioned immersion in their use, without which human thinking would not get off the ground, and a continual interrogative turning back to them so that they

appear with a certain strangeness and as prompting new thoughts. This unsettling of the relation between thought and sign is suggested for Thoreau by the physical practice of reading itself, where the bent arm holding the book, and angling it in order the better to see it, figures the indirectness of this relation and opening to further thought. In fact, Thoreau is prescient here of ideas that emerge a century later in the work of Levinas, where our words are described as having two necessary aspects or moments—that is, a fixity in 'the said' (*le dit*) and a dynamic movement in 'the saying' (*le dire*). In the final chapter of *Walden*, Thoreau writes: 'The volatile truth of our words should continually betray the inadequacy of the residual statement. Their truth is instantly *translated*: its literal monument remains' (Thoreau 1986 : 373). This is the imperative—not to settle with the residual statement but to keep thought live—and it is one to which Thoreau's own style continually leads the reader. In the opening paragraphs of the book, he addresses his readers as 'you who read these pages, who are said to live in New England', which seems at first to be a reference to the place that has come to be known as 'New England' but which, at a second thought, raises the question not of their location but of whether these readers are living at all! Such subtle and recurrent ambiguity in phrasing puts the reader in the position of having to read! Certainly his purpose is to wake his readers up—in their reading, their thinking, their speech, and their lives.

Understanding reading (in the familiar sense) as an accentuation of the processes of interpretation—in seeing the world, in having a world—shifts the ways that the child's growing autonomy and development can be conceived. This is not well understood as the progressive accumulation of skills and competences. The child's education requires entry into an open range of possibility and growing sensitivity to this. The child does not build up from a consolidated centre, through the progressive adding of attributes, but is pulled up beyond itself, by culture, which is to say by the always open possibilities of human language. There is something spiritually charged about this. But there is a problem also if we throw the emphasis too much onto a contrast between first and second natures (see Bakhurst, 2011; McDowell, 1996), for this risks denying something that is already there in the very young child, whose state is not simply comparable to that of animals but holds a propensity towards something more. Consider Cavell's cautionary words in the following:

> [Y]ou bring the child into a world of mystery. You give a child a word and that word, each word, has a destiny that is absolutely lost in the mist. That word keeps finding itself in further and further regions, dimensions of itself. And then there's the moment at which education becomes the prohibition against any further learning. There's something you already know you want the child to mean by these gestures, by these words, by this life it's introduced to. So then it must stop making a contribution to that world. It must stop wanting further changes. (Cavell and Standish 2012 : 166-167)

Cavell is pointing to the dangers of some forms of what purports to be education, where these further regions of thought to which the word opens

are regimented and closed off. The child is (too quickly) corrected to find that the furry dog is not a 'kitty', associations and connections are abruptly foreclosed, and the child's contribution is stunted, nipped in the bud.

If we are to speak of an ideal of autonomy as of key importance in education, as has so widely been emphasised, it is important to recognise that that the kind of autonomy that should matter will not be so much a mastery of situations and self-control but a receptive-responsiveness to the world. The importance of language and literacy, it comes to be seen, is not primarily or solely as a means of communication but rather as manifested in two aspects, in *expression* and *criticism*. *Expression* is misunderstood as the outward production of an already formed inner thought, for it is rather the medium in which the child finds itself and which human beings must continually find themselves. This is the very element in which the world becomes. *Criticism*, as exercised in the humanities and the arts especially, depends crucially on attention to and thinking about the ways that human beings make sense of their world, a making sense that is, at the same time, the making of the world. Critical reading, where reading is not a matter of decoding, involvesis the exercise of judgement without a rule, and this is fundamental to human experience and constitutive of human subjectivity. Coming into the world, coming into language, and reading the world must, in these ways, come together.

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Paul Standish is Professor and Head of the Centre for Philosophy of Education at UCLIOE. He has extensive teaching experience in schools, colleges and universities, and his research reflects that range. He is the author or editor of some twenty books,

with a sustained interest in Wittgenstein extending from his *Beyond the Self: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Limits of Language* (1992, Ashgate) and *Wittgenstein and Education: On Not Sparing Others the Trouble of Thinking* (2023, Wiley), co-edited with Adrian Skilbeck. He is the author of many essays on Stanley Cavell, as well as co-editor with Naoko Saito of *Stanley Cavell and the Education of Grownups* (2012, Fordham UP), *Stanley Cavell and Philosophy as Translation: The Truth is Translated* (2017, Rowman & Littlefield), and *Walden in Tokyo: Stanley Cavell and the Thought of Other Cultures* (2024, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Special Issue). He is President of the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain and Co-Editor of the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*.

Paul Standish est professeur et directeur du *Centre for Philosophy of Education* à University College London (UCLIOE). Enseignant de longue date dans des écoles et universités, ses recherches reflètent la diversité de ses expériences. Il a écrit ou édité une vingtaine d'ouvrages, dont un certain nombre sur Wittgenstein, par exemple *Beyond the Self. Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Limits of Language* (1992, Ashgate) et *Wittgenstein and Education : On Not Sparing Others the Trouble of Thinking* (2023, Wiley), coédité avec Adrian Skilbeck. Il est l'auteur de nombreux essais sur Stanley Cavell, et a co-édité avec Naoko Saito: *Stanley Cavell and the Education of Grownups* (2012, Fordham UP), *Stanley Cavell and Philosophy as Translation : The Truth is Translated* (2017, Rowman & Littlefield), et *Walden in Tokyo: Stanley Cavell and the Thought of Other Cultures* (2024, *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Special Issue) Il est président de la *Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain* et co-rédacteur en chef du *Journal of Philosophy of Education*.