

# TAKING AVOWALS SERIOUSLY: | EIKE VON THE SOUL A PUBLIC AFFAIR | SAVIGNY

## I. Preliminary

In the section “Use determines meaning”, I will give a simplified outline of what I take to be Wittgenstein’s idea that use determines meaning, and I will do it in such a manner that we can put it to use in an interesting way. In the section “First person psychological utterances”, I will show how the view of first person psychological utterances as expressions of people’s sensations, feelings, moods, impressions and so on fits in with this sketch of the ‘use theory of meaning’; my result will be that the commonly accepted understanding of such an utterance determines what the speaker’s mental state<sup>1</sup> is like. In the section “Nonverbal expressions of mental states”, I generalize this conclusion to mental states that are expressed in nonverbal behavior; the result will be that commonly accepted reactions to nonverbal expressive behavior determine what the speaker’s mental state is like in the same way as is the case with verbal expressive behavior. Thus, rather than arguing this anti-individualistic interpretation of Wittgenstein directly from the text, I try to pin him down to it by embedding his view on avowals in his use picture of meaning.

It is, of course, controversial to find, in Wittgenstein, a *coherent* picture of the idea that meaning is use. It may be still more disputable to apply such a picture to expressive utterances in the way of applying a *theory* to a special

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1. Never mind the word; I use it for lack of a better alternative.

| A. Pichler, S. Säätelä (eds.), *Wittgenstein: The Philosopher and his Works*, pp. 230–243,  
| Frankfurt a.M.: ontos verlag 2006, © ontos verlag, Eike von Savigny.

case. And most experts on the later philosophy will lose patience when they see the result of this application being *generalized*. However, I find Wittgenstein's ideas sufficiently interesting for trying to find out what will result from fitting them into a coherent whole. I do not deny that, in all probability, he might have been horrified by the prospect of *this* "perspicuous representation".

## 2. Use determines meaning

In the *Philosophical Investigations*,<sup>2</sup> elements of language – words, sentences, utterances – owe their meaning to their role in language-games; such language-games are complex behavioral regularities (so complex that they constitute rule-following behavior). Now if we take seriously Wittgenstein's thought experiment from *PI* §§ 206–207, the attempt of the explorer to find out whether the people observed speak a language, then the following also becomes clear: in language-games, the linguistic elements have meanings only in so far as the regularities of these language-games are substantial enough for such meanings to emerge. To each meaning, there corresponds a set of rich behavioral regularities, a set that is characteristic for the use of linguistic elements with precisely that meaning. That is the general idea.

One thing is for sure: Wittgenstein keeps the reader frustratingly short of examples of what behavioral regularities look like that are characteristic of linguistic elements with a given meaning. Instead, the reader often gets the impression that in the use of expressions, part of the regularities that determine meaning is constituted by the expressions' being applied to the proper things. However, properly applying a predicate cannot be just a basic regularity, one of those that an explorer in the completely unknown country can ascertain first. For 'to apply a predicate properly' is to *state* something or to *agree to* something that has already *been stated* or to *answer a question* in the *affirmative*. Therefore, the explorer would have to determine whether there are, in this community, the language-games of stating, agreeing, and affirming; in order to make such a determination he first has to make clear to himself what he is actually looking for.

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2. I quote the 2000 reprint of the second German-English edition of 1958 (Oxford, Blackwell).

In *PI*, one has to confine oneself to indirect clues concerning how the behavioral regularities could look. We find such a clue in the example of giving a gift that Wittgenstein *uses* in *PI* § 268 to say concretely *what it takes for something linguistic to be meaningful*: to be an instance of giving, a way of behaving must have the “practical consequences” of giving a gift. The practical consequences of giving are: the recipient becomes the owner of the gift; he has no obligation to reciprocate; however, he is obligated to be grateful. And with that, our analysis arrives at rule-following behavior involving multiple people. For now that the recipient is the owner of the gift, he is permitted to do certain things with it that others are not allowed to do – he may use it, sell it, lend it, give it; he may deny others the use of it; and so on. That the recipient is permitted to do various things means: others must tolerate what he does, i.e., their toleration is generally expected.

There can only be a giving of a gift when the giver (i.e., the speaker) is the owner of the gift; I call this the ‘precondition’ for giving (Wittgenstein doesn’t have his own word for this; the preconditions are to be found among what Wittgenstein calls the “circumstances” of the utterance). An utterance is thus characterized as the giving of a gift by the fact that under certain preconditions it has certain practical consequences. In a similar manner: in order for an utterance to be a statement that it is raining, it must be expected of the speaker that he knows whether it is raining, and of the listener that he is interested in learning whether it is raining. If the statement comes off, then it will have the practical consequence that the addressee, at the expense of the speaker, may count on the fact that it is raining. So if he runs into trouble because the statement was wrong, the speaker has to compensate (usually, in an informal way like accepting blame). That is a very rough picture and not to be found in *PI*, though it easily fits with *PI* §§ 348, 363; according to this picture, a statement is treated as an informal kind of a guarantee.<sup>3</sup> The precondition for an utterance to be an order is that the speaker has the necessary authority in regard to the addressee to order the action (in many examples in *PI*, the speaker of the order is a teacher and the addressee his student); the practical consequence is that the addressee must carry out

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3. This is Searle’s “essential condition” for statements; see J. Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge (CUP), 1969, p. 66.

the order. Thus, an utterance becomes a gift, a statement, or an order – where the preconditions for giving, stating, or ordering are satisfied – when it has the practical consequences of giving, stating, or ordering. It is then that the utterance plays in a language-game the role of a gift, statement, or order, and in doing so, it has the meaning of a gift, statement, or order.

### 3. First person psychological utterances

The “practical consequences” that an utterance has when it is made under certain preconditions constitute the generally accepted understanding<sup>4</sup> of the utterance and thereby determine its meaning. Let me ask, what is the role of consequences for the meanings of utterances that a speaker uses to express his mental state? Prime examples of such utterances are those like ‘I’m in pain’, ‘I have the impression that the fire extinguisher is red’, ‘I feel depressed’, ‘I feel flattered’, ‘I’m imagining the color red’. Wittgenstein later uses the word “confession” (“Geständnis”) when he wants to distinguish such utterances from statements and reports (*PI* II xi, p. 222); in the international discussion, the term ‘avowal’ has gained currency. I too shall use ‘avowal’. Instead of the ‘I’ form you could also have an equivalent construction, for instance ‘My stomach is nauseous.’ We will only consider such utterances for which the speaker has a particular authority. (Thus, we are not concerned with such cases where someone says astonished at the end of a psychological experiment, “Aha, now I see, I experience the fire extinguisher as violet!”)<sup>5</sup>

Wittgenstein considers two possibilities for how expressive utterances can achieve a role in a language-game. The first possibility is that such an utterance could take the place of, and play the same role as, nonverbal behavior.

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4. “Way of grasping” (“Auffassung”) with Wittgenstein where he is stressing the contrast with “interpretation” (“Deutung”).

5. What I have to say concerns only the fact that with Wittgenstein, the spontaneous and linguistically competent utterance *determines* what is being expressed. This point is independent of the questions whether or not the speaker knows about his sensations and whether or not he reports them. The latter questions are at issue in the literature; I have not found discussions of the determination question. In section 5, I have listed some earlier research which I have mostly learnt from as well as a selection of more recent papers which I take to represent the state of the art.

In *PI* § 244, such a possibility is clothed in the form of an instance of learning. (Wittgenstein likes to use instances of learning to clarify how a competence looks that is acquired through learning, or how the meaning of an utterance looks whose use is picked up through learning.) First, a child has hurt himself; then he cries out; then he is comforted. Instead of crying, he learns to say, “Ow,” and later “Baby boo-boo” or eventually – though rather unrealistically – “I’m in pain.” “I’m in pain” occupies then the same place between getting hurt and being comforted that the crying out previously occupied. Crying out is an expression of pain, and since “I’m in pain” plays the same role, it is also an expression of pain. We see that we have the schema: precondition – utterance – practical consequences; getting hurt is recognized as a precondition whereby crying out has to be answered with comforting, and that it must be answered with comforting is – under the precondition of being hurt – the practical consequence of the crying out. The same applies for the utterance “I’m in pain.”

A second possibility is that in which there is no antecedent nonverbal expressive behavior; rather, expressive behavior begins with verbal behavior. *PI* § 270 offers an example: under the precondition that I have learned how to announce correctly a rise in my blood pressure without the help of any device, my uttering “my blood pressure is rising” is sufficient for the practical consequence that one can use this utterance to some practical end (i.e., that anyone may prepare for whatever may follow from the rise in my blood pressure). This is why it is important that I have in fact learnt to correctly announce the rise in blood pressure! (I interpret *PI* § 270 in the light of realistic examples such as “I feel nauseous,” or “I’ve got to go to the bathroom.”) Others would describe the situation in which I announce the rise in my blood pressure in the following way: “He feels that his blood pressure is rising” or “He has the feeling that his blood pressure is rising.” I take on this manner of speaking in the first person and say, “I have the feeling that my blood pressure is rising.” It would be a terrible mistake to conclude from this verbal form that I detect a feeling of rising blood pressure, which I then describe. On the contrary, it is through the sameness of my recurring utterance that the feeling, which is first brought into the game at all through the verbal form chosen by others, counts as the same feeling each time. Here too, we are presented with the scheme of precondition (a history of success–

ful announcements of a rise in blood pressure), avowal, and practical consequence (useful results).

In a different context, Wittgenstein describes the same situation for the utterance “I understand” (*PI* §§ 151–155, *PI* §§ 179–184; there the theme is that the meaning of an utterance is dependent upon the surrounding circumstances). In order for “I understand” to express understanding, the speaker must be knowledgeable with the matter in question, and his utterance must entitle others to the expectation that he will behave like someone who has understood. Here too, we have the schema of a history of success (in applying a formula) – utterance – generally accepted expectation of future behavior. This scheme constitutes the generally accepted understanding of the expressive utterance and thereby determines its meaning.

The consequences of this are stunning if we relate them to the following fact about avowals: whoever says, “I have the intention to travel abroad,” under the right circumstances, has the intention to travel abroad; whoever says, “I am imagining the color red,” under the right circumstances, is imagining the color red; and so on. This is what the particular authority of the avowal consists in: whoever verbally expresses a mental state under the right circumstances, feels the way he says. Now, that he is expressing with the utterance, “I am imagining the color red,” his imagining the color red, is determined by the generally accepted understanding of his utterance. That he is imagining the color red comes, therefore, from the generally accepted understanding of his utterance!

One would like to say that this could not be true. Certainly, the linguistically competent, sincere utterance, “I am imagining the color red,” is authoritative when it is made under the right circumstances. Nevertheless, is it not just authoritative because among the right circumstances there is the fact that the speaker is actually imagining the color red, implying as a consequence that the linguistically competent and sincere utterance is true? No, says Wittgenstein; utterances of the imagination are as little reports (of a mental state) as are any avowals. Rather, what belongs to the right circumstances above all is that I have mastered the language-game of utterances of the imagination:

How do I know that this color is red? – It would be an answer to say: “I have learnt English”. (*PI* § 381)

Given the context of this section, it means:

How can I so blithely say that I am just imagining the color red? – An answer would be: “I have learned how one operates with utterances of the imagination”.

Thus, e.g., when asked to bring a flower of the imagined color, one has to be capable of selecting and bringing a red flower; one has to be receptive to the question of whether the red carpet goes with the yellow curtains; one has to be able to describe an imagined scene in a way that is free of contradictions; and so on. However, one does not have to look inside oneself and determine that the color that one is imagining is the color red.

#### **4. Nonverbal expressions of mental states**

Let us now go a step further. Mental states that *can* be verbally expressed need not actually be expressed verbally. Wittgenstein explicitly takes note of the extra-linguistic expressive behavior of flies (*PI* § 284), cats, prey (*PI* § 647), and dogs (*PI* § 650), and he names numerous examples for people. Additionally, one can alternatively express at the same point in time one’s state verbally or extra-verbally, e.g., that one is expecting someone. Extra-linguistically that would go like this:

What’s it like for me to expect him to come? – I walk up and down the room, look at the clock now and then, and so on.

And linguistically it might go like this:

But perhaps I say as I walk up and down: “I expect he’ll come in” (*PI* § 444)

Given the way Wittgenstein describes the case, one person is in fact expecting another, and that is not affected by her saying in the end, “I expect he’ll come in.” Even before she says this, she is expecting him. In this respect, therefore, she is already, before the utterance of expectation, in that mental state that is determined by the generally accepted understanding of the later utterance of expectation. She would also be in this state even if in the end she did not make the avowal at all. In general terms, that means: even when a mental state is not in fact linguistically expressed, it is still determined, as

regards its content, by the generally accepted understanding of that avowal with which it *could* be spontaneously expressed.

At this point, the most natural way to avoid metaphysical confusion seems to consist in one's seeing the extra-linguistic expressive behavior as occupying the same role as the linguistic: what extra-linguistic expressive behavior expresses depends on the generally accepted way in which the expressive behavior is reacted to. This is clear in the example of the child (*PI* § 244) who after having been hurt first cries and then later learns to say, "I'm in pain"; it is only in this way that the crying and the avowal occupy *the same place* after the child's being hurt so that the avowal can be used *in place of* the crying (this is Wittgenstein's pun: see *PI* § 508). By way of this established reaction of comforting, the crying (after an injury) is understood as an expression of pain and the condition of the child as one of being in pain.

If one reads Wittgenstein as an author who endeavors not to utter any contradictory rubbish, then one will, in a first step, apply his picture of the establishment of linguistic meaning in language-games to avowals, and will extend this picture in a second step to the meaning of extra-linguistic expressive behavior insofar as this behavior expresses something mental that could also be expressed verbally. And there actually are quite a few clues in the *Investigations* to the idea that extra-linguistic expressive behavior also expresses what it does thanks to generally accepted understanding. *Pretending* and *simulating* can only be done insofar as the accepted reactions of those around fit the expressive behavior in the required way (*PI* §§ 249, 250).<sup>6</sup> A person is able to express what she *imagines* by imitating the appropriate behavior as if in stage-acting (*PI* § 391, cf. also *PI* § 282), and the content of what takes place on the stage is of course dependent upon the generally accepted understanding of the audience. An instance of expressive behavior expresses *hope* only where, by virtue of convention, it is so understood (*PI* § 584). An act is *intentional* insofar as it is mastered, i.e., competently carried out (*PI* §§ 628, 629), i.e., in accord with the established standards for such

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6. For a detailed interpretation, see E. v. Savigny 1993, "Why Can't a Baby Pretend to Smile?", in J.V. Canfield, St. G. Shanker eds., *Wittgenstein's Intentions*, New York (Garland), pp. 104–118; for a critique, see S. Schroeder 1997, *Das Privatsprachen-Argument*, Paderborn (Schöningh), §§ 58–60.



actions.<sup>7</sup> – True, one does not *have to* read these passages in this way; however, they acquire their own weight in the light of the interpretation that is required by the above picture of avowals.

The mental for Wittgenstein is public, then, in a much more radical sense than the careful and sympathetic interpreters of his philosophy of psychology assume. They are agreed for the most part these days that with Wittgenstein, the accessibility of the mental goes farther than in logical behaviorism – for Gilbert Ryle, for instance, the mental was indeed perfectly accessible, though still always *readable from behavior* (the reverse not holding); with Wittgenstein, however, the mental is just as directly perceivable as behavior. (This does not exclude error any more than error is excluded in other perception, and it implies the importance of learning quite as much as learning is necessary for perception in general.) Being public in this way means being *accessible to the public*; what I have sketched out above means public in the sense of *determination through the public*. Let me try out some comparisons.

When archaeologists find a stone in the form of a hand-axe that shows the clear marks of workmanship, then they will report the find of a hand-axe. Why is that justified? Because no explanation occurs to anyone other than that people in the Stone Age used the stone as a hand-axe. The hypothesis of this use is just too obvious for anyone to get the idea that the stone was actually used differently, and because of the use, we end up having to regard it as a hand-axe. The same is true for apartment houses – we recognize them immediately, for their use goes without saying, and if it did not go without saying, the buildings would not be apartment houses. Whoever hikes through an area filled with animals such as goats may stop short when the trail branches or leads into a morass of trails, and his question will be: Which trail is the path? That is, on which trail do people usually go? A path is a trail that people use to go from one place to another, and that is the reason why a trail is a path. The stone, the building, the trail have quite objective properties that make them a hand-axe, an apartment house, a path, and they have them for the reason that people go about using them in a cer-

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7. I have argued these interpretations in E. v. Savigny 1996, “Psychological Facts: Social Facts about Individuals”, in K. S. Johannessen, T. Nordenstam eds., *Wittgenstein and the Philosophy of Culture*, Wien (Hölder-Pichler-Tempsky), pp. 223–7.

tain way. Butter has a completely objective price (*PI* § 693) for the very reason that people pay a particular amount for it.

One can overlook this fact because the customary use is likely to be connected with other facts that are not constituted by human ways of handling things. Take the social mother and father of a child. It is an entirely objective fact that they are his social parents, for it is generally expected of them that they care for the child, albeit in ways that differ from society to society. This is connected to their generally being his biological parents, but both facts are not the same; rather, it just obviously suggests itself or is simply practical for the biological parents to also be the social parents. Again, when is a person ill? At the time when she has a socially accepted claim of being looked after, cared for, and comforted, and that is connected to the non-social fact that her physiological condition is rather unfavorable considering her age. But both are not the same, as the political debate over the recognition of diseases by health insurance shows. (Mental illnesses offer a fitting example.) It is not by way of social definition that the sick person is in that physiological condition which she is in; but the social definition is necessary for this physiological state to be considered enough of a justification for her being cared for, and thus for her to be sick. And if a person is physiologically impaired, it certainly makes sense for socially living creatures to spoil her with being looked after, cared for, and treated. However, the degree of impairment at which the spoiling is begun will depend on many different circumstances, e.g., on available resources. (We *still* do not consider age a disease!)

When I speak of socially established reactions to nonverbal expressive behavior, I am not claiming that, given our actual make-up, these reactions could be other than they are. Just as we can surely use a hand-axe only for chopping, we can surely only react with sympathy to the crying of a child who has his finger caught in the car door. A large part of our reactive behavioral repertoire that functions in understanding the expressive behavior of our fellow humans may be inherent from birth. Thus human reactions, in the *PI*, have the same defining role as they would have in the eye of an extraterrestrial ethologist who uses the customary concept of expressive behavior from present-day ethology to get wise of our mental states. According to the ethological idea, expressive behavior is behavior whose only function consists in modifying the behavior of others of the same species. For example, with some primates there is the famous 'silent baring of

teeth' that has the function of reducing aggression or fear in others of the same species. For this reason, the ethologists interpret this expressive behavior as friendly and the mood of the 'grinning' primate as equally friendly. The extraterrestrial behavioral scientist would not proceed any differently with us: he would look to see how we as a rule react to the expressive behavior of another human, and from that he would determine the mental state of the other human. However, we should not fool ourselves: human expressive and reactive behavior is so extraordinarily complex that someone who has not mastered it himself would probably not have a chance to come up with correct hypotheses that he could then methodologically test by observation. In so far as we had to learn it, we may be grateful for our learning capacities.

Honor whom honor is due: the suggested interpretation of Wittgenstein's picture of mental facts that I have here sketched out was first given by Noel Fleming.<sup>8</sup> Fleming takes a famous remark from Wittgenstein literally: "The human body is the best picture of the human soul." (*PI* II iv, p. 178) What is surely meant is human behavior (cf. *PI* § 357), and Fleming asks: Where do pictures get their content from? (How does it come about that behavior expresses a particular fact about the soul?) Even if we limit ourselves to so-called naturalistic pictures, they are not in any self-evident way similar to their content: they are two-dimensional or, as statues, completely lifeless; if someone came upon a life-sized black and white photo of a person, he would certainly not confuse it with the person. That a picture portrays a particular object seems to depend on it looking like a picture that one would expect to portray such an object. We expect from a realistic picture, e.g., a correct perspective; before the Renaissance that was not usual, and if a person in an altarpiece was smaller than another person, he was not further back but portrayed as humble. Briefly, for a culture, something is a picture of a thing *if the culture treats it as a picture of that thing*; of course, this last expression must be explained in detail, which I cannot do. (It would be like

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8. N. Fleming 1978, "Seeing the Soul", *Philosophy* 53, pp. 33–50. Unaware of his paper, I tried to make a case for this interpretation in the bulk of E. v. Savigny 1988–9, *Wittgensteins "Philosophische Untersuchungen"*, 2 vols.; 2nd. ed. 1994–6; Frankfurt a. M. (Klostermann). When in examining the secondary literature I came across Fleming's article I felt like having reproduced an effect in an independent experiment.

explaining, in general, what the use of a sentence is.) For example, in our culture a normal black and white picture is sufficient for passport control; and one can return ordered goods if they do not match the picture in the catalog in a certain generally expected way.

In the sense of this comparison, behavior expresses a mental fact when the members of the culture in question normally treat the person in the way that is appropriate if the mental fact obtains. That is just what they bring about with that reactive behavior that characterizes the behavior of the person in question as an expression of the respective mental fact. Whoever comforts someone who has hurt himself and is crying, treats his crying as an expression of pain and the crying person as someone who is in pain. If a person does this in precisely those circumstances as is required by the norms of her culture, she sees the other person as someone who is in pain; this comes to the same as when someone sees the storm in El Greco's picture "Storm over Toledo" (Fleming's example) because it is a norm of our culture to see the picture as one of a storm. Seeing-as is here the same as treating-as; and because this treating determines the content of the expressive behavior, and with it the expressed mental fact itself, it is exactly the same with the soul as it is with the content of the picture: whichever mental fact a culture sees, determines the mental fact in exactly the same way as whichever content of a picture a culture sees, thereby determines the content of the picture. The seeing of a mental fact is, therefore, co-responsible<sup>9</sup> for which mental facts there are to see.<sup>10</sup>

## 5. Research bibliography

The first part lists research on avowals that I myself have learnt much from; it is ordered chronologically because I would like to point out that much really good stuff seems to have been simply forgotten.

P. F. Strawson, "Critical Notice: Philosophical Investigations", *Mind* 63, 1954, pp. 70–99, esp. pp. 79–80, 83, 85–88, 92–94.

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9. Co-responsible because the determining reactions also depend causally on expressive behavior in suitable circumstances, of course.

10. I thank George Wrisley for translating the text into English.

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The second list is to represent the state of the art; there is no claim to completeness.

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