Wittgenstein on Use, Meaning and the Experience of Meaning

Elena Valeri
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Abstract   In this paper I discuss the relationship between the notion of experience of meaning, introduced by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and the idea of meaning as use, central to much of his thought. In particular, I ask whether the former is to be seen as a development, an integration and a specification of the latter, or whether its emergence in Wittgenstein's work indicates a change in his attitude to meaning. My answer is that the notion of experience of meaning does not bring back some form of psychologism, but rather it develops, integrates and specifies that of use.

Keywords   Wittgenstein. Use. Rules. Experience of Meaning. Anti-psychologism.

> Yes, young lady. I cannot give you any rule.
> One must have a feeling for it, and well,
> that's it. But in order to have it, one must
> study, study, and then study some more.
> Eugène Ionesco, *The Lesson*[1]

> So does the word 'Beethoven' have a
> Beethoven-feeling?
> Ludwig Wittgenstein,
> *Last Writings on the Philosophy
> of Psychology II*[2]

1 Introduction

While Wittgenstein was introducing and discussing – especially, but not exclusively, in the *Philosophical Investigations* – his well-known idea that there is some kind of link between meaning and use, a question gradually arose which led him to new questions and problems. The question can be formulated as follows: Is there something more to meaning than its use – something that escapes 'use' and that 'use' fails to account for? In this paper, I aim to illustrate what might be considered the stages in the gradual emergence of this question and Wittgenstein's treatment of it, and my focus will be on how to interpret the topic which Wittgenstein arrived at: the experience of meaning. Specifically, the point at issue is whether we should regard this reference to the experience of meaning as a kind of re-evaluation of psychologism and, together, a questioning (and downgrading) of the notion of use, or whether it is consistent with his anti-psychologism and his appeal to use. In order to provide some answers, I will first outline how and for what purpose Wittgenstein introduces the notion of use; then, I will examine the context in which the notion of experience of meaning occurs; and finally, I will make an interpretative proposal for how to understand the relationship between (meaning as) use and the experience of meaning.

2 Meaning and Use

Readers of the *Philosophical Investigations* will be well aware of Wittgenstein's constant reference, when he speaks of the meaning of a word, an expression or a sentence, to use (*Gebrauch*, *Verwendung*), employment (*Verwendung*, *Benützung*) and application (*Anwendung*),[3]

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1 Ionesco 1958, 68-9.

2 LW II, 3.

3 Here I use the 2009 edition of *Philosophical Investigations*, edited by Peter M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, who in their editorial preface state that they "have

and of the central role these notions play in his investigation of meaning.[4] The key section is, of course, section 43, the first paragraph of which reads:

> For a *large* class of cases of the employment (*Benützung*) of the word 'meaning' – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use (*Gebrauch*) in the language. (PI, § 43; italics in the original, here and in what follows)

The fundamental question presented to interpreters by this paragraph is whether or not it contains a definition of what for Wittgenstein is (what he takes to be) meaning. That is, whether (a) Wittgenstein undertakes to argue that meaning is (coincides with or is identified with) linguistic use, or (b) his aim is different and, perhaps, entirely different. This is also tantamount to asking whether or not there exists in the 'later' Wittgenstein a theory of meaning as use (a use-theory of meaning) that is to be regarded as primarily different from (or even opposite and antithetical to) that of the 'early' Wittgenstein (the author of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*).[5]

The affirmative or negative answer to this question defines two opposite readings and two corresponding approaches: (1) the reading and approach of those who believe that in Wittgenstein there is, like it or not, a theory which, in competition and opposition with other

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translated *Gebrauch* by 'use', *Verwendung* by 'use' or 'employment', and *Anwendung* by 'application'. 'Use' also does service for *benützen*"; "[i]n general, however, [they] have not allowed [them]selves to be hidebound by the multiple occurrence of the same German word or phrase in different contexts" (Hacker, Schulte 2009, xiv; italics in the original).

4 The central role of use is certainly evident in the case of the *Philosophical Investigations* and the texts coeval with their composition. I would point out, however, that the centrality which this notion assumes in Wittgenstein's later texts is anticipated by its significant presence in the *Tractatus*. Indeed, in the *Tractatus*, meaning is connected to the usefulness (or uselessness) of the sign (cf. TLP, 3.328), and 'usefulness' means that the sign can "determine a logical form" only if "taken together with its logico-syntactical employment" (TLP, 3.327); as we also read, one can "recognize a symbol by its sign" only by observing "how it is used with a sense" (TLP, 3.326). Although Wittgenstein speaks of "logico-syntactical employment" (TLP, 3.327), there is already a tension here between a notion of use linked to logic and a broader notion of use, which anticipates a certain view of use, found in the *Blue Book* and the *Philosophical Investigations*, as that which 'gives life' to signs, which would otherwise be 'dead' and 'inert': as Wittgenstein suggests, "if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use*" (BB, 4). Consider also this remark: "Every sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life? – In use it *lives*. Is it there that it has living breath within it? – Or is the *use* its breath?" (PI, § 432). For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between sign and use in Wittgenstein, see Perissinotto 2009.

5 Of course, this presupposes something that is neither obvious nor taken for granted, namely that there is such a thing as a theory of meaning in the early Wittgenstein. See, for example, the position of the Neowittgensteinians (Crary, Read 2000), who radically deny that there is any theory of meaning in the *Tractatus*.

and different theories (e.g. in competition and opposition with the picture-theory of the *Tractatus*, or with referentialist or ideational theories), leads back (reduces) meaning to use,[6] and (2) the reading and approach of those who recognise, on the contrary, that the emphasis on use is nothing but a step – perhaps the most important and decisive step – in the Wittgensteinian philosophical method. According to the latter reading and approach, in section 43 (and similar sections) Wittgenstein is suggesting that looking at use is a way "to cure you of the temptation", so widespread in philosophising, "to look about you for some object which you might call 'the meaning'" (BB, 1) and of the "mental cramp" (BB, 1) that this temptation produces.[7] In the view of (2), what is contained in section 43 of the *Philosophical Investigations* would not be, as in the view of (1), a theoretical definition of meaning, as if use were something definable that accompanies words, expressions and sentences, but rather a methodological indication that invites one to follow such a maxim: "Don't look for the meaning of a word (an expression, a sentence), look for its use".[8]

Even if one accepts and adheres to this methodological reading – and I think there are good reasons for doing so[9] – one is left with a question that Wittgenstein himself poses more than once: Where should I look if it is the use which I am looking for? That is, what is the use for which I am supposed to look? Such a question arises precisely because 'use' (as well as 'employment' and 'application') is a rather vague term, far from unambiguous. Even with 'use', as it were, we need to ask (and know) how it is used. Moreover, not only does the emphasis on use seem to be 'operationally' unhelpful (where should I look? What do I say, when I am asked about meaning?), but also, as Paul Snowdon (2018, 29) observes, the fact "that the term 'use' is very indefinite" is itself the reason why "[i]t is very difficult to assess" Wittgenstein's proposal. In short, whether we read it as a theoretical definition, i.e. as "meaning is use", "meaning = use", or

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6 The problem with this reading and approach, which evaluates Wittgenstein's proposal as a theoretical hypothesis (which can then be said to be correct or not), is expressed by Paul Horwich in the following way: "Moreover, no matter how these matters are decided, his proposal surely isn't going to be *obviously* correct; but in propounding a controversial hypothesis, is he not guilty of contravening his own anti-theoretical meta-philosophy?" (Horwich 2008, 134).

7 In particular, questions such as "What is meaning?" produce this impasse: "We feel that we can't point to anything in reply to them and yet ought to point to something" (BB, 1).

8 In a late note from January 1948, Wittgenstein makes this point as follows: "Nicht nach der Begleitung des Wortes ist zu suchen, sondern nach dem Gebrauch" (It is not the accompaniment of the word that is to be sought, but its use) (MS 136, 64b).

9 It should be noted that the expression "For a *large* class of cases" (PI, § 43) already shows that Wittgenstein had no theoretical intention, since generality or universality is unanimously a hallmark of the theoretical.

methodologically as "Don't look for the meaning, look for the use", we need to know what use is and where, so to speak, it is to be found. In order to attempt some sort of answer, we can begin by taking the negative route, that is, by pointing out what use is certainly is not, and how its relation to meaning is not to be understood.

2.1   What (Linguistic) Use Is Not

First of all, (1) there is a sense of 'use' which obviously leads us to exclude that 'use' could have the meaning we are looking for: there is a clear difference between a very generally understood use and a use which has to do with linguistic meaning. 'Use' does not always convey the linguistic meaning, since there are clearly uses which have nothing to do with this kind of meaning (I mean linguistic meaning), either in the sense that there are words (expressions, sentences) which have a use, but of which we would not say that they have a (linguistic) meaning (e.g. a 'lalala' that we repeat for our own amusement, or magic words such as 'abracadabra' and 'bibbidi-bobbidi-boo'), or in the sense that there are words (expressions, sentences) which have meaning without any connection to the particular use we make of them (e.g. the word 'cat' used as a password or as a decorative motif on some wallpaper). In such cases, the use (of a word, an expression or a sentence) does not seem to be that "use in the language" (PI, § 43) of which Wittgenstein speaks in section 43, but rather a use *of* the language, so to speak.

(2) But 'use' should not be understood, even trivially, as the use I make of a word, an expression or a sentence to mean something: what I use a word (an expression, a sentence) to mean. For Wittgenstein, the point is not that I can *use* a word (an expression, a sentence) *to mean* something – assuming that it can be established "what using an expression [a word, a sentence] to mean something actually amounts to, or, comes down to" (Snowdon 2018, 30) – but that what I mean with a word (an expression, a sentence) results from (or is in) the use I make of that word (expression, sentence) in different circumstances.

(3) Even what would be the most obvious thing to do, namely, to turn to Wittgenstein's examples in order to find the characteristics of use according to him, does not seem to be decisive. An examination of the examples with which Wittgenstein begins his *Philosophical Investigations* (such as the examples of red apples in section 1, building stones in section 2, or numbers in section 8; see PI, §§ 1, 2, 8) – together with the numerous others scattered throughout his later writings – suggests that all these uses refer to "something interpersonal and social" (Snowdon 2018, 30), which can be traced back to forms of training and acquired habits (see PI, § 199). Wittgenstein's examples are admittedly, very simple, and probably deliberately simplified,

but it is true that they highlight mostly, or rather exclusively, a single aspect of use: they are imperatives, where use only "amounts to a speaker getting a hearer to do something" (Snowdon 2018, 30). So much so that it is easy to see that they leave out much of the meaning – for instance, what we might call 'descriptive' uses or meanings. One must then ask whether they really represent the 'locus' of meaning and whether they serve to shed full light on what is meant by 'use'.[10] In short, while Wittgenstein's examples give us some pointers – above all, the idea that "use in the language" (PI, § 43) is not to be understood in an intralinguistic sense – they leave the question of where to look for meaning open and undecided in many respects.

Hence, it seems far from easy to determine what this "use in the language" (PI, § 43) is that is supposed to give us the meaning. After all, it seems safe to say that Wittgenstein, who, as we shall see, tries to give us some hints as to how to understand the notion of use, was fully aware of these difficulties. In the pages of the *Philosophical Investigations*, as well as in many other pages of his manuscripts and typescripts, we find Wittgenstein often dissatisfied and constantly struggling to come to terms with the mental cramps, confusions and misunderstandings which his own repeated emphasis on use risks producing; as we might also say, and as he knew well, in philosophising it can sometimes happen that what is presented as the solution turns out to be the problem, or at least part of the problem. As we have seen, it is possible to appeal to use while remaining fully within the theoretical stance that Wittgenstein unfailingly questions.

2.2 The Rest of the Task: Gains and Losses

Clarifying what use is would only be a part of the task. Even once we have established a non-extrinsic link between use and meaning, the problem remains if, by looking for the meaning of a word (an expression, a sentence) in its use, we do not see many things about meaning that we would do much better to see: assuming that there are gains in looking for meaning in use, are we sure that they compensate for any losses? And what, if anything, would these losses be? These are questions that recur insistently in the writings of the 'later' Wittgenstein, though not always in this form, and so explicitly. It is from these questions, and Wittgenstein's (almost obsessive) engagement with them, that topics such as the experience of meaning emerge. In

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10   As Snowdon puts it: if "in thinking of imperatives, interpersonal responses seem a reasonable aspect to bring in [...] it is far harder to make this seem plausible as a model of what we might call descriptive meaning", so that "if 'use' means something like interpersonal responses there is no obvious application for the slogan [meaning is use] to large central parts of language" (Snowdon 2018, 30).

order to better understand the significance of this, however, it will be necessary to say something more about the problems that Wittgenstein's emphasis on use, so important as to be considered a hallmark of his later philosophy, can give rise to.

3   Three Problems with Use

There are (at least) three aspects that, according to Wittgenstein himself, are problematic in indicating the locus of meaning in use. It should be noted that these are not fictitious problems to which Wittgenstein already has, or thinks he already has, the answer; while his questions are sometimes rhetorical, they are not always so, and not even, I would say, in most cases. The question and answer between two or more interlocutors in which Wittgenstein assumes multiple roles and positions, so typical of the *Philosophical Investigations*, is real and not merely a dramatized staging of already established and, so to speak, archived results. Let us see in detail what these three aspects are and what problems they raise.

3.1   Use and Calculus

When asked what the use in which meaning is to be sought actually is, Wittgenstein initially (i.e. in the years of his return to philosophy, 1929-30) did not hesitate to answer that (linguistic) use is to be understood as a calculus defined, as in the paradigmatic case of arithmetic calculus, by precise and rigorous rules. At this stage, he was even convinced that the calculus was something more than a simile: as he "deliberately" pointed out to his interlocutors in the Vienna Circle, "there is not a mere analogy" (WVC, 168) between (linguistic) use and calculus; one could even say that the concept of calculus encompasses that of (linguistic) use.[11] That is to say, the use of words (expressions, sentences) is not like a calculus, but is a real calculus, because:

> [w]hat I am doing with the words of a language in understanding them is exactly the same thing I do with a sign in the calculus: I operate with them. (WVC, 169-70)

However, the certainty with which Wittgenstein expresses this identity between (linguistic) use and calculus is gradually lost. In the

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[11]   In Wittgenstein's words: "I can actually construe the concept of a calculus in such a way that the use of words will fall under it" (WVC, 168).

Philosophical Investigations, as already in the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein casts doubt on his previous conviction by pointing out the error that may lie behind the fact "that in philosophy we often *compare* the use of words with […] calculi with fixed" and "definite rules" (PI, § 81; see BB, 24): a dogmatic identification of use and calculus. Indeed, it is one thing to treat calculus as a good analogy for illuminating language, and quite another to claim that our language, despite its apparent imperfections, is a rigorous calculus.[12]

Should we, then, to prefer a more attenuated, less dogmatic version of the idea of calculus, treating it only as a term of comparison, as a model? But why keep it and not get rid of it altogether? As is almost always the case with Wittgenstein, the problem is not the word 'calculus' as if it were in itself misleading. Indeed, having freed the calculus from those 'logicising' implications we have seen, we can preserve it and transform it methodologically into a term of comparison for clarification purposes. Wittgenstein's answer to our question is then clear: the comparison between (linguistic) use and calculus should be preserved because it is helpful, and it helps us precisely insofar as it sheds light on (clarifies), by means of analogies and differences, the confusions that can arise when 'use' is dogmatically identified with 'calculus'. After all, as epistemologists have always emphasised, this is the function that a good model must fulfil: to highlight analogies and differences.

Even if we give this methodological value to the notion of calculus, what we might call 'the problem of the rule and of following (applying) a rule', which the identification of language with a calculus had helped to bring to the fore, does not disappear. This problem occupies a substantial part of the *Philosophical Investigations*, but also of the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. More precisely, Wittgenstein is led to ask himself two questions, the first of which can be formulated as follows: apart from the fact that use can be fully identified with a calculus, in what sense can we say that use (like calculus) is limited by rules? The second question is: how do we know how to follow or apply a rule? What is it that allows us to say that someone who answers "It's 14" to the question "What is 8 plus 6?", or who brings a chair after being ordered "Bring me a chair!", is correctly applying the rule of addition, or the rule for using the word 'chair', unlike someone who answers "It's 19", or brings a hammer?

Through a series of examples and comparisons, Wittgenstein repeatedly invites us to see that the use of a word (an expression, a

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12   In this claim, Wittgenstein recognises a form of that dogmatism, against which his whole philosophy seeks to fight, which, as he very effectively explains, consists in predicating "of the thing what lies in the mode of representation", i.e. in taking "the possibility of comparison, which impresses us, as the perception of a highly general state of affairs" (PI, § 104). On Wittgenstein's dogmatism, see Kuusela 2008.

sentence) is "not everywhere bounded by rules" (PI, § 68).[13] There is, however, a persistent tendency in philosophy to affirm that a use which is not entirely bounded by rules, or even without rules, is (and remains) an 'inexact' use, since it is open to hesitation and doubt, and that what one should aspire to is a use "that is everywhere bounded by rules", i.e. "whose rules never let a doubt creep in, but stop up all the gaps where it might" (PI, § 84). Against this aspiration (shared by both Descartes and Frege), Wittgenstein suggests that we compare a rule to a signpost. Indeed, "[a] rule stands there like a signpost", and a signpost "sometimes leaves room for doubt, and sometimes not" (PI, § 85). Sometimes, and usually, we follow it without even thinking about it; sometimes, because of the way it is placed, or for other reasons, we may hesitate and wonder exactly which way it is pointing. Why should the fact that there are times when we doubt lead us to conclude that we should always doubt? Or that we should never follow the signpost without first stopping and thinking? As this simile of the signpost shows, hesitation, doubt and uncertainty are *part* of the rule, not its negation or dissolution. Certainly, 'doubtful' or 'inexact' "does not mean 'unusable'" (PI, § 88).[14]

Acknowledging all this, however, does not settle the question of what it might mean to 'follow (or apply) the rule' (whatever it is or however it works). The problem that Wittgenstein faces in some of the most famous passages of the *Philosophical Investigations* is basically this: there are rules, all right, and these rules may be more or less 'exact', but what does it mean exactly to follow (or apply) a rule? Consider, for example, the rule "Add 2". Wittgenstein asks: how can this "rule teach me what I have to do at *this* point" (PI, § 198)? How can it teach me that, having arrived at 1004, what I have to say is exactly "1006", and that any other number would be wrong?

The question posed in section 198 could be answered – in a Platonist tone – by remarking that the rule teaches me what I am to do because it already contains its applications within itself: the rule, as it were, "traces the lines along which it is to be followed through

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13   For instance, the same applies to both rules of use and rules of play. Indeed, as Wittgenstein points out using one of his favourite examples, there are certainly rules, even codified rules, that distinguish the game of tennis from other kinds of games: "tennis is a game [...], and has rules too", even if there are "no [...] rules for how high one may throw the ball in tennis, or how hard" (PI, § 68).

14   Likewise, 'undoubtful' or 'exact' does not mean 'usable'. An order such as "Stay roughly here!" is inexact when compared, say, to the order: "Stay right here!". Nevertheless – Wittgenstein ask rhetorically – "[i]f I tell someone 'Stay roughly here' – may this explanation not work perfectly? And may not any other one fail too?" (PI, § 88). On the contrary, just to follow the "ideal of exactness", should we think that the measurement of the width of the table we give to a joiner must be exact "to the nearest thousandth of a millimetre?" (PI, § 88) Wouldn't that get in the way of his work? Would he really understand what we are telling him and asking him to do?

the whole of space" (PI, § 219), like a groove or "a visible section of rails invisibly laid to infinity" (PI, § 218). According to this Platonist-sounding answer, every subsequent step is already ideally envisaged in the rule.[15] I cannot develop this point here, except to say that Wittgenstein's key statement (unlike that of the Platonist, who thinks that the applications are already in the rule, and also unlike that of the anti-Platonist, who, on the contrary, separates the rule from its applications) is that there is not the rule *and then* its applications, but that the rule *is* its applications. In short, following (or applying) a rule is one and the same thing as recognising it as a rule.[16] Still, I have dwelt on this for a moment because Platonism anticipates certain questions and problems – questions and problems very similar to those which, as we shall see, Wittgenstein will address when he introduces the notion of experience of meaning.

3.2 Sudden Understanding and Use in Time

Wittgenstein again clashes with the Platonist attitude to which, as we have seen, he is opposed in his various remarks on rule-following when he turns his attention to a phenomenon which seems to cast some shadow on the idea that it is in the use that meaning is to be sought: sudden understanding.

It is not uncommon for us to say, about a rule (an arithmetic rule or not) or the meaning of a word (an expression, a sentence), something like: "*Now* I have understood how I should proceed!"; "At *this* precise moment, the meaning has become clear to me", "*Suddenly* I have understood what it means", etc. Now, how does this sudden understanding (of the rule, the meaning of a word, etc.) fit in with the fact that the use of a word (or the application of a rule) unfolds over time, so to speak? When we suddenly understand or grasp the meaning of a word, what exactly is it that we have understood or

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15   The Platonist answer is not the only one Wittgenstein considers. He dwells at length on the stance of those who assume that between the rule and its applications there must be 'something' that, from time to time, establishes that 'this', and not 'that', is the step to be taken: to the Platonist answer, one might counter, in an anti-Platonist spirit, by asking what guarantees I have that the actual step I take is precisely what the rule ideally envisages. In particular, Wittgenstein considers the answer of those who maintain that there must always be an interpretation between the rule and its applications, and for whom, therefore, applying a rule is always equivalent to interpreting it. As is well known, this interpretationism gives rise to the famous 'paradox' of the section 201 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, which shows that this reading of the relationship between a rule and its application leads to the dissolution of the rule itself (see PI, § 201).

16   This lies in the background of Wittgenstein's statement that "'following a rule' is a practice" (PI, § 202). The focus of Wittgenstein's investigation has completely shifted – to put it in a formula – from the rules of use to the use of rules.

grasped? These questions seem complicated to answer. But one thing seems certain, namely that "[w]hat we grasp in this way is surely something different from the 'use' which is extended in time" (PI, § 138). So here 'meaning' seems to be something different from 'use': while the former can be grasped 'suddenly', the latter cannot, precisely because it extends 'in time'. And then a problem arises: are we forced to conclude that meaning is not to be found in use, since it can be grasped 'suddenly', i.e. before any use? How can we escape from this trap?

Wittgenstein's way out is, once again, to invite us to change our perspective or point of view and to look more closely at the various circumstances in which we happen to say things like "Now (suddenly) I understand what this is (or what this word means)!". Let's imagine, for example, a person who is at first puzzled by certain explanations, and at some point exclaims: "Now (suddenly) I understand what an Allen key is (or what 'Allen key' means)! An Allen key is…". In the face of this exclamation, it is of little use to ask where (in the mind?) and what this 'thing' is that the person has suddenly understood, and which has led them to exclaim "Now I understand…". "Now I understand…" can mean many different things, depending on the circumstances in which it is said (see PI, § 154). It can mean that one no longer needs explanations, something like: "Now I can do it myself!", or "That wasn't so complicated!", or "Try me!". The individual in question seems to have understood what 'Allen key' means if they know how to use the word in the appropriate way and circumstances. For example, we can say that someone has understood and knows 'Allen key' if, when they need to loosen or tighten the screws on the handlebars of their bicycle, they ask a neighbour or friend: "Do you happen to have an Allen key I can borrow?". Against the idea that when I grasp the meaning there is 'something' that I grasp, Wittgenstein observes that "[i]f something has to stand 'behind the utterance of the [rule]', it is *particular circumstances*", that is to say, those circumstances that "warrant my saying that I can go on" (PI, § 154), and that now I know e.g. how to use 'Allen key'.[17] This is why Wittgenstein emphasises that the grammar of the words 'understand' is "closely related" to the grammar of the words 'know', 'can' and 'is able to', and that the family to which they all belong is that of "[t]o have 'mastered' a technique" (PI, § 150).

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17   As Wittgenstein also says, "[t]he use of the word in practice is its meaning" (BB, 39).

3.3 Meaning and the Experience of Meaning

As we have seen, the phenomenon of sudden understanding can lead us to think that meaning is 'something' that we grasp and understand. This temptation is even stronger when our attention is drawn to another phenomenon which Wittgenstein, with explicit reference to William James,[18] calls the 'experience of meaning' (*Bedeutungserlebnis*) or the 'feeling of meaning' (*Bedeutungsgefühl*) and the related (by negation) phenomenon which he calls 'blindness to meaning' (*Bedeutungsblindheit*).[19] What prompts Wittgenstein to carefully consider these other two phenomena are, once again, the perplexities, uncertainties and doubts that his maxim "The meaning is (in) the use" might raise. What Wittgenstein is wondering here, as in the aforementioned case, but in a stronger and more obvious way, is whether the emphasis on use (as well as on understanding as the mastery of a technique) is somehow limiting or reductive, and, in particular, whether it risks disregarding the fact that not everything in meaning is use, or of neglecting, by relegating it to the background, certain experiences which seem to be fundamental to every speaker and to the actual use of language. Such experiences include, for example, that feeling of 'familiarity' which sometimes seems to accompany the words we use and that feeling of 'fusion' between a word and what it signifies, which gives the impression that there is a kind of close, and not at all arbitrary or conventional, intimacy or consonance between, say, our name and ourselves.[20]

The experiences of meaning illustrated and discussed by Wittgenstein also include: (a) those connected with proper names, such as the

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[18]   For example, James 1950, 472. But Wittgenstein also has in mind a passage by George Moore which appears in chapter three "Propositions" of his *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*: "It is quite plain, I think, that when we understand the meaning of a sentence, something else does happen in our minds *besides* the mere hearing of the words of which the sentence is composed. You can easily satisfy yourselves of this by contrasting what happens when you hear a sentence, which you *do* understand, from what happens when you hear a sentence which you do *not* understand: for instance, when you hear words spoken in a foreign language, which you do not understand at all. Certainly in the first case, there occurs, beside the mere hearing of the words, another act of consciousness—an apprehension of their meaning, which is absent in the second case. And it is no less plain that the apprehension of the meaning of one sentence with one meaning, differs in some respect from the apprehension of another sentence with a different meaning" (Moore 1953, 58-9).

[19]   On the experience of meaning and its related phenomena, see also Goldstein 2004.

[20]   Wittgenstein describes this impression of us by saying that the words of our language are like faces, whose particular and peculiar expressions are familiar to us: "Meaning – a physiognomy (PI, § 569). He also writes: "The familiar face of a word, the feeling that it has assimilated its meaning into itself, that it is a likeness of its meaning – there could be human beings to whom all this was alien. (They would not have an attachment to their words). – And how are these feelings manifested among us? – By the way we choose and value words" (PPF, XI § 294).

one described in the remark "Goethe's signature intimates something Goethean to me" (RPP I, § 336), when we feel that a name perfectly suits its bearer (his personality, physicality, etc.) "as if the name were an adjective" (LW I, § 69); (b) so-called 'synaesthetic experiences', such as those with coloured vowels (see LW I, § 59),[21] which he links and almost assimilates with the experiences of meaning; (c) experiences that enable us to understand orders or requests such as the following: "Pronounce the word 'till' and understand it as a verb, and not as a conjunction" (see PPF, XI § 261),[22] "Repeat the word 'March' to yourself and understand it now as an imperative now as the name of a month (see PPF, XI § 271)[23] or, again, "Read the word 'rank' as a verb and not as an adjective" (see LPP, 342).

The fact that Wittgenstein considers all these different experiences with words shows that, while insisting on use and gradually clarifying the sense and scope of his insistent appeal, he also asks himself, perhaps with no less insistence, whether it is indifferent to use one word instead of another, that is, whether meaning has a dimension which cannot be limited or reduced to use, because it is, so to speak, prior to use and independent from it. As Wittgenstein acknowledges, there often seems to be 'something' in our words, a sort of character or soul which we feel and experience, and which makes us inclined to use a specific word because it seems to us to be the most, or even the only, suitable and convenient word for our purposes and intentions. Wittgenstein, who devotes a great deal of space to the discussion of the phenomenon of the experience of meaning, attempts to explain precisely this component which he calls, with two pithy metaphors, the 'aroma' or 'atmosphere' of words (see, for example, PI, §§ 594, 596, 610; PPF, VI §§ 35, 42, 50; RPP I, § 243), and at the same time wonders whether it is not lost if we look too emphatically and exclusively at use. To insist on this, considering experiences such as those mentioned raises the question of whether an over-emphatic and exclusive focus on use ultimately loses the experiential, even aesthetic, dimension or component of meaning, or, to put it differently, whether taking these experiences seriously also means admitting the limits and shortcomings of the appeal to use, however methodologically circumscribed. What Wittgenstein needs to do is to

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21 On this and other cases of synaesthesia in Wittgenstein, see ter Hark 2009. This is an interest and concern that Wittgenstein shares with the phenomenological tradition, among other, and that refers back to many aesthetic-artistic experiences of great significance. Think, for example, of nineteenth-century Symbolist poetry, in particular Rimbaud and Mallarmé.

22 The German word used by Wittgenstein in his example in PPF, XI § 261 is 'sondern', which means 'to separate' as a verb and 'but' as a conjunction.

23 Wittgenstein's example in German is with the word 'weiche' which means 'soft' as an adjective, 'side' as a noun and 'move away' as a verb.

come to terms with an objection which the maxim "The meaning is (in) the use" can easily raise, and to which he is by no means insensitive: by strictly adhering to this maxim, does one not end up treating every word as indifferent and interchangeable with every other, and thus failing to see or disregarding (what seems to be) the undeniable aesthetic-experiential dimension or component of meaning?

We might think that Wittgenstein's tendency is to also apply to the case of the experience of meaning the same critical strategy that he uses on several occasions with regard to those (mental) images and feelings that may accompany words and their use. As we know, although Wittgenstein would never dream of denying that they exist and that they often accompany the use of words, he does not hesitate to declare that these images and feelings have nothing to do with meaning, i.e. with our use of words and our knowledge of how to use them (in different circumstances) words. But is this really so? The answer is neither simple nor obvious, as evidenced by the complexity of this passage of Wittgenstein's, which shows more doubts than certainties:

> It is as if the word I understand has a specific slight aroma, which corresponds to its being understood. It is as if two words well known to me were distinguished not only by their sound, or their appearance, but, even if I do not associate any representation with them (*nichts bei ihnen vorstelle*), by their certain atmosphere. (RPP I, § 243)

As is quite clear, in the quoted passage, Wittgenstein distinguishes the case of *Vorstellungen* (mental images or representations), from that of the aroma or atmosphere of a word, suggesting that the former do not serve the same function as the latter, since (1) aroma or atmosphere does not depend on *Vorstellungen* and that (2) unlike the latter, aroma or atmosphere has to do with understanding. In short, as we might also say, it is one thing to recognise that words have an aroma or atmosphere and that to understanding them is also, so to speak, to feel or experience this aroma or atmosphere; it is quite another to identify, as mentalists of the most varied schools do, the meaning of a word with the mental images or representations which are associated with it or accompany it. In this respect, Wittgenstein is an anti-mentalist.

Having ascertained this, the question remains as to whether, and if so to what extent, the attention paid to the experience of meaning compels Wittgenstein (or us) to reconsider or reformulate what has always been regarded as the guiding maxim of his research, namely, the maxim with which I began, which states that "the meaning of a word is its use in the language" (PI, § 43). Here is the question in brief: what is the ultimate relationship between 'meaning' and 'use' if, as all the phenomena mentioned and similar ones suggest, the use

of a word is often, if not always, connected with our experience of its meaning? Wittgenstein explicitly asks this question in a remark on 'reading expressively'. After observing that "[w]hen I pronounce this word while reading expressively (*ausdrucksvollen*), it is completely filled with its meaning", he asks himself (or makes himself ask), I think not rhetorically: "'How can this be, if meaning is the use of the word?" (PPF, XI § 265). Indeed, if meaning is the use of the word, then 'this', i.e. a word completely filled with its meaning, appears to be nonsense. Suffice it to observe that if, in the expression "This word is completely filled with its meaning", we replace 'meaning' with 'use', we are faced with the nonsense of a word filled with its use; yet, the experience of meaning is given, and then, unless we argue that it is only an illusory appearance, we must conclude, as Wittgenstein himself seems to do, that meaning is not, or is not always, in the use of a word. Phenomena such as those on which Wittgenstein dwells seem to show that "more to meaning than the use of the word" (Zemach 1995, 490).[24] We can, however, interpret this conclusion in two different ways. (1) On the one hand, it can be argued that in realising that there is such a thing as the experience of meaning, Wittgenstein finally came to recognise the serious limitations of the maxim "The meaning is (in) the use". (2) On the other hand, it can be argued that this phase of his thought is only one part of the process that led him progressively to free himself from the image of language as calculus. This is the question that Wittgenstein then asks himself, and which effectively leaves him without an answer:

> How about this: you can set up *certain* rules, but only a few, which are of such kind that the person usually learns them through experience anyway – but what if, what is left, the most important part, is *imponderable*?? (LW I, § 921)[25]

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[24] A key passage in this regard is the following: "When I supposed the case of a 'meaning-blind' man, this was because the experience of meaning seems to have no importance in the *use* of language. And so because it looks as if the meaning-blind could not lose much. But it conflicts with this, that we sometimes say that some word in a communication meant one thing to us until we saw that it meant something else. First, however, we don't feel in this case that the experience of the meaning took place while we *were hearing the word*. Secondly, here one might speak of an experience rather of the sense of the sentence, than of the meaning of a word" (RPP I, § 202).

[25] Here by 'imponderable' – elsewhere by 'imponderable evidence' (see PPF, XI §§ 358-60) – Wittgenstein seems to refer to all those circumstances in which the choice of one word over another makes a great difference, e.g. the difference between a good and a bad poem, even if the difference between the two words belongs to what Wittgenstein calls 'subtle' difference (see PPF, XI § 297). On the significance of Wittgenstein's appeal to imponderable evidence, see Putnam 1992, 39-46; Boncompagni 2018. It should also be emphasised here that in this context Wittgenstein recovers the value of 'experience' that resonates in the word '*Erfahrung*', for example, when we say of someone (think of the Homeric Ulysses) that they have seen many things and had many experiences, or

Besides, we should not forget, as we are often inclined to do, that the famous section 43 of the *Philosophical Investigations* excludes that 'meaning' and 'use' are always interchangeable; 'experience of meaning' seems to apply to those cases which do *not* belong to the "*large* class of cases*" (PI, § 43) referred to in the section. For, to repeat, while the expression 'experience of meaning' can give us a headache, 'experience of use' is utterly nonsensical.

But even if we leave aside how the specification of section 43 should be interpreted, the question remains: "'What would someone be missing if he did not *experience* the meaning of a word?'" (PPF, xi § 261).[26]

4   A Modest Proposal

Ideally, there are two almost antithetical ways of interpreting the relationship between (meaning as) use and the experience of meaning.

According to a first interpretation (see Bouveresse 2007),[27] which focuses above all on the fact that the experience of meaning is an

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when we acknowledge that "we learn certain things only through long experience (*Erfahrung*)", not simply "from a course in school" (LW I, § 925). It's through experience that we "develop a feeling for the rules" (LA, 5), so to speak. It is in this way, for example, that we form those tastes and aesthetic sensibilities that characterise the person who is usually called a 'connoisseur'. To form "the eye of a connoisseur" requires "[a] great deal of *experience*": one does not learn to evaluate a painting "in the *same* way as one learns to calculate", but, say, by looking at and comparing, with the help of a teacher, "a large number of pictures by various masters again and again" (LW I, § 925). Therefore, although "[i]n most cases" the connoisseur is "able to list reasons for his judgement" (e.g. for the judgement: "This picture could not have been painted by this master"), we have to admit that "generally it wasn't *they* that were convincing" (LW I, § 925). Indeed, even in cases where this man is not able to give good reasons for his judgment, what makes us accept it as evidence is, precisely, that he is a connoisseur, i.e. that he has long and extensive experience of painting, and "this is more or less the *only* way of weighing such evidence" (Monk 2005, 104).

26   Alongside the descriptions that can be found in various of Wittgenstein's writings (largely in RPP I), an effective description of what this person would be missing is provided by fiction; consider this excerpt from Mark Haddon's famous novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in Night-Time*, whose young protagonist describes his 'blindness to meaning' in this way: "This will not be a funny book. I cannot tell jokes because I do not understand them. Here is a joke, as an example. It is one of Father's. **His face was drawn but the curtains were real**. I know why this is meant to be funny. I asked. It is because *drawn* has three meanings, and they are **1)** drawn with a pencil, **2)** exhausted, and **3)** pulled across a window, and meaning **1** refers to both the face and the curtains, meaning **2** refers only to the face, and meaning **3** refers only to the curtains. If I try to say the joke to myself, making the word mean the three different things at the same time, it is like hearing three different pieces of music at the same time which is uncomfortable and confusing and not nice like white noise. It is like three people trying to talk to you at the same time about different things. And that is why there are no jokes in this book" (Haddon 2003, 10; bold in the original).

27   Michel ter Hark (2011) seems to be going in a similar direction. See e.g. what he writes in presenting the point of his reading: "In this chapter, I will show otherwise

experience, Wittgenstein introduces this notion, much as Frege introduced the notion of representation in *Sense and Reference*, in order to declare it irrelevant to the question of meaning. The experience of meaning would be something like the crown on the head of the chess king of which Wittgenstein speaks of in this passage from the *Blue Book*:

— I want to play chess, and a man gives the white king a paper crown, leaving the use of the piece unaltered, but telling me that the crown has a meaning to him in the game, which he can't express by rules. I say: "as long as it doesn't alter the use of the piece, it hasn't what I call a meaning". (BB, 65)

Applying to this case an image that has been used in the case of Frege, we could say that the notion of experience of meaning ends up in Wittgenstein's 'wastebasket' (see Bar-Hillel 1971). In short, according to this first interpretation, the way in which Wittgenstein handles this notion would only be a confirmation of his radical anti-psychologism.

According to a second possible interpretation,[28] the introduction of the notion of experience of meaning corresponds to Wittgenstein's recognition that meaning cannot be entirely or totally in the use and that, indeed, the presence of something like an experience of meaning (and here the emphasis is on 'of meaning') would entail at least a partial return to the idea that meaning is something we can experience here and now. This kind of interpretation may perhaps explain why, as seen above, several scholars have expressed suspicion and distrust of any attempt to give weight to the topic of the experience of meaning. Wittgenstein's rejection of the idea that meaning is 'something' is so strong and repeated that any attempt to revalue it seems hardly in keeping with the spirit of his thinking, even in his later years.

With respect to these two almost mirror-image interpretations, I would like to conclude by suggesting a third interpretation, which obviously requires further development and investigation. My idea is

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and establish, exegetically and argumentatively, that the discussion of the experience of meaning is not supplementary to the earlier account of meaning and understanding. It is not the case that Wittgenstein gradually came to see that the earlier account had left something out, i.e. the familiar feel of words to which Moore and James refer. Rather, the point of the discussion is to determine what it is that philosophers think that is left out in an account of language which emphasizes 'only' the use of signs. Put otherwise, what is under investigation here is the very concept of experience of which not only Moore and James but also Wittgenstein's commentators say that it has to be included in any account of language distinctive of human beings" (ter Hark 2011, 501). See also ter Hark 2013.

28   Probably no one has supported this interpretation in its most explicit and strongest form, although it clearly serves as a critical lens for the first interpretation.

that we can apply to our topic (the relationship between use and the experience of meaning) part of what Wittgenstein says when, in the *Philosophical Investigations*, he addresses the relationship between our concepts and some "very general facts of nature" (PPF, XII § 365). According to Wittgenstein, it must be acknowledged that there is a "correspondence" (PPF, XII § 365) between these facts and our concepts. To acknowledge this, however, is not to acknowledge that our concepts have their basis in these facts. Rather, taking up some suggestions from *On Certainty*, we might say that these facts are "incorporated into" (OC, § 61) our concepts and related language games. Something similar could also be said about the relationship between use and the experience of meaning. Far from being the basis of use, this experience is incorporated into use and modulates it in certain ways. Let us take two examples. (1) Proper nouns are such because they are used in certain ways and circumstances (to call someone, to roll call at school, to sign a document, etc.). However, this use also involves (incorporates) the experience of 'fusion' with one's own name and 'attachment' to it (see PPF, XI § 294), without which proper names would have a different place and role in our lives. Our name, for example, could be changed without any suffering on our part. (2) If the experience of meaning were not incorporated into the use of words, that spasmodic attention to the choice of each individual word which is characteristic of poetry would not be there, or would be very different. From a certain point of view, we could say that without the experience of meaning we would only have 'unpoetic' uses of words.

On closer inspection, many of Wittgenstein's remarks about blindness to meaning have an analogous (methodological) function to that of "imagin[ing] certain very general facts of nature to be different from what we are used to" (PPF, XII § 366). In short, Wittgenstein never says that without the experience of meaning there would be no meaning, but he does say that without the experience of meaning our uses would be different, and perhaps more like the calculus he had in mind in the intermediate phase of his thought. Some support for this reading of mine can be found in this passage from *On Certainty*, at least if we assume (as it is reasonable to do) that the facts of which Wittgenstein speaks here also include what we might call 'psychological facts', such as, for instance, the fact that we cherish our name and consider it part of who we are:

If we imagine the facts otherwise than as they are, certain language-games lose some of their importance, while others become important. And in this way there is an alteration—A gradual one—in the use of the vocabulary of a language. (OC, § 63)

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