

**EXPERIENCE AND GRAMMAR:  
WITTGENSTEIN AND JAMES  
ON THE EXPERIENCE OF MEANING**

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper focuses on Wittgenstein's philosophical engagement with James' thought on the experiential account of meaning and understanding. According to this account, meaning is characterized as a state of mind of the subject, while understanding is conceived as a kind of experience of the subject. This paper argues that, although Wittgenstein criticizes the experiential model as a tempting but deceptive philosophical view, James's account has a pervasive positive influence on Wittgenstein's thought. It will be shown that, even though Wittgenstein argues *against* the idea that meanings are experiences, the Jamesian principle of the absence of the will act informs Wittgenstein's alternative conceptions of meaning as use and understanding as mastery of a technique. Moreover, Wittgenstein's discussion of aspect-seeing in the second part of the *Philosophical Investigations* follows the discussion of the experiential account. Wittgenstein's discussion is presented as an instance of the distinction between experience and grammar and as an example of a broader engagement with James's philosophy on the concept of experience.

**Keywords:** Wittgenstein; James; experience; meaning; pragmatism.

### **Introduction**

The concept of experience is at the core of an interesting "imaginary dialogue" between Ludwig Wittgenstein and William James on meaning. I use the word "dialogue" because, mainly in the spirit of Goodman's work, I think that James exerted a pervasive *positive* influence on Wittgenstein's thought (Goodman 2002). Wittgenstein worked with *The Principles of Psychology*<sup>1</sup> from the 30's till the end of his life and he thought James to be a serious philosophical interlocutor.

In this paper, I will address the issue of the experiential account of meaning and understanding which is paradigmatically found in James' masterpiece. More specifically, I will focus on two theses that

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<sup>1</sup> From now on "The Principles".

Wittgenstein ascribes to James: 1. The idea that meaning is a state of mind of the subject, 2. The conception of understanding as an experience of the subject. Overall, Wittgenstein's discussion of the experience of meaning is presented as an instance of the distinction between experience and grammar, or language. Contrary to the general trend among critics, I will trace Wittgenstein's engagement with James on meaning and experience by looking at Wittgenstein's early discussion found in *The Brown Book*, rather than looking at part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*. Moreover, I will show that, although Wittgenstein argues *against* the idea that meanings are experiences, the Jamesian principle of the absence of the will act informs Wittgenstein's alternative conceptions of meaning as use and understanding as mastery of a technique. This specific topic, therefore, is an example of a more general philosophical engagement between Wittgenstein and James on the concept of experience.<sup>2</sup>

### **The experiential model**

In ordinary life, we often find ourselves suddenly uttering expressions such as "Now I understand!", "Now I know how to do it!" while reading a text, or while listening to an instruction, or just while deeply thinking about something. Moreover, if we think about what happens when we read a text with understanding we feel as something different is going on than when we read a text we don't understand. We feel like we are having a specific and particular *experience*. Correspondingly, we tend to see meaningful words as words that are intimately infused with their meaning. When an expression is seen as meaningful, it is not seen as a mere sound or black mark, but rather as an entity which would not be the same if the meaning changed. When we employ familiar words, we feel like we are having a specific *experience of meaning*. This can take many forms: we experience a loss of meaning when the

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<sup>2</sup> Wittgenstein uses the German term "Erlebnis" when he writes about the experience of meaning. It is this concept of experience which is at issue here, that is, the individual's *primary* and *inner* experience.

word is repeated several times (RPP I §194)<sup>3</sup>, or we experience different meanings of the same word, such as experiencing “bank” as meaning a financial institution and then as meaning a river’s edge, or we take a proper name to be intimately connected to its bearer (PI p. 282). Overall, it seems that every familiar word “carries an atmosphere with it in our minds, a corona of faintly indicated uses” (PPF §35). Is then understanding an inner process, namely the collection of all these experiences? Is the meaning of a word the experience one has in hearing or uttering it?

The phenomenology of understanding seems to suggest that meaning is something that we experience, that is, a state of the mind. We are thereby inclined to define understanding as a kind of experience which *accompanies* the hearing and uttering of words. After all, isn’t this experience that distinguishes an intelligent uttering or reading from an automatic one? According to Wittgenstein, the experiential account of meaning and understanding is a tempting – but still deceptive – philosophical view and it is paradigmatically endorsed by James in *The Principles*.

### James and the priority of experience

James does not actually say that meanings are a kind of experience. However, Wittgenstein ascribes to him the experiential account of meaning and understanding and this ascription, as I shall argue, is not unjustified. As Goodman suggested, experiences seem to stand as the best candidate for linguistic meaning in James’ system of thought (Goodman 2002, 75). The experiential account is found at least in four settings of *The Principles* in chapters IX and X: 1. The passage about the feelings attached to words, 2. James’ discussion on the sense of familiarity, 3. The Ballard case, 4. The empirical self.

1. In chapter IX, James famously states that “there is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought. [...] We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*” (James 1983, 238). Wittgenstein reads this passage as a view on meaning, that is, the idea that the meaning of a word is the specific feeling, or experience attached to it. However, to be precise, James is not dealing with the problem of linguistic meaning in *this* setting. This gets clearer if we report the entire passage. Before speaking about the feeling of words, James states that “if there be such things as feelings at all, *then so surely as relations between objects exist in rerum naturâ, so surely, and more surely, do feelings exist to which these relations are known*” and, after saying that we ought to say all those feelings, he complains that “we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use” (James 1983, 238). In this context, James is mainly concerned about the misleading classical empiricist view of thought and experience as a set of separate and isolated “atoms”. According to James, by contrast, the thought is sensibly continuous, that is, even the relations are part of it. He indeed distinguishes between substantive parts – the “resting places”, and transitive parts – the “places of flight”, and he criticizes traditional philosophy for not taking into account the latter.<sup>4</sup> However, even if the context is not specifically semantic, James repeatedly states that language is

<sup>3</sup> See “Bibliography” for abbreviations of Wittgenstein’s works.

<sup>4</sup> James criticises the dichotomy between sensationalism and intellectualism: sensationalists have denied the existence of relations and tendencies; intellectualists, on the other hand, have similarly denied the existence of feelings but they have concluded that, since so, relations must be known by a pure act of Reason, or Intellect. This is a point which will be greatly emphasised in *The Essays on Radical Empiricism* (James 1996).

inadequate and it does prevent us to see the truth given by experience. In particular, the naming process is what inclines us to see only the substantial parts of thought: we think that where we have a separate name, a separate thing must be there, whereas where there is no name, no entity can exist (James 1983, 238). This point introduces the priority given by James to experience over language and this is indeed a central part of the experiential model we are discussing.

2. What is the difference between an experience tasted for the first time and the same experience recognized as familiar? The sense of familiarity is generally something we badly manage to describe and characterize. In this context, James immediately moves to the linguistic level.

When we read such phrases as “naught but”, “either one or the other”, “*a* is *b*”, “but, although it is, nevertheless”, “it is an excluded middle, there is no *tertium quid*”, [...] is it true that there is nothing more in our minds than the words themselves as they pass? What then is the meaning of the words which we think we understand as we read? What makes that meaning different in one phrase from what it is in the other? “Who?” “When?” “Where?” Is the difference of felt meaning in these interrogatives nothing more than their difference of sound? (James 1983, 244).

Meaning is here conceived as something that we *feel* and, moreover, it is something that attaches to the word so that the word is not a *mere* word that passes in our mind. If the meaning is so conceived, then, accordingly, “that first instantaneous glimpse of some one’s meaning which we have, when in vulgar phrase we say we ‘twig’ it” is “surely an altogether specific affection of our mind” (James 1983, 245). If we are still not convinced about the genuine linguistic import of James’ passages, it might be useful to point out that James mentions and endorses Dr. Campbell’s theory on sense and nonsense.

That connection [he says] or relation which comes gradually to subsist among the different words of a language, in the minds of those who speak it, is merely consequent on this, that those

words are employed as signs of connected or related things. [...] Hence the sounds considered as signs will be conceived to have a connection analogous to that which subsisted among the things signified; I say, the sounds considered as signs; for this way of considering them constantly attends us in speaking, writing, hearing, and reading. When we purposely abstract from it, and regard them merely as sounds, we are instantly sensible that they are quite unconnected, and have no other relation than what ariseth from similitude of tone or accent (James 1983, 252).

According to James, Dr. Campbell’s view helps to emphasize the fact that when we experience a sentence as meaningful, certain grammatical expectations are fulfilled. Nonsense in grammatical form would sound half-rational to us. If we know a language, then when we hear the first words of a sentence we expect other words to come after and we have a glimpse of the thought expressed even before the end of the uttering (James 1983, 245). In other words, when a sentence is understood and experienced as the expression of a unitary thought, then each word is felt not only as a word but as having a *meaning*. More specifically, this happens when we take meaning dynamically in a sentence. In this case, meaning can be reduced to a bare fringe of felt suitability or unfitness to context and conclusion. But meaning can also be taken statically, that is, without context. “The static meaning, when the word is concrete, as ‘table,’ ‘Boston,’ consists of sensory images awakened; when it is abstract, as ‘criminal legislation,’ ‘fallacy,’ the meaning consists of other words aroused, forming the so-called ‘definition’” (James 1983, 255). Whether we take meaning dynamically or statically, the meaning seems to be a kind of mental state: an experience of fittingness in the former case, and a proper sensory image attached to the word in the latter. Moreover, this conception of meaning seems to presuppose a kind of priority of thought over language: language seems to be a mere vehicle of autonomous and pre-constituted thoughts. This suggestion brings us to the Ballard case.

3. Mr. Ballard is a deaf-mute man from birth who wrote some reminiscences of his childhood. He claimed to have been able to think before he could speak. Ballard writes: "It was during those delightful rides, some two or three years before my initiation into the rudiments of written language, that I began to ask myself the question: *How came the world into being?* When this question occurred to my mind, I set myself to thinking it over a long time" (James 1983, 257). James takes Mr. Ballard reports being sufficient proofs of the fact that thought is perfectly possible without language or speech. This conclusion is based, I think, on two assumptions: the idea that thought may be entirely divorced from behaviour, including the verbal one, and the methodological acceptance of introspection.<sup>5</sup> This brings us to the last point.

4. A man's empirical self is "*the sum total of all that he CAN call his*, not only his body and his psychic powers, but his clothes and his house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, and yacht and bank-account" (James 1983, 279). The self, so conceived, is constituted by the material self, the social self, the spiritual self and the pure ego. For our purposes, I will focus on the spiritual self. James defines it as "a man's inner or subjective being, his psychic faculties or dispositions, taken concretely" (James 1983, 283). What is to be underlined is that, according to James, we consider the spiritual self through a *reflective process* which is intimately different from an outward-looking point of view. Human beings immediately *know* their own inner states. "This attention to thought as such, and the identification of ourselves with it rather than with any of the objects which it reveals, is a momentous and in some respects a rather mysterious operation, of which we need here only say that as a matter of fact it exists" (James 1983, 284). Moreover, thanks to introspection we can individuate a certain portion of the stream that James calls "the active

element" in all consciousness. This element is what, in a certain sense, gives life to thought, to words, to everything that is experienced and it is something that is *felt* by the subject by *direct acquaintance*.

Overall, we might conclude that the experiential model endorsed by James involves four aspects: the idea that meanings are experiences, that is, feelings associated with the words; the idea that understanding is an affection of the mind which accompanies the uttering or reading of the words; the priority of thought over language, that is, the view of language as a vehicle of pre-constituted thoughts inwardly uttered; finally, epistemic priority given to the first person in the light of the methodological value of introspection. The priority of experience – even epistemologically – is then a core trait of James' thought and it is one of the elements of continuity between *The Principles* and *The Essays on Radical Empiricism*. Wittgenstein, as we shall see, argues against such priority and charges James with the failure to distinguish experience from meaning, language, or grammar.

#### Wittgenstein's concern

According to Goodman, Wittgenstein is mainly interested in James' empiricism, that is, the idea that *experience* is a sufficient fundamental category. However, whereas James aims to analyze and classifying phenomena, Wittgenstein considers *concepts*. As a result, it is the concept of experience which is mainly at issue in his remarks about the experiential model. First of all, Wittgenstein warns us that the concept of experience is often used in philosophy to refer to something solid which could furnish a kind of "bedrock, deeper than any special methods and language-games". Something similar applies to the concept of fact or happening. However, he goes on, "such extremely general terms have an extremely blurred meaning. They relate in practice to innumerable special cases, but that does not make them any *solid*, no, rather it makes them more

<sup>5</sup> Both points are extensively criticized by Wittgenstein (PI §§327-343).

fluid” (RPP I §648). Secondly, further misunderstandings stand behind the attempt to use such alleged “solider concept” to give an account of language. Wittgenstein’s interest in the experiential model is therefore essentially semantic; he is concerned with James’ conception of the experience of meaning as a deceptive model of meaning and understanding. Wittgenstein does not say that we don’t have experiences of meaning, he rather warns us against the tendency to think that those experiences *constitute* meaning.

It is generally assumed that Wittgenstein writes extensively about the experience of meaning after finishing Part 1 of the *Philosophical Investigations* in 1945 because he feels that something is missing in the account of meaning as use exposed in that work.<sup>6</sup> However, there is evidence of an early interest in this topic in writings from the first half of the 1930s and Wittgenstein does draw the distinction between meanings as states of mind and meanings construed in terms of “rules” already in *The Big Typescript*:

What are we to understand the “meaning” of a word? A characteristic feeling that accompanies the asserting (hearing) of the word? (The and-feeling, if-feeling of James.) Or are we to use the word “meaning” completely differently; and, for example, say two words have the same meaning when the same grammatical rules apply to both of them? (BT p. 29e).

I argue that Wittgenstein’s discussion of the experience of meaning is *part* of his reflection about the concepts of meaning and understanding and it helps to shape the alternative model of meaning as use. Therefore, it is not the *later conception* of meaning. For this reason, I will try to retrace Wittgenstein’s engagement with James by looking at an extensive discussion we find in *The Brown Book*, dated 1935-1936.

### Limits and sources of the experiential model

Wittgenstein famously writes that “for a large class of cases of the employment of the word ‘meaning’ – though not for *all* – this word can be explained in this way: the meaning of a word is its use in the language” (PI §43). For “use” Wittgenstein does not mean the practical function of the word. Rather, he is pointing to a certain *public* and *shared practice* with the word: the way a word is used in a system of signs, that is, a language. A word is used in accordance with certain *rules*, therefore normativity stands at the core of Wittgenstein’s conception of meaning: meaning is best characterized as the *correct use* of a word in a specific language, or language game. Wittgenstein introduces the notion of grammar to elucidate this new perspective on language. Although the term “grammar” is used by Wittgenstein in a variety of ways, I will be using this term to refer to the rules of usage of a particular word or expression.<sup>7</sup> There is, therefore, a knowing how and when to use a term and this also provides a criterion for someone’s understanding it. The concept of understanding, correspondingly, is best characterized in terms of a capacity to use the word, a “mastery of a technique” which is learned by training in a particular cultural system or, better, in a “form of life” (PI §§150, 19).

Nevertheless, Wittgenstein admits that the idea of meaning as some sort of conscious mental phenomenon is very seductive because it comes from some basic intuitions about the phenomenology of understanding.

We think of the meaning of signs sometimes as states of mind of the man using them, sometimes as the role which these signs are playing in a system of language. The connection between these two ideas is that the mental experiences which accompany the use of a sign undoubtedly are caused by our usage of the sign in a particular system of language. William James speaks of specific feelings accompanying the use of such words as ‘and’, ‘if’, ‘or’ (BB p. 78).

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<sup>6</sup> Zemach 1995, Voltolini 2009.

<sup>7</sup> Wittgenstein also talks about the grammar of an entire language to refer both to the set of rules that constitute that language and the study of the rules of that particular language (PG §§44, 23a, 23e, BT p. 58).

Overall, Wittgenstein does not want to deny a certain phenomenology of the use of familiar terms. He rather criticizes the philosophical tendency to use such experiential elements to *ground* the meaning of terms. The outcome of his discussions is that “[t]he meaning of a word is not the experience one has in hearing or saying it, and the sense of a sentence is not a complex of such experiences” (PPF §37). We surely have specific experiences when we engage with familiar words, however, these experiences can’t determine the meaning because, as we shall see, they presuppose such a meaning. In what follows I will first expose two limits of the experiential model that Wittgenstein discusses in the *Brown Book*: essentialism and the confusion between “expressing an experience” and “describing an experience”.

After mentioning James, Wittgenstein admits that “there is no doubt that at least certain gestures are often connected with such words, as a collecting gesture with ‘and’, and a dismissing gesture with ‘not’. And there obviously are visual and muscular sensations connected with”. However, “it is clear enough that these sensations do not accompany every [my emphasis] use of the word ‘not’ and ‘and’” (BB pp. 78-79). When we understand the meaning of a word, we say, a specific experience must occur in me other than the mere hearing or reading the word. However, do we always have that particular experience when we understand the meaning? It is useful to imagine the following case: I give to a person a list of words and I ask her to say “yes” or “no” after the uttering of each word according to whether she understands the word or not. We then ask this person to remember what happened in her mind when she understood the word and when she did not understand the word. According to Wittgenstein, this mental experiment will show us a multitude of different characteristic experiences, but it will not show us *one* experience which we should call “the experience of understanding”.

There will be such experiences as these: I hear the word “tree” and say “Yes” with the tone of voice and sensation of “Of course”. [...] I hear “Mamma”, this strikes me as funny and childish-“Yes”. [...] I hear “spintharoscope”, and say to myself, “Must be some sort of scientific instrument”, perhaps try to think up its meaning from its derivation and fail and say “No”. [...] There will, on the other hand, be a large class of cases in which I am not aware of anything happening except hearing the word and saying the answer (BB p. 155).

When we describe the characteristic experiences that accompany our use of signs we are describing just *one* possible case within many, but our way of speaking assumes that there should be a specific experience which characterizes what we want to define. This experience is thought to be the *essential* feature of the phenomena, the element which must be in common of all phenomena of that type. Wittgenstein thinks that this philosophical tendency comes from a dissatisfaction toward his own descriptions. Let’s go back to the previous example: there could be the case in which the person should have to say simply “I know of no particular experience at all, I just said ‘Yes’, or ‘No’” after hearing the uttered words. I merely *reacted* in that way. This description, however, is thought to be too meagre. One could say that surely this couldn’t have been all. The experiential element seems to offer a more solid basis for a description which is more respectful of the human character of language but, since we cannot really point to any such essential experience, we find ourselves in

a curious difficulty: on the one hand it seems we have no reason to say that in all cases in which we understand a word one particular experience- or even one of a set- is present. On the other hand, we may feel it’s plainly wrong to say that in such a case all that happens may be that I hear or say the word. For that seems to be saying that part of the time we act as mere automatons. And the answer is that in a sense we do and in a sense we don’t (BB p. 156).

It is in this context that Wittgenstein applies to language James’s view of “the absence of an act of volition” and he explicitly employs James’ example:

It has been said that when a man, say, gets out of bed in the morning, all that happens may be this: he deliberates, "Is it time to get up?", he tries to make up his mind, and then suddenly he finds himself getting up. Describing it this way emphasizes the absence of an act of volition. [...] Now there is something in the above description which tempts us to contradict it; we say: "We don't just 'find', observe, ourselves getting up, as though we were observing someone else! (BB p. 150).

In this context, Wittgenstein is thinking *along with* James. We are not content with that description as we are not content with the picture of meaning as use. There must be something more, we say, otherwise we would employ *mere* words, *mere* sounds whereas when we speak and read we are dealing with meaningful signs. Wittgenstein's discussion of various cases has a deflationary force: just like it is not necessary that there is a willing act every time we do a voluntary act, so there does not have to be an act, or experience of understanding or meaning in order for someone to understand or mean something.

The second limit of the experiential model concerns our misleading way of employing the concept of experience. In particular, according to Wittgenstein we fail to distinguish between "reporting an experience" and "expressing an experience" (Schulte 1993, 60-62). Wittgenstein writes that the philosophical trouble we have been turning over is connected with the use of the word "particular". "We have been inclined to say that seeing familiar objects we have a particular feeling", "that we had a particular experience when we acted voluntarily", or that we feel a particular sensation when we hear or read a known word (BB p. 158). The word "particular" has two different uses: the transitive use, and the intransitive one. In the first case, the word is used preliminarily to a description, a specification or a comparison. That means I can answer the question "In what way particular?" by explaining in different words. For example, we might describe the smell of a dish by saying that "This pasta has a *particular* smell. It is the smell I felt every day when I was a child at school". In the

second case, the word is used to *give emphasis* and it does not require further description. It is an expression similar to "peculiar", "out of the ordinary", or "uncommon". For example, the sentences "What a peculiar smell!", or "This face has a particular expression!". However, this is not the only way we could emphasize something with words. Wittgenstein introduces the interesting notion of "reflexive use of words". Like the intransitive use, the reflexive form of speech is a matter of emphasis but the difference is that it can always be "straightened up" (BB p. 161), that is, we can always rephrase what we want to say in straight – not reflexive – terms. For example, we say in the reflexive mode "That's that" meaning "The matter is closed", or "That is settled". The reflexive form, therefore, is a special case of the transitive use. According to Wittgenstein, when we philosophize about understanding and meaning we use the word "particular" in a way which is very similar to the intransitive use but "we are regarding its use as a special case of the transitive use" (BB p. 160), i.e., the reflexive use. We think we are denoting with the word "particular" an elusive and mysterious experience which cannot be properly grasped by language. In particular, "we feel as though we could give an experience a name without at the same time committing ourselves about its use. [...] We are emphasizing, not comparing, but we express ourselves as though this emphasis was really a comparison of the object with itself; there seems to be a reflexive comparison" (BB pp. 159-160). However, when we employ such expressions we indeed are not properly describing anything, we are just *expressing* those particular experiences we are having. We might say that those expressions are expressions that we correctly employ as expressions of particular experiences – it is a use which is included in their grammar – but they are not descriptions of those experiences. When I say that I feel a particular experience when I read with understanding, a further demand of specification about such an experience may put the mind on a whirl because I would point to that experience again. I am not comparing that

experience with another paradigm, I am just giving emphasis to it, I am saying that I am having it. This is a temptation, though, that it is strictly connected to the philosophical perspective and in particular to a way of doing philosophy that clearly echoes James' introspective method.

When we philosophize about this sort of thing we almost invariably do something of this sort: We repeat to ourselves a certain experience, say, by looking fixedly at a certain object and trying to 'read off' as it were the name of its colour. And it is quite natural that doing so again and again we should be inclined to say, "Something particular happens while we say the word 'blue'". [...] But ask yourself: Is this also the process which we usually go through when on various occasions--not philosophizing--we name the colour of an object? (BB p. 149).

### Two senses of "experience"

In the *Brown Book* Wittgenstein introduces also an intimate connection between the discussion on the meaning experience and the discussion on aspect-perception. "Our sentence 'I have this feeling while I'm writing' is of the kind of the sentence 'I see this'" (BB p. 174). Aspect perception is a mechanism that stands between sensory information and conceptual elaboration. What does it mean to say that one can see a certain object at one time *as this* and at another time *as that*? When we look for a man in a puzzle picture, for example, we might start seeing mere dashes, and then later appears a face. We would then say: "Now I see it as a face" (BB p. 163). In cases like these, Wittgenstein says that we are inclined to think that seeing a man in a puzzle picture is not merely seeing a complex of lines, but rather it is having an additional and particular experience different from the mere seeing of the puzzle picture. Here, however, we are dealing with two different uses of the term "seeing": seeing *tout court* and seeing an aspect. Is aspect-seeing an additional process to seeing *tout court*? Is the meaning experience an additional process to the *mere* hearing or uttering the word? Wittgenstein writes against this philosophical

tendency. Seeing an aspect is not seeing an additional and different object, but it is rather seeing the same object in a *different way*. Aspect-perception, therefore, is not perception of a particular property of the object but it is rather an exercise of some recognition capacities.

At this point, we are in better position to understand Wittgenstein's discussion in Part 2 of the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Only of someone *capable* of making certain applications of the figure with facility one says that he saw it now this way, now that way. The substratum of this experience is the mastery of a technique (PPF §224).

The outcome of Wittgenstein's discussion is to show that, as we are inclined to think about aspect-seeing as an additional process to mere seeing, so we are inclined to conceive the experiences of meaning and understanding as additional processes which accompany the *mere* reading of words. However, Wittgenstein clarifies the fact that when we speak about the experience of meaning, the concept of experience used is not that of the *primary experience*, like having some sensation, feeling pain, etc, but a kind of experience which *presupposes a particular ability*, or competence. This competence is the mastery of the use of words which constitutes their grammar. Such an experience already presupposes meaning as use, therefore it cannot be what constitutes such a meaning.

But how odd for this to be the logical condition of someone's having such-and-such an *experience*! After all, you don't say that one 'has toothache' only if one is capable of doing such-and-such. – From this it follows that we cannot be dealing with the same concept of experience here. It is a different concept, even though related. Only of someone who *can do*, has learned, is master of, such-and such, does it makes sense to say that he has had *this* experience (PPF §223).

According to Wittgenstein, therefore, the experience of meaning is an experience that we actually have when we engage with familiar words, but it is accommodated – together with other subjective aspects of the use of language – by the notion of *secondary meaning* of a word. This meaning presupposes the primary meaning, that is, meaning as the role and use of the word in the language- its grammar. The expression “to experience the meaning of a word” is a secondary use of language, that is, an expression for which the primary use of “meaning” is essential.

#### Conclusion: from experience to grammar

The experiences of understanding and meaning occur simultaneously with the reading or hearing of the signs, hence seem radically different from understanding in the sense of the ability to use words and meaning as the role of signs in a system. Wittgenstein’s discussion is meant to show, by contrast, at least the *semantic* dispensability of the notion of meaning experience: it is not a necessary condition for understanding an expression and for correctly employing it.<sup>8</sup> Overall, Wittgenstein’s remarks are meant to reverse the Jamesian view on experience and thought: the priority is given to grammar, that is, the rules according to which we employ and understand words. Part of the philosophical task is then to clarify the grammar of the concept of experience and to show that even such concept, like every other concept, is used in accordance with rules embedded in a certain public and shared practice, therefore it cannot provide a more solid ground for the meaning of words.

To conclude, I would like to highlight two points. Firstly, the priority of grammar over experience involves a different view of language itself. Whereas James sometimes, especially in *The Principles*, seems to conceive language as a tool to share pre-constituted thoughts, Wittgenstein rather conceives language as a

human activity, or practice the mastery of which must be presupposed in order to formulate inward thoughts themselves.

An intention is embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions. If the technique of the game of chess did not exist, I could not intend to play a game of chess. In so far as I do intend the construction of a sentence in advance, that is made possible by the fact that I can speak the language in question (PI §337).

Secondly, I would like to suggest that Wittgenstein’s distinction between two senses of “experience” might also be used – independently of Wittgenstein’s own interest – to highlight a concept of immediate experience which is not that of the *Erlebnis*. Such a concept does not involve any epistemological priority of the first person and, indeed, it rather focuses on the continuous interaction between the subject and a world which is inherently social; a way of doing and undergoing. The philosophical engagement between Wittgenstein and James on the experiential model of meaning and understanding is, then, an instance of a broader philosophical reflection on the concept of experience, which is a core issue for the pragmatist tradition. By stating that, I do not want to argue that Wittgenstein might be considered a pragmatist philosopher, but rather I want to stress the philosophical relevance of a research which takes into consideration Wittgenstein and the pragmatist tradition together. Wittgenstein, as we have seen, argues against the Jamesian priority of experience over language. However, in the light of what has been suggested above, we might add a further step which can be the object of further research: not just from experience to grammar, but from *Erlebnis* to *Embodiment*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Wittgenstein provides further proof for this point by discussing the case of the “meaning-blind person” (PPF §§257-261).

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<sup>9</sup> In this way, the research might be extended so to include Dewey’s reflection on experience (Dewey 1939).

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