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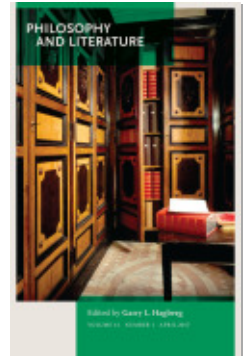
## Knowledge of People

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Philosophy and Literature, Volume 41, Number 1, April 2017, pp. 207-214  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2017.0014>



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# Notes and Fragments

## KNOWLEDGE OF PEOPLE

by HUMBERTO BRITO

### I

PHILOSOPHERS SUCH AS ELIZABETH Anscombe and Donald Davidson have explained that we cannot derive predictions from judgments such as “he boasted from vanity.” Such judgments are also the source of countless painful mistakes. However, are they necessarily unreliable? Often enough, even if only gradually and partially, we get people right. Assuming that we do is already assuming that there must be a connection, if not causal then at least casual, between what a person is, what she does, and how she acts; and that we may describe it correctly. If no ironclad generalizations can be made that connect the way a person is, her reasons, and her actions, how might we describe correctness in judgments such as this?

Anscombe believed there is a distinction between describing an action and interpreting it. For instance, “he boasted” would be a description of the action; “from vanity” an interpretation of that action. Like Anscombe, philosophers interested in the question of what (an) action is want to retain this distinction when treating action examples (e.g., omelets, houses, promises, switch flippings, goings-from-here-to-Kathmandu,

and so on). They think as if from a spectatorial perspective, resembling Jimmy Stewart's and Grace Kelly's stances in *Rear Window*. Imperfective correctness seems more than enough to grasp the intentional form. In other words, if we can grasp that a given X is "a"-ing in order to "b" (for instance, breaking eggs in order to make an omelet), we may say we have grasped the action, and, arguably, what an action is. Any further considerations are deemed (as Lisa, Kelly's character in the Hitchcock movie, memorably puts it) "rear-window ethics."

Action theory is an episodic, impersonal genre. What philosophers, in a sense, see occurring ("what happens,"<sup>1</sup> to use Anscombe's formulation), comes up in examples given in action theory as a token of some action type, whose intelligibility is irrespective of considerations concerning the person that performs an action. (Say "John," or "X," is cooking an omelet, building a house, going from here to Kathmandu, and so on.) These action descriptions we are given—think of them as episodes bereft of narrative—give out an action's crude etiological configuration, detached from considerations concerning the protagonist. In the picture of action this manner of depiction suggests the person who does the action has no part in its intelligibility. Think, however, of how unlikely this sounds to nonphilosophers. No person is a given X. No one seriously thinks any given action is something just anyone would, or could, do. Omelets included. On the other hand, "something you might be doing out of generosity and goodness," says Wittgenstein, "is the same as you may be doing out of cowardice or indifference."<sup>2</sup> Might we say, then, that we have grasped the action (and what an action is) merely by identifying such-and-such movements from T to T<sub>1</sub> as a token of some action type?

There must be a way to describe what it is like to be right about the difference between an act of cowardice and an act of indifference, even if they look alike. As Wittgenstein seems to suggest, judgments like "he boasted from vanity" are possibly true as often as they are false. Truthful or not, they describe the protagonist as a certain kind of person: one whose actions (or many of whose actions) can be accounted relative to more or less fixed, second-natural dispositions: "P did/is doing Q so and so; P is so and so." So I want to call them second-natural judgments. Consider, for instance: "X signing up with a lesser club that pays more is a sign of greed," so "X is greedy"; "X signing up with a lesser club was a promise he made to his father," so "X keeps his promises" and "is a good son." In certain cases, needless to say, more than one reason can explain the action, which can be, all at once, an act of greed, a

promise kept, and a display of filial affection. In countless other cases, though, one explanation cancels the other. (Did X boast from vanity, or did he make an accurate assessment of his skills?) Is correctness in second-natural judgments simply a matter of luck?

## II

The form of our apprehension of second nature in action is nicely captured in Aristotle's formula *houtos ekeinos* (this person is so-and-so) (*Poetics*, 1448b). This appears to be the minimal structure of second-natural judgments. Think, for instance, of your reaction upon realizing that Oedipus will not shirk from what he did in ignorance, or of King Lear when he demands his daughters to articulate their love, or of someone who has betrayed your trust. You think "houtos ekeinos." Now consider the beast's conduct in *The Beauty and the Beast* (a clear-cut case of acquiring a second nature). The beast was not always like this; he stops acting like a beast when returned to the prince form. If a child asks why he treats the merchant's daughter the way he does, the Aristotle in us should reply: "The curse has made him so-and-so; it is natural that he acts in such-and-such way."

Of course, this use of "it is natural that" begs the question. One can be so-and-so, and still act contrary to what one is (or, rephrasing Aristotle, one can act better or worse than one is). The qualities captured by second-natural judgments should not be construed as being hopelessly fixed. Still, we are not prepared to abandon the notion that we are right to understand the beast's actions relative to second-natural aspects, just as we are not prepared to abandon the notion of being right in attributing someone's action to her vanity. What being right here means remains unclear.

(In passing, does retaining the notion of correctness in second-natural judgments require a theory concerning how second nature determines action? That, I think, is beside the point. I am interested only in describing how we apprehend second nature, not in how, or whether, it shapes actions.)

## III

Correctness in second-natural judgments—the question of how we apprehend character, or, to put it in a modern idiom, how we apprehend personal individuality—might be like what Anscombe has in mind

when, in a Wittgensteinian moment, she talks of “seeing the action in [a certain] light” (*I*, p. 21). I could perhaps redescribe the *houtos ekeinos* formula in reference to what Wittgenstein called “seeing-as” or “noticing an aspect.”<sup>3</sup> To the objection that I am displacing Wittgenstein’s philosophy of psychology, I reply that Wittgenstein himself saw a continuity from “noticing an aspect” in visual perception to noticing aspects in actions and persons. To be sure, he conducts his investigation from the former, perhaps elementary, cases to cases wherein, from “subtleties of glance, of gesture, of tone,” one “may recognize a genuine loving look, distinguish it from a pretended one” (*PI*, p. 240e). “Is there such a thing as ‘expert judgment’ about the genuineness of expressions of feeling?” he asks. “Here too, there are those with ‘better’ and those with ‘worse’ judgment”: “In general, predictions arising from judgments of those with better knowledge of people will be more correct. Can one learn this knowledge? Yes; some can learn it. Not, however, by taking a course of study in it, but through ‘experience.’ . . . What one acquires here is not a technique; one learns correct judgments. There are also rules, but they do not form a system, and only experienced people can apply them rightly. Unlike calculating rules” (*PI*, p. 239e).

That second-natural correctness involves “knowledge of people” does not greatly advance the point. We need to characterize what such correctness means. If Wittgenstein is right, and if we are permitted the analogy, it has to do with a change that occurs in a person whence she can see something now as one thing, now as another. This way of thinking would lead us to forsake the distinction between describing an action and interpreting one, for when we become able to see something “now as one thing, now as another,” we “*see* it as we *interpret* it” (*PI*, p. 203e). In short, to realize or discover (or, in some sense, to see) that a person is this way or that way (e.g., spiteful, or generous, or greedy, or a good son)—to see it in her actions, that is—is like seeing a rabbit where there used to be a duck. It is always a bit striking that the duck impression should linger where you now see a rabbit, although in time one tends to naturalize one of the pictures in the case of people. Everyone is someone’s duck-rabbit at least for a while.

Using Wittgenstein’s metaphor, suppose we take this as a description of an aspect’s “lighting up.” “Ever since P did ‘x,’ I never could see him again with the same eyes.” Such descriptions are the expression of a change of mind that typically occurs in the form of second-natural judgments. Truthful or not, the apprehension of a change of aspect prompts changes in one’s attitude and one’s actions toward the object

of judgment. At any rate, that change of aspect can be seen from the kind of things one does and the kind of things one says, as Wittgenstein suggests. “If I heard someone talking about the duck-rabbit picture, and now he spoke in a certain way about the special expression of the rabbit’s face, I’d say, now he’s seeing the picture as a rabbit” (*PI*, p. 217e).

Analogously, we could say, “Ever since P did ‘x’ . . . (or ‘Ever since I saw P as . . .’), I never spoke to him again.” A meaningful difference here, of course, is that one can hardly be wrong in the visual duck-rabbit seeing-as sort of experience, but we can make dreadful mistakes about people. One might think this is because our object in the first case was made to resemble both a rabbit and a duck, and there is no such equivalent for second-natural judgments to cling on. (In truth, literature is full of examples suggesting otherwise, and so is life.)

Wittgenstein says: “In general, predictions arising from judgments of those with better knowledge of people will be more correct” (*PI*, p. 239e). We have seen that judgments such as “he boasted from vanity” are discredited because they lack grounds for predictions. To the extent that the apprehension of second nature might be taken as a form of aspectual cognition, however, predictive consistency is clearly beside the point. We are not looking for law-like generalizations concerning human behavior. The truth of a person’s second nature appears to be irrespective of behavioral inconsistency (and it can, of course, change in time). We may be right at T that Ebenezer Scrooge is a miserable person, although he is a changed man at T<sub>1</sub>. Granted, tales of Scrooge-like redemption are possibly very sporadic. Redemption narratives, as well as stories of turpitude, are equally eloquent in what regards the possibility of apprehending changes in a person’s second nature. Strikingly, Scrooge’s rendezvous with the three Ghosts of Christmas is, to a certain extent, the perfect example of a Wittgensteinian picture of aspect cognition. “Ah, now I see this” (*PI*, p. 206e) might well be Scrooge’s report: “a cry of recognition” (*PI*, p. 208e), as Wittgenstein puts it.

That “only someone conversant with the shapes of the two animals can ‘see the duck-rabbit aspects’” (*PI*, p. 218e) might raise the old Socratic puzzle of how a Scrooge type can recognize his miserliness. In any case, Wittgenstein wants us to notice how changes seem to occur, or are expected to occur, in the behavior of those who notice an aspect. “From someone who sees the drawing as such-and-such an animal, what I expect will be rather different from what I expect from someone who merely knows what it is meant to represent” (*PI*, p. 215e). “Only of someone capable of making certain applications of the figure with

facility would one say that he saw it now this way, now that way. The substratum of this experience,” Wittgenstein explains, “is the mastery of a technique” (*PI*, p. 219e). Our attitude toward our object is altered by the apprehension of an aspect. Involving the experience of what Aristotle calls *anagnorisis*, the actions subsequent to Scrooge’s redemption are in a sense what correction means in second-natural judgments.

Another salient feature of Wittgenstein’s idea of “noticing an aspect” is that it involves the apprehension of a “particular organization” (*PI*, p. 206e; see also p. 219e) in the elements that compose our object. Analogously, we might be tempted to suggest that the apprehension of second nature involves apprehending a certain organization in the actions performed by the same person whose actions we suddenly perceive in a different light. However, what we mean by “organization” in this case is admittedly unclear. This prompts me to reformulate Anscombe’s metaphor into another metaphor, of which, however, I am not entirely sure. Rather than speaking of seeing the action in a certain light, one might perhaps speak of a light that shines through the action. That such light is likely recognizable in other actions of the same person indicates that they are in some sense organized in the same way or originated in the same disposition. A separate argument would be necessary to consider if and why (as seems to be the case) poets, writers, and theologians, rather than philosophers, are best at capturing the light that shines through human actions. A narrative concept of “action” is, as Aristotle perceived, required to make sense of the way we apprehend second nature. Perhaps we need a better account of narratives to have a better account of action, or of second nature in action, at any rate. Another difference is second-natural correctness need not result from *anagnoretic* insight episodes. To be sure, correctness need not come at all, and still we make, and conduct our relations by, second-natural conjectures all the time. Going from duck to rabbit in the eyes of others tends to occur gradually.

#### IV

“The expression of a change of aspect is an expression of a new perception and, at the same time, an expression of an unchanged perception” (*PI*, p. 206e), Wittgenstein continues. The double nature of the cognitive content of the expression of a change of aspect is particularly interesting if we consider thoughts about actions. It means that understanding an action relative to the agent’s second nature already involves a grasp of

its etiological structure, of its intentional structure. One seems able to train oneself in turning one's attention toward aspect structures, but not in recognizing intentional structures. In other words, the experience of "seeing-as" hinges on intentional structures, but it does not apply to them. One does not say, "Now, see it as an action," for one already sees it as an action. On the other hand, understanding an aspect in an action is to grasp an aspect of the agent, either positively ("P did 'x' because P is so-and-so"), or adversatively ("P did 'x,' but P is not so-and-so").

Second-natural adversative judgments are in fact instrumental to how we interpret and relate to one another. To speak of an isolated episode is already to place it within some second-natural mythos ("Even though he boasted from vanity, I would not say he is a vain man"). Correction in second-natural judgments ought to be construed as relative to an undecided balance of particular instances, which may be clarified over time—or not. Understanding a person takes time, and is an irregular, loopholed process that requires many changes of direction. Still, or precisely because of that, an episodic, imperfect view of action is an impoverished view of action. Imperfective judgments are only powerful inasmuch as they are a part of an ongoing balance about a person, and about people in general.

This does not mean that understanding an action always requires consideration of motives and second nature. Every day we formulate countless orphan intentional judgments—let us call them—by which I mean the seamless representation of animal movements: the representation of what goes on in the world, which we appear to identify as event forms and action forms half unthinkingly, paying little or no attention to them. Let us call this "aspectual indifference," the basis of sanity.

To conclude, there is a distinction, no doubt, between aspectual indifference and what Wittgenstein calls "aspectual blindness." Certain people seem to be impervious to the recognition of certain aspects, and this reflects in their incapacity to establish certain connections, or in their incapacity to act in certain ways. Noticing as aspect, Wittgenstein suggests, is a relational concept. It is visible primarily in the way other people and we relate to P, and not in the putative precision of our predictions concerning P's behavior. So one might then say that the concept of aspectual blindness presupposes the concept of "aspectual vision," that is to say, the capacity of recognizing certain aspects in actions and persons. This seems to be an acquired capacity, which guides, or shapes, or, in a sense, shines through our actions.



*This essay results from the research project titled Intention, Action and the Philosophy of Art: New Boundaries in a Theory of Action (PTDC/FILFIL/116733/2010), funded by Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia (FCT). I am indebted to Alberto Arruda, Miguel Tamen, and Brett Bourbon for their comments and suggestions.*

1. G. E. M. Anscombe, *Intention* (1957; repr., Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 52; hereafter abbreviated *I*.
2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, ed. Georg von Wright, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 54e.
3. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 203e; hereafter abbreviated *PI*.