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Wittgenstein on understanding: language, calculus and practice

Zwei Seelen wohnen, ach! in meiner Brust ...

Goethe, *Faust*

1. The argument between the calculus and the anthropological approach.

It is often said that the Wittgenstein of the early 1930s advocates the so-called “calculus conception” of language, conceives of language as a calculus, or at the very least, holds that there are crucial similarities between language use and calculus use. In this paper I argue that this is wrong, or at best, one-sided. In the early 1930s Wittgenstein certainly made extensive use of the calculus analogy. For instance, §35 of the *Big Typescript* is entitled “*To Understand a Word = To Be Able to Use It. To Understand a Language: To have Command of a Calculus.*”¹ But he did not defend and promote that analogy in ways that committed him to *holding* a calculus conception of language. In fact, the *Big Typescript* begins by criticizing the calculus conception at the start of its very first chapter on “*Verstehen*” (Understanding).

The calculus approach received its strongest expression in the *Tractatus*, while the alternative anthropological conception played a dominant role in the *Philosophical Investigations*. While what did not fit the calculus conception in the *Tractatus* had to be passed over in silence, the *Philosophical Investigations* gives it a prominent role. In this paper I aim to show that the anthropological conception is already much more present in the *Big Typescript* than most Wittgenstein scholars acknowledge. Indeed, we shall

¹ Ts-213,143r[1]. I refer to Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass* by the *Wittgenstein Source* (<http://www.wittgensteinsource.org>) convention. Each *Bemerkung* referred to in this paper can be inspected on Wittgenstein Source, upon completion of the site, by entering its URL, e.g. [http://www.wittgensteinsource.org/Ts-213,143r\[1\]_d](http://www.wittgensteinsource.org/Ts-213,143r[1]_d) for a diplomatic version of Ts-213,143r[1], [http://www.wittgensteinsource.org/Ts-213,143r\[1\]_n](http://www.wittgensteinsource.org/Ts-213,143r[1]_n) for a normalized one, and http://www.wittgensteinsource.org/Ts-213,143r_f for the facsimile. For citations from the *Big Typescript* in English I use the translation of 2005, but have occasionally modified it.

see that the opening of the *Big Typescript*’s first chapter stages a dispute between the calculus approach on the one hand and the anthropological approach on the other.²

One of the commitments of the calculus conception is that what is philosophically relevant in language is covered by exact rules, and “exactness” is one of the mantras of this conception. Any aspect that cannot be articulated in terms of such rules is philosophically irrelevant to the philosopher, or at least it should be. With regard to the question “What is the meaning of a word?”, the calculus conception holds that the meaning is determined by definite rules for its correct use. This conception has, or at least seems to have, the big asset that, on its premises, signification – the conversion of the sign into a symbol³ – runs, as it were, on rails: it leaves no gap between sign and symbol, no gap that could be filled with *wrong* symbolization, wrong meaning. On the calculus conception, no personal acts of meaning are involved in signification, and definitely no *psychological* acts that could come between the sign and its correct symbol and thus corrupt signification. The task of correct signifying falls in the end entirely under the responsibility and authority of language: logic / language must take care of itself.⁴ Thus, according to this conception, the meaning of a sign more or less simply comes with the use of the sign if it is in accordance with the general rules. However, under this conception not only the psychological, but the human agent as a whole drops out from signification – at least: it drops out as a constitutive part of it. The idea of mental representation does not become obsolete as such (for mentalism is compatible with the philosophy of the *Tractatus*, cf. 3.11), but the human agent cannot play any

² Hrachovec 2006 reads the *Big Typescript*’s first chapter as setting out a sophisticatedly composed dialogue between different views and reads it partly along the same lines as I do. Recent discussions of the middle Wittgenstein’s relation to the two conceptions include Hacker 2010a and 2013, and Engelmann 2013. The reader will notice that my account differs from both Engelmann’s and Hacker’s. Because Engelmann pays much less attention to the passages that I attribute to the anthropological conception, and treats “amorphousness” negatively, he takes the *Big Typescript* to endorse the calculus conception. While Hacker does hold that the Wittgenstein of the early 1930s promotes the anthropological conception against the calculus conception, he has a fundamentally different understanding of the two conceptions. In fact, some of the elements that I attribute to the calculus conception, Hacker endorses as characteristics of the anthropological. An early exposition of the tension between the two conceptions, under the labels of “Kalkül” and “Kultur”, is Sedmak 1996, who also ascribes the calculus conception to the middle Wittgenstein.

³ TLP 3.32.

⁴ TLP 5.473.

active role in it. The fact that mentalism in the variant of a psychologism drops out of the picture certainly seems advantageous, and such mentalism is one of the critical targets of the calculus conception. But perhaps one needn’t throw the baby out with the bath water.

According to the calculus conception, there cannot be anything like half understanding or half-sense, or a bit of sense: the sign either has a sense or it has none at all. If it has sense, it has complete sense; sense is always completely determined.⁵ To use the chess metaphor, Wittgenstein’s favorite, but also misleading, metaphor in the early 1930s: just as there is no meaningful half move in chess – either you make a move or you don’t – there cannot be half sense, and there cannot really be half a sentence either.⁶ There is “no halfway house between sense and nonsense”.⁷ We can also compare the situation to electricity: it is on or off.

In contrast, the anthropological conception permits open-endedly vague meaning, and partial sense. The anthropological conception’s mantra is not “exactness”, but “human practice”: human practice copes well with vague concepts and unclear meaning, as well as the fact that the particulars falling under a common name may be connected by nothing more than “family resemblance”.⁸ In short: “Practice takes care of itself.”⁹ On the anthropological conception, detailed attention to actual human practice is not only required for the explanation of how signification, language and communication work, but it is largely speaking also sufficient. The focus on rules and regularity play a role also here, but practice gets logical priority over the rule.¹⁰

It is true that the calculus conception’s competitor, the anthropological conception, only had its big breakthrough after the *Big Typescript*, beginning with its revision. Moreover, I do not deny that the calculus conception is one of Wittgenstein’s favorites, and it would be wrong to deny that it plays any positive role in his later philosophy. Of course it did; it does so wherever it functions as a useful “object of

⁵ TLP 3.23.

⁶ Ts-213,1r[4], Ms-140,1r[5] a.o.

⁷ Glock 1996, 200.

⁸ PI §§66-71.

⁹ Cf. OC §139.

¹⁰ See Johannessen 1988.

comparison”¹¹ rather than as a general stand on how things *are*. However, the question how best to make use of the calculus approach already posed a challenge for the early Wittgenstein. The calculus conception *is* one side of the story, and a prominent and attractive one. But neither in the *Tractatus* nor the *Big Typescript* did Wittgenstein let it win out over the anthropological conception. Throughout his philosophical career, Wittgenstein oscillated between on the one hand striving for and wanting to uphold some ideal of exactness, while on the other hand refusing to deny the presence and relevance of certain inexact, “amorphous”¹² elements in human language and experience – elements that did not fit into his striving for exactness. The question was always: How to relate those elements?

In the summer of 1931 Wittgenstein wrote a notebook passage that is very telling in this context. There Wittgenstein reassures himself that he, as a philosopher, can only be interested in “what is exact.”¹³ The inexact and vague are to be excluded from philosophical consideration. He applies his approach to the topic of understanding and concludes that understanding a sentence must be of the same kind as mastering a calculus, or as knowing how to multiply.¹⁴ Language only interests him “in so far as it is a calculus”¹⁵:

Understanding, as it is usually conceived, is a vague process – we are only interested in what is exact. But not because we are only interested in the “ideal” of a language which reality only approximates, but because we only in this way can capture what is expressed in every language.

But what am I saying when I say “that only what is exact interests me”? What is the inexact? What is the vague that I exclude?

¹¹ PI §131.

¹² In the material sciences, “amorphous” solids lack, in contrast to the “crystalline” ones, a specific regular structure. I consider this a relevant background for Wittgenstein’s use of the terms. I am indebted to Alfred Schmidt for pointing this use of “amorphous” out to me.

¹³ Ms-153a,102v[2].

¹⁴ Ms-153a,104v[4]et105r[1].

¹⁵ Ms-153a,98r[3].

Isn't it that I have to exclude what I don't know in precise enough terms? I.e.
don't I want to say that — — —

Why do I say: feelings, moods etc. that accompany, follow, or precede a sentence
don't interest me! Because it is only the symbolic structure that interests me.

Doesn't the vague consist in the fact that it does not belong to the symbol, that it
can be one way or the other, even when the symbol remains the same?

No, there is still something else: that, in a sense, it is my only task to say
something clearly and not to allude to anything.

It is almost as though I wanted to say I'm weaving a tapestry & therefore I cannot
have any unclear colour transitions. But in reality this is not a good simile.

Shall I say that exactness consists in the fact that what is dubious does not
concern us?

What does our exactness consist in?

Frege about psychological logic. His comments are all concerned with the
inexactness of a psychological study in contrast to a logical one.

Can I say that I am only interested in the content of the sentence? And the
content of the sentence lies in it.

The sentence has its content as a component of the calculus.

Is thus, “understanding a sentence” of the same kind as “mastering a calculus”?

Thus, as knowing how to multiply? I think so.¹⁶

However, there are other passages in Wittgenstein’s work from the same period that question this position or even assert the opposite.¹⁷ Why should philosophy only be concerned with what is exact? Why should one hold that understanding is like mastering a calculus? These are issues that occupy Wittgenstein throughout extended periods of his philosophical development. The calculus conception responds to the demand for exactness, the anthropological conception also allows for the inexact.

In the preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein thanks two people, one of them Piero Sraffa, who had made Wittgenstein reconsider whether meaningful sign use really does essentially involve logical form or grammar. And if it does, whether it makes sense to identify the bounds of sense with the bounds of grammar: “I had to accept this & that as sign (Sraffa) but couldn’t give any grammar for it.”¹⁸ If signs can work without grammar, or at least without grammar that can be articulated in words, then this poses a problem for the calculus conception. If so, a conception of signification that includes the human agent as prior to grammar is needed. Consequently, it seems right that the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein’s principal later work, begins with a substantial critique of a conception of signification that leaves out the human. This conception’s “over-simple”¹⁹ if not wrong “picture of language”²⁰ drops the human out of the act of signification; it suggests that meaning is taken care of by language alone. On this picture:

(...) the individual words in language name objects—sentences are combinations of such names. (...) Every word has a meaning. This meaning is correlated with the word. It is the object for which the word stands.²¹

¹⁶ Ms-153a,102r-105r.

¹⁷ See for example Ms-155,21r[2]et21v[1].

¹⁸ Ms-157b,5r[4]et5v[1]et6r[1]et6v[1]. Two versions of the story have survived: According to Malcolm, Sraffa’s gesture made Wittgenstein withdraw the idea that a sentence and what it depicts must have the same logical form; according to von Wright, the idea that anything that represents must have logical form or grammar (Malcolm 1984, 58).

¹⁹ PI §4.

²⁰ PI §1.

²¹ Ibid.

There is no mention of any human involvement in this description of the essence of human language. In contrast, the alternative anthropological conception has a different, “relational” view that brings human agency *in*: A sign is so always for and through a human being. This view informs Wittgenstein’s entire mature philosophy: Nothing is a sign unless it is understood (and made use of) as a sign by a human.

2. Understanding in the Big Typescript and Wittgenstein’s 1930-33 lectures.

The concept of understanding is central to the argument between the calculus and the anthropological conception.²² Is understanding – as the calculus conception has it – just reading off the symbol from the sign, “nothing more than getting hold of the symbol”;²³ is it simply a (sort of neo-Platonistic?) partaking in a pre-established “pneumatic”²⁴ logical structure? Or do we, in order to understand understanding, need to bring in the human agent more strongly? How strongly? The *Big Typescript* begins by investigating precisely this question. While the two conceptions had been present in Wittgenstein’s work even before 1929, Wittgenstein now, at the beginning of the *Big Typescript*, assesses their respective accounts of the nature of understanding.²⁵ The calculus conception makes a strong start at the very beginning of the *Big Typescript*’s first chapter, but the anthropological conception soon catches up with it.

The calculus approach generates the title of the *Big Typescript*’s first subchapter and sets the tone: “Understanding, meaning, drops out of our consideration.”²⁶ Indeed, on the calculus conception understanding *drops out* of philosophical consideration. The chapter’s very first remark presents the entire issue *in nuce*:

[calculus conception:] Can one understand something else than a sentence? Or, rather: [anthropological conception:] Does it only become a sentence if one

²² See also Hacker 2013.

²³ M, Lent Term 1931, Lecture 1, 5:52, 105.

²⁴ See Schulte 2005.

²⁵ Literally: Of the remarks where the two conceptions had manifested themselves; these remarks stem mostly from MSS 108-110 (1930-31).

²⁶ Ts-213,1r[1].

understands it? Thus: Can one understand something in other ways than *as a sentence*?²⁷

The anthropological position’s “understand something as a sentence” can be read in two ways. First, that it may need a human to understand a sentence as a sentence: it is not the *sentence* as such that tells me that it is a sentence. Second, that we often understand something also in other ways than as a sentence: that we understand non-verbally, for example.

The “thorn in the flesh” of the calculus conception of understanding – one that it continually tries to excise – is the amorphous that has no sharp borders and seems not confinable by exact rules. Is there *amorphous understanding*? Is the concept of understanding itself amorphous? The anthropological conception pays attention to actual use and stresses that the expression “understanding” is itself used amorphously: The second subchapter of the *Big Typescript* is entitled “‘Understanding’ used amorphously. ‘Understanding’ ambiguous.”²⁸ That understanding is amorphous can mean two things. First, that ‘understanding’ is a collective term, a *Sammelbegriff* that denotes different types of understanding that do not need to have one thing in common, and that may also include kinds of understanding which cannot be captured by a calculus approach. Second, that both the concept and the phenomenon of understanding may themselves be amorphous, lacking the determinate form the calculus conception wants them and expects them to have. The calculus approach will, regarding the first, close its eyes to those kinds of understanding that are not types of calculus understanding. Regarding the second, it will want to neglect those aspects of understanding that are not open to a calculus account, and will want to say: What we regard as falling under understanding *must not* include anything that is amorphous. Accepting understanding as something amorphous amounts, for the calculus conception, to accepting it as something that partly cannot be paraphrased or put into words at all. This is something the calculus conception cannot accept.

²⁷ Ts-213,1r[2]. The earliest retained version of this remark is in Ms-110,187[5]. The shortest version is Ts-302,1[1].

²⁸ Ts-213,5r[2].

But in the *Big Typescript*’s second subchapter, the anthropological approach emphasizes that understanding *does* work amorphously in real life and language. Understanding includes “intransitive” understanding – a type of understanding that contrasts with the “transitive understanding” which is the calculus conception’s focus. The concept of understanding thus denotes at least two different types of understanding: transitive and intransitive. The calculus conception asks, “How do we know a man has understood a sentence?”, and wants to answer: We know, if he can articulate the sentence with other symbols.²⁹ This is transitive understanding and can be verbally articulated, while with intransitive understanding such translation into other symbols is neither possible, nor relevant.

The *Big Typescript*’s third subchapter begins by contrasting the two conceptions of understanding, promoting the first and rejecting the second:

For if “to have sense” is used intransitively, as it were, so that one can’t distinguish the sense of one proposition from that of another, then having sense is a process that accompanies the use of the proposition, and this process doesn’t interest us.³⁰

According to the calculus conception, the notion of intransitive understanding involves a concept of understanding as a process, and it finds this unacceptable. But in other passages, the concept of intransitive understanding is evaluated positively, and it is also prominent in the *Philosophical Investigations*.³¹

Intransitive understanding receives positive attention in a lecture in April 1933 lectures where “discursive” (= transitive) and “intuitive” (= intransitive) understanding are distinguished.³² “Intuitive” (intransitive) understanding includes both “taking something in as a whole at a glance” (“augenblickliches Verstehen”³³) and ongoing, occurrent understanding such as following a melody. On April 28, Wittgenstein refers to music in order to bring out the intransitive aspects of understanding (a sentence): “(...) the sense of a proposition is much more similar than one would think to the meaning of

²⁹ See for example Ts-213,5r[3]et5r[1] and Ts-213,16r[1].

³⁰ Ts-213,11r[6].

³¹ See PI §531, §527 and §610.

³² M, May Term 1933, Lecture 2a, 8:59, 309.

³³ Ts-213,22r[3].

a melody or theme. People say a theme has a meaning for them, & if you ask them what it means they can't tell you.”³⁴ This suggests that intransitive understanding is at work in *any* understanding, including transitive understanding.³⁵

The fact that people can't say precisely what a specific musical theme means to them, while they also hold that it does mean something, is a challenge to the calculus conception. The calculus conception can only permit a concept of understanding that avoids the vague and non-verbal. But on the anthropological view this restriction is due to an unjust ideal, an *idol*. The ideal of exactness is endorsed in a lecture from January 1931, together with opposition to conceiving of thought as something “amorphous” rather than as “symbolic” and bound to language.³⁶ However, two years later the same ideal is questioned, along with conceding that giving examples rather than a definition is usually the right thing to do:

It is one thing to draw an outline; & another thing to portray another thing by means of an outline.

Our words haven't an outline, & therefore it's not a weakness that we can't draw an exact outline.³⁷

But if you say this isn't enough to define proposition, I agree & I can't give you a general definition of “proposition” any more than of “game”: I can only give examples.

³⁴ M, May Term 1933, Lecture 2a, 8:66, 313.

³⁵ On this topic also see Appelqvist in this volume. The analogy between understanding a sentence and understanding a melody was clearly important for Wittgenstein. It occurs first in Ms-155,66r[2]et66v[1]et67r[1]et67v[1] (written between September 1 and November 10, 1931) and Ms-112,76r[2]et76v[1] from November 10, 1931. It is included in the *Big Typescript*, the major “summae” of his philosophy from 1929 to 1932, , as well as the *Philosophical Investigations*. The April 28 lecture version seems to be its earliest invocation in 1933 (not counting the version in Ts-213,148r[5] which was typed from Ts-212, most likely in Wittgenstein's absence). In his exegesis of PI §527, Hacker sees an important analogy between understanding a theme in music and understanding a sentence to consist in the fact that following a sentence “does not consist in thinking of something else (e.g. an interpretation or a paraphrase). In that sense what is understood is, as it were, autonomous – like understanding a melody”. However, the most important disanalogy he sees in the fact “that someone who understands a sentence can say what it means, can paraphrase it, and thereby explain its meaning” (Hacker 1996, 232). This reading of the analogy exactly reverses mine.

³⁶ M, Lent Term 1931, Lecture 1, 5:50, 104.

³⁷ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 4a, 7:84, 250.

Is this inexact?³⁸

Intransitive understanding is the grasping of intransitive meaning, and intransitive meaning can be present, and *is* meaning, even if paraphrase is not possible; we can find such meaning in language, music, gestures, beds of pansies.³⁹ Typically, intransitive meaning is meaning that is conveyed by *structure* rather than specific expression, for example, by the structure or form of a literary work or a musical piece. Intransitive understanding is then the grasping of this structure as significant for the meaning of the work. It may not be possible to paraphrase intransitive meaning other than by reference to structure (i.e. one has to *see* the structure in order to see the meaning), or, where it is already verbalized, to express it in other ways than by reusing the original expressions. For the calculus conception, this turns intransitive understanding into something that drops out, a “process that accompanies the use of the proposition, and this process doesn’t interest us.”⁴⁰ But *why*, the anthropological approach insists, should such understanding not interest us?⁴¹

This is the background of the discussion at the beginning of the *Big Typescript*.⁴² It asks: Can one understand something other than a sentence? The calculus conception says (trusting in the sentence as the only guarantee of exactness): To understand a sentence is to understand *the sentence*. Understanding is reading off the symbol from the *Satzzeichen*. The anthropological position counters (arguing that we need a human for signification, while at the same time not worrying that the “amorphousness” this brings with it would pose a dangerous risk): But doesn’t it only become a sentence if a person *understands* it? Doesn’t understanding a sentence mean understanding something *as a sentence*; that there simply *is* no sentence before it is understood as a sentence?⁴³ Taking in the *Satzklang* can be an important part of understanding the

³⁸ M, Lent Term 1933, Lecture 7a, 8:18, 280.

³⁹ See BRBK, 178 ff.

⁴⁰ Ts-213,11r[6].

⁴¹ Johannessen 1994 argues that intransitive understanding is the dominant form of understanding in the arts. Schroeder 2001 discusses transitive and intransitive uses of the word “meaning”. Czernin 2006 considers seeing form or structure (intransitive understanding) central to the understanding of poems and literary works. For a recent discussion of intransitive understanding see Mácha 2015, ch. 18.

⁴² Ts-213,1r[2].

⁴³ See Ts-213,6ar[4].

sentence, as in the case of nonsense poetry.⁴⁴ Does the sentence come as something that is already symbolized, as a concatenation of determinate symbols, as the *Tractatus* had put it? If so, then amorphous understanding really drops out, then there simply *are* no amorphous sentences or thoughts. What comes first, who is in charge: language or the human, meaning or its use? It seems a natural thing to say, the human and use: “A sign is there always for a living being; that must be something that is essential to signs.”⁴⁵ But the calculus conception doesn’t want it like that: “The sign has a purpose only in the human society, but this purpose is of absolutely no concern to us.”⁴⁶

Doesn’t the anthropological position’s emphasis on the role of human agency in signification amount to an unacceptable form of mentalism, or interpretationism? No, it replies: Interpretationalism – “every act of signification is the result of a conscious separate act of interpretation” – isn’t implied; understanding and rule-following simply do not need to involve interpretation, “Deuten.”⁴⁷ Granted, there is a crucial difference between seeing and seeing as: seeing a Chinese sign (script) and seeing it *as a sign*,⁴⁸ but this does not mean that understanding as an *understanding as* involves a separate, conscious act, as interpretation does.⁴⁹ Acts of symbolization, meaning acts, are not learned through interpretation, nor do they need to be carried out with interpretation as an ingredient or continuous companion. Rather, we learn – in a context of language, gesture, facial expression, acting, and other cues – *by example*, and we begin to learn before concepts are in place. Once learned, our acts of meaning and understanding turn into habitus, second nature, certainty. We follow rules “blindly”,⁵⁰ full of trust and without doubt or interpretation ever needing to come in: as I can follow *someone* blindly. Such understanding is more like the execution of an ability, a capacity, a technique, a “being able to”, a “knowing how” that is continuously there and just needs to be activated.⁵¹ Significantly, “being able to”,

⁴⁴ See Ts-213,74r[1] ff.

⁴⁵ Ts-213,192r[4].

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ See BT, subchapters 5-6, esp. Ts-213,19v[1], as well as many other passages such as Ts-213,10r[1], Ms-115,10[4]et11[1] and BLBK, 36 (“Now there are pictures ...”).

⁴⁸ Ts-213,5r[6]et6ar[1]et6br[1].

⁴⁹ Ts-213,19v[1].

⁵⁰ PI §219.

⁵¹ See BT, subchapter 6; esp. Ts-213,21v[1].

capacities, abilities are properties of concrete human persons rather than of language. Consequently “language game”⁵² and “form of life”⁵³ – two of the anthropological conception’s central notions – are more relevant to getting a grip on understanding than “calculus”.

In *Philosophical Investigations* §81, Wittgenstein speaks of the normative view of logic as dogmatic and links it to a certain conception that had held also him captive – the calculus conception. The calculus conception brings one “to think that if anyone utters a sentence and *means* or *understands* it he is operating a calculus according to definite rules”.

(...) All this, however, can only appear in the right light when one has attained greater clarity about the concepts of understanding, meaning, and thinking. For it will then also become clear what can lead us (and did lead me) to think that if anyone utters a sentence and *means* or *understands* it he is operating a calculus according to definite rules.⁵⁴

This remark tells us that the consequences of the calculus conception become particularly visible in the way it informs the concepts of “understanding, meaning, and thinking”. Thus, if one wants to recognize both its strengths and weaknesses, we should start with these concepts. These are precisely the topics that open the *Big Typescript*. The first chapter title is “Understanding”, the second is “Meaning”; “Thinking” comes a bit further on. In short, the *Big Typescript*’s first chapter does precisely what *Philosophical Investigations* §81 asks: it introduces a critical discussion and clarification of the concept of understanding as it appears in the calculus conception. On its first page we find:

Check // Consider: “Understanding begins with the sentence. (And therefore it doesn’t interest us.)”⁵⁵

Thus, it says: Scrutinize whether understanding really only begins with the sentence, as the calculus conception demands. On what basis could the calculus conception rule out

⁵² PI §7.

⁵³ PI §19.

⁵⁴ PI §81.

⁵⁵ Ts-213,1r[5].

amorphous usage as philosophically irrelevant? Only on the basis of the normative and dogmatic idea of crystalline logic – but let’s go “[b]ack to the rough ground!”⁵⁶ It is the anthropological approach that produces this critique of the calculus conception. Once we see that the *Philosophical Investigations*’s anthropological criticism of the calculus conception is already at work in the *Big Typescript*’s first chapter, we will also recognize the anthropological conception as already present in the *Big Typescript*. In that case, we will no longer want to construe the title of the *Big Typescript*’s first subchapter (“Understanding drops out of our consideration”) as an authoritative statement of Wittgenstein’s position.

Thanks to its anthropological strand, the *Big Typescript*’s first chapter both succeeds in opening up a conception of understanding that is not tied to the calculus conception and articulates a critique of that conception. Furthermore, Moore’s lecture notes show that the anthropological approach was also important for the “public” Wittgenstein. On February 6 and 27, 1933, he questions the ideal of exactness, and on April 24 he introduces the distinction between “discursive” (“transitive”) and “intuitive” (“intransitive”) understanding. Consequently, it seems wrong to say that the “middle” Wittgenstein adhered to the calculus conception; rather, he used it as one of his philosophical voices.⁵⁷ There indeed are (at least) two voices on stage already within the first paragraph of the *Big Typescript*: the calculus *and* the anthropological voice.

3. Univocity in Wittgenstein’s 1930-33 lectures and the relevance of attention to form in middle Wittgenstein’s writings.

In their introduction to *Wittgenstein: Lectures, Cambridge 1930-1933*, the editors make the following comment: “There is very little, if any, of the dialectic between different voices that is characteristic of much of Wittgenstein’s post-*Tractatus* writing in Moore’s lecture notes. The principal voice in these notes is that of Wittgenstein the teacher, setting out ideas that he wants to convey to his students or debate with Moore.”⁵⁸ This is surely correct, and it is one of the central claims of this contribution

⁵⁶ PI §§97, 107-108.

⁵⁷ See Cavell 1962; Pichler 2004; Stern 2005; Wallgren 2006.

⁵⁸ M, xlii.

that the *Big Typescript*’s first chapter is characterized by the dialectic between the calculus voice on the one hand and the anthropological voice on the other. We know that Wittgenstein discussed and developed ideas in his lectures and did not only use them for one-way communication; nevertheless, he did not speak “polyphonically”,⁵⁹ with a “dialectic between different voices”. While Wittgenstein deviated from some of the prevailing norms in his lectures, he did still obey the code of the academic genre. But why is it that the lectures are not characterized by such dialectical exchanges?⁶⁰

Apart from the fact that Wittgenstein may have felt much more bound by prevailing academic standards in his lectures than in his writings, we also have to consider the following: the composition of polyphonic works demanded, precisely, *composition*, an editorial process on paper. The creation of a polyphonic dialectic was dependent on *writing*, on laborious *editing* and composing together of texts written earlier; it was not the product of first writing, but rather of a repeated process of rewriting.⁶¹ It is difficult to see how this could have been accomplished orally in a lecture setting. Wittgenstein may have felt that the inventory of philosophical tools available to him in the lectures was much reduced in comparison to the possibilities available on paper. At the same time, he must also have experienced the lectures as a source of inspiration and as an apt place for putting his ideas and approaches to work. The actual voices and dialectics in his discussion class would certainly not be without positive impact also on his writing.

One of the aims of this paper is to show that the calculus conception of language, in contrast to what is commonly held, is not an overriding characteristic of the middle Wittgenstein. Rather, what *may* be considered characteristic of the middle Wittgenstein is that he permits *the struggle between the calculus and the competing anthropological*

⁵⁹ Pichler 2004.

⁶⁰ For a complementary discussion of this issue, see Klagge’s “Wittgenstein and His Students” in this volume.

⁶¹ Examples of such composition include, in addition to the *Big Typescript*, the earlier “re-processing” of TS 208 in MSS 111-114 (1931-32, see Pichler 1994, 77 ff., and Kienzler 1997, who calls it the “Wiederaufnahme”) and the later composition of the *Philosophical Investigations* “Urfassung” in MS 142 (1936-37) where many *Big Typescript* remarks were reused. The title of Josef Rothaupt’s Habilitationsschrift “Kreation und Komposition” (2008) turns on the distinction between first writing (creation) and the later composition of the written into structures. Using Rothaupt’s terms, the lectures are consequently to be classified as “Kreation” rather than “Komposition”.

conception (as well as other struggles) to emerge fully. Later, Wittgenstein will say of the *Philosophical Investigations* that they contain the *precipitate* of philosophical investigations from the last sixteen years.⁶² These chemical reactions are not to be found in the *Philosophical Investigations* – they took place in middle Wittgenstein.

This understanding of the role of the calculus conception in the *Big Typescript* only becomes available if one acknowledges the dialectical form and function of middle Wittgenstein’s writings, and is prepared to lend one’s ear to what is usually called Wittgenstein’s “opponent” or “interlocutor”. In fact, the “opponent” is often unfortunately brushed off in the name of a specific position attributed to Wittgenstein at the outset. However, including that opponent as a voice in his own right, as Wittgenstein did, brings with it not only a different understanding of middle Wittgenstein’s views, but also of his overall philosophical development.⁶³ It is usual to present his development under a template of successful progress and step-by-step change: After his return to Cambridge, Wittgenstein takes up questions and issues that were left unsatisfactorily dealt with in the *Tractatus*, which leads him to his “phenomenological” philosophy; problems arising from this new philosophy as well as the philosophy of others (such as Russell) bring him to develop the calculus conception of language; the calculus conception is in turn later replaced by the anthropological conception.⁶⁴ This follows a “not yet there, but coming next” scheme. Passages that do not fit into this scheme are attributed to the “opponent” whose basic role it is to present the views to be overcome.

However, an alternative approach to Wittgenstein’s philosophical development may well make more sense. The polyphonic approach proposed here abandons the “first a, then b” perspective, acknowledging that while a and b are both present in Wittgenstein’s thought, it is the weighting and rating which each receives that changes. Seen in this light, it becomes clear that both the calculus and the anthropological conception are already present on an equal footing in the *Big Typescript*, and that the calculus conception is only one of the *Big Typescript*’s lines of argument. As a

⁶² I am grateful to Jérôme Letourneau for having made me think more about Wittgenstein using this specific expression at the beginning of his preface to PI.

⁶³ See also Schulte 1992, 99.

⁶⁴ For a fine example of such an approach see Engelmann 2013; for a notable recent exception Lugg 2013.

consequence, it is not so much that the calculus conception is later replaced by the anthropological conception, but rather that its role in certain contexts becomes qualified and restricted, yet it is still active and awaiting new tasks elsewhere. If we adopt this perspective, the anthropological approach, far from being a deus ex machina that is first found in the *Brown Book* or the *Philosophical Investigations*, was already available to Wittgenstein much earlier, even if he was not yet ready to give it its later role. This fits well with what Wittgenstein says in §86 of the *Big Typescript*, namely that the difficulty of philosophy is “not the intellectual difficulty of the sciences, but the difficulty of a change of attitude. Resistance of the will must be overcome.”⁶⁵ Accordingly, this paper aims to bring to the fore not only Wittgenstein’s intellectual struggle, but also his struggle of the will.

The question of how best to understand the *Big Typescript* first chapter’s considered attention to the amorphousness of meaning and understanding plays an important role here. It is not only the calculus conception, but also Wittgenstein scholarship generally, that reads these observations purely critically, treating the amorphousness as something negative and thus as an argument for the calculus approach. On the reading proposed here, they have their own constructive value and provide a rationale for questioning the adequacy of the calculus conception – as is later confirmed in *Philosophical Investigations* §81. This allows us to see more clearly the role the human agent already plays in signification for the middle Wittgenstein, and consequently to better exploit for our own philosophical purposes Wittgenstein’s rich thought on this topic.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Ts-213,406r[1].

⁶⁶ I am indebted to discussions at the Wittgenstein conferences in Pirenópolis (2014), Klagenfurt (2015) and Iowa (2015) where I presented earlier versions of this paper, and to discussions with J. Conant, S. Greve, P. Hacker, L. Hertzberg, K.S. Johannessen, H.W. Krüger, J. Mácha, A. Schmidt, D. Stern and S. Uffelmann.

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