

On the Feeling for Language and its Epistemic Value

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1. Feelings as Bearers of Knowledge?

The title of my essay presupposes that there is such a thing as 'feeling for language', i.e. that there exists what, in German, is much more naturally and commonly referred to as *Sprachgefühl*. If this assumption is justified, then the question arises what this 'feeling for language' is or ought to be, and how we ought properly to describe it and to distinguish it from other feelings. Only when this has been done will it become clear how one might begin to answer the question as to the value — and in particular the epistemic value — of the phenomenon in question. For it is clear that it is not settled from the start that feelings in general and the feeling for language in particular can in any sense be seen as bearers of knowledge.

If we start out from the widest conception of what 'feelings' are, then this expression relates to all states of pleasure and displeasure and to the transitions between such states. However, as everyone knows, our ordinary language is not so easily able to support us in this simplification, since in using it we readily run together the vocabulary of sensibility (or indeed of sensation) with that of feeling proper. Thus we call a man 'sentimental' who is imbued with certain sorts of feelings; we say that another man is 'insensitive' or that his sensibilities have been wounded (for example by an insult). On the other hand

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we also commonly say that this or that stuff *feels* 'raw', that one *feels* that the water is cold — just as we say that one feels ill, or sad.

Thus we see that it is not initially clear that we can begin our inquiries by assuming any classificatory differentiation of feelings and sensations, or indeed of feelings and phenomena of interest or preference, since these are evidently blurred together in linguistic usage. As we know, however, we can and should attempt in our philosophical analyses to provide more clarity and perspicuity than is available at the start.

2. On the Nature of Feelings

It is an old question whether feelings extend beyond the two poles of pleasure and displeasure by which they are initially determined. But quite apart from the question whether such a primitive opposition is sufficient to comprehend the spread of feelings (or whether it should be replaced by that between *love* and *hate* or by some other pair of opposites, or indeed by some quite different, more elaborate scale), and indeed quite apart from the various possible contrasts and oppositions which one might mention here, there is also the following question: do feelings reside within themselves or do they extend, directly or indirectly, into other regions of basic human attitudes such as sensation, presentation, judgment or volition? And if so, how do they hang together with these other modes of activity of the human mind? In the treatment of the functions of language expressions of feelings are usually little investigated. The reason for this is that of course taken strictly there is hardly any particular class of expressions which could be assigned specifically to the realm of feeling. Certainly the hearer learns something about the speaker from what he hears, something that is not explicitly the object of what the speaker says. But this happens so to speak through his speaking-behaviour, through changes in the characteristic flow of his speech

and through variations in the choice and intensity of, say, evaluative expressions. Yet it could be deduced also from other factors, as especially from the mimicry and gestures of the speaker. These remarks themselves draw attention to the fact that expressions of feeling are often bound up with other, often more predominant forms of expression in such a way that feelings themselves may penetrate even to the level of the most basic of human attitudes, so that a distillation or abstraction of what pertains to feeling has something artificial about it. There is, I believe, no doubt at all that our attitudes of feeling can control and dominate all our other attitudes, and this even against our express volition. Thus the disposition, the mood, in which we find ourselves can give flight to our thinking and willing, but it can also serve to paralyse them. Indeed — as Waismann once correctly remarked — the whole world can become changed in its feeling tone from major to minor and vice versa.¹

I take it for granted here, then, that feelings are complex psychological formations and that we should not presume from the start that we are able without further ado to extract them from their connections to presentations and judgments. Having gained a little clarity about this question, now, it will be easier to cope with the problem of our putative 'feeling for language', or at least with one aspect of this problem, which is of course all that I can handle in the framework of the present essay.

I started out by employing the somewhat hackneyed and over-general concepts of pleasure and displeasure in order to characterise the spread of feelings; this was only because the states of pleasure and displeasure do seem to cover both the poles and the range with which we have to deal. They designate of themselves the acceptance or rejection of an object which stirs our emotions. The same range has been marked out also by means of the concepts of *joy* and *sorrow* or (in the case of Brentano) *love* and *hate*. In each of these cases one is still using expressions of a certain sort of *position-taking* — either of acceptance or rejection — bound up with emotional states or stirrings of our selves. And this means only that in the meaning of the basic classes of psychic phenomena it is apparently

difficult to go beyond the most general, at least without doing harm to the matter in hand.

In the tradition of modern philosophy such emotional stirrings have been awarded the character of intentionality, of directedness, being no different in this respect from the intellectual attitudes of thinking, perceiving, believing, presuming, judging, and so on. We take pleasure *in* something, we are moved, touched, stirred, shocked, revolted, insulted, disgusted *by* something whose existence we explicitly presuppose or at least assume or hypothesise. Now of course one might want to see this directedness as a trivial implication of the fact that all psychic events are directed; yet there are cases where doubts arise in this regard. Do we not have the Kierkegaardian distinction between fear and anguish, the latter being described as an objectless mood, the former as a directed emotion? And have not others erected philosophical edifices on this distinction? I will not however go into this matter here.

What is nonetheless common to all feelings is that they are not localised, they have no seat in the body, even though their forms of expression — that which Wittgenstein calls observable behaviour — are intimately interwoven with our bodily movements, with mimicry and gesture. When someone suffers, then one sees in him that this is so, and when someone is full of hate, then good will is not to be seen in his eyes. That is why — as someone said — the human being is the best picture of the human soul. It is only a primitive reading of this fact to suppose that every emotion must be bound up with such a picture. But it remains an interesting case when it is not.

Something else that is peculiar to our feelings is their temporal character, their duration. They have a beginning and an end. The delight which the piece of music calls forth will thereafter subside; the rage which I experience will first break out and then blow over. One falls into a depression and then succeeds in freeing oneself therefrom. The beginning and the ending of feelings is *not*, however, like the occurrence of presentations, in our power. We can call forth in consciousness arbitrary presentations, produce them at will; we cannot bring forth arbitrary attitudes of feeling and emotion. Feelings are in this

regard more like sensations than intellectual phenomena or phenomena of will.

These brief and incomplete remarks about feelings and emotions will not in the least suffice to describe or classify them adequately, or indeed to determine the conditions of their occurring and becoming known. But still, they provide us with a framework within which we can understand what is meant when one is talking about those kinds of attitude which bear their names.

3. Sprachgefühl: The Feeling for Language

Among the stirrings of the emotions, now — and this is required by the presupposition of our title — there is one kind of feeling that is properly to be called *Sprachgefühl* or feeling for language. This phenomenon appears in the same series of object-related feelings as religious feeling, feeling for justice, musical feeling, and so on. It is here substantivised as a disposition: it is assumed to be something that is habitually present when we are in doubt as to which form of an expression is appropriate or which expression is fitting but are able to refer back to no explicit rule in order to judge what is correct or apposite. I must not embark here on an investigation of those varieties of object-relatedness by means of which we analyse for example moral, religious or musical feeling, although contrasts and affinities with other zones of feeling would be useful for a determination of the character and achievements of the feeling for language. For the questions which I see as providing a more authentic key to the understanding of this feeling are the following: Is this so-called feeling for language a productive guiding force which determines our linguistic behaviour, makes it follow the rules of language? Does it represent a manner of knowing how, in the given case, one is to decide between linguistic alternatives? Does it merely accompany our linguistic activity with the nuances of pleasure and displeasure,

or does it intrude upon or mesh with this activity in some deeper sense?

It seems that most philosophers and psychologists of language are at one in the view that the feeling for language represents neither a special form of knowledge rooted in inborn schemata, nor a sub-class of the feelings themselves, to be set alongside, say, loving and hating, joy and pain and other, similar cases.² What, then, is it? It will be useful at least briefly to call to mind the various phenomena referred to under the heading 'feeling for language' in order to establish to what extent attitudes of feeling toward linguistic events do or do not possess a cognitive value. In essence one understands by the feeling for language an intuitive certainty or sureness of touch resulting from talent, experience and analogising that is manifested in dealing with language, both in linguistic action and in the evaluation of what is linguistically right and proper.

It seems, therefore, that there belongs to the feeling for language an evaluative mechanism which distinguishes between the "correct" and the "incorrect", just as it distinguishes between the appropriate and the inappropriate, the apposite and the inapposite, and so on.

One might now be inclined to award to feeling a rational structure, to see it as the realisation of a relation-pattern, considering it as an abstraction of a type or pattern of events which are themselves relational.³ It would lead us too far afield to show why the analysis in terms of the theory of objects is to be preferred to a view of this sort. The main reason however lies in this: that intentionality itself does not require an analysis, for this would bring no simplification.

Thus for example we say of a person whose judgment about the rhythm of a language melody is unerring, that he must dispose over a good feeling for language if he notices a departure which eludes the listener who is less sensitive. We call into question the sureness of someone's feeling for language if he cannot keep to the style of his speech, resorts to cliché and second-hand formulations in places which draw attention to themselves. I am not, be it noted, referring here to the primarily aesthetic considerations which manifest themselves in certain related modes of

attention. I am referring, rather, to the ordinary sureness that is involved in a correct use of words, though I certainly do not deny that it is difficult to draw any boundary between an aesthetically motivated preference for some expression or turn of speech in a text completed or in process of being produced, and a preference that is ascribed to the feeling for language. Which of several possible synonyms is to be preferred in a given context — whether one says 'couch' or 'divan', 'field' or 'meadow' and in a thousand other cases which could serve here as examples — this may well be decided by the feeling for language. But whether this is accompanied or guided by an aesthetically significant feeling for style, this is something that has to remain open. It must remain open because we do quite often respond to the poet's use of language with the evaluative reaction that it reveals either a special feeling for language or no such feeling at all. I do not however wish to abolish or to render irrelevant the distinction between judgments of taste and expressions of feeling, but merely to underline the fact that there exist transitional cases which forbid any clear sort of boundary. The instinctive — that is to say feeling-induced — resistance to a particular turn of phrase on the one hand, and the judgment of taste in regard to the very same expression on the other hand, are not therefore to be kept apart through any sort of criterion.

The examples mentioned are not essentially distinct from that case which some amongst us know best from our own activity, that is the case where we revise a spoken or written text, be this our own or someone else's. What was said, was said; what was written, was written, and now one asks: how could it have been said better? what would have been better written? I do not at all want to go through the various possibilities which can constitute the reason for a proposal for revision. What will first be noticed, what first catches our eye, are grammatical errors and weaknesses, syntactical inconsistencies and the wide field of inappropriate uses of expressions and linguistic forms. If we supply examples of the different possibilities here, then it will become clear that we have to do with proposals which often cross the boundaries between feeling and intellect. Thus it is not

seldom that we *notice* that a rule has been broken, as when a plurality of subjects of a sentence are coordinated with a singular verb, or a verb that is appropriate to one sort of predication is applied to mutually incompatible subjects. This noticing may take place because of some explicit perception of the breaking of a rule, for example in that the absence of the plural in the first case is consciously apprehended from the start. Or it may happen (as one says) 'purely instinctively', as a matter of feeling. One of the characteristic features of immediate apprehension is that the object of noticing is individuated and grasped as such: one knows what it is, what has attracted one's attention, and one therefore knows also what it is that one has grasped. Not so in the case of the purely instinctive reaction which is our present concern. Certainly there is something that we feel. But what it is remains often indeterminate, is not individuated by the feeling in question. One is oneself somehow affected and made unsure, one has a suspicion that something is not quite right in what is being said — even though one may thereby understand it perfectly well, and perhaps also lend it one's agreement. But the fact that one cannot say by what it is that one is affected, what it is that has made one insecure — at least not when one first becomes aware of the feeling — points to a source which is itself not already a cognitive attitude. This is, if you like, the prime example of that instinct through which we ourselves sense that something is not quite right, that serves our own particular interest. It is comparable to the situation in which we hear a piece of music and suddenly, in place of the expected continuation of the melody, some note, dissonant or not, causes us (as we say) pain. If in this last example it is our musical feeling that is affected and perhaps injured, so in the former example it is our feeling for language. We become aware of some property or state of affairs without it being the case that we had made any judgments in this regard. It is not merely that we experience our feeling as one of being touched or injured; we become aware also of something that has produced or caused it in this and this way. When, however, we look for this cause of our feeling, we do not as yet know what precisely it is. Indeed it is not infrequently difficult for

us to say what it is that has disturbed or touched us, since it appears — perhaps is — quite indeterminate. But this implies that there are transition-cases or, as one says, different intensities and degrees of determinateness. As in regard to many other sorts of psychic attitude, so also here, it is the extremes, the two opposite poles of a spectrum of cases, which are clear, but not the intervening field itself. This is why there are no sharp boundaries but only transitions; this is why there is even in the extreme case no certainty in the identification of the object. And this is why, also, a distinction put forward in his day by Meinong seems not to be very useful for our present case.

Meinong drew the distinction between what he called knowledge-feelings (*Wissensgefühle*, *Urteilsgefühle*) on the one hand and value-feelings (*Wertgefühle*) on the other, whereby we are to understand by the former such feelings as refer to cognitive attitudes as these come to expression in judgments of knowledge and conviction, and by the latter feelings which refer essentially to values, of oneself or of other persons or things.⁴ Meinong is, in contrast to Theodor Lipps, concerned to show that for example the feeling of joy on receipt of a gift is based upon a certain judgment as its presupposition, so that without this judgment the joy would not exist. This he contrasts with the case of pleasure associated with, say, sensations of smell, where no intellectual act of forming judgments need be involved. I do not wish to deny that not only mere presentations without judgments but also all forms of judgments can give rise to emotional reactions. But that it should follow from this that there would be special classes of 'presentation-feelings' and 'judgment-feelings' does not seem to me to have been established. For if the emotions in question are likewise directed, or at least could be so directed, then the assumption seems reasonable that they are correlated with their object or object-complex even when there is lacking any judgment in regard to the latter. Granted that there is an important grain of truth in Meinong's theory — namely that there are feelings built up on the basis of judgments and of knowledge — I cannot accept that in the cases mentioned so far a judgment of whatever sort would serve as the basis of an emotion. Thus for example in regard to Meinong's example of the

pleasure at a gift, I cannot accept that the judgment concerning the existence of the gift yields the basis of my pleasure, is what serves to give me pleasure. It seems to me much rather to be clear that it is the feeling itself which first causes us to ask after the nature of that object thanks to which we have the given feeling. Certainly however I wish to agree with Meinong (and his student Witasek⁵) that emotions are often stirred through the noticing of a fact, something which expresses itself or at least allows itself to be expressed in the form of a judgment. The feeling of repugnance that is awakened in us when we perceive a crime has as its presupposition that a judgment presents to us the case which disturbs us. Aesthetically parallel examples make clear to us that this presupposition must also be fulfilled in imagination if the aesthetic object is not merely to 'please' us, but also excite us, take hold of us. In the aesthetically relevant case, therefore, the assumption, which is here a fictitious or make-believe judgment, will constitute the presupposition of the emotional reaction.

4. The Normative Power of the Feeling for Language

Let us now return to our initial question whether the feeling for language can serve as bearer or source of knowledge. After what has been said it might appear that even though this feeling refers us with greater or lesser clarity and intensity to an object, it is still such as to serve only as a preliminary to the properly cognitive attitudes of belief, presumption, doubt and finally of knowing — as intention serves as the preliminary to action. Clearly, however, this order of progression is by no means essential, if the object of the attitude is already presupposed. The fact that my feelings are stirred by a specific turn of phrase does not imply that I will, whether before or after, adopt also a cognitive attitude. It may be that a cognitive dimension is included already in the former, or indeed that the whole matter is forgotten once the feeling has

passed away. It is the unnoticed transition that causes difficulties here, as in its own day did the *petites perceptions* of Leibniz. *We sense in unnoticed manner that which is worthy of being noticed*: this is the point. And it is a quite different question how our attitudes become coloured, affected or indeed called forth thereby. But just as the unnoticed perception does not achieve nothing just because it is unnoticed, so the 'unnoticed' noticing of our feeling can become articulated in the form of a judgment, even though it does not itself *eo ipso* acquire the status of a cognitive attitude.

It is Heinrich von Kleist who has examined in an almost classic manner this case in his small treatise "On the Step-by-Step Composition of our Thoughts while Speaking":

because I have a dark presentation which stands in some sort of distant connection with what I am seeking, my mind, once I have boldly made a start, under the necessity now of finding for this beginning some conclusion, stamps my confused presentation with full clarity while speaking proceeds, in such a way that the thought, to my astonishment, is completed with the arrival of the full stop.⁶

In this text phenomenological description gets its due: the expression I am trying to convey is guided by my episodic emotional reaction — the latter becomes the guiding mover of my thought — *without* it being the case that the individual steps would follow any articulated intention. Rather it is simply that feeling to a certain extent drives the building up of the sentence, as though it were the conscious expression of that thought which in fact only comes into existence through our use of language. But however much feeling is involved in our noticing of differences, still it is not a substitute for cognitive production. Much rather does it constrain our thinking in the form of speech, without our knowing how this happens. The capacity to notice differences will be expected just as much from the connoisseur as from the creators, the powerful speakers, the poets, the literary enthusiasts. In these cases however the phenomenon takes on its more subtle forms.

How, then, does the primitive form appear? With this question we are called upon to change our perspective. For if we ask after the simple form in which a feeling for language makes itself felt, then we shall not be allowed to leave the learning of language out of account. I do not here wish to go into the question — intimately associated with our present concerns — as to the nature of following a rule', which is just as essential to the learning of language as to the learning of all practical skills, the use of tools, participation in games, the practice of custom and habits in general. It is at this point that one may recall the Wittgensteinian assertion as to the intimacy of knowledge, skill and technique, in which remark I want here to draw attention only to that mastery (at any given stage) which *shows* the knowledge that has been acquired.⁷

The primitive form of the feeling for language shows itself in the sureness of the use of those forms with which we are entirely familiar, in the use in familiar situations of the learned store of language, however small this may be. Here it is sufficient to recognise what is the same as the same in order not to lose the feeling of familiarity. This surety in use is the ground of our practical knowledge of language, the capacity, gained in our dealings with other human beings not only to express the distinctions laid down in language but also to detect these distinctions when employed by others. But the feeling that we develop is not any sort of accompaniment to our activity of speaking or hearing a language. It is much rather a sort of watchman who sits up and takes notice only when something worthy of attention has taken place or threatens to do so. It is more like a warning-sign than a shadow which follows us in our use.

Perhaps the comparison with our dealings with the alternating character of the illusory figures treated by the Gestalt psychologists will here serve us better than the usual reference to 'following rules'. It is often only with the *change* in a Gestalt that we notice what our familiarity has concealed from us hitherto. For one would normally be tempted to suppose that what is familiar to us would also call forth in us a special feeling. But the opposite is the case. A stirring of emotion makes itself felt only when that with which we are familiar *alters*, or when we have

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altered ourselves and notice anew what has become habitual, ourselves included. This means that — contrary to the usual opinion — while our feeling for language certainly has its ground in what is familiar, in certainty and sureness, in the mastery of use, it is not itself a feeling which makes its appearance in relation to this ground. The increasing sureness of one's hold, one's mastery, of action, serves much rather to suppress the feeling which then appears anew only with some alteration, in order to announce itself and thereby draw attention to the fact that it has noticed the change in question. It is in this function that it has a cognitive value. But it would be peculiar to want to be aware of such a value in the natural execution of our ordinary actions.

If this attempt at description should be accurate at least in its broad outlines, then it will follow that the feeling for language cannot be brought forward in order to explain 'following a rule of language'. And if one still sees it or wants to see it as performing this function, then such a view would explain nothing more than is implied by the phenomenon itself. There is no special 'feeling for rules' when we follow rules in our action or, as one says, are guided by the rules themselves. And there certainly is no feeling for language to which we could ascribe the knowledge of the rules, for — as has often been said — we normally follow rules *blindly*, that is without noticing the rules, nor even the fact that our actions are governed by rules at all.

Notes

1. See F. Waismann, *Wille und Motiv. Zwei Abhandlungen über Ethik und Handlungstheorie*, ed. by J. Schulte, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1983, pp. 86ff.

2. Cf. the survey in F. Kainz, *Psychologie der Sprache*, Stuttgart: F. Enke, 1967, pp. 301ff.

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3. See H. Fay Nissenbaum, *Emotion and Focus*, Stanford: Center for the Study of Language and Information, 1985.

4. A. Meinong, "Über Urteilsgefühle, was sie sind und was sie nicht sind" (1905), as repr. in Meinong's *Gesamtausgabe* (Graz 1969), Vol. I, pp. 577-614.

5. See S. Witasek, *Grundlinien der Psychologie*, Leipzig: Meiner, 1908, pp. 326f.

6. Heinrich von Kleist, "Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden", *Werke*, in 6 parts, ed. by H. Gilow *et al.*, 2nd revised edition, Berlin: Bong, n.d., Part 5, p. 34.

7. Cf. J. Schulte's contribution to this volume.