

The Aesthetic Commitment of Philosophical Analysis

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What is Wittgenstein saying when he claims that a philosophical investigation resembles an aesthetic investigation? What do aesthetic issues and conceptual issues have in common? I would like to show that, for Wittgenstein, a certain kind of aesthetic experience is presupposed in philosophical analysis as he comes to conceive of it in the Thirties. It is the experience of becoming receptive to grammatical facts, and pursuing the exactness of expression that characterizes the language of poetry

1. Aesthetics was always paramount in Wittgenstein's thinking. In *Tractatus*, aesthetics (together with ethics) shares the transcendentalism of logic. This must be regarded as following from the picture theory of language: aesthetical propositions are meant to express value judgments, hence they do not picture anything. They are concerned with the limits of the world, though not in the same way as the propositions of logic.

Much changes in Wittgenstein's philosophy after *Tractatus*; however, even after setting the picture theory aside he claims that there is a "queer resemblance between a philosophical investigation (perhaps especially in mathematics) and an aesthetic one. (E.g. what is bad about this garment, how it should be, etc)" (CV p.25, 1936). Moreover, he declares that "I may find scientific questions interesting, but they never really grip me. Only *conceptual* and *aesthetic* questions do that" (CV p.79). What is the queer resemblance between a philosophical investigation and an aesthetic one about? Wittgenstein's philosophical investigations concern a variety of utterances from very different domains of discourse: anthropology, psychology, mathematics, traditional philosophy ("metaphysics"), ethics, and aesthetics as well. Why, then, are *only* aesthetical issues regarded as akin to conceptual ones?

2. In his *Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930-1933*, Moore recalls that, as he wondered about the nature of anthropological understanding, Wittgenstein would deny that it could be derived from causal explanation and would insist that in anthropology we are interested in understanding *what strikes us*. Now, the question "Why does this impress us?" he took to be quite similar to such aesthetic questions as "Why is this beautiful?" or "Why will this bass not do?" (LM p.107). Thus, a first, tentative answer to our question might be that Wittgenstein regarded aesthetics as a kind of model for anthropological understanding. (Bell 1984, Dei 1991). However, this is not enough to clarify the relation between aesthetics and philosophy; moreover, it doesn't appear to be entirely accurate.

In Wittgenstein's *Lectures and Conversations* we read that in order to achieve a clear picture of what aesthetic words mean, "you have to describe ways of living" (LC p.11). "We think we have to talk about aesthetic judgements like 'This is beautiful', but we find that if we have to talk about aesthetic judgements we don't find these words at all, but a word used something like a gesture, accompanying a complicated activity" (LC p.11). Here we might say that anthropology serves aesthetic under-

standing, rather than that aesthetics is of help in anthropological understanding.

A second answer to our question would come from pointing out that Wittgenstein's aesthetical interest was so deep and pervasive to be an ever-present background ingredient of every philosophical investigation he carried out. Because of the central role he gave to the aesthetic while writing about the different philosophical topics he was interested in, "he was writing—if at one remove—about aesthetics. For questions of meaning, of perception, and of sense are all clearly central to aesthetic experience, and the writing he undertook on these subjects holds significance for questions of artistic meaning" (Hagberg 2007). It is no doubt correct to emphasize that Wittgenstein's analyses concerning meaning, perception, and the senses can be instrumental in reformulating aesthetical issues, thereby originating something like a Wittgensteinian aesthetics (see Gibson and Huemer 2004); but on the other hand, it seems wrong to claim that the philosophy of art, or of artistic experience, played such a central role in his philosophical reflection. If such had been the case, surely Wittgenstein would have done more than just jotting down a few sparse remarks about literary texts and musical works: he would have engaged the topic more persistently, as he did with mathematics, psychology, logic, colors, and certainty.

In what follows I would like to show that, although matters of meaning, of perception, and of sense are all central in aesthetic experience, there is a kind of aesthetic experience that is crucial for the kind of philosophical analysis Wittgenstein pursued and actually practiced. It is a kind of aesthetic experience that is presupposed in Wittgenstein's new method of doing philosophy.

3. Remarks in two different areas can be distinguished in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. There are (1) remarks on the meaning of aesthetical words and our understanding of aesthetical judgments, and (2) remarks on aesthetic experience, i.e. on aesthetic disquiet/puzzlement and the satisfaction of it. As we saw, Wittgenstein tackles the issue of understanding aesthetic judgments from an anthropological and contextualist viewpoint: to understand the meaning of aesthetical words, we must describe a whole culture and the role that words occurring in aesthetic judgments play within such culture. "The words we call expressions of aesthetic judgment play a very complicated role, but a very definite role, in what we call a culture of a period. To describe their use or to describe what you mean by a cultured taste, you have to describe a culture. What we now call a cultured taste perhaps didn't exist in the Middle Ages. An entirely different game is played in different ages." (LC p.8). "What belongs to a language game is a whole culture. In describing musical taste you have to describe whether children give concerts, whether women do or whether men only give them, etc., etc." (*ib.*). Nothing of this is unexpected.

By contrast, aesthetic experience is presented and described in ways that are not entirely obvious. On the one hand we have disquiet, that consists in being affected by certain sequences of sounds, or of pictures, or words. We

feel that something is wrong. Such disquiet cannot be assuaged by causal explanation; what is needed is comparison of a particular kind. "The sort of explanation one is looking for when one is puzzled by an aesthetic impression is not a causal explanation, not one corroborated by experience or by statistics as to how people react" (LC p.21).¹ "What we really want, to solve aesthetic puzzles, is certain comparisons – grouping together of certain cases" (LC p.29). On the other hand we have aesthetic satisfaction, occasionally accompanied by words of approval such as 'right' or 'correct'. When we are satisfied, it is as if something "clicked" (LC p. 19). "It is as though you needed some criterion, namely the clicking, to know the right thing has happened" (*ib.*). But the picture of something clicking, Wittgenstein says, is just a simile: "... really there is nothing that clicks or that fits anything" (*ib.*).

Finding that something is the right thing may come from having developed a *feeling for the rules* (LC p.5); it may consist in agreeing with someone about the right thing being right or correct. Wittgenstein describes the case of a tailor learning the rules of tailoring and developing sensitivity to such rules, whether he is just mechanically following them or he is interpreting them. Concerning the other case, he points out that correctness and agreement support each other:

"What is in my mind when I say so and so"? I write a sentence. One word isn't the one I need. I find the right word. "What it is I want to say? Oh yes. That is what I wanted." The answer in these cases is the one that satisfied you, e.g. someone says (as we often say in philosophy): "I will tell you what is at the back of your mind: ..." – "Oh yes, quite so." The criterion for it being the one that was in your mind is that when I tell you, you agree" (LC p.18).

The last quotation once more includes explicit mention of philosophy. Indeed, in the new method of philosophical analysis Wittgenstein adopted in the course of the Thirties, *agreement* plays a crucial role: agreement that arises – or rather, ought to arise – between the philosopher and his reader on the correctness or accuracy of the philosopher's description of a grammatical problem. "Indeed we can convict someone else of a mistake if he acknowledges that this really is the expression of his feeling.// ... If he (really) acknowledges this expression as the correct expression of his feeling [*Gefühls*]" (P p165).

The many sides of Wittgenstein's philosophical method (the "morphological method", so called) have been widely investigated and described (e.g. by Hacker, 2005); such descriptions will not be repeated here. However, a few aspects of the method are still to be clarified if we are to understand how deep the relation is of aesthetics and philosophy, according to Wittgenstein.

4. Wittgenstein insists that "philosophy is a struggle against the bewitchment of our understanding by the resources of our language" (PI 109). One consequence is that the philosopher is not to introduce a new language, a technical language, to face philosophical problems. To dissolve philosophical disquiet deriving from misunderstanding our own rules, he is only to employ the language that is already in use. The difficulty a philosopher has to face is the following: on the one hand, "The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity" (PI 129 /CV p.39). On the

other, it is thanks to such familiarity that the comparative activity that is grammatical analysis can be successful: "And this is what the solution of all philosophical difficulties looks like. Their answers, if they are correct, must be homespun and ordinary." (P p.167). To get out of the *impasse*, philosophers must develop a kind of talent, a special ability: "The capacity [the talent] for philosophy consists in the ability to receive a strong and lasting impression from a grammatical fact" (P p.183). Like the man "who is not used to searching in the forest for flowers, berries, or plants, will not find any because his eyes are not trained to see them [*sein Auge ... nicht geschärft ist*]" (CV p.29) [...], "someone unpractised in philosophy passes by all the spots where difficulties are hidden in the grass, whereas someone who has practice will pause and *sense* [my italics] that there is a difficulty close by" (*ib.*). Like the tailor who has developed a feeling for rules (of tailoring) so that he can find the right cut, the philosopher has to develop a feeling for the rules of grammar that would enable him to "express all false thought processes" so characteristically that the reader will say, "Yes, that's exactly the way I meant it" (P p.165). He has "to make a tracing of the physiognomy of every error" (*ib.*). This is what might be called the *aesthetic commitment* of this kind of philosophical analysis: the *peculiar sensitivity* or *receptivity* the philosopher has to achieve to have insights into the workings of our language (PI 109), to receive impressions from the labyrinth of paths our language consists in (PI 203). To be sure, this disposition to receive strong and lasting impressions from grammatical facts comes from the hard work of ploughing through the whole language (P p.195). "When you are philosophizing – Wittgenstein tells us – you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there" (CV p.65). Moreover, since a philosophical problem "always has the form: 'I simply don't know my way about'" (P p.181/ PI 123), it is of the utmost importance that one can "depict[ing] anomalies precisely" (CV p.72); "If you cannot do it – Wittgenstein declares – that shows you do not know your way around the concepts" (*ib.*).

By making the most of the aesthetic commitment of Wittgenstein's philosophical analysis, we can also understand the new ideal of correctness he formed in connection with his new method. It is an ideal that has nothing to do with logical exactness (PI 88,89), while it is related to the search for the right word in poetry. As the philosopher "ought to be no more than a mirror, in which [the] reader can see his own thinking with all its deformities so that, helped in this way, he can put it right" (CV p.18), an important part of her work should consist in the choice of the right words, "because only the exactly aimed thought can lead to the correct track" (P p.165). Wittgenstein can be entirely explicit about the relation of philosophy to poetry: "I think I summed up my attitude to philosophy when I said: philosophy ought really to be written only as a *poetic composition* (*Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten*)." (CV p.24) . An then he adds: "It must ... be possible to gather from this how far my thinking belongs to the present, future or past. For I was thereby revealing myself as someone who cannot quite do what he would like to be able to do" (*ib.*).

Recalling the origin of Wittgenstein's morphological method, should we see this as promoting some version of the Romantic (indeed, Goethian) ideal of depicting the secret laws of Nature in the forms of poetry?² Surely not. Wittgenstein was critical of Goethe's illusion that a scientific theory of colors could be produced just by describing

relations among colors. Aesthetic commitment cannot ground knowledge that would reveal new facts and respond, one way or another, to the world out there. It can only be an ingredient of the kind of conceptual analysis that, like Wittgenstein's, intends to put in order the rules we gave ourselves but in which we have become entangled. In this kind of analysis, one might say, we are only responsible to ourselves, or at the most to those who agree with us and, in this sense, share our community of thought.

Endnotes

¹ "You could say: 'An aesthetic explanation is not a causal explanation'" (LC p.18).

² On these themes, see Richards 2002 and Steuer 2006.

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