

Wittgenstein on aesthetics and philosophy

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Wittgenstein on Aesthetics and Philosophy

by Severin Schroeder (University of Reading)

1. Wittgenstein's objections to scientific aesthetics

For a short period of time in 1912, Wittgenstein tried to apply experimental psychology to aesthetics. With his friend David Pinsent he experimented on the perception of musical rhythm, trying to ascertain under what circumstances a regular sequence of beats, such as of a metronome, was heard as accentuated (McGuinness 1988, 127-8). 'Useless experiments' he called them later in a 1933 lecture (*ML* 363), and continued to explain what is wrong with the idea of aesthetics as a branch of psychology. The same lines of criticism recur in his 1938 lectures on aesthetics. The following are Wittgenstein's three main objections.

(i) Scientific aesthetics is typically motivated by a striving for objective standards of aesthetic quality. Dissatisfied with the permanent disagreement among our subjective preferences, people hope that somehow scientific research might find some general principles to prove some aesthetics judgements true and others false (Shimamura 2011, 4). Such an idea of aesthetics as a science telling us what's beautiful, what we should like, Wittgenstein thought 'almost too ridiculous for words' (*LC* 11).

How should psychology be able to establish such standards of taste? In its crudest form, the psychological approach to aesthetics simply investigates what the majority of people like. Thus, Gustav Theodor Fechner (1876), one of the pioneers of psychological aesthetics studied people's aesthetic responses to different kinds of rectangles. His experiments seemed to show that the most beautiful rectangles, those that the majority of people found pleasing, were those constructed according to the Golden Section, a ratio already known and used in antiquity.¹ However, more recent studies failed to confirm Fechner's results. Holger Höge (1997) found that preference ranking varied considerably according to the experimental method used (e.g. whether subjects were asked to draw rectangles or to sort them), but either way, no clear preference for the Golden Section could be found.² But even if there *was* a majority preference for

¹ The ratio of the Golden Section is: a (longer side) : b (shorter side) = $(a + b) : a \approx 1.61803$.

² In fact, in another study of 'experimental rectangle aesthetics', Chris McManus found that 'population preferences were small in comparison with individual variation' (McManus 1980, 522). In other words, even for very simple geometric shapes different people have strikingly different aesthetic preferences. But if there is no agreement at the most elementary geometric level, it is hard to see how such experiments could provide us with any guide to the assessment of more complicated aesthetic arrangements, especially

rectangles with the Golden Section ratio, why should that impress those who prefer their rectangles to have different ratios?

Moving from simple geometry to art, the American psychologist Colin Martindale found that his undergraduates quite liked academic painters such as William-Adolphe Bouguereau and Lawrence Alma-Tadema, and concluded that these painters' low esteem in the art world must be down to snobbery and prejudice (Martindale 1998, 146). In other words, Martindale suggested that popular vote rather than expert critique was to be the criterion of aesthetic quality. By the same token, it would appear that kitschy puppies and sunsets on porcelain plates are likely to be esteemed as the finest paintings, while soppy soap operas may be acknowledged to be the most admirable dramatic art.

Again, the obvious response to such a view is this: why should it matter to me how many of Martindale's students, or the general public, enjoy Bouguereau? Obviously I don't need psychologists to tell me what I myself like, nor should I be so weak-minded as to make my liking dependent on the agreement of the majority. And if I don't like Bouguereau, what does it profit me to be told that, say, 73% of the population do?

Hume suggested that instead of following the majority we derive a standard of taste from the verdict of ideally perceptive and well-educated people. That is half sensible, half mistaken. If you are interested in a certain art form you are indeed well advised to listen to a discerning connoisseur of that kind of art, but it is mistaken to expect such a critic to prove to you that you should care for that art form or genre, with its implicit conventions, in the first place. Sancho's kinsman (in Hume's story) can convince us that the wine from a certain hogshead tastes slightly of leather, but he cannot convince us to care for wine, rather than beer, or to accept the conventional standards of the oenological community regarding a hint of leather.

(ii) In order to compare and rank works of very different kinds, or even of different art forms one would need some external measure, which is typically taken to be the pleasure (or some other positive psychological effect) produced by an aesthetic experience. This hedonist instrumentalism, implicit in many attempts to put aesthetics on a psychological footing, is also rejected by Wittgenstein. Artistic value is not instrumental value, a capacity to produce independently identifiable – and scientifically

as such arrangements in painting are hardly ever a matter of pure geometry, but tend to involve reference to things beyond the canvas. Thus, Flip Phillips *et al.* had to admit that 'applying a metric to beauty' was seriously impeded by, what they called, 'connotative properties of artwork' (Phillips *et al.* 2010, 269).

measurable – psychological effects. ‘The work of art does not seek to convey *something else*, just itself’ (*CV* 67). Unlike a tin opener, a car or an aspirin, a work of art is not to be regarded as a means to an end. Rather, it is appreciated for its own sake.³

(iii) Psychologists do not only investigate what most people like, but also which characteristics cause them to like or dislike something. Such research can undoubtedly be worthwhile, but it is not what interests us in aesthetics or art criticism. As Arnold Isenberg puts it:

when we ask [somebody] as a critic “why he likes the object Y,” we want him to give us some reason to like it too and are not concerned with the causes of what we may so far regard as his bad taste. [Isenberg 1949, 158]

Aesthetic discourse is concerned with reasons, rather than causes (*LC* 21); with justification relative to the internal standards of an artistic practice, rather than with a genetic account of what caused us to have those standards in the first place (*ML* 360) and with explanations that (re-)describe and clarify our impressions (*ML* 356, 361; *LC* 20, 29).⁴

2. Wittgenstein’s conception of aesthetics

At the centre of Wittgenstein’s account of aesthetics lies the notion of a ‘cultured taste’ (*LC* 8). This need not be a taste in art. One of Wittgenstein’s key examples is sartorial: ‘a person who knows a lot about suits’ and is able to tell a tailor exactly which cut, length and material he thinks right (*LC* 5-7). A *cultured taste*, or serious aesthetic appreciation, has three characteristics:

- (i) It is informed by an uncommonly detailed knowledge of its subject matter, a keen awareness of particulars and nuances that others might overlook (*LC* 7).
- (ii) It is based on (though not fully determined by) a loose set of conventional rules (*LC* 5).
- (iii) It manifests a certain consistency of judgement (*LC* 6).

Whereas Hume, Kant, and many others were anxious to free aesthetic judgements as much as possible from the contingencies of their cultural context,

³ For further discussion, see Schroeder 2017a, 616-18.

⁴ For some further discussion of Wittgenstein’s objections to scientific aesthetics, see Schroeder 2017b.

Wittgenstein, on the contrary, urges that these contingencies are of paramount importance. Social conventions, fashions, ideological background and temperamental inclinations should not be regarded as distorting influences, but as the necessary underpinnings of any serious aesthetic appreciation. What gives substance and significance to our appreciation of art, what makes it more than a superficial liking, is the way it is anchored in a specific culture, a way of life defined by its customs and manners, its moral values, its religious and political beliefs. Hence the ideal of a timelessly valid aesthetic judgement, cut loose from all its cultural moorings, doesn't make any sense. In the same way, the proper appreciation of a bespoke suit is inseparable from the sensitivities of a culture in which suits are worn and seen as a manifestation of social respectability, and where small differences in material, colour and fit are noticed with approval or disapproval. To somebody from a different culture with very different sartorial customs a European three-piece suit may look exotically charming or beautiful, but such a person would be unable seriously to appreciate it (*cf. LC 8-9*).

Needless to say that our societies are not homogenous, but harbour a great variety of life styles, moral, political, and religious views, and so there co-exist many different cultured tastes, which one may explore and cultivate according to one's personal preferences and inclinations. Aesthetics is concerned with questions of right and wrong, better or worse (*LC 3*) — but only relative to the rules and standards of given cultured taste, which one is free to adopt or to ignore.

More specifically, Wittgenstein describes aesthetics as concerned with aesthetic explanations of either an educational or a clarificatory nature.

Educational aesthetic explanations are to give others a better understanding of a work of art, guiding them to look at it in the right way, to see what is essential. Common examples are interpretations of works of literature which do not normally go beyond the contents of the work.⁵ Rather, they summarize and re-describe those contents in an illuminating way by relating them to the work's major themes (*cf. Lamarque & Olsen, 1994, 259-61*).

Clarificatory aesthetic explanations are attempts to remove some sort of puzzlement about one's aesthetic impressions. Perhaps the simplest kind of case is that something, say, a musical phrase, strikes you as a familiar gesture or movement, reminds you of something — but you cannot say of what (*LC 19*). You may then be satisfied by lighting

⁵ The widespread idea that literary interpretations should result in some sort of new message applies only in rather exceptional cases, such as allegories or *romans à clef* (*cf. Schroeder 2001*).

on the comparison with the move from a premise to a conclusion (*LC* 37). Sometimes, however, it is exactly the experienced aptness of such a comparison or metaphor that seems to call out for an explanation. If, for example, Tchaikovsky's Sixth Symphony strikes me as pretentious, I may wonder how it can do so: how it can make an impression of promising more than it delivers (cf. Isenberg 1952). A satisfactory explanation may then point to certain phrases whose dramatic character does not fit well into their context: does not follow well, according to the rules of the classical style, from what goes before and is not satisfactorily developed in what follows.

Wittgenstein emphasises two characteristics of aesthetic explanations (of either kind): First, they are further descriptions or poignant synoptic representations of aspects of a work, often making use of telling comparisons (*ML* 361; *LC* 20, 29). Secondly, the criterion of success of an aesthetic explanation is that it satisfies the addressee (by making them see the point of something or by removing a prior puzzlement) (*ML* 357, 367; *LC* 18-19).

3. Aesthetics & Philosophy

Wittgenstein remarked repeatedly that there was a striking similarity between aesthetics and philosophy. Moore reports that in Wittgenstein's 1933 lectures, 'he said that the same sort of "reasons" [as in Aesthetics] were given, not only in Ethics, but also in Philosophy' (*M* 106). And in 1937 Wittgenstein was struck by:

The queer resemblance between a philosophical investigation (perhaps especially in mathematics) and one in aesthetics. (E.g. what is bad about this garment, how it should be, etc..) [*CV* 29]

In 1949 he singled out aesthetic and conceptual questions as the only ones that 'really grip him' (*CV* 91).

Some similarities between Wittgenstein's accounts of aesthetics and philosophy are indeed obvious.

(i) Aesthetic questions arise on the background of a developed taste that essentially involves *rules* (whose importance is emphasised in the 1938 lectures: *LC* 5-7); likewise, the subject matter of philosophy, i.e. conceptual analysis, is the rule-governed system of our language.

(ii) In both areas, an investigation is occasioned by a *disquiet* or *puzzlement*, or at least a felt lack of understanding, which need to be cured or resolved. Our efforts should always be focused on specific problems. Wittgenstein has no time for systematic theory building, independent of a particular explanatory need.

(iii) In both areas, Wittgenstein emphasises that the temptation to give *causal* explanations must be resisted. They would by-pass our conceptual or aesthetic problems.

(iv) Rather, in these areas, what we need are further descriptions, reminders of what we already know, *synoptic representations* (*PI* §122), and illuminating *comparisons* (*RPP I* §1000). No new discoveries are to be expected, rather a new arrangement of familiar things is to change the way we look at them (*PI* §126; *LC* 28).

The philosopher says “Look at things *like this!*” ... [*CV* 70]

All that Aesthetics does is to draw your attention to things: e.g. “This is a climax”. It places things side by side: e.g. this prepares the way for that. [*ML* 356]

One may indeed wonder if this is just a similarity or if it is not simply a matter of aesthetics being a branch of philosophy. *Are* aesthetic questions not conceptual questions? Not exactly. Wittgenstein’s lectures on aesthetics are of course a contribution to philosophical aesthetics, but the aesthetic questions and explanations he describes in those lectures do not have the generality of philosophy; they are about specific aesthetic experiences: personal responses to particular works of art. Aesthetic discourse has an essential indexicality, which has been well explained in Isenberg’s perceptive essay ‘Critical Communication’ (1949). The reasons we can give for aesthetic judgments can never be entirely separated from the particularity of the work in question. When, for example, praise of El Greco’s *The Burial of Count Orgaz* is supported by reference to ‘a steeply rising and falling curve’ made by the contours of the figures depicted that specific quality cannot be captured by the words alone, but must be perceived in the painting. For, obviously, not every steeply rising and falling curve is as impressive as this one. The critic’s meaning must, so to speak, be filled in by the act of perception (Isenberg 1949, 162-3).

Many problems in philosophical aesthetics are generalisations of problems individuals have encountered vis-à-vis some particular works of art, for example, the

search for an explanation of the emotional expressiveness of instrumental music or the question of why we are not upset by the representation of sorrowful or terrible events on stage. And arguably it is exactly that generalisation — abstracting from particular works and individual sensitivities — that makes such philosophical questions unanswerable. What explains *your* responses to the kinds of music and tragedy you appreciate will probably not explain *my* somewhat different responses to somewhat different works (see Schroeder 2017a, 623-6).

So, aesthetics as art criticism (and discussion of other specific aesthetic phenomena) cannot be subsumed under philosophy, but only resemble it. However, what seems to speak against the likening of philosophical to aesthetic explanations is that whereas, on Wittgenstein's account, the latter are correct when they satisfy us — they are essentially subjective —, one wants to protest that in analytic philosophy: right is *not* simply whatever seems right to me.

The way to resolve this tension is to consider that philosophy, as conceived by Wittgenstein, has two parts. Usually, when we encounter a philosophical problem (in an academic book or article) it comes together with an attempted answer: a philosophical theory. We rarely discuss philosophical problems afresh and in isolation; we are almost always concerned with the assessment of various existing answers to a given problem.

These existing answers or philosophical theories are, according to Wittgenstein, just subtle forms of nonsense (*PI* §119). Hence, philosophical investigation is to a large extent concerned with showing the flaws and inconsistencies in some given philosophical picture or theory. Thus, in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein occupies himself at some length with the dismantling of his own earlier philosophical theory about language, and later in the book he attacks a certain very natural and very common conception of psychological words (which is, roughly speaking, Cartesian dualism). This critical and destructive part of philosophy (*PI* §118) is markedly different from an investigation in aesthetics, though it would resemble the critical discussion of a theory in philosophical aesthetics. It consists in finding flaws that are not just a matter of personal dissatisfaction, but breaches of logic and patent empirical falsehood.

However, once this negative task has been done, we get back to the original problem and try to resolve it in a way that eschews the temptation to concoct another nonsensical philosophical theory. Instead we are to look for synoptic representations of the relevant aspects of our grammar; or for some persuasive comparisons with other

phenomena that help to make the puzzling one appear less puzzling. This is the part of philosophy that resembles aesthetics.

For instance, Wittgenstein shows convincingly that linguistic meaning cannot be explained as being due to mental acts of meaning something accompanying speech. That theory out of the way, there appears to remain a puzzle, namely what to make of the phenomenon of experiencing the meaning of a word in an instant. When Wittgenstein grapples with this phenomenon in the late 40s, the ‘queer resemblance’ with an aesthetic investigation is fairly obvious. He is, for the most part, not concerned with the demolition of any philosophical theories, but trying to dispel an abiding sense of puzzlement. And what he is casting around for are comparisons that would put the phenomenon of experiences of meaning into a perspective where it no longer appears baffling. — Here is a perplexing phenomenon (encountered when thinking about conceptual relations) that is very much like an aesthetic experience we don’t fully understand; and the attempts to dissolve the perplexity are markedly similar to what cures an aesthetic problem.

Consider two classical philosophical problems that Wittgenstein touched upon, but that have been given a more systematic treatment and solution along Wittgensteinian lines by Peter Strawson, namely: the problem of induction and the problem of free will.

How can it be rational to accept a conclusion that is not entailed by the premises; that for all one knows may turn out to be false? As Strawson explains, the paradoxical appearance that it is ultimately irrational to trust induction is due to an unreasonable fixation with deduction as the paradigm of rationality and hence an inclination to see induction as only a defective variant of deduction (Strawson 1952, 250). He poignantly compares the question whether induction is rational to the question ‘Is the law legal?’, for —:

to ask whether it is reasonable to place reliance on inductive procedure is like asking whether it is reasonable to proportion the degree of one’s convictions to the strength of the evidence. Doing this is what ‘being reasonable’ *means* in such a context. [Strawson 1952, 257]

To my mind, Strawson’s discussion is an exemplary piece of philosophical analysis that conclusively dissolves the Humean puzzlement about induction. And yet not all readers

seem to be entirely satisfied by it. In some of them the Humean puzzlement stubbornly resists Strawson's explanations (e.g., Stroud 1977, 64-7; Dancy 1985, 203-5).

Again, it has been a perennial source of philosophical puzzlement how our concepts of freedom and responsibility can remain applicable in the light of causal determinism. And again, Peter Strawson has provided a perceptive and convincing analysis to dissolve the puzzle in his famous essay 'Freedom and Resentment' (1962).⁶ Yet again, it appears that not everybody's disquiet about determinism could be laid to rest by Strawson's analysis. The quasi hypnotic power of the idea that our actions have causal antecedents beyond our control is nicely illustrated by the way Galen Strawson's 'The Impossibility of Moral Responsibility' (1994) shows this philosopher to be quite impervious to the force of his father's arguments.

Such familiar examples of continuing philosophical disagreement as to whether a proposed conceptual analysis can be regarded as the solution to a philosophical problem lend further support to Wittgenstein's view of philosophy as interestingly similar to aesthetics. It is fairly obvious that our aesthetic impressions can differ widely, and with them our sense of what aspects of our experiences need explaining and what then we regard as a satisfactory explanation. It is less obvious — and perhaps more frustrating — that in philosophy too our disagreements may not just be due to remediable mistakes and confusions, but also to insuperable differences in our subjective responses: in what we find puzzling and in need of explanation and in what we regards as a solution to a philosophical problem.

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⁶ Just as Strawson's analysis of the problem of induction develops ideas that are laconically indicated by Wittgenstein, e.g. in *PI* §481, the key idea of 'Freedom and Resentment' is already hinted at in Wittgenstein's 1947 remark: 'Denying responsibility means, not *holding* anyone responsible' (*CV* 73).

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