

Wittgenstein on übersichtliche Darstellung and Gaining Clarity

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Abstract: *The article discusses what the later Wittgenstein calls übersichtliche Darstellung together with his view on art. It argues that Wittgenstein does not develop an aesthetic theory and shows how understanding art is akin to conducting a philosophical investigation and expressing a form of life.*

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Just what Wittgenstein's aesthetics is has long been a puzzling issue. But this well might be one of those issues that are insufferably easy to answer. For the question behind it might be based on a misunderstanding. If so, then giving an answer would of course consist making the issue disappear by opening that misunderstanding to clear view.

It might be trite to say that being generally skeptical of philosophy as theory, Wittgenstein is of course *ipso facto* skeptical of the very idea of aesthetics as a specific type of philosophical theory. But what can aesthetics, if not a subdivision of philosophy? But what is more, I believe that Wittgenstein's skepticism about aesthetics is so radical that in a sense there is, strictly speaking, *nothing* that can be properly called 'Wittgenstein's aesthetics'. And that this is not necessarily a bad thing. Without making any

essentialist presuppositions about the nature of aesthetics as a theoretical endeavor, there manifestly are different, non-aesthetic, but perfectly meaningful ways of speaking about those phenomena and experiences that we usually call ‘art’, ‘beauty’, ‘judgment’, and the suchlike. And Wittgenstein seems to be arguing that at least some of them are decisively more adequate to what they speak about than what generally passes for aesthetics.

At the same time, paradoxically, Wittgenstein’s thought seems to stand in a broad tradition that places what we are used to call – for want of another word – ‘the aesthetic’ at the heart of thinking itself. This strand of thought obviously includes Kant and post-Kantian German idealism and romanticism, but not only. To put it succinctly yet roughly, for philosophers who belong here, ‘the aesthetic’ is by no means a side affair akin to the fine embellishment provided by a nice yet not quite necessary diversion – to the contrary, it is (in one way or another) crucial for the structure of possible experience, of understanding as such, or, in other versions, for the structure of logic and metaphysics. The early Wittgenstein has his own notorious formulation of the thing in that obscure pronouncement: “aesthetics is transcendental” (*TLP*, 6.421). Here, aesthetics is on par with ethics *and* logic.

In this short essay, I am going to focus on the thought of the so-called later Wittgenstein. In some of the most oft-quoted remarks in what came to be known as *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (*Culture and Value*), he confesses:

I may find scientific questions interesting, but they never really grip me. Only *conceptual* and *aesthetic* questions do that. At bottom I am indifferent to the solution of scientific problems; but not the other sort. (*CV*, p. 79)

This oft quoted reflection can throw light on much of Wittgenstein’s writing during and after the 1930s. What is the deep grip of aesthetic questions? And, given the misgivings about the notion, in what sense are they *aesthetic*? To flesh this out,

let us look at a longer passage about how Wittgenstein sees the difference between scientific and conceptual inquiry:

It is all one to me whether or not the typical western scientist understands or appreciates my work, since he will not in any case understand the spirit in which I write. Our civilization is characterized by the word ‘progress’. ... It is occupied with building an ever more complicated structure. And even clarity is sought only as a means to this end, not as an end in itself. For me, on the contrary, clarity, perspicuity [*Durchsichtigkeit*] are valuable in themselves.

I am not interested in constructing a building, so much as in having a perspicuous [*durchsichtig*] view of the foundations of possible buildings. (*CV*, p. 7)

Wittgenstein is not interested in so-called cumulative knowledge with its claims to advancement: scientific, technological, or cultural. What he cares about has a transcendental air to it – gaining a view of the conditions of possibility of insight. And in connection to it, we are introduced to the notion of *Dursichtigkeit* (openness to viewing through), a precursor – albeit of slightly different meaning – to the pivotal notion of *Übersichtlichkeit* (openness to overview) we know from *Philosophical Investigations*, §122.

Manifestly, it is primacy of the search for clarity that brings together ‘conceptual’ and ‘aesthetic’ inquiry; moreover, clarity holds a fundamental status that can be viewed as the legacy of the transcendental status of logic and aesthetics from the *Tractatus*. This clarity thesis might look trivial, but it is not *entirely* so. For even though we talk of clarity in both logical form and artistic presentation, we are accustomed to considering the two as same in name only. But the mysterious (even “mystical”) connection (even “identity”) Wittgenstein first saw early on between logical and aesthetic clarity is not thrown away in his subsequent thinking. Thus, in the *Bemerkungen* he also says that there is a

“queer resemblance between a philosophical investigation and an aesthetic one” (*CV*, p. 25).

So, we should enlarge upon the clarity thesis. For Wittgenstein, at least part of the goal of both philosophical reflection and ‘aesthetic’ contemplation is to extract us from confusion by laying out things in an order that makes them intelligible, or by crafting ordered images that do as much. What is more, the achievement of both activities brings with itself a certain experience, which could with perhaps improper approximation be called ‘existential’. Or: intimately related to what one feels as the foundation of one’s form of life. Unlike with your typical aesthetic theory, it is an experience not so much of pleasure, as of deep tranquility. For the problems that have been troubling us are resolved. This position is of course not unheard-of: think about the aesthetic theories of the young Schelling or Schopenhauer, the latter of whom Wittgenstein knew very well.

However, we need to say more about the nature of the clarity that is at stake in Wittgenstein’s case. This, I shall argue, is something that should be understood in terms of the abovementioned notion of *übersichtliche Darstellung*, usually translated into English as ‘perspicuous presentation’. It seems that the first formulation of that notion is in a paragraph from the notes on Frazer (*PO*, p. 132-133), later included with some modification in *PI*, §122, which runs as follows:

A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of [*nicht übersehen*] the use of our words. — Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity [*Übersichtlichkeit*]. A perspicuous representation [*Die übersichtliche Darstellung*] produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connexions’. Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate cases.

The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account

[*Darstellungsform*] we give, the way we look at things.

Even though this one of the most important and well-known paragraphs of the *Investigation*, the idea has proven hard to grasp and explicate. As commentators have pointed out, one important reason is that Wittgenstein hardly enlarges on it in his published writings or *Nachlass*. As it is, the idea has proven as elusive as it is pivotal.

In one of the most extensive, influential, yet controversial accounts, Hacker (2005) has attempted to explain perspicuous presentation as a comprehensive description or tabulation of the grammar of a certain expression. Among the less commented features in his analysis is that Hacker has interestingly identified significant similarities between Wittgenstein's approach and that of Goethe's morphological method in natural science (Hacker, 2005, p. 315-317). He admits that apart from the structural similarities, there is no direct textual evidence for this reading, but aptly recalls that Wittgenstein was extensively familiar with and greatly admired Goethe, and not only for the latter's literary work.

I believe Hacker's analogy is heuristically powerful, actually more so than his overall interpretation of perspicuity as comprehensive tabulation. But it overlooks some important features of Goethe's approach that can throw a nice light of what Wittgenstein seems to getting at. Among them is that Goethe's method involves not only comparison and variation, but also presupposes something like *seeing* the morphologically related phenomena *together in one* structure or image. That seems to be the reason Goethe calls this unified structure or image an 'idea' (e.g. *G*, p. 20, 69, 74-75). The idea is one version the so-called *Urphänomen* – something that the researcher is supposed to make appear in front of her or him in diverse fields ranging from optics to plant and animal morphology.

Back to Wittgenstein's notion of surveying, it also clearly

involves a certain kind of seeing. The various English translations might obscure that fact. A clumsy, yet I believe correct and useful literal rendering of *übersichtliche Darstellung* would be *overseeable laying-out*. And given the contexts of the expression, we have no reasons to believe that Wittgenstein is using ‘seeing’ in any importantly metaphorical way. A set of connections, a picture, a landscape are perspicuous if they can be clearly seen over in one, synoptic look. A side corollary of this reading is that it gives reasons to doubt Hacker’s interpretation, for the activity of comprehensively tabulating manifestly involves a type of explanation that is to a much greater degree discursive. But as we shall later see, there is an even stronger argument, for in a strict sense *übersichtliche Darstellung* is not supposed to give *any* explanation *at all*.

Herein lies an important difference, for Goethe’s *Urphänomen* or *Idee* is intended to have explanatory power for science. Moreover, in contrast to Goethe’s proto-Hegelian vision, Wittgenstein’s perspicuous presentation is not something akin to Hegel’s so-called ‘concrete universal’. For Goethe often explained what he called the ‘idea’ as something containing all particular instances of the phenomena under consideration. As such, the idea, naturally, is a universal, albeit one that can be seen or at least intuited. In contrast, Wittgenstein’s *übersichtliche Darstellung* seems to be a particular image or picture that, in spite of its particularity, bears some characteristically revelatory or illuminating traits. Or, it might be a clearly surveyable set or structure of such particulars allowing us to “*see connections*” (again, *PI*, §122).

But in addition to the emphasis on seeing, there is a broader, yet I believe illuminating similarity between Goethe’s and Wittgenstein’s overall attitudes to investigation. As is attested in many texts from his youth to his old age, Goethe did not envision his work as a writer as radically or specifically different from that

as a scientist. He saw the two as interrelated parts of the endeavor to understand nature, both outside us and within us, between which he saw a continuity. This can be plainly read in his 1798 poem “The Metamorphosis of Plants” (one that Hacker 2005 quotes), as well as in his late conversations with Eckermann. So Goethe was not one to subscribe to that notorious division between the ‘two cultures’ – one literary and humanist, the other scientist and naturalist – which in his time was only starting to distinctly emerge.

Things with Wittgenstein are more complicated, as he was early on conscious of precisely that widening gap. This is evident in his many dismissive remarks regarding the course taken by the science of his day, one of which I quoted above. At the same time, we have also seen that he sensed a similarity between philosophical investigations – which are supposedly relevant for science, among other things – and investigations of art. However, the gap is still manifest in that he does not talk of identity, but rather of a *queer* resemblance.

Hacker is not blind to this ‘aesthetic’ dimension of Wittgenstein’s thought. He relates clear *Darstellung* to the wonder at beauty. However, he does not give us any clue as to the relevance of wonder to grammar, which latter ultimately remains what is important to him. In a more recent paper, Savickey (2014) has made a better job of integrating the ‘aesthetic’ aspect, arguing that perspicuously presenting does not aim at achieving something final and hard set, but is always a dynamic process akin to presentation or play (*Spiel*) in theater. She furthermore has shown how kind of activity is not something that merely embellishes life, but can be quite fundamental, in that it expresses the inner character of a form of life. However, I think that although she gives a good lead, her focus on gestures and theatre gives somewhat narrows down the perspective on what is involved here.

In *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein writes:

People nowadays think that scientists exist to instruct them, poets, musicians, etc. to give them pleasure. The idea that *these have something to teach them* – that does not occur to them. (*CV*, p. 36)

This is remarkable. Wittgenstein questions the intuition that we cannot learn anything significant from what artists do. Thus in effect he questions a fundamental intuition about the very nature of learning something, i.e. of knowledge. Apparently there can be knowledge in art. But we need to be careful here. Wittgenstein is not implying that works of art should contain (encoded inside them) something akin to scientific theory. It seems that the knowledge offered by the arts is not of the type of that provided by the sciences. It is not a *theory*. But neither is Wittgenstein ‘aestheticising’ knowledge or the approach to understanding nature. He is not suggesting that scientific research should in any way be artistic. Actually, as I suggested in the beginning, he is ‘de-aestheticizing’ the arts. By suggesting that arts can bestow upon us some type of knowledge, he *both* criticizes the narrow scientist view of cognition, *and* questions the intuition that the ultimate significance of the arts is to provide us with a type of (sophisticated) pleasure.

Regarding the anti-theoretical aspect of the above remark, let us recall the original context for introducing *übersichtliche Dartellung*. In that passage, what Wittgenstein was arguing against was precisely Frazer’s *theoretical* presuppositions that made him *unable to see* just what is involved in the rituals he theorized about. Supposedly, if, instead of theorizing about them, we presented those rituals clearly and perspicuously, we would be able to see them as manifesting forms of life, systems of beliefs, sets of practices endowed with significance. In addition what irritated Wittgenstein the most was Frazer’s overall outlook: not only the particular theoretical explanations he gave to specific rituals, but the overall interpretative tactic of seeing old ritual as

some kind of primitive, naïve, under-developed theory (*PO*, p. 118-127, 152-153). Thus Frazer's error is ultimately not one of interpretation, but rather more fundamental, one having to do with his basic categories and intuition. With these rituals, one should not attempt to *explain*, but merely *describe*, an idea that again is famously reprised at a crucial place in the *Investigations*: "We must do away with all *explanation*, and description alone must take its place" (*PI*, §109).

In a similar vein, Wittgenstein seems to be making the effort for opening a view at natural beauty and art from an angle usually obscured by aesthetics as a theoretical discipline. This view seems to have something in common with the correct, atheoretical view of ritual he tried to articulate in the *Remarks on Frazer*. What is more, this is a view aiming to make us see the connection between understanding art and beauty, on one hand, and understanding in general, on the other. As he wrote in the *Investigations*:

Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a theme in music than one may think. What I mean is that understanding a sentence lies nearer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a musical theme. (*PI*, §527)

Just as philosophy cannot legitimately build a theory of art, so art cannot and should not be expected to give us a theory of life. When correctly understood, it can give us a picture, a way of seeing, which is so much as to say – an expression of a form of life. So *Darstellung* is no *Vorstellung* – not a representation that gives an image of a reality exterior to it. It is an expression, i.e. part of that reality, but one that paradigmatically or characteristically *embodies* it.

As Savickey has pointed out, art also is manifestly an activity of *darstellen*, of presenting or laying out (Savickey, 2014, pp. 111 ff.). Conversely, the experience of beauty involves synoptically overviewing what has been laid out before us. This

is not primarily something geared towards producing a feeling, but again an activity that as such corresponds to an ability. The ability to present and overview is inherent both in creating and in experiencing beauty. In this way, creating a perspicuous presentation of a grammatical problem and understanding it are akin to crafting and understanding a work of art.

To clearly lay out this standpoint, I think it is useful to recall an older understanding of art: art not as the citizen of the so-called ‘autonomous aesthetic domain’, but rather art as *craft*. An ability to be cultivated, yet with no fixed rules – just as Wittgenstein never formulates any fixed methods for achieving perspicuity about language. Again, artistic craft is not primarily ‘aesthetic’, not merely about a certain kind of sophisticated experience, appreciation, or judgment. It crafts tools: for orienting oneself and learning one’s way about, for gaining oversight, for achieving a clear understanding of – or within – a form of life. What such an interpretation involves can and must be fleshed out in much greater detail and richness, but this task cannot be fulfilled unless we throw out the theoretical presupposition that Wittgenstein is doing aesthetics.

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