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WITTGENSTEIN ON THE NATURE OF AESTHETIC REMARKS*

The origin and the primitive form of the language-game is a reaction; only from this can the more complicated forms grow.

Language - I want to say - is a refinement; 'in the beginning was the deed'.

Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*

1. Questions of art were of central concern to Wittgenstein. He wrote:

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 sort¹.

The reason for this, it appears, is that he saw a kinship between the philosophical understanding of a problem and the understanding of a work of art. Thus, in a notebook he wrote about

[t]he 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).

And in the manuscript *On Certainty* he remarked, in speaking about the difficulty of finding the right response to the philosophical sceptic:

We need to realize that what presents itself to us as the first expression of a difficulty, or of its solution, may as yet not be correctly expressed at all. Just as one who has a just censure

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¹Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Vermischte Bemerkungen / Culture and Value* (ed by G.H. von Wright in collaboration with Heikki Nyman), English translation by Peter Winch, Oxford 1980, p. 79. (I shall refer to this work by 'CV' and page number in the text.)

of a picture to make will often at first offer the censure where it does not belong, and an *investigation* is needed in order to find the right point of attack for the critic (§ 37).²

In Wittgenstein's view, philosophy, generally speaking, aims at a deepened understanding of things rather than at uncovering new information; this, evidently, is one important point of affinity between philosophical and artistic endeavour. In a remark from 1931, he compared philosophy to architecture (a form of creativity which he had himself engaged in when taking part in designing a house for his sister in Vienna in 1926-1928):

Working in philosophy - like work in architecture in many respects - is really more a working on oneself. On one's own understanding. On one's way of seeing things. (And what one demands of them.) (CV, p. 16³.)

Wittgenstein would discuss problems of aesthetics during his lectures at Cambridge in the 1930's, and at least three accounts of such lectures have been published.⁴ His writings contain several discussions or remarks with a bearing on the field. In 1977 there appeared a selection of his remarks on a variety of subjects under the title *Vermischte Bemerkungen* (translated into English as *Culture and Value*). This selection, which was made by G.H. von Wright, contains a great number of remarks on questions of art and on the work of individual artists.

In this essay, I wish to begin by making some general comments about Wittgenstein's views on aesthetics⁵; after that, I shall concentrate on a matter of central concern to him: his criticism of the attempt to assimilate aesthetic remarks to empirical hypotheses.

2. Wittgenstein never tried to define words like 'art', 'artistic value' or 'aesthetic quality'. This was in keeping with his aims in philosophy. He took it for granted that we are all familiar with these words and are able to use them in a variety of contexts. He wanted to reflect on the ways in which we speak about these matters and to warn of some misunderstandings to which we are prone in connection with them.

²L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. by G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, Oxford 1969.

³I have here deviated slightly from Winch's translation.

⁴G.E. Moore, 'Wittgenstein's Lectures in 1930-33', III, *Mind* 64 (1955), pp. 1-27; L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief* (ed. by C. Barrett), Berkeley and Los Angeles 1967; A. Ambrose (ed.), *Wittgenstein's Lectures, Cambridge 1932-1935*, Oxford 1979. (I shall refer to the first by 'Moore' and to the second by 'LC' and page number.)

⁵What to my knowledge is the most penetrating discussion of Wittgenstein's philosophy of art is to be found in two works by B.R. Tilghman, *But Is It Art?*, Oxford 1984, and *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics: The View from Eternity*, Albany 1991.

One of the most influential misunderstandings, according to Wittgenstein, is the notion that artistic activity is primarily to be understood as the attempt to create a work that will give *pleasure* to the audience; that this is its main reason for being (Moore, pp. 18 f; LC, Secs I-II). Concerning Tolstoy's theory that the work of art conveys 'a feeling' he wrote:

You might say: the work of art does not aim to convey *something else*, just itself. Just as, when I pay someone a visit, I don't just want to make him have feelings of such and such a sort; what I mainly want is to visit him, though of course I should like to be well received too (CV, p. 58).

And according to Moore's lecture notes, he said:

.. the fact that we go to see 'King Lear' by no means proves that that experience is agreeable ... even if it is agreeable, that fact 'is about the least important thing you can say about it' (p.18).

Instead of pleasure, Wittgenstein emphasized the role played by words like 'necessary', 'correct', and 'incorrect' in discussions about art. Concerning the way in which we understand a musical theme, he wrote:

'The repeat is *necessary*.' In what respect is it necessary? Well, sing it, and you will see that only the repeat gives it its tremendous power. - Don't we have an impression that a model for this theme already exists in reality and the theme only approaches it, corresponds to it, if this section is repeated? Or am I to utter the inanity: 'It just sounds more beautiful with the repeat?' (There you can see by the way what an idiotic role the word 'beautiful' plays in aesthetics.) (CV, p. 52. Cp. also p. 57.)⁶

According to Moore, he also said that a remark like 'That bass moves too much' is not concerned with human beings and their reactions, but is rather to be

⁶Wittgenstein was perhaps inclined to run together two ideas that should be kept apart, even if they are mutually connected in complex ways: the idea that the function of art is to produce pleasure, and the idea that beauty is the central category of aesthetic appraisal. When I call something beautiful (pleasant) or ugly (unpleasant) I am not necessarily reporting an actual feeling of pleasure or revulsion.

When we think it important that a funeral service should be beautiful, this expresses our reverence for the life of the deceased; it is connected with our effort to be fully attentive to the significance of the occasion. (The Swedish word 'andakt' is apposite for describing this attitude.)

For a different example, consider the role of beauty in mathematics; there it may even (as connected with simplicity) be internal to the issue of what is a good proof.

I believe the kind of importance beauty may have in art can be better understood by comparing it to these cases and many others. What the cases have in common is that, although we may strive for beauty in various connections, beauty (let alone pleasure) is usually not what the whole thing is about.

compared with a mathematical assertion, and that the solution to a problem in aesthetics is similar to the solution to a problem in mathematics (Moore, *ibid.*).

I believe the following line of thought can help us understand Wittgenstein's position. To reduce the question about the aesthetic merit of a work of art to a question of its ability to produce pleasure is to give a simplified, distorted view of the significance that art may have for us. What is being overlooked, generally speaking, is the sense in which one's responses to a work of art can be said to express an *understanding* of the work.

The significance of this is brought out by considerations like the following: we do not consider all reactions to a work of art equally significant, but rather they are subject to discussion and appraisal. This is seen by the extensive use we make of what might be called a cognitive vocabulary in discussing art appreciation. Thus, we may dismiss a specific response by saying that the person uttering it is 'insensitive' to the work, that he has 'missed the point' of it or does not 'understand' how it 'is to be heard (seen, read)'. It is generally assumed that a person's receptivity to art can be heightened by training or by his having works of art explained to him. Art, in our culture, is something to be taught: people may be instructed in painting, say, as well as in art appreciation. And this is closely connected with the essential part played by criticism in our thinking about art.

The way in which someone responds to a work of art can often be understood against the background of ways of relating to art that are shared by members of the culture to which he belongs, and these tend to be connected with general attitudes to life and general ways of thinking. On the other hand, we may find that some particular writer or composer no longer has anything to say to people living today. A closely connected thought is expressed in the following remark by Wittgenstein:

Compare a concept with a style of painting. For is even our style of painting arbitrary? Can we choose one at pleasure? (The Egyptian, for instance.) Is it a mere question of pleasing and ugly?⁷

I take these questions to be rhetorical; Wittgenstein is suggesting that choosing a style cannot be compared to a case in which one agrees to follow a certain convention; a style is not, in this sense, arbitrary. What limits our choice of style, however, is not the conditions of enjoyment, but rather the sorts of considerations that we might express by saying things like, 'this style no longer feels natural', 'this style has nothing to say to us', or 'we can no longer take this seriously'.

⁷L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford 1958, p. 230.

Another important dimension of aesthetic evaluation is the extent to which a work of art succeeds in being true to the artist's personality:

Every artist has been influenced by others and shows traces of that influence in his works: but his significance for us is nothing but *his* personality (CV, p. 23).

An important part of the process of learning artistic creativity, accordingly, is choosing or developing a style in which one's individuality will be able to express itself. Hence, too, questions of authenticity, of the honesty of the artist's performance, have a crucial role in art criticism.

This point could also be made by saying that the ways in which we relate to works of art and to artistic styles have a kinship with our ways of relating to the individual forms of expression of other people, to variations in human forms of conduct. In short: our ways of relating to works of art are significantly similar to the understanding of persons. (On this, cp. for instance CV, pp. 73, 75.)

4. Maybe one reason why in reflecting on aesthetic discourse we are inclined to emphasize pleasure and beauty and to overlook the importance of matters like understanding and correctness is that an emphasis on the former notions seems to be more in keeping with some other aspects of our attitude towards art. (What I say in this section is not based directly on remarks by Wittgenstein, although I believe it to be in agreement with things said by him.) It could be argued that the recipient of a work of art should ideally have what might be characterized as an open and personal attitude towards the work. She should be attentive to the particularity of each work she encounters, be prepared to let the work teach her what terms are relevant for expressing her understanding of it, rather than approach it with a set of ready-made criteria. Her critical judgments should also be true to the actual power of the work of art to move her, otherwise her preoccupation would be barren, even insincere.

These might be considered reasons for thinking that an approach to aesthetic matters that places an emphasis on what appear to be intellectual concepts does not, after all, do justice to the actual position that art occupies in our lives. The word 'understanding', we feel, has too coolly rational a ring to capture the warmth and the unpredictability of any authentic engagement with art. This is a mistake, however. What is involved in understanding something is not necessarily an intellectual relation, at least not on a narrow understanding of this word. The word 'understanding' in fact has a variety of uses: we might think about the ways in which we speak about understanding a person, a facial expression, a joke, etc. What these cases have in common, it

could perhaps be said, may simply be that we have what could in some sense be called a 'happy' response to the object in question. But what precisely this consists in varies from case to case. By a happy response I do not simply mean that we receive pleasure from the object of our response; in a given case, the fact that I am pleased might precisely show that I am not getting it. On the whole, what is important here is not the way I feel, but the fact that I am part of the situation, that I resonate to it.⁸

My laughing at a joke may show that I have understood it. But from the way I repeat the joke or explain it someone may decide that I did not really get the point. This probably means that my response to the joke was too crude; I did not realize that a more refined or imaginative joke lay hidden behind the joke I was responding to. This does not depend on the existence of any general rules determining when something is or is not funny. There are no such rules, and when I laugh, I do not laugh because I *know* the joke is funny; I simply respond to what is funny about it.

Now, Wittgenstein's conception of the understanding of art can perhaps be regarded along similar lines. In connection with the criticism he made of Tolstoy's theories of art, which I quoted before, he admits that the idea that the work of art conveys a feeling is correct in the sense that 'in so far as people understand it, they "resonate" to it, respond to it in the same way'. The error criticized by Wittgenstein is simply the thought that *pleasure* is the only relevant response to a work of art, or that it explains the value art has for us.

5. At the same time, Wittgenstein emphasizes that there are no determinate criteria of understanding a work of art:

... what is it to follow a musical phrase with understanding, or to play it with understanding? Don't look inside yourself. Consider rather what makes you say of *someone else* that this is what he is doing. And what prompts you to say that *he* is having a particular experience? For that matter, do we actually ever say this? Wouldn't I be more likely to say of someone else that he's having a whole host of experiences?

Perhaps I would say, 'He is experiencing the theme intensely'; but consider how this is manifested (CV, p. 51).

In many of the cases in which we use the word 'understanding' it is true that we expect those who have understood something to converge in the comments they make about it. But why should this always be the case? I wish to suggest that this need not be true in the case of understanding art. We can imagine a

⁸ Cp., in this connection, *Philosophical Investigations* §§ 527-533.

number of ways of giving verbal expression, say, to our understanding of a musical passage: one person may be inclined to describe it in emotive terms, someone else uses metaphors of nature, a third person uses ethical or linguistic concepts ('pure', 'courageous', 'spiritual', 'generous'; or, 'question and answer', 'argument', 'exhortation'), etc. These ways of responding do not necessarily conflict with one another: perhaps they can all be regarded as ways of understanding the same work. This does not mean that anything goes: we may, of course, say that some ways of commenting on a musical passage would betray a lack of sensitivity; however, what responses I would rule out cannot necessarily be inferred from the comments I make myself. In this respect, the logic of 'understanding a work of art' has a different structure from that of, say, 'making out what's in a photo' or 'interpreting an eyewitness report of an accident'.

II

6. I shall now turn to a discussion of the following thought, which Wittgenstein expresses or suggests in several places: a common way in which aesthetic remarks are misunderstood is to regard them as hypotheses of some sort, open to confirmation or refutation through an experimental investigation of the responses of various individuals to a work of art. In most cases, according to Wittgenstein, it is more illuminating to regard them as direct expressions of the speaker's own responses to the work of art. One of his examples is the following: when we discuss the architecture of a building, and say that the door is too high, this remark can be compared to our reaction in pulling our hand away from a hot plate (LC, p 14). The point of the comparison can be seen, I believe, if this case is contrasted with a case like the following: we notice a burning sensation on our skin, and infer that we must have burned ourselves on a nettle. We may try to verify this inference by tracing our path looking for a nettle. Here our relation to the object of the remark, the nettle, is an indirect one, mediated by an investigation.

There are close parallels to this thought in discussions of other issues in Wittgenstein's later writings:

(i) In Wittgenstein's notebooks there are two sets of remarks on James Frazer's anthropological classic, *The Golden Bough*.⁹ Frazer received the impulse for

⁹Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*, in C.G. Luckhardt (ed.), *Wittgenstein: Sources and Perspectives*, Hassocks, Sussex 1979. There are also some comments on Frazer in Wittgenstein's lectures on aesthetics in 1932-1933, cp. Moore, pp. 19 f.

this work when reading about the custom of the priest-king at Nemi during the Roman Empire. The priest-king was a slave who had to guard a holy tree in a grove dedicated to Diana. He retained his office until another slave managed to kill him and shouldered the burden. Frazer found this custom barbaric and puzzling in its historical context, and accordingly argued that it could only be made intelligible by showing that it had survived from a more primitive period. Wittgenstein objected that such a custom may have been carried forward precisely *because* of its sinister features, not in spite of them. And he argued that, when such a custom seems barbaric to us, this is a response to the custom itself as it appears to us; the impression is not based on a historical hypothesis, and it can be neither confirmed or refuted through an investigation into its origins.¹⁰

(ii) In discussing Freud and psychoanalysis Wittgenstein remarks that it is not always clear whether Freud's accounts of the effects of the unconscious are to be understood as *hypotheses*, as Freud himself claims, or as new, attractive *ways of looking* at certain familiar phenomena.¹¹

(iii) In *Philosophical Investigations*¹², and elsewhere too, Wittgenstein discusses the notion of seeing something as a picture of some object. He draws attention to the difference between actually seeing something as a picture (i.e. relating to it, responding to it, experiencing it in that way), and *inferring* that it is a representation of something, e.g. by applying certain conventions, a certain method of projection.

(iv) In a notebook from 1937¹³, Wittgenstein criticizes the view of causal judgments that is commonly associated with David Hume: the idea that our causal beliefs are to be regarded as hypotheses that we have consciously or unconsciously formed on the basis of recurrent observations. According to Wittgenstein, the source of our causal thought is rather to be sought in our ways of acting: in the fact that in different situations, we respond to something

¹⁰For a discussion of Wittgenstein's remarks about Frazer, see Frank Cioffi, 'Wittgenstein and the Fire Festivals', in I. Block (ed.), *Perspectives on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Oxford 1981.

¹¹Wittgenstein made comments on Freud in the context of lecturing on aesthetics in 1932-1933 as well as in 1938. Cp. Moore, pp. 20 f, LC, pp. 44-52. These issues are dealt with by Frank Cioffi in 'Wittgenstein's Freud', in P. Winch (ed.), *Studies in the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, London 1969.

¹²*Philosophical Investigations*, Part II, Chap. xi.

¹³'Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness', *Philosophia* (Israel) 6 (1976), 391-445. For an illuminating discussion of these issues, see Norman Malcolm, 'Wittgenstein: the Relation of Language to Instinctive Behaviour', *Philosophical Investigations* 5 (1982), 3-22. There are some fragments of the same discussion in the lectures on aesthetics of 1938.

as a cause in a variety of different ways, as when we pull our hand away from the hot plate as opposed to looking for the nettle on which we burnt ourselves (the latter activity can be regarded as a 'refinement', a further development of the language-game); or when we spontaneously ('automatically') turn towards the sound when we are surprised by a sudden noise as opposed to trying to find the source of a sound through experiments (e.g. trying to find out which glasses make a sound when we walk past a cupboard).

(v) In the same notebook (*ibid.*, p. 414), Wittgenstein speaks about the language-game of attributing pain to someone. He says that a primary form of this language-game is to be seen in a case in which a mother immediately, 'instinctively', responds to the crying of her child as an expression of pain, without trying to find out 'what the child means', and without a doubt entering her mind.

What all these cases have in common, if Wittgenstein is right, is that here we tend to misconstrue the relation of our utterances to the situation to which we are responding. We are inclined to regard what should really be thought of as an unmediated reaction as though it were an inference, an outcome of thought. And the same is apparently true, in many cases, where aesthetic remarks are concerned. This inclination is due to our failure to distinguish between, on the one hand, the rules of inference, the ratiocinative and argumentative skills that those who have a language can formulate and can convey to one another, and, on the other hand, the habits of response which constitute our ability to speak the language in the first place. Because of this oversight we do not realize that those habits cannot themselves be taken to be based on inferential skills, but must rather be understood to consist in unmediated responses.¹⁴

Concerning this, Wittgenstein wrote in *On Certainty*:

I want to regard man here as an animal; as a primitive being to which one grants instinct but not ratiocination [German: *Raisonnement*]. As a creature in a primitive state. Any logic good enough for a primitive means of communication needs no apology from us. Language did not emerge from some kind of ratiocination (§ 475).

7. What underlies our inclination to regard unmediated responses as the results of inference is a way of thinking which we might call *the empiricist view* of the relation between language, thought and reality. On this view, there are certain

¹⁴I discuss these issues in 'Primitive Reactions: Logic or Anthropology?', forthcoming in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Vol. XVII.

statements, the truth of which can be immediately established on the basis of observation. These statements are taken to have a dual role: on the one hand, they are the foundation for all our *knowledge* of reality, since it is thought that we can have certain empirical knowledge only of what can be directly observed, or of what can be inferred from direct observations. On the other hand, these statements are the source of all linguistic *meaning*, since we can only understand a statement if what the statement asserts can be manifested in something that can be directly observed.

These and similar views, which have been put forward in various forms throughout the history of Western philosophy, were a central target of Wittgenstein's criticism. They are expressive of deep-rooted patterns of thought which tend to determine our view of human thought and language. Let us look at some of their consequences. If observation statements are to constitute the foundation of all empirical certainty, one has to suppose that their application is unproblematic for anyone who understands them, whose faculties of perception are normal, and who is in a position to make the requisite observations. If we play a few notes on a piccolo to someone, and then a few notes on a bassoon, we expect him to say, without hesitation, that the notes on the piccolo are higher. If he hesitates, we probably conclude that his hearing is impaired, or that he has not understood the use of the word 'high' in connection with sounds. We would reject any suggestion that there could be genuine uncertainty concerning the relative pitch of these two notes.

Now suppose there is some word we hesitate to apply even though we understand it and even though the conditions of observation are ideal. In this case, there seem to be two possibilities. Either the word has no determinate meaning, or else it is one that cannot be applied directly on the basis of observation. In the latter case, the question of its application must be reducible to a question concerning some other, unproblematic words. Accordingly, it seems, on this view, every statement that purports to refer in a determinate way to an independent reality must express either a direct, unproblematic observation or an empirical hypothesis concerning possible observations.

Now it seems clear that many aesthetic judgments cannot be regarded as unproblematic expressions of observation. Consider Wittgenstein's remark that there is an expression of irony in the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (CV, pp. 55, 81). If someone made such a remark to me, I might respond in a variety of ways. I might say, 'That's right, it's precisely the experience I've had! But it never would have occurred to me to express it like that.' Or: having heard the remark I listen carefully to the passage, then say, 'I understand what you mean, that's exactly what it is!' Or I may say, 'I think I can see why you say that, but I think you're wrong.' Or

again, 'I have no idea what you're talking about', or, 'I don't understand how you can speak about irony in connection with music.' The fact that this variety of responses is intelligible among people who have no difficulty agreeing on the meaning of the word 'irony' makes it evident that the remark cannot be what the empiricists would call an observation statement.¹⁵

Is it, then, like a hypothesis? If I do not hear the irony in the music, there are several things you could do in order to help me hear it. You could draw attention to certain details, certain motifs. If you were a skilled performer you could make it stand out by giving exaggerated emphasis to those features of the passage that contribute to this expression, or you might leave those features out, hoping to achieve your effect by means of contrast. An actor might convey the irony by listening to the music with a certain expression, a dancer by the way she danced to it, etc. Or you might compare the passage to other works of music with a similar character, or to a poem, a human fate, a historical event, etc.

Consider, for instance, the case in which you play a passage on the piano with a certain emphasis in order to bring out the irony. We might be inclined to think about this along the lines of an empirical experiment: on this view, your claim is confirmed if you manage to produce the same response in me, otherwise it is disconfirmed. But this would be a confusion. When you say that the work contains an expression of irony, you are not making a prediction about the responses of other people to the work. It is open to you to insist that the work has this expression even if others fail to hear it; you may suggest, for instance, that they simply have not discovered the right way of listening to it.

In this way, the remark about the irony in the passage differs from a hypothetical remark like, 'This key fits the lock.' There is a method for testing *this* claim which is internal to its sense: that of checking to see whether the key opens the lock. There might be other ways of finding out whether the key fits, but they are all ultimately dependent on this one. If someone saw that a key actually opened the lock without difficulty but still doubted whether it fit, we would infer that he did not understand how the word 'fit' is used in this connection. But there is no method which is in this way internal to the sense of the remark about irony in music. Any method might succeed, and none has to be thought decisive. And on the other hand, we may appreciate a remark

¹⁵The word 'irony' is here used in what Wittgenstein calls a secondary sense. Secondary uses of words are extremely common in aesthetic discourse, and this fact is probably important for an understanding of the nature of art (I would not claim, however, that *all* aesthetic remarks involve secondary uses of words). For discussions of Wittgenstein's use of this notion, see Cora Diamond, 'Secondary Sense' in her *The Realistic Spirit*, Cambridge, Mass. 1991; Chap. 7 in B. R. Tilghman, *But is it Art?*, op. cit.; and Oswald Hanfling, "'I heard a plaintive melody'" in A. Phillips Griffiths (ed.), *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays*, Cambridge 1991.

like this right away without the benefit of any method.

If after you play the passage with a certain emphasis I say 'Now I can hear it!' this, we might say, would be a delayed reaction to the music. Still it would be an unmediated reaction in the sense that your illustration is not part of what I am speaking about when I say, now, that the music has an expression of irony. In fact, it makes no difference whether you actually played the piece to me, or whether I simply imagined or dreamt about its being played in this way. Logically speaking, the illustration was like a ladder that I could throw away as soon as I had climbed to the top of it. Whereas what characterizes an empirical hypothesis is that a procedure is part of its sense, and so cannot be left out of account.

8. It is obvious then that a remark such as that about the irony of a musical passage does not fit the traditional dichotomy of observational and hypothetical judgments. But if so, how is its character to be understood? Considerations like these have perhaps made it seem inevitable to conclude that this and many other aesthetic remarks cannot be related to an independent reality: on this view, their sense has to consist, not in their power of representing facts about the world, but in their giving expression to the speaker's reaction to an object. But here we stand before another dichotomy which seems pervasive in our thought about language and its relation to reality: the distinction between statements capable of expressing objective truth, and subjective utterances. If there can be disagreement about beauty even among those with good eye-sight, and if judgments of beauty are not hypotheses about human reactions, then beauty, unlike shape or colour for instance, evidently has to be in the eye of the beholder.¹⁶ These, it is conventionally thought, are the only alternatives.

But this means that there can be no genuine disagreement on aesthetic issues. An utterance which is held to express a mere subjective reaction, it is thought, is not open to challenge in the same way as one that claims to express an objective truth. I may question a speaker's sincerity, but it would be futile to question the validity of his claim, since there is no independent instance that can be appealed to for resolving the matter.

This view of things is another consequence of the way of thinking about the sense of our utterances that was a target of Wittgenstein's criticism. On this way of thinking, our use of language has one primary purpose, that of recording facts. Making use of language for giving vent to the way we feel or

¹⁶John Locke, as is well known, argued that colour (like sound, heat, and several other qualities), in contradistinction to shape, is not an actual quality of a physical object, but is merely a sensation produced in the observer. But since objects produce sensations of colour in a regular manner, the contribution of the viewer could be disregarded; colour could be dealt with as if it were an objective quality.

for expressing our reactions to things is secondary: it may be psychologically important, but it can be demarcated from the function of language as an instrument of human reason, and we could well imagine a language without it. The recording of facts may also be part of a larger activity in which it serves a practical purpose, as when I give someone directions on how to get to the Post Office, but on this view, this practical aspect is external to the question of what my utterances mean or how their truth is to be established. There is nothing in principle to prevent our imagining a language that is never put to any practical use; in which the recording of facts is never anything more than an end in itself. All that would be required for such a language to have a relation to reality would be a key for correlating utterances in the language with external facts.

Now the picture theory of sentence meaning that Wittgenstein had himself formulated in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* was intended precisely as a description of that correlation. It was in fact the most sophisticated account given to that date of the relation between language and reality, and thus, in a sense, it was the crowning achievement of the empiricist tradition in philosophy. However, as is well known, Wittgenstein abandoned this whole way of thinking, and devoted the remainder of his time working in philosophy to combatting it.

The gist of his criticism was this: the idea that there might be a correlation between language and reality independently of human activity is unintelligible. The idea of a correlation involves the idea of a distinction between correct and incorrect ways of applying the expressions of our language, and nothing could supply the logical room for applying that distinction apart from a context of human activity in which it matters what is said and how it is understood. (The room could not be provided, for instance, by the fact that expressions had been applied in a certain way in the past. For this would leave unresolved the task of deciding what is the correct way of projecting those past models onto new cases. This is one central insight in Wittgenstein's discussion of private languages.¹⁷)

The context of human communication forms the gravitational field in which there is a difference between saying the right thing and being in error. There is a difference because that communication is carried out between individuals living lives in which it matters what is said and done.

¹⁷There is a vast literature on this discussion. I have found two contributions particularly worthwhile, Rush Rhees's 'Can There Be a Private Language?' in his *Discussions of Wittgenstein* (London 1970), and Cora Diamond's 'Rules in the Right Place' in D. Z. Phillips and P. Winch (eds.), *Wittgenstein: Attention to Particulars* (Houndsmill 1989). I have discussed the issue in 'Wittgenstein and the Sharing of Language' in R. Haller and J. Brandl (eds.), *Wittgenstein - Towards a Re-Evaluation* (Vienna 1990).

Accordingly, when it is thought that the sense of linguistic expressions lies in their having a relation to reality, this is not so much wrong as empty. For the relation that is relevant to each particular expression can only be seen in the human activity in which the use of that expression plays a part. Thus, what counts as a traffic light being red is shown by the circumstances in which a driver will be cited for a traffic light violation. What counts as raspberries being red is shown by our being ready to eat them. What counts as a hot plate being red is shown by our taking care not to touch it. Etc. In each case, the activity which is constitutive of the expression's relation to reality is a different one.

When this perspective is adopted, it means that the distinction between utterances which provide an objective representation of the way things are and utterances which simply express the speaker's reaction turns out to be illusory. The life of language consists in its being used to express human reactions, and it is only within a network of shared reactions that a claim about an utterance being true or untrue to the facts has a determinate sense.

Consequently, the difference between the nature of our disagreements about matters like colour and about aesthetic matters cannot be made intelligible by appealing to a philosophically grounded distinction between objective fact and subjective opinion. It is to be thought about, rather, by considering the difference between the role of these remarks in our lives. The fact that our colour language has become settled in categories concerning the application of which normal speakers in normal conditions have little difficulty in agreeing is obviously connected with the fact that we mostly use colour words for the purpose of identifying objects or for the purpose of ascertaining the state an object is in, purposes which would be thwarted if the application of the colour scheme were open to widespread hesitation and disagreement. Aesthetic remarks, on the other hand, are prominently used in altogether different ways. Their purpose is often to open the eyes of other spectators to aspects of a work of art that are not immediately apparent, to encourage them to take up new perspectives and to make bold comparisons.¹⁸ Accordingly, the point of an aesthetic remark is not defeated even if it gives rise to incredulity or vehement rejection; on the contrary, its fruitfulness may lie precisely in the instructive disagreement it is able to provoke. The role of aesthetic commentary is connected with the fact that there is no ready-made place for a particular work of art in each of our lives; rather the place we make for it will reflect our individual experiences, our sensitivity and our view of human existence. There

¹⁸It is perhaps no coincidence that the colour schemes used in aesthetic connections, e.g. in interior decoration or clothing design, are much more refined and, consequently, more difficult to apply than the ones we apply in more down-to-earth contexts.

would be nothing amiss with expressing this point, if we are so inclined, by saying that aesthetic discourse is subjective, as long as this word is not given a metaphysical emphasis; in saying this we would simply be describing the spirit in which we speak about art.

If the empiricist view is adopted, aesthetic issues will either come to be regarded as matters to be settled by scientific inquiry, or as matters that are too personal and arbitrary for serious interchange to be possible concerning them. In either case, it fails to show the sense of the struggle that we, as individual spectators, may find it important to carry out in order to come to terms with the works of art that confront us.

