

Symposium

In this issue we introduce a new feature: a shorter and less formal essay to which replies of *not more than 500 words* are invited for the next issue.

Wittgenstein and Aesthetics

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A discussion of Wittgenstein and Aesthetics could be an attempt to summarize his whole corpus. For Wittgenstein was a philosopher who would have liked to make us think very differently from the way we do think, for the most part, in our epoch; and the difference he wanted to effect is the difference, in one way of conceiving, between understanding in science and understanding in art. The simplest formulation is to say that there is a vital difference between causes and reasons; and, indeed, Wittgenstein spoke, when discussing Freud, of the abominable mess that results from failing to distinguish reasons and causes. I shall say more of this later.

Wittgenstein was hostile to scientism. I mean, and I hope he meant, hostility to an ideology of science, or an idolizing of science, an outlook wherein only the making and testing of causal explanatory hypotheses is allowed to further our understanding, hypotheses that must face the crucible of experiment and the constraint of observable data. Wittgenstein's hostility to scientism was so great that it is optimistic to assume that it was not plain hostility to science. But he was trained as an engineer and his technical skills were considerable, in architecture and in assisting in the treatment of patients in hospitals during World War II. There is no reason to think that his outlook was like that of people who delight at what science has not yet explained, who are vulnerable to the latest stories of magical cures, spoon bending, water divining or flying saucers. The philosopher who, early in life, held that only the propositions of natural science made sense, did not forget the distinctive advantage such propositions have when it comes to being able to settle a question, being able to resolve disagreements. Wittgenstein remained a sort of positivist in this respect: if the issue can be resolved by empirical means, it does not belong to philosophy.

Wittgenstein was much more interested in what we have to say for ourselves and to each other of the kind that, as Plato saw, sometimes causes anger and hatred when disagreement occurs.

This will, of course, be what we have to say when we speak of ethics and art. Art is not far from ethics in this respect.

What do I mean by saying that art and ethics are kindred in an important way? I can get the point across, I hope, by saying that art is intermediate between ethics and mere preference, mere preference being best exemplified by what is literally a matter of taste. I ask you whether you like vanilla or chocolate better. Suppose you say vanilla. Then I ask you to carry out the following thought experiment: imagine yourself, from where you are now in your life, five years down the track and imagine that, at that time, you have come to prefer chocolate to vanilla. Think of yourself later, or, as we might say, your later self; and ask if you regard the change as commendable or deplorable development. Surely you will find it implausible to say that the change from vanilla to chocolate is either commendable or deplorable, either a case of growth in taste or a slide into vulgarity.

Now carry out the same test with, say, your attitude toward sexually molesting children. You are now perhaps vehement about that matter. Now imagine yourself, again five years down the track, the leading child molester in Sydney, setting records for patience in the neighbourhood of school playgrounds. Surely this is deplorable corruption, degeneration within you and your life; that is how you will view it from where you are now. Of course, then, it will not matter to you that it once mattered to you. But now it matters greatly that then it would not matter.

Let us apply this test to our taste in art. You must be willing here to substitute things that are appropriate to you; I ask myself whether I prefer Mozart operas to Elvis Presley; and then I ask how I view my later self with this preference reversed. This much is clear; it is not like ice cream or child molestation. But it seems much nearer the ethical end of the spectrum than the end of the spectrum that involves mere preference.

Discussion of that test was not really a digression, though there is, as far as I know, nothing quite like it in Wittgenstein. It amounts to a distinction between preference and evaluation. But suppose that someone pipes up and says, regarding the Mozart-Presley change, that it is just a matter of background and habituation that I have the preference I have. Such a one would explain my preference causally, in psychological-sociological terms. We are familiar enough with that

intellectual move; it is the blight of intellectual life. What one needs to be good at is articulating what one admires or is moved by in Mozart and what one deplores or is repelled by in Presley. And one needs to be able, in doing that, to characterize one's appreciation and conviction in such a way that it is intelligible how it can have value in it that is similar to ethical value. Probably exploiting the concept of sentimentality is one good way to do this, bringing out a difference between objects that invite sentimentality and those that resist or even deflect it, despite one's resolute determination to use a work sentimentally. The talk here will be a mixture of technical appreciation and more or less successful rendering into words something of what the work expresses. It may sometimes be just a matter of calling attention to something. One speaks of simplicity and its marvels; but nothing shows that better than the duet from *The Magic Flute*.

It is that difference in what is taken to be useful for understanding response, and so for possibly eliciting it—the critic's hope—that is important here. Genetic explanations, either of the work or of the love or hate of it, are not in place. I do not mean, and Wittgenstein did not mean that genetic explanations are never in place. I shall briefly mention later his criticisms of Frazer's *Golden Bough*, where he does seem to be repudiating genetic explanations. But much he says would allow that a genetic explanation and an aesthetic or, as I would say, formal explanation, can both be appropriate for different interests. When this is what he seems to be saying, one is reminded of Aristotle's distinctions among material, efficient, formal and final causes; or four ways of asking and answering the question Why? For those familiar with Aristotle, it may be useful to say that Wittgenstein is insisting on the importance of formal causes. A formal cause, in Aristotle's thought, is what you are told about in answer to a question such as 'Why is the arm bent like that?', that it is because the statue is of a discus thrower. The same interrogative sentence could have been used to ask instead a question that sought an answer in terms of the force exerted on the material to bend it as it is bent.

Wittgenstein was interested in Freud, and the problem of genesis as opposed to formal explanation is his theme there, as well as with Frazer. When he talked about Freud, he spoke of confusion between reasons and causes. But, as Frank Cioffi has made us appreciate, even then it is not completely clear just which of various antitheses Wittgenstein had in mind.¹ A clear example of one antithesis is the contrast between a traffic light acting on you like a drug, and a traffic

light entering into why you stop, that is because you recognize it as meaning that you are to stop. You give a causal explanation in one case and you give a reason in the other. It is precisely scientism to suppose that giving a reason is just a temporary expedient, to be improved on when we know more about the human brain and nervous system, and so can give a neurophysiological account of what took place.

The replacement of our ordinary ways of understanding each other, in terms of our beliefs and our desires, by shiny, up-to-date science has been around for a while. There used to be students, mostly from psychology departments, who claimed to admire Shakespeare because he was able to see so much without benefit of modern psychology: as though he were to be compared to Babylonians, doing quite well at astronomy without benefit of telescopes. A quotation from the late Paul Grice bears on this kind of scientism. He imagines a neurophysiologist speaking to his wife:

My (for at least a little while longer) dear, I have long thought of myself as an acute and well-informed interpreter of your actions and behaviour. I think I have been able to identify nearly every thought that has made you smile and nearly every desire that has moved you to act. My researches, however, have made such progress that I shall no longer need to understand you in this way. Instead I shall be in a position, with the aid of instruments which I shall attach to you, to assign to each bodily movement which you make in acting a specific antecedent condition in your cortex. No longer shall I need to concern myself with your so-called thoughts and feelings. In the meantime, perhaps you would have dinner with me tonight. I trust that you will not resist if I bring along some apparatus to help me to determine, as quickly as possible, the physiological idiosyncrasies which obtain in your system.

Grice says he has the feeling that the lady might refuse the proffered invitation.² But this may be unfair to many psychologists. Here is one, quoted by Frank Cioffi in the article already mentioned: Gustav Ichheiser writes:

Our feelings are often peculiarly vague and elusive (so) we have considerable difficulty in describing them correctly ... we are aware of the innumerable symbolic meanings which permeate our perceptual experience ... and we must react to them ... in a peculiarly implicit way ... What we call insight consists in the ability to make these meanings explicit.

Wittgenstein himself, trying further to elucidate his distinction between reasons and causes, speaks of all of the following: hypotheses and further descriptions; the cause of an impression and getting clear

about it, as in getting clear about why you laughed; an empirical explanation of a mental state and working out what was at the back of our mind; science and sounding like science; a good way of representing a fact, a discovery, and persuasion. These may all be subtly and importantly different differences.

The bearing on aesthetics seems clear enough. In understanding one's own responses, in inducing them in friends or audiences for critical reflection on art, much of the enterprise is surely a matter of these further descriptions, much a matter of finding the way to hit things off. But as I have already said, another part of this enterprise may be somewhat more—and I think this is the right word—technical. For one may need to describe mechanisms. These will vary from medium to medium. And a crucial point is that the description may need to be carried on in the presence of the work, helping another to see how something is achieved or how awful it would be if just this or that were different.

An important fact about such talk is that there is probably nothing on the technical level—which is, so to speak, the factual part of aesthetic discourse—that allows much in the way of generalization. Something which really helps to explain an effect here may very well be something which, elsewhere, in another work, would be a disaster. A fine example to which this point applies occurs in Jane Austen's *Emma*, where a deliberate piece of bad grammar contributes to the effect created by the writer: Emma is with Mr. Knightley, whom she will eventually marry, but is still not fully aware that she loves him:

He looked at her with a glow of regard. She was warmly gratified—and in another moment still more so, by a little movement of more than common friendliness on his part. He took her hand.—whether she had not herself made the first a motion, she could not say—she might perhaps have rather offered it—but he took her hand, pressed it, and certainly was on the point of carrying it to his lips—when, from some fancy or other, he suddenly let it go.—Why he should feel such a scruple, why he should change his mind when it was all but done, she could not perceive.—He would have judged better, she thought, if he had not stopped.—The intention however, was indubitable; and whether it was that his manners had in general so little gallantry, or however else it happened, but she thought nothing became him more.—It was with him, of so simple, yet so dignified a nature.—She could not but recall the attempt with great satisfaction. It spoke such a perfect amity.—He left them immediately afterwards—gone in a moment. (Ch.45)³

The solecism is the insertion of the word 'but' in the long sentence beginning with the words 'The intention however ...' Even if some

would disagree that this is a solecism (I am not one of them), there is no doubt that 'but', as it there occurs, contributes vitally to the effect of the passage, that effect being of a sort of disruption, or even eruption in Emma's thought. But to cite this in explanation of Austen's success here does not lead to any useful generalisation about grammar and similar effects elsewhere. (For those who find the grammar acceptable, the point might be that the insertion of 'but' is certainly unnecessary for the sense of the passage. But it is probably best for those who think the grammar acceptable to consider, with the help of examples of their own, the generality that generality in such cases is likely to be futile.)

To notice such a detail and bring out how it is effective and to see how attending to it, in its context, can enhance appreciation is, I think, one of criticism's main tasks. But the interaction between critic and artist guarantees that no philosopher or critic is likely to get away with a generalization about what makes for good works of art, even if only of this kind, where kind is a matter of the medium. If a critic should dare, especially in our time, to say that A, B, and C, were necessary and sufficient, or even necessary or sufficient for something being good, it wouldn't be long before practising artists made some things that refuted these hypotheses. Thus one of the main tasks of aesthetics is inherently inimical to the generalization we look for in science. That, of course, does not mean that there are no responsibilities to evidence or the like here. The very case, involving attention to, and respect for, the detail of a work, goes against saying anything so stupid. Rather, God is in the details, as, I am told, Flaubert once said.

The technical task and the effort to articulate response, to develop it and say further illuminating things about a work, are not really separate, since the articulation may proceed aided by a fine sense for relevant technical features. But there are cases where the business of just hitting it off predominates. And we do not need to look to high art for this. Our own bodily sensations provide us with material for aesthetic discourse. Saying how it feels, bodily speaking, is an everyday poetry. Metaphors are rife, such as 'butterflies in my stomach', 'jackhammer in my skull', 'a vice tightening on my head', 'pins and needles', and so on. There is room for improvement and criticism, as when one is offered 'soda water in my arm' in place of 'pins and needles'. I've tried in vain to persuade anthropologist friends to make a study of this matter, to see what the everyday poetry of alien peoples is like, how it contrasts with ours. Note that sensations can be identified and described with phrases such as 'the sensation you get when the

circulation is coming back in your arm after it has been lain on for a while.' I suppose this is comparable to what I have spoken of as technical in talking about art. It is indeed technical; one can easily imagine people who know too little about blood circulation to understand the description even if, as is likely, they are familiar with the sensation.

Let me conclude with a mention of Wittgenstein's criticism of Frazer for his work in *The Golden Bough*.⁴ Frazer believed that the practices he was interested in involved magical beliefs; and he conceived of such beliefs as bad causal hypotheses, on the model of dancing to make it rain. Apparently it did not occur to him that people might dance as a way of reconciling themselves to their dependence on rain. Maybe some of them believe their dancing is causally efficacious and maybe some of their fellows regard them as superstitious or foolish for that. After all, some Christians among us think prayer is causally efficacious and other Christians among us criticize that view, emphasising the idea that proper prayer is a way of accepting God's will, not trying to influence it. Moreover, in our own culture, we often reconcile ourselves to something harmful or helpful to our interests by speaking of good and bad fortune, of luck. But luck is not a causal hypothesis! Nor is it a hypothesis to speak of the will of God.

Two examples of Frazer's approach that Wittgenstein discussed were the fire festivals of Beltane, in Scotland, and a practice of Bosnian Muslims involving a form of adoption, as I would put it. In the fire festivals, effigies are thrown into a fire; and it is characteristic of a school of anthropology, originated by Frazer, to explain this by speaking of a time gone by when human sacrifice was carried out, saying this current practice has its origin in real human sacrifice. Wittgenstein seems not so much to want to deny the historical claim, but to say that one doesn't need that information to see and appreciate the connection with human sacrifice. The relationship to human sacrifice is a relation he calls internal or formal, not external and genetic, as when one sees the relation of a circle to an ellipse, a relationship someone might be got to see by holding a circular object in front of him, tilting it slowly and asking him to notice when the appearance is roughly the same as one of an ellipse that is drawn on the board. This would not be to say that the drawn ellipse had its origin in a circle, though an elliptical piece of string might have been so transformed. Thus Wittgenstein does not seem to be saying that it is false to postulate a historical origin. He rather seems to be saying

that to focus on the genetic story is to distract us from the significance, the awe, of the ritual itself. It is scientism.

Frazer's observations of the Bosnian Muslim ritual of, as I will say, adoption, are really outrageous, while what he said about the fire festival was not that so much, but instead a mistake about how to bring out the significance or meaning of a ritual. In Bosnia then—and perhaps now for all I know—a woman, in effect, adopts an infant born to another woman by standing among her tribespeople in a large and loose garment and passing the infant through the clothing, thus becoming its mother. I find this an impressive and attractive ceremony of adoption. I know nothing about the conditions under which women surrendered their biological offspring for these purposes, and nothing about the circumstances of the adopting mothers. But Frazer, astonishingly, learned of this practice and said that the woman, passing the child through her clothing, thinks she has given birth to it. Wittgenstein's reaction is apt; he says: 'Aber sie hat nicht ein Fehler gemacht!' (But she hasn't made a mistake!). No woman could. This remains so even, if in that language, it there is only one verb which we should translate into English disjunctively as 'gives birth to or adopts'.

The philistinism of Frazer's reading of the ritual is emblematic for Wittgenstein of a response that is encouraged in our scientific culture. Perhaps by now, forty years after Wittgenstein's death, the encouragement has gone so far that it has produced an unfortunate overreaction, the treatment of science as only a form of literature or a branch of rhetoric. It can do art no good, the humanities no good, and is likely only to attract contempt from scientists, to be so stupid. Rather we should exploit Wittgenstein's work to get clear and keep clear about the difference between science and art.

Notes

- 1 Frank Cioffi, 'Freud's Abominable Mess', *Wittgenstein Centenary Essays*, ed. A. P. Griffiths, Cambridge, 1991.
- 2 Paul Grice, 'Method in Philosophical Psychology', *The Conception of Value*, Oxford, 1991.
- 3 See Richard M. Gaskin, 'Can Aesthetic Value be Explained', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 29, No.4 (Autumn 1989).
- 4 'Wittgenstein's Remarks on Frazer's *Golden Bough*', *Synthese*, 19 (1967): 233-53.