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“PERHAPS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING
IN CONNECTION WITH AESTHETICS”

WITTGENSTEIN ON
“AESTHETIC REACTIONS”⁽¹⁾

Simo SÄÄTELÄ

Now that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s *Nachlass* is published in an electronic form⁽²⁾ and has become freely available for scholars, there is

(1) This paper is partly based on chapter 3 in my doctoral dissertation *Aesthetics as Grammar: Wittgenstein and Post-Analytic Philosophy of Art* (Uppsala University, Department of Aesthetics, 1998).

(2) *Wittgenstein’s Nachlass The Bergen Electronic Edition* 6 CD-ROMs (The University of Bergen and Oxford U. P., 2000). In this paper, I have nevertheless decided to refer to printed editions of Wittgenstein’s work instead of manuscripts sources. References will be given in the text using the following abbreviations:

- CE “Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness / Ursache und Wirkung: Intuitives Erfassen”, ed. R. Rhees, tr. P. Winch, *Philosophia* 6:3-4 (1976), 391-445.
- CV *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains / Vermischte Bemerkungen: Eine Auswahl aus dem Nachlass*, ed. G. H. von Wright, rev. ed. of the text by A. Pichler, tr. P. Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).
- LC *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*. Compiled from notes taken by Y. Smythies, R. Rhees and J. Taylor; ed. C. Barrett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966).
- M “Wittgenstein’s Lectures in 1930-33”, in G. E. MOORE, *Philosophical Papers* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1959), 312-315.
- OC *On Certainty / Über Gewissheit*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, tr. D. Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969).
- PI *Philosophical Investigations / Philosophische Untersuchungen*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and R. Rhees, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe. 2 ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958).
- RPP *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology: Vol I & Vol. II / Bemerkungen über die Philosophie der Psychologie, Bd. I & Bd. II*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980).
- Z *Zettel*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe. 2 ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).

some risk that less attention will be given to “apocryphal” sources to his thought. However, some of this non-canonical material can open up aspects of Wittgenstein’s philosophy not available to us through his own writings. Perhaps the most important example of this kind is the collection of notes published as *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, edited by Cyril Barrett. These notes are mainly from a set of lectures in aesthetics that Wittgenstein gave to a selected group of students in Cambridge in the summer of 1938. I am fully aware of the problematic nature of this text: it is based on informal lectures, known to us only through notes taken down by some of his students. ⁽³⁾ Nevertheless, we should not ignore these remarks. Not only do they deal with topics that are only briefly touched upon in the rest of Wittgenstein’s corpus — for example, here we find Wittgenstein’s only sustained account of aesthetics — but what also makes them important and even unique is their unguarded and informal tone. As Ray Monk notes, it is precisely because Wittgenstein was speaking spontaneously that that these lectures “provide one of the most unambiguous statements of his purpose in philosophy, and of how this purpose connects with his personal *Weltanschauung*”. ⁽⁴⁾

In these lectures Wittgenstein takes up and elaborates some of the central insights he develops in his later philosophy. That he is doing this in the context of aesthetics and in an informal and concise manner can often illuminate his points in surprising and informative ways. This is one of the reasons why I think we should attach more importance to these lectures than is usually done. There are many interesting and important parallels between Wittgenstein’s informal treatment of aesthetics and his more worked out views on language and the philosophy of psychology, but in this paper I will deal with just one central issue that has, to the best of my knowledge, not been elaborated: the parallel between the notion of primitive or natural reactions (that occurs frequently in his later philosophy), and the notion of “aesthetic reactions” that he introduces in his lectures. ⁽⁵⁾

(3) Indeed, Wittgenstein specifically requested the students not to write down his “spontaneous remarks”, because he did not want them some day to be published as his “considered opinions”. See M. O’C. DRURY, “Conversations with Wittgenstein”, *Recollections of Wittgenstein*, R. Rhees (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 97-171, p. 141.

(4) Ray MONK, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1990), p. 404.

(5) It should be noted that Wittgenstein specifically does not speak about aesthetic

I

Wittgenstein's lectures were not published until 1966, and had but little impact upon further developments in philosophical aesthetics. However, the kind of discontent with traditional aesthetics that Wittgenstein expresses at the very start of his lectures (saying that aesthetics is "entirely misunderstood", *LC I*, § 1), is echoed by the complaints about "the dreariness of aesthetics" that are characteristic of the first forays of analytic philosophers into this field in the early 1950's. Aesthetics, they argued, should follow the lead of the rest of philosophy and make a "linguistic turn" instead of obstinately clinging to outdated and discredited philosophical theories. (6) However, if aesthetics was slow to follow the linguistic turn, it has been part of the vanguard of the "hermeneutic" or "interpretive" turn in Anglo-American philosophy. (7) The reason for this is, of course, the fact that interpretation has always been a special concern in the philosophy of art. Now that the idea of infinite interpretability has become something of a current dogma within philosophy in general and many feel that "interpretation is the only game in town", there has also been a renewed interest in aesthetics. (8)

The turn to interpretation and hermeneutics is prompted by a loss of faith in different objectivist and foundationalist ideals, and it is characteristic of different versions of "post-analytic" philosophy. This way of understanding the lessons of anti-foundationalism is to say that interpretation "goes all the way"; there are no "brute facts" or any immediate access to reality. Everything we understand is, the argument goes, in one way or another mediated through our interpretations

responses or experience, but about aesthetic *reactions*. This seems to me a clear indication of the affinities between "primitive reactions" and "aesthetic reactions"; in addition, we can note that "primitive reactions" are a central theme in his remarks about causality (*CE*), which were written down in a notebook in September-October 1937 — indeed some parts of this discussion recur in the lectures on aesthetics (see *LC II*, §§ 11-39).

(6) See, e.g., John PASSMORE, "The Dreariness of Aesthetics", and the other papers collected in *Aesthetics and Language*, W. Elton (ed.), (Oxford: Blackwell, 1954).

(7) The anthology *The Interpretive Turn*, D. R. Hiley, J. F. Bohman, and R. Shusterman (eds.) (Ithaca and London: Cornell U.P., 1991) attempts to give an outline of this "turn".

(8) It has, indeed, been claimed that the interpretive turn has already been overtaken by an "aesthetic turn". See, e.g., Wolfgang WELSCH, *Grenzgänge der Ästhetik* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1996), pp. 96-97

or cognitive schemes. Consequently, the idea is that we do not only interpret things or texts that are somehow obscure or ambiguous, but that “interpretation begins at home”.

Richard Shusterman has, in an insightful paper, characterized such a view as *hermeneutic universalism*, which he defines as follows: it is the view that “simply to perceive, read, understand, or behave intelligently at all is already, and must always be, to interpret”.⁽⁹⁾ This kind of universalism builds upon the idea of the hermeneutic circle in its most general sense: all understanding is interpretation, and every new interpretation always presupposes an already interpreted starting point. Thus we have no recourse to an “uninterpreted reality” outside the circle, and our horizon or perspective always already limits our understanding.⁽¹⁰⁾ This idea is habitually coupled to a further argument about the linguistic nature of all understanding. Briefly, the argument says that all understanding is conceptual and requires language, and that all linguistic understanding entails interpretation or “decoding” of signs that are arbitrary rather than natural, and must be interpreted or translated into meaningful propositions. This argument, as Shusterman points out, highlights a close connection between the hermeneutic and the linguistic turns in both Anglo-American and Continental philosophy.⁽¹¹⁾ Interpretation, in short, is seen as some kind of explanation of what understanding consists in. Perhaps the main problem with this kind of view is that the use of such an expansive notion of interpretation either makes “interpretation” an empty catch-all word, or over-intellectualizes our understanding of language as well as art by modelling it on the interpretation of difficult texts with hidden meanings.

Though currently very fashionable, the central tenets of hermeneutic universalism can and should be challenged, not only in the name of

(9) Richard SHUSTERMAN, “Beneath Interpretation”, in *The Interpretive Turn*, 102-128, p. 102. The paper is reprinted in Shusterman’s latest book, *Performing Live* (Ithaca and London: Cornell U.P., 2000).

(10) A major Continental background influence here is of course Nietzsche, whose perspectivism and idea of there being “no facts, only interpretations” is frequently cited in support of different forms of hermeneutic universalism (cf. Shusterman, *op. cit.*, p. 103). On the analytic side, the influence of Quine’s idea of radical translation is difficult to overestimate. This odd couple should make us realize that there are enormous differences among the philosophical views Shusterman subsumes under the title of hermeneutic universalism; there are, however, also interesting and surprising similarities between them.

(11) *Ibid.*, p. 115.

conceptual clarity. Interpretation should be possible to contrast it with immediate understanding. Interpretation is not a precondition for understanding; instead "a proper reaction [...] may be enough to indicate that one has understood".⁽¹²⁾ One way to counter the claims of hermeneutic universalism is, indeed, to emphasize the role of immediate response, natural reactions and instinctive behaviour and to contrast this with interpretation. Thus Shusterman from his neo-pragmatist point of view contrasts the natural and somatic with the linguistic and interpreted. He wishes to make a case for "prereflective, nonlinguistic experience and understanding"⁽¹³⁾, partly by referring to Wittgenstein. In a somewhat similar fashion David Best appeals to Wittgenstein when emphasizing the importance of immediate, natural and primitive responses involved in understanding and producing art.⁽¹⁴⁾ Best claims that "understanding the arts, in the sense of being able to articulate artistic experience, presupposes, at least to some extent, understanding in the sense of being able to engage in them, which presupposes roots in non-rational feelings, responses or attitudes."⁽¹⁵⁾ But how precisely are we to understand the relation between language and non-linguistic understanding, and what does Wittgenstein himself say about these matters?

II

Even though some aspects of Wittgenstein's thought have influenced different versions of "hermeneutic universalism", it is possible to claim that Wittgenstein — at least in his later philosophy — is opposed to its central tenets. Wittgenstein frequently contrasts interpretation with immediate understanding or reaction, and this contrast is central to what he says about the concept of 'following a rule', which he understands as a way of acting that is not grounded in interpretation or in mental states of understanding (*PI*, § 201; § 206). In another important passage he contrasts seeing an aspect with inter-

(12) *Ibid.*, p. 127. Typically, interpretation is characterized by linguistic articulation, while understanding is often tacit (*ibid.*, p. 126-127).

(13) *Ibid.*, p. 119.

(14) David BEST, *Feeling and Reason in the Arts* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), revised and extended as *The Rationality of Feeling* (London: The Falmer Press, 1992).

(15) BEST, *The Rationality of Feeling*, p. 24.

preting what one sees, reserving the notion of interpretation for explicit reasoning, which, for instance, involves the formulation of hypotheses (*PI*, p. 212).

More generally, it is possible to see Wittgenstein's appeal to "primitive reactions" as an alternative to the interpretative view of language. He seems to say that at least some of our concepts are grounded in primitive reactions or pre-linguistic, instinctive behaviour. To take the perhaps most obvious example: our concepts relating to sensations like pain are partly formed by unreflective reactions, which make more sophisticated reflections possible. Wittgenstein says that pain-behaviour is *replaced* by words and sentences, which function as expressions or avowals (*Äusserungen*) of pain (see e.g. *PI*, § 244). Calling a reaction primitive means that it is not based on analogy, calculation or interpretation; it indicates that such a "mode of behaviour is pre-linguistic: that a language-game is based *on it*: that it is the prototype of a mode of thought and not the result of thought" (*RPP I*, §§ 915-916). And further:

Being sure that someone is in pain, doubting whether he is, and so on, are so many natural, instinctive kinds of relationship towards other human beings; and our language is merely an auxiliary to, and further extension of, this relation. Our language-game is an extension of primitive behaviour. (For our *language-game* is behaviour.) (Instinct.) (*Z*, § 545)

To call a reaction or a way of acting primitive in this sense is to indicate that there is no need for further discussion about the causes of acting in a particular way, other than noting that this is how we act. There is nothing to be gained by "digging further"; there is no justification to be found for this way of reacting. Language and the forms of behaviour which make it possible are intertwined in a very complex way, but language presupposes the ways in which we behave and react and thus our bodily existence as a certain kind of creature, even though it is in a sense a human artefact. Consider this remark from 1937:

The origin & the primitive form of the language-game is a reaction: *only* upon this can the more complicated forms grow.
Language I want to say -- is a refinement. "in the beginning was the deed" (CV, 36)

Wittgenstein thus not only says that language *replaces* primitive

behaviour and represents, e.g., a new kind of pain-behaviour, but also that it serves as an *extension* or *refinement* of that behaviour. This means, according to Norman Malcolm, that "the language of sensation provides finer descriptions of sensation than would be possible with purely non-linguistic behaviour." (16) Thus an exclamation like "It hurts" can replace non-linguistic pain-behaviour (e.g. groaning). But it also functions as a refinement of instinctive pain-behaviour; it makes it possible to convey things that cannot be conveyed in non- or pre-linguistic behaviour.

All this makes it tempting to construct Wittgenstein's appeal to reactions and instinctive behaviour as an *alternative theory* of language and the genesis of our concepts. (17) For instance Malcolm suggests that language should be seen as growing from or based upon primitive reactions or instinctive behaviour which is natural or even "something animal" (see *OC*, § 359). He maintains that "something resembling the primitive reactions that underlie the first learning of words pervades all human action and all use of language." (18) We could call this a replacement/refinement model of the relation between pre-linguistic behaviour and language.

It would of course be an over-simplification to claim that all language-games could in *equal measure* rest on primitive reactions or instinctive behaviour. (19) However, the use of language pertaining to aesthetic appreciation seems to be a case in point, since Wittgenstein himself claims that "perhaps the most important thing in connection to aesthetics is what may be called aesthetic reactions" (*LC II*, § 10). Thus one could assume that by analogy with language, artistic production, response and criticism somehow "grow from" primitive forms of reaction. This is indeed Best's argument: he claims that the practices of art rest on common capacities and instinctive ways of behaviour which are universal in human life.

(16) Norman MALCOLM, *Nothing is Hidden* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p. 4.

(17) Especially Wittgenstein's treatment of the concept of cause (*CE*) invites such a reading. See Elisabeth WOLGAST, "Primitive Reactions", *Philosophical Investigations* 17 (1994), 588-603.

(18) MALCOLM, *Nothing is Hidden*, p. 152. See also "The Relation of Language to Instinctive Behaviour", *Philosophical Investigations* 5 (1982), 3-22.

(19) That is, some language games can be considered more fundamental than others. See Joachim SCHULTE, *Experience and Expression* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 23.

Wittgenstein himself certainly hints at such a possibility. He begins his lectures by talking about how words like “beautiful” and “good” are learned and used, and his account is very similar to the one about words relating to pain that was presented above. When discussing a word, Wittgenstein says, we should “ask how we were taught it. Doing this on the one hand destroys a variety of misconceptions, on the other hand gives you a *primitive language* in which the word is used” (*LC I*, § 5; my italics). He notes that a word like “good” is “taught as a *substitute* for a facial expression or a gesture” (*ibid.*; my italics). He also suggests that such words are used as interjections, logically on the same level as expressions like saying “Ah!” and smiling, or just rubbing one’s stomach, “as far as these primitive languages go” (*LC I*, § 7).

III

This kind of appeal to “natural”, “primitive” and “instinctive” is bound to sound suspicious to any anti-foundationalist. Isn’t it just a form of naturalistic explanation, functioning as a replacement of a discredited “onto-theological” foundation, and thus a piece of quasi-biological *a priori* reasoning? In short, what we have here seems to be another incarnation of the “Myth of the Given”. Taken out of context many of the things that Wittgenstein says may certainly sound like this. Take for example this famous claim: “What has to be accepted, the given, is — so one could say — *forms of life*” (*PI*, p. 226). Thus Elisabeth Wolgast thinks that the appeal to primitive reactions is a misguided attempt to account for the genesis of concepts, and David Best’s attempt to transpose this argument into aesthetics has been met by similar accusations of *a priori* theoretical reasoning and ontological naturalism. ⁽²⁰⁾

However, it is both possible and plausible to argue that theorizing of this type is altogether alien to Wittgenstein’s philosophy, and that we

(20) See WOLGAST, “Primitive Reactions”. On Best, see, e.g., Trevor PATLMAN: “Wittgensteinian Aesthetics”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 26, (1986), 172-175; R.A. SHARPE: [Review of] David Best: *Feeling and Reason in the Arts*”, *Philosophical Investigations* 10, (1987), 160-164; Richard ELDRIDGE, “Problems and Prospects of Wittgensteinian Aesthetics”, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (1987), 251-261.

should instead understand these remarks in another way. Lars Hertzberg, for instance, claims that there is an important distinction to be made with regard to primitive or natural reactions. Sometimes Wittgenstein does indeed talk about *natural* (or instinctive) reactions in a biological sense. Following Hertzberg this could be called the *anthropological* sense of "primitive". This means that the notion of the primitive is used in connection with the notion of the natural; "here the suggestion that a reaction is primitive seems to be a way of saying something about why it occurs by suggesting that it is rooted in human nature".⁽²¹⁾ In connection with aesthetics, such reactions would perhaps include swaying to rhythm, reacting to sounds, colours and so on; in short, reactions that depend upon the fact that human beings are a certain kind of creature. If everybody was colour-blind, Josef Albers' paintings would not make much sense; if people generally did not react to rhythm in certain ways, we would not have music or dance as we know them, etc. These reactions belong to the "general facts of nature" (*PI*, p. 230) that Wittgenstein claims our form of life is grounded in, and they are in a sense "something animal", neither learned nor dependent upon conventions.

This claim can hardly be disputed, and as such is not very interesting from a philosophical point of view. The appeal to the natural or instinctive does, however, *not* have any explanatory role in Wittgenstein's philosophy. He does not attempt to reduce language to biology; mentioning such "facts of nature" does not indicate naturalism. He is not doing disguised natural science; nor is he interested in describing the range of natural human reactions or formulating a hierarchy on the scale natural/conventional. Instead, the notion of natural, primitive reactions plays a certain strategic role in his argument. Consider the following passage from the *Investigations*:

If the formation of concepts can be explained by facts of nature, should we not be interested, not in grammar, but rather in that in nature which is the basis of grammar? — Our interest certainly includes the correspondence between our concepts and very general facts of nature. (Such facts as mostly do not strike us because of their generality.) But our interest does not fall back upon these possible causes

(21) Lars HERTZBERG, "Primitive Reactions — Logic or Anthropology?", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, XVII (1992), 24-39, p. 26

of the formation of concepts; we are not doing natural science; nor yet natural history — since we can also invent fictitious natural history for our purposes. (PI p. 230)

This kind of invention occurs frequently in Wittgenstein's philosophy: he wants his readers or listeners to imagine strange tribes with peculiar habits, lions that can talk, weird-looking extra-terrestrials, people who make language with their ears, etc., in order to make certain grammatical points about understanding and the use of language.

Following Hertzberg, we have to distinguish the *logical* sense of the primitive from the anthropological sense. A reaction that is primitive in the logical sense is not necessarily "natural" or instinctive in the anthropological or biological sense. Hertzberg notes that "to think of a reaction, an attitude, etc. as primitive in [the logical] sense is to rule out certain types of questions concerning it. The point here is to see that something is a foundation, a beginning, and not to seek for any more basic justification or explanation for it." (22) What we have to do with is not an account of the genesis of our concepts, but rather a description of the circumstances in which a language-game has the sense it does. (23)

IV

Having introduced this distinction, let us now look closer at the case of aesthetics. There are, of course, many different sorts of responses that we can think of as "aesthetic reactions". In his paper "Art and Real Life" H.O. Mounce recounts the following story by Robert Schumann:

A young German intellectual finds himself at the performance of an opera by Donizetti. He listens with a superior smile. The orchestration is crude, the harmonies trite, the melodies vulgar. Vulgar stuff

(22) *Ibid*, p. 26.

(23) See Hugh KNOTT, "Before Language and After", *Philosophical Investigations* 21 (1998), 44-54, p. 45. In addition to Hertzberg, this kind of interpretation has also been advanced by Rush RIELS, "Language as Emerging from Instinctive Behaviour", *Philosophical Investigations* 20 (1997), 1-14, and Peter WINCH, "Discussion of Malcolm's Essay", in N. MALCOLM, *Wittgenstein - A Religious Point of View?* (London: Routledge, 1993).

altogether. Suddenly panic grips him. In the middle of an aria, he feels a tear running down his cheek. The symptoms seem unmistakable. He is about to weep. Instantly he leaves the theatre and rushes home. Sitting at his piano, he pounds out the aria he has just heard, grotesquely distorting the melody. After continuing in this fashion for an hour, he leans back with sigh of relief. Reason has returned. The tear was only sweat. ⁽²⁴⁾

This story illustrates the indeterminacy of the notion of "aesthetic reaction", but unreflected and immediate emotional responses (that are difficult or even impossible to repress) are perhaps what first come to mind, and are indeed among Best's examples. Often it is also claimed that it is somehow more genuine to respond emotionally than to take a cool, detached, intellectual and interpretive attitude. Mounce seems to take this view when he writes that

the roots of art are the same as those of magic. They lie in our primitive reactions to images. [...] the unsophisticate who sobs at Hollywood slush is closer to the spirit of art than Schumann's intellectual. The unsophisticate responds to very bad art. But the response is at least genuine. The intellectual is deficient not perhaps in what he thinks good but in how he responds to it; he no longer feels its magic. ⁽²⁵⁾

Similarly Shusterman defends the bodily, unassuming, tacit and unsophisticated dimension of such direct response, and the experiences of the non-professional public. But does this not reduce aesthetic appreciation to subjective response, or, at the very least, signify a return to theories of aesthetic experience? Shusterman is indeed trying to rehabilitate Dewey's ideas of art as experience. Wittgenstein's approach on the other hand is quite different. ⁽²⁶⁾ Wittgenstein by no means denies the importance of unsophisticated and often emotive responses, but he does not suggest that such responses are the only genuine and immediate aesthetic reactions. Neither is he trying to give an account of

(24) H. O. MOUNCE, "Art and Real Life", *Philosophy* 55 (1980), 183-192, p. 186.

(25) *Ibid.*, pp. 191-192.

(26) The notion of "aesthetic experience" is notoriously problematic, and I want to suggest that an additional reason why Wittgenstein chooses to talk about reaction instead of experience in this context is precisely because of the philosophical mistakes that invariably plague theories of aesthetic experience. Cf. Francis J. COLEMAN, "A Critical Examination of Wittgenstein's Aesthetics", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 5, Nr. 4 (1968), 257-266, p. 265.

“the roots of art” by appealing to aesthetic reactions. The insistence on the primitiveness and primacy of reactions is, instead, a conceptual or grammatical point.

Let us take a closer look at how Wittgenstein introduces the notion of aesthetic reactions in his lectures. There are quite a few things going on in this short passage, and it is remarkable that it has escaped the interest of most people who have written about Wittgenstein’s aesthetics.

You design a door and look at it and say: “Higher, higher, higher... oh, all right.” (Gesture) What is this? Is it an expression of content? Perhaps the most important thing in connection with aesthetics is what may be called aesthetic reactions, e.g. discontent, disgust, discomfort. The expression of discontent is not the same as the expression of discomfort. The expression of discontent says: “Make it higher... too low!... do something to this.” (LC II, § 10)

Commenting on this example, he says that utterances like “Too low!” or “Too high!” in such a context are reactions:

The important thing is that I say: “Too high!” It is a reaction analogous to my taking my hand away from a hot plate — which may not relieve my discomfort. The reaction peculiar to this discomfort is saying ‘Too high’ or whatever it is. (LC II, § 15)

The analogy with pulling away one’s hand from a hot plate is perhaps misleading. Wittgenstein seems to be saying that an aesthetic reaction is more or less like a causal reaction or reflex, and his insistence on the interdependence of aesthetic remarks and aesthetic reactions might begin to sound a bit like the emotivistic “bah-hurrah” theory, i.e., the idea that aesthetic remarks would merely be expressions of one’s non-rational pro or con attitudes. For example, in his infamous treatment of aesthetics in *Language, Truth and Logic* (first published in 1936) A. J. Ayer writes: “a scientific treatment of aesthetics would show us what in general were the causes of aesthetic feeling, why various societies produced and admired the works of art they did, why taste varies as it does within a given society, and so forth. And these are ordinary psychological or sociological questions”.⁽²⁷⁾

(27) A.J. AYER, *Language, Truth and Logic* (2 ed.) (New York: Dover, 1946), p. 113.

Wittgenstein, however, vehemently rejects such an approach, calling it an "exceedingly stupid" idea (LC II, § 35).⁽²⁸⁾ He says that we should not be interested in the *causes* of such reactions, but in their *objects*:

To say: "I feel discomfort and know the cause", is entirely misleading because [it] makes it sound as if there were two things going on in my soul — discomfort and knowing the cause.

In these cases the word 'cause' is hardly ever used at all. You use 'why?' and 'because', but not cause. [Why are you disgusted? Because it is too high. — R.]

We have here a kind of discomfort which you may call "directed", e.g. if I am afraid of you, my discomfort is directed. [...] We have given, as it were, a grammatical explanation [in saying, the feeling is "directed"]. (LC II, §§ 17-18)

Wittgenstein claims that reactions are *directed* towards their objects. My discomfort in this case is not just a vague, general sensation. The feeling has an object; it is not just a reflex (like pulling away your hand from a hot plate). Thus the analogy to the hot-plate reaction should not be taken too far, since such a reaction or reflex is not directed at anything, whereas it is crucial for the aesthetic reaction that it be directed at an object. Thus, such reactions essentially involve

(28) Probably it is not only Ayer that is Wittgenstein's target here. Well-known precursors of Ayer's empiricism, and representative of such a causal approach to aesthetics, are Hume and Burke. See Oswald HANFLING, "Aesthetic Qualities", in *Philosophical Aesthetics: An Introduction*, O. Hanfling (ed.) (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 48-50. Also Herbert Read adhered to a similar causal view, and Hanfling suggests that Wittgenstein might be alluding to Read when contrasting "discontent" and "discomfort". In *The Meaning of Art* (London: Faber, 1972, first published in 1932) Read claims that "certain arrangements in the proportion of the shape and surface and mass of things result in a pleasurable sensation, whilst the lack of such arrangement leads to indifference or even to positive discomfort and revulsion" (*The Meaning of Art*, 18; cited by HANFLING, p. 49). Hanfling also thinks that "by 'discomfort' [Wittgenstein] meant, like Read, sensations resulting from suitable causes, whose occurrence would be a matter of trial and experiment. 'Discontent' on the other hand, was not a sensation but an attitude; and in expressing discontent with an aesthetic object one was criticizing the object as being 'not right', and not commenting on its power to cause sensations" (*ibid*). Even though this is an interesting point, we should note that Wittgenstein actually says that *both* aesthetic "discomfort" and "discontent" are directed reactions and not (here) to be treated as causal reactions. Hence I would rather understand Wittgenstein as undermining the very idea of a causal approach. Also Frank Cioffi claims that aesthetic reactions are causal reactions (or have a causal component), and that they have a hypothetical character. This is clearly mistaken. See Severin SCHROEDER, "'Too Low!': Frank Cioffi on Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Aesthetics*", *Philosophical Investigations* 16 (1993) 1993, 261-279.

a cognitive or an intentional element. This is a point of grammar, and not an explanation of the reaction.

It is by now widely accepted that emotions have objects and not only causes; e.g. fear is not a mere sensation, but a directed emotion — one is afraid *of* something. ⁽²⁹⁾ The suggestion that aesthetic reactions are similarly directed at an object means that the aesthetically relevant response is conceptually dependent upon our perceiving the object in a certain way, i.e., our understanding of the object is indicated by a proper response or reaction. The question does not concern cause and effect. Instead,

[t]here is a “Why?” to aesthetic discomfort not a “cause” to it. The expression of discomfort takes the form of a criticism and not “My mind is not at rest” or something. It might take the form of looking at a picture and saying: “What’s wrong with it?” (LC II, § 19)

But what exactly *is* the aesthetic reaction in Wittgenstein’s example of the door? It might seem puzzling or even confused that Wittgenstein first says that “perhaps the most important thing in connection with aesthetics is what may be called aesthetic reactions, e.g. discontent, disgust, discomfort”, i.e., he says that for example *discomfort* is the reaction in this case. However, a little later he claims that saying “Too high!” is “a reaction analogous to my taking my hand away from a hot plate”. Thus the reaction would *not* be the discomfort, but my *saying* “Too high!” — “a reaction peculiar to this discomfort” (LC II, § 15).

Now, this can be clarified by the analogy with pain. Such critical remarks as “Too high!” must, in important respects, be treated as avowals or *Äusserungen*. As Severin Schroeder points out,

aesthetic evaluations are avowals — comparable to “It hurts!” — in that their truth is guaranteed by their “special criteria of truthfulness”

(29) This important phenomenological point has also been developed in the tradition stemming from Wittgenstein. See Anthony KENNY, *Action, Emotion, and Will* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963). C. A. Mace claims that the idea of the directedness of emotions comes to Wittgenstein from Moore or Stout, who in turn were influenced by Brentano. However, as Mace notes, Wittgenstein is not merely repeating Brentano’s point about intentionality, but he is also striving to disentangle the concept of directedness from its mentalistic background. See “On the Directedness of Aesthetic Responses”, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 8 (1968), 155-160. Wittgenstein also mentions the distinction between the object and the cause of fear in the *Investigations* (§ 476), and in the *Nachlass* he extensively discusses the classification of psychological concepts, also here using “fear” as an example of a directed emotion (see e.g. *RPP II*, § 148).

[PI p. 222]. But in contrast to avowals of pain, they are "objective" inasmuch their topic is the object under consideration and not the person's sensations or emotions. [...] Hence our inclination rather to regard such utterances as descriptions, true or false, than avowals. This inclination is particularly strong when in aesthetics evaluations are densely interwoven with descriptions. ⁽³⁰⁾

Wittgenstein himself explicitly compares an utterance that is a reaction to the door ("Higher!") to avowals like "I'm in pain":

Cf. "Why do I say 'Higher!'" with "Why do I say 'I have a pain'?" [Rhees's notes:] Here 'explanation' is on the same level as an utterance — where the utterance (when you say that you have a pain, for instance) is the sole criterion. Explanation here is like an utterance supplied by another person — like teaching him to cry. (This takes the surprisingness away from the fact that the whole point of an explanation is that it is accepted. There are corresponding to these explanations utterances that look like this; just as there are utterances which look like assertions.) (LC II, § 40)

This can be compared to a central passage in the *Investigations* where Wittgenstein discusses the question how a human being learns the meaning of the names of sensations — of the word "pain", for example:

Here is one possibility: words are connected with the primitive, the natural, expressions of the sensations and used in their place. A child has hurt himself and he cries; and then adults talk to him and teach him exclamations and later, sentences. They teach the child new pain-behaviour.

"So you are saying that the word 'pain' really means crying?" — On the contrary: the verbal expression of pain replaces crying and does not describe it. (PI § 244)

So the explanation, in the aesthetic case, is "like an utterance supplied by another person" which can be thought of as learning "new aesthetic behaviour" or new ways of expressing one's reactions. ⁽³¹⁾ An expla-

(30) SCHROEDER, " 'Too Low!' ", p. 267.

(31) There is a puzzling asymmetry between the point Wittgenstein makes in the lectures and the point he makes in the *Investigations*. In the lecture, Wittgenstein uses *crying* as an example of "new pain-behaviour". This is confusing, since crying is a paradigm of a primitive, pre-linguistic expression of pain, and it is much easier to see *words and exclamations* as the "new pain-behaviour". However, this unclarity is probably due to the informal lecture situation.

nation of my discomfort could be, for instance, to say “the proportions of the door do not fit the proportions of the windows”, and “the whole point of an explanation is that it is accepted” — if I accept that explanation, it functions as a description or elaboration of the intentional object of my reaction. That is, I accept such an explanation directly, without additional scrutiny. That is why it is not a causal explanation. ⁽³²⁾ The explanation (to why I say “Higher!”) “is on the same level as the utterance”, since “Higher!” is an avowal, an expression of the discomfort, in a similar way that “I am in pain” functions as an *Äusserung* of pain, and not as a description of my inner state. This does not mean that I *could not* be in pain without any observable expression or avowal of pain. It is nevertheless essential for our concept of pain that we usually react to pain by such and such verbal or non-verbal expressions, and usually we do not doubt that a person who reacts in such a way is in pain (cf. *PI* §142; § 281). Thus, the expression of pain functions not only as a symptom, but also as a criterion of pain.

Now the similarity to aesthetic reactions should be obvious: in this particular example the reaction peculiar to this discontent is saying “Too high!” which also functions as a criterion for the discontent. The expression of discontent does not have to be a verbal avowal; it can also be a gesture, analogous to a non-verbal expression of pain. For example, I can express my discontent by making a face, gesticulating with my hands or groaning in a certain way. But of course I can feel discontent with the door without saying so or indeed without expressing it in any way — this feeling would still be a reaction to the door. However, that I feel discontent with the door is something internally connected to what I am prepared to do with it, or say about it, what kind of description of it I am willing to accept, etc. ⁽³³⁾ For example, if I am an architect in the process of building a house, I will try to correct the door, if this is feasible. We could say that this is a kind of attitude towards the object in question, and that reactions manifest this attitude.

(32) Cf. Roger SCRUTON, *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (London: Methuen, 1979), p. 143.

(33) Similarly: “How do I show my approval of a suit? Chiefly by wearing it often, liking it when it is seen, etc.” (*LC I*, § 13).

V

What, then, should calling different forms of verbal and non-verbal behaviour "aesthetic reactions" remind us about? For instance this: our aesthetic reactions are not just expressions of subjective feelings or likes and dislikes; the aesthetic reaction does not only have to do with how things look or seem to me, but it also refers to an objective world. As we noted above: what is interesting when aesthetics is concerned is not primarily what I feel or experience, but instead the object of my reaction. The interesting thing is not *how* exactly I felt disgusted or delighted, but *what* exactly disgusted or delighted me, i.e., the *object* of my disgust or delight. Thus the expression of discomfort or delight typically "takes the form of a criticism". However, it is part of the grammar of aesthetic remarks that nobody is compelled to accept my judgement, since it concerns the way the object appears to *me*. On the other hand, the judgement of taste "appeals to everyone for agreement" as Kant puts it, i.e., there is a claim to generality or universality. (34)

An important caveat is needed here: we are not talking about necessary and sufficient conditions for something to be an aesthetic reaction. Nor is there much use in trying to compile a list of such reactions; the most that can be said is that there is a family resemblance between different contexts in which we can use this notion in an intelligible fashion, and that this is a way of calling attention to certain characteristics of complex situations of meaningful behaviour and use of language. Wittgenstein's own example is just that: an example of a situation where the appeal to aesthetic reactions makes sense. Wittgenstein himself emphasizes that aesthetic judgements and appreciation form "an immensely complicated family of cases" (*LC I*, § 32) and there is no reason why his remarks on aesthetic reactions should be restricted to the type of situation described in this particular example.

One might, however, complain that if the emphasis on primitive reactions is only a logical point, this makes the notion quite formal; the anthropological sense, on the other hand, seems to have something to say about (the causes of) why we react in a certain way, but sounds

(34) See SCHROEDER, " 'Too Low!' ", p. 164.

suspiciously like a priori theorizing and unsavoury naturalism. Interestingly enough, however, the directedness of primitive reactions links the anthropological to the logical sense of the primitive. Hertzberg points out that we must be able to see a primitive reaction as intelligibly connected with the object of the reaction; “failing this, we would not be in a position to tell what someone was reacting to, which means that we would not be in a position to see his behavior as a reaction.” (35)

When Malcolm emphasizes that primitive reactions are pre-linguistic, and when Shusterman talks about non-linguistic experiences that are beneath interpretation, they do this in order to challenge the claim that all understanding and meaningful experience is linguistic. But have we not now accepted a view which implies that reactions are inherently linguistic, and thus sold out to “hermeneutic universalism”? Not necessarily, since we must take note of a certain ambiguity in “non-linguistic” and “pre-linguistic”. Criticizing Malcolm’s appeal to such notions, Peter Winch points out that

the language-games [...] provide the framework within which we identify in the first place the reactions of which we speak. Only thus are we able to make the distinctions between them which we need and which would be indiscernible, would indeed make no sense, if the wider context of the language-game were not presupposed. (36)

“Primitive” is a relative term. Thus primitive reactions are described in terms taken from the particular language-game; they are seen (and intelligible) *from the point of view of that language-game*. (37) This is something the replacement/refinement model does not pay enough attention to. Thus the reaction to another person’s pain is indeed pre-linguistic, but the very fact that we can identify it as a reaction to pain presupposes the language game of pain-behaviour. The situation is seen “under the aspect of pain”, which makes the reaction intelligible. (38) Analogously we could then say that we must see a situation “under the aspect of aesthetic appreciation” in order to be able to identify aesthetic reactions.

(35) HERTZBERG, “Primitive Reactions”, p. 33.

(36) WINCH, “Discussion of Malcolm’s Essay”, p. 124.

(37) *Ibid*, p. 123.

(38) HERTZBERG, “Primitive Reactions”, p. 33.

This also means that the fact that a reaction is pre-linguistic and "natural" does not *in itself* make it intelligible, which is another way of saying that there are no *sui generis* "aesthetic" reactions. (39) Thus to see something as a primitive reaction involves both the "natural" and "logical" sense of the primitive. That is to say, the reactions in themselves are not necessarily linguistic, but their identification as particular reactions presupposes the context of a language-game (remember, too, that what belongs to a language-game is not merely the use of verbal language, but also certain ways of acting). As Hertzberg points out,

the suggestion that a reaction is primitive is not meant to exclude the possibility that it may in some sense presuppose learning. Thus, there are primitive, independent reactions [...] to the learning of language, not just before it. In fact, among the most important examples [of primitive reactions] are precisely reactions that are possible only in a language: seeing aspects, using words in a secondary sense. (40)

It is important to remember that perhaps most "aesthetic reactions" typically involve a linguistic element. This does not make them any less "natural" than pre-linguistic reactions. Take for example the fact that people react in a certain way to the difference between the major and minor keys, finding the one generally cheerful and the other sad; or that we generally find certain colours warm and others cold, greys and browns subdued, and so on. These are cases of harmony in reactions and judgements, which are dependent upon the same capacities as seeing aspects and using words in a secondary sense. It is, of course, very difficult to say what is natural and what is conventional or culturally dependent in cases like these, but that is a question concerning causal history and is thus not relevant here. In fact the question "how far does the empire of natural response extend" (41) loses its urgency, if we understand primitivity in a logical sense.

Consider what is involved in the ability to hear the irony in the *Fugato* in the first movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (*CV*,

(39) Cf. COLEMAN, "A Critical Examination", p. 265.

(40) HERTZBERG, "Primitive Reactions", p. 30.

(41) Discussing Best's work Pateman asks whether we really can "do aesthetics without a view as to how far the empire of natural response extends" ("Wittgensteinian Aesthetics", p. 173). He is quoted approvingly by ELDRIGE, "Problems and Prospects", p. 259.

63). Of course this presupposes certain rock bottom natural reactions such as reacting to rhythm and to major and minor keys in a certain way, etc., but also a host of “culturally dependent” or conventional things that can be called knowledge of music. Still, hearing the irony is a primitive reaction. It is not based on calculation or interpretation, it is rather something that one either hears or doesn’t hear *directly*. And if I’m not able to hear the irony, someone can get me to hear it, by playing the theme in a certain way, by making appropriate comparisons, etc. (cf. *M*, 313).

So if someone cries at an opera, his reaction is only intelligible in a culture which has the practice of performing arts and music. It should be clear that such reactions presuppose certain kinds of background knowledge and competence. This also makes them essentially contextual. So from this point of view it is quite in order to say that “art has developed where speech is and not without it”⁽⁴²⁾ without having to commit oneself to any kind of “hermeneutic universalism”.

However, we should not completely distance us from talk about *pre-linguistic* behaviour, since there is an important additional point to be made. Hugh Knott, in his discussion of this matter, wants to point out that there are cases in which speaking of pre-linguistic behaviour carries “direct grammatical weight”. These are cases in which firstly, non-linguistic behaviour is *more elementary* to a language-game than language, and secondly, where the grammar of the concepts within the language-game *presupposes* non-linguistic forms of behaviour. Pain would be the obvious example here, and Knott notes, correctly, that it can be said more generally that the class of concepts to which this applies are “those which are fundamental to our concept of a person”.⁽⁴³⁾ So we can say that, according to Wittgenstein, immediate and primitive reactions are crucial in our dealings with other human beings. Now, if something similar also applies to our aesthetic concepts, as we have reason to believe, this would mean that they, too, must be thought of as fundamental for us as human beings.

This points towards a close relation between ethics and aesthetics that can be claimed to be typical of Wittgenstein’s way of thinking. The emphasis on reactions which has been discussed in this paper also reasserts that the link between ethics and aesthetics does not only

(42) Rush RHEES, *Without Answers* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), p. 149.

(43) KNOTT, “Before Language and After”, p. 52-53.

belong to his early philosophy. (44) The parallel between primitive reactions and aesthetic reactions is another example of how Wittgenstein's views on understanding art are linked to what he says about understanding people. And this, finally, might be the reason why aesthetic reactions can be thought of as "perhaps the most important thing in connection with aesthetics".

VI

Wittgenstein says: "if language is to be a means of communication there must be an agreement not only in definitions but also [...] in judgments" (*PI*, § 242). But one can go further and say that such agreement or harmony in judgements ultimately depends on harmony between human reactions; "and this must be a primitive harmony, since to suppose it to be shaped or mediated by a common language would involve a logical circle". (45) We can connect this to our earlier discussion of what Wittgenstein says about the relation between concepts and "general facts of nature" late in the *Investigations*. In this context he writes:

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? (*PI*, p. 230)

The answer to this, for Wittgenstein, would most certainly be "no". Similarly, the fact that aesthetic reactions are logically on the same level as primitive or natural reactions means that our aesthetic judgements cannot be thought of as completely arbitrary. This is also an argument against the idea that criticism and interpretation would only consist of picking out or inventing any arbitrary play of signifiers.

However, the fact that we cannot treat our concepts as wholly arbitrary does not mean that other concepts are unimaginable or that the meaning of our concepts would be somehow guaranteed by "facts of nature". *Mutatits mutandis*, the fact that our aesthetic concepts are not

(44) See B. R. TILGHMAN: *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics* (London: MacMillan, 1991) for a convincing argument for the interdependence of ethics and aesthetics in both early and late Wittgenstein.

(45) HERTZBERG, "Primitive Reactions", p. 33.

completely arbitrary does nothing to guarantee an actual agreement in aesthetic judgements or reactions. Of course we want to say that our styles of painting as well as our aesthetic judgements *are* arbitrary in a way that, for example, our concept of a person is not, but there is an important similarity between the two. Neither class of concepts is guaranteed by anything *outside* the language-games. Consequently, as Wittgenstein notes, we cannot say that our concepts are “absolutely the correct ones” (*ibid.*).

Thus we can make a gloss upon Wittgenstein: quite generally, the meaning of our concepts is dependent upon “general facts of nature”; however, what is more important when our aesthetic concepts are concerned are “general facts of culture” — Wittgenstein maintains that “the words we call expressions of aesthetic judgement play a very complicated rôle, but a very definite rôle, in what we call a culture of a period. To describe their use [...] you have to describe a culture”. And further: “What belongs to a language game is a whole culture” (*LC I*, §§ 25-26).

This means, among other things, that reactions can only be identified in the context of a language-game, and that we cannot be certain of understanding a reaction unless we share the language-game and consequently the culture in question. In that case the fragmentation of a culture also means the fragmentation of language-games and reactions. And this seems to be the situation today. This was perhaps one of the things that Wittgenstein referred to as “the disappearance of the arts” and “the disappearance of a culture” (*CV*, 8-9). The “disappearance of a culture” means that agreement in judgements and reactions can no longer be taken for granted.

In his discussion of what lies “beneath interpretation” Shusterman quotes the following remark by Wittgenstein: “What happens is not that this symbol cannot be further interpreted, but: I do not interpret. I do not interpret, because I feel at home in the present picture” (*Z*, § 234). The imagery of this remark makes Shusterman “hazard the suggestion that we are today so occupied with interpretation largely because we so rarely feel comfortably at home in the often conflicting worlds of our understanding, that our age is an age of interpretation because it is one of alienation and fragmentation.”⁽⁴⁶⁾ I

(46) SHUSTERMAN, “Beneath Interpretation”, p. 123.

think his diagnosis is correct, and that the same kind of uncertainty or disorientation seems to attach to aesthetic reactions in our "post-modern" age. The sophisticated viewer, for example, probably does not feel at ease if he is moved by Hollywood slush: therefore, he seeks an interpretation which explains why he was moved, and which perhaps helps him overrule his immediate emotive reaction. This kind of tendency can be illustrated by considering a similar point that Wittgenstein makes in his lectures. He talks about a case in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (47) in the following way:

Freud does something which seems to me immensely wrong. He gives what he calls an interpretation of dreams. In his book [...] he describes one dream which he calls a 'beautiful dream'. A patient, after saying she had had a beautiful dream, described a dream in which she descended from a height, saw flowers and shrubs, broke off the branch of a tree, etc. Freud shows what he calls the 'meaning' of the dream. The coarsest sexual stuff, bawdy of the worst kind [...] Freud says the dream is bawdy. Is it bawdy? [...] Freud called this dream 'beautiful' putting 'beautiful' in inverted commas. But wasn't the dream beautiful? I would say to the patient: "Do these associations make the dream not beautiful? It was beautiful. Why shouldn't it be?" I would say Freud had cheated the patient. (LC III, § 20)

Wittgenstein thinks the patient was cheated since her initial reaction to the dream (that it was beautiful) was destroyed by the interpretation. Such an interpretation does, however, have a certain charm. Maybe the situation can be similar when it comes to art. Perhaps nowadays we often seek such an overruling of the immediate reaction, since we do not *want* to trust it, exactly like Schumann's intellectual.

The so called post-modern condition is often said to be characterized by simulation (Baudrillard) or a "fictionalized experience of reality" (Vattimo). (48) The idea of unending interpretation carries with it an ideal of an all pervasive irony, a detached attitude to anything spontaneous or moving. The fictionalization of reality also

(47) The dream in question is discussed in Sigmund FREUD, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 1965), pp. 382-385. See also MONK, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, p. 406.

(48) These notions often hark back to Nietzsche's perspectivism, i.e., the idea that the world contains an infinite amount of interpretive possibilities, none of which can be taken for granted, since none of them are objectively foundational or true.

means that one's natural reactions cannot be trusted, and creates a certain anxiety which we often feel is at the bottom of such an ironical stance towards the world. Such an attitude results in the disappearance of the certainty and confidence that characterize immediate reactions, and this kind of "romantic irony" easily turns into nihilism, leaving nothing but an "endless absolute negation" (49). Whether this development is the price we have to pay for "our greater freedom and pluralistic possibilities" (50) is up to each of us to decide. Wittgenstein would most probably have seen it as yet another symptom of "the darkness of this time" (cf. *PI*, x), an expression of "the spirit of this civilization" (*CV*, 6).

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(49) This is how Kierkegaard characterizes "romantic irony" in *The Concept of Irony* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966).

(50) SHUSTERMAN, "Beneath Interpretation", p. 123n31.