

# Art, Opinions, and Attitudes

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B.R. Tilghman (1991) suggests that we can make use of the notion of an attitude in connection to art without referring to aesthetic attitude theories and their psychologistic understanding of "attitude". We should instead turn to Wittgenstein, who uses this notion when discussing our relation to other people. This attitude is no psychological stance or special mode of perception, but rather something that characterizes the grammar of the concept of a person. Tilghman argues that it can also be important in aesthetics. If this is right, it will point to important parallels between understanding people and understanding art, and thus between ethics and aesthetics.

## I

Towards the end of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein talks about the difference between an automaton and a human being, and concludes:

My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul [*eine Einstellung zur Seele*]. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul. (*PI* p. 178)

How should this contrast between opinion (*Meinung*) and attitude (*Einstellung*) be understood? I have an *attitude* towards a soul when confronted with a person, which means for instance that I react to him and his behaviour in a certain way. Wittgenstein's aim here is to undercut the debate between the mentalist and the behaviourist, who both consider that to regard someone as a conscious being is to hold certain beliefs about him, beliefs that can perhaps ultimately be grounded in a theory of some sort. To have an "attitude towards a soul" is, on the contrary, to see a person's gestures and facial expressions as "filled with meaning".

Wittgenstein does not talk about *Einstellungen* only here: he also characterizes *belief in God* as an attitude (see also *CV* 96-97):

But what is the difference between an attitude and an opinion? I would like to say: the attitude comes before the opinion. (*Isn't belief in God an attitude?*) How would this be: only one who can utter it as information *believes* it. An opinion can be wrong. But what would an error look like here? (*LW* 38)

The third important context in which Wittgenstein talks about *Einstellungen* is in connection to the discussion of *aspect perception*. Wittgenstein uses this term when considering what is involved in seeing a picture as representing something, to contrast seeing with merely knowing or interpreting what it is meant to be:

"To me it is an animal pierced by an arrow." That is what I treat it as; this is my *attitude* to the figure. This is one meaning in calling it a case of 'seeing'. [...] If you see the drawing as such-and-such an animal, what I expect from you will be pretty different from what I expect when you merely know what it is meant to be. (PI p. 205)

We thus have three important contexts in which Wittgenstein refers to *Einstellungen*: our knowledge of persons, religious belief, and perception. In all these cases "explanations come to an end" in what might be called an attitude.

## II

But what is the point Wittgenstein is after? Some of the differences between opinions (or beliefs) and attitudes are perhaps best shown by the fact that changing an attitude involves changing the person with that attitude (his way of reacting, his way of understanding a certain thing, etc.), whereas changing an opinion need involve nothing more than changing just that, the opinion. Opinions are also expressed merely by words, while attitudes are not necessary verbalized or even verbalizable; rather they *show themselves* in the actions and reactions of people, in how I treat the object of my attitude, in "fine shades of behaviour" and their consequences (PI p. 204). This means that there is an *internal relation* between the attitude of a person and the object of his attitude (Winch 1987, 148), and also between an *Einstellung* and the reactions indicative of it.

Opinions only have an external relation to their objects—our understanding of what the object *is* is independent of our opinions about it (the object is what it is regardless of our opinions about it). In contrast to this, we can say that an attitude is something that is manifested in our life, which means that our reactions indicate a particular attitude towards the object of the reaction. When discussing sensations, Wittgenstein writes: "Our attitude to what is alive and to what is dead, is not the same. All our reactions are different" (PI §284).

An attitude of this kind cannot be deliberately taken up, or abandoned at will. Indeed, in another passage Wittgenstein discusses the belief that someone is in pain, characterizing such a belief as an attitude:

I tell someone I am in pain. His attitude to me will then be that of belief; disbelief; suspicion; and so on.

Let us assume he says: "It is not so bad".-Doesn't that prove that he believes in something behind the outward expression of pain?-His attitude is proof of his attitude.-Imagine not merely the words "I am in pain" but also the answer "It is not so bad" replaced by instinctive noises and gestures. (*PI* §310)

"His attitude is proof of his attitude" is more than a tautology-instead, what we have to do with is a "reflexive construction". There is nothing further or more basic that can prove the attitude than the attitude itself. According to Winch, Wittgenstein's aim here is to show that there is something wrong with the idea that there must be something *behind* the "behaviour and expressive demeanours that go with typical human feelings and emotions and with the expressive responses to such emotions"(1987, 142).

As mentioned, an attitude of this sort is not anything one ordinarily can choose. Thus it might be misleading to speak about "taking an attitude" here; an attitude is rather something I *find* myself in. It has something to do with how we see and treat things or the perspective in which things make themselves perceived by us. To have an "attitude towards the soul" means that I react to a person's words and behaviour in a way that indicates that he has a soul; I am not of this opinion-I do not interpret his movements and behaviour and then infer that he is indeed a self-conscious being. Or, to change Wittgenstein's example into something more mundane: I am not of the opinion that a certain chair is my favourite chair; rather, my attitude towards that chair is an attitude towards a favourite chair, and this also means that any similar chair will not do instead. Similarly, I am not of the opinion that "her picture smiles down at me from the wall"; this is how I regard the picture, it is my attitude towards it (*PI* p. 205); and my liking for a suit is manifested not in my opinions about it, but in the fact that I wear it often, like it when it is seen, etc. (*LC* 5).

Wittgenstein implies that it is out of order to talk about errors when attitudes are concerned. Certainly I can make mistakes; I think that there is a person in the room, but it turns out to be a dummy, for instance. But it was not my *Einstellung* in itself that was an error here. I can not be mistaken *in* my attitude, though it might turn out to be a mistake that I *had* that attitude. How could a belief in God be shown to be wrong, if it really is an *Einstellung*? Of course it is possible that such an attitude changes; one might fall out of faith, say. But this does not make one's former belief an *Irrtum*; there are no independent facts to be mistaken about. We could say that a *revision* of an attitude does not mean a *correction* of it. Perhaps the point is clearer if we take the example of the favourite chair, where there is no controversy about the existence of the object of my attitude. I might buy a new chair which becomes my favourite one, and thus the chair

that used to be my favourite is no longer that. However, it would be senseless to say that my former attitude was an *error*.

The line between an opinion and an attitude is not absolute, but clear enough in the sort of cases Wittgenstein envisages. The "*Einstellung*" comes before the "*Meinung*", since it is constitutive of the objects we can have opinions about. It is on the basis of an *Einstellung* that I can even have opinions about something. And if it can be shown that something similar is the case in art, this will consolidate the view that art is something important precisely because it belongs to those things that are distinctive for the human form of life and which can be important and meaningful in people's lives, and which make a life the life of a human being.

### III

So how should the possible analogies between the attitude towards persons and our attitude towards works of art be fleshed out? Obviously, introducing this notion of an attitude in the context of art and aesthetics is not a way to attempt to answer the question "What is art?", but rather to describe what it is to acknowledge something as art, what kind of relation is involved.

We can put the analogy between understanding art and understanding people in this way: I am not of the *opinion* that a painting is marvellous, or that a cathedral is tremendous, or that a play made a great impression on me. Instead, I express my attitude by means of an avowal (*Äusserung*). This also means that I do not always have to give further reasons for such judgements-sometimes it is not even possible. Compare this to the "primitive reaction" to a person in pain. Why do you react with shock, concern or distress when you see that someone is badly injured? "Because he is hurt." There is no need of further explanations or reasons. Similarly: "Why do you think that cathedral is tremendous?" "Just look at it!" This is a perfectly intelligible answer and does not necessarily have to be grounded further, for example in my beliefs about the object. So in a way "it's all in the attitude" (LC 35): if someone really does not consider the building tremendous, there isn't really anything I can do, except to accept that he has a different attitude; "that is 'an end' to the discussion" (Moore 1959, 315).

During Wittgenstein's lectures Lewy, one of his students, gave the following example: "If my landlady says a picture is lovely and I say it is hideous, we don't contradict each other." Wittgenstein's answer suggests that the difference would be in the attitudes towards the picture: "In a sense you do contradict each other. She dusts it carefully, looks at it often, etc. You want to throw it in the fire." (LC 11). A crucial feature of aesthetic reactions which indicates their connection to attitudes is that their revision

does not mean a correction. That is, since an attitude is shown by, for instance, how I react to things, a change in attitude does not mean that my earlier reaction would have been mistaken. A revision of reactions does not undermine my former evaluation; instead, we could say that it is an indication that my attitude has changed (Schroeder 1993, 267). So if Lewy came to think of his landlady's picture as lovely, that would not undermine his former judgement that it was hideous; instead his whole attitude would have changed (this would also mean that his behaviour changes, and that he himself, in certain important respects, becomes a different person).

According to Wollheim (1980, 91) "it is intrinsic to our attitude towards works of art that we should regard them as works of art, or, to use another terminology, that we should bring them under the concept 'art'". However, in view of what just was said about such attitudes, this perhaps has too theoretical and technical a ring to it. An "attitude towards a work of art" needs not be anything extremely sophisticated. Thus Lewy's landlady's relation to the picture expresses such an attitude, involving notions of respect and value. Consider also the following example from Wittgenstein's lectures on aesthetics, which in a way repeats the distinction between opinion and attitude:

There are lots of people [...] who know a lot about and can talk fluently about dozens of painters. There is another person who has seen very few paintings, but who looks intensely at one or two paintings which make a profound impression on him. [...] an appreciation which concentrates on one thing and is very deep-so that you would give your last penny for it.-R.](LC 9)

An important feature of *Einstellungen* is that they are typically directed towards a particular object; Wittgenstein talks about eine Einstellung zu *ihm*; zu *der Seele*; *zum Menschen*. My "attitude towards the soul" shows itself in how I regard or treat a particular person, the way I behave in his presence, etc. Winch (1987, 148-149) says that Wittgenstein's use of the definite article suggests precisely this kind of internal relation between the *Einstellung* and its object; that is, the *Einstellung* is characterized by the fact that it is directed to a particular object. Similarly, an aesthetic attitude is directed towards a particular object, which is seen as valuable "in itself". Thus we can make an analogy between "eine Einstellung zur Seele" and "eine Einstellung *zum Kunstwerk*". The possibility of such a relation or attitude towards works of art is crucial to the point art, and thus something our concept of art depends upon.

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