

Wittgenstein, the artistic way of seeing, and the sense of the world

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In proposition 6.421 of the *Tractatus*, in brackets and without providing any explanation, Wittgenstein states that “ethics and aesthetics are one”. In his *Conference on ethics*, the idea is remodelled: Wittgenstein maintains that ethics, understood as research into that which has value, or into the meaning of life, in fact “includes” what he believes to be “the most essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics”. What constitutes this “most essential” part? Why do ethics and aesthetics appear to him to be “one”? What links them together?

Perhaps the use of the word “aesthetics” is deceiving; Wittgenstein was probably not thinking of a philosophical discipline, but of art and art not as an activity aimed at producing particular objects, but rather as a form of vision. In an entry in his *Notebooks 1914-1916* we read: “The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*; and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connexion between art and ethics” [Wittgenstein 1961, p. 83e (7.10.16)]. The work of art seems to be the result not of a productive process, but rather of an attitude; it seems that any object can acquire the *status* of a work of art, if it is seen in a certain way – the way qualified by the expression “*sub specie aeternitatis*”. The same seems to be true for the good life; more than the result of particular activities or ways of acting, this seems to be the result of a way of seeing, of the same way of seeing that makes an object a work of art. If we assume that the “good life” is an expression equivalent to “happy life” and that both indicate fundamentally a life that appears meaningful to he who leads it, it may follow from this that art incorporates something like the perspective of sense. I would like to put forward several reflections concerning this connection and what it is grounded on, in part using a comparison which in critical terms is completely extrinsic and yet, I believe, illuminating, between Wittgenstein’s conception of the work of art, as results from several entries in his *Notebooks*, and a particular philosophical interpretation of seventeenth-century Dutch painting. Let us begin with Wittgenstein.

I

Wittgenstein dedicates some particularly evocative observations to (the work of) art. A particularly important one is that whose very Schopenhauerian *incipit* I have just quoted. It goes on as follows: “The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside. In such a way that they have the whole world as background. Is this it perhaps – in this view the object is seen *together with* space and time instead of *in* space and time? Each thing modifies the whole logical world, the whole of logical space, so to speak. (The thought forces itself upon one): The thing seen *sub specie aeternitatis* is the thing seen together with the whole logical space” (*ibid.*).

The passage presents art and ethics as contexts in which vision *sub specie aeternitatis* is practised and it then tries to clarify the nature of this vision by contrasting it with usual vision. Wittgenstein uses a rather singular expression to define the “usual way of seeing objects”: to see objects *in* space and *in* time is to see them “from the inside”. To see “from the inside” probably means to see things in the context of states, of connections of things, of

which our body is also part and, with it, that which we could call our “empirical I”. On the other hand, the seeing *sub specie aeternitatis* which characterises artistic vision is qualified as a seeing “from the outside”, like a “ripping away” of the thing from the natural context of the state of affairs to which it belongs, from its connection with other objects in time and in space just as with our psychological I, with our desires (cf. Haller 1986, pp. 108-123 and Elliott 2006, pp. 137-154).

Wittgenstein returns to this type of vision in his notes of the following day, clarifying what it involves: “As a thing among things, each thing is equally insignificant; as a world each one equally significant. If I have been contemplating the stove, and then am told: but now all you know is the stove, my result does indeed seem trivial. For this represents the matter as if I had studied the stove as one among the many things in the world. But if I was contemplating the stove *it* was my world, and everything else colourless by contrast with it. (Something good about the whole, but bad in details.) For it is equally possible to take the bare present image as the worthless momentary picture in the whole temporal world, and as the true world among shadows” [Wittgenstein 1961, p. (8.10.16)].

The thing, Wittgenstein seems to be saying, as a thing among things – the stove as one of many objects – remains closed in itself, devoid of meaning; only when it becomes the exclusive object of contemplation does it open itself up, offer itself in its richness of sense. To a transformation in the way of seeing therefore there corresponds a transformation of the object seen, a transformation described in terms of addition of sense. This addition seems to come about because the observer, so to speak, absorbs himself in the object, in such a way that the object, though it be ordinary and habitual, ceases to be an insignificant thing among things and becomes his world. If the entry of August 8th is really a comment on that of the previous day, it does not seem wrong to attribute to Wittgenstein the idea that the artistic gaze renders things significant; but why should it have this capacity? Artistic vision seems to shift the gaze from factuality to the simple subsistence of things, of the world, a subsistence which does not have the nature of fact; this shift, that is to say the seeing of the object not in its ordinary connections with other things, but rather in its simple existence, seems to determine that which Wittgenstein considers to be the miracle, or the wonder of art: “Aesthetically”, he notes, “the miracle (*das künstlerische Wunder*) is that the world exists. That what exists does exist” [*ivi*, p. 86e (20.10.16)]. The meaningfulness revealed by art is thus one and the same with the revelation of the simple existence of things; but where, and how should we understand, in this, the connection with the question of sense and of value, that is, with ethics? That it subsists Wittgenstein confirms in his conversations with Waismann: “For me the facts are unimportant. But what men mean when they say that ‘*The world is there*’ lies close to my heart. I ask Wittgenstein: Is the existence of the world connected with the ethical? Wittgenstein: Men have felt a connection here and have expressed it in this way: God the Father created the world, while God the Son (or the Word proceeding from God) is the ethical. That men have first divided the Godhead and then united it, points to there being a connection here” (Waismann 1965, p. 16).

How the connection of the artistic vision with the theme of sense is to be understood is suggested by the following observation contained in the note of August 20th: "Is the essence of the artistic way of looking at things, that it looks at the world with happy eye? Life is serious, art is gay" (Wittgenstein 1961, p. 86e). Art sees with a happy eye, or rather what makes the difference is not something present in the world, but something in the eye that sees, in the nature of the gaze. The example of the stove is emblematic of the fact that the addition of meaning does not take place by virtue of the object, but thanks rather to the way in which the object is considered. The idea seems to be that sense does not appear from the outside, but only thanks to the involvement of the subject, in so far as he contemplates the stove not as a thing among things, but rather as *his* world. The artistic gaze, we could say, marks the difference between being surrounded by facts and having a world. In it the point is not the response to something that happens, but rather the assumption of the simple existence of things, the amazed attention to the *presence* of things, of the world that *is*. Concerning the suggestion contained in this regarding the question of the sense of the world, there may be a heuristic value in recalling a particular interpretation of the sense of Dutch painting of the seventeenth century. There is indeed, in the attitude considered by Wittgenstein, something very similar to what we find in this painting. In both cases it seems permissible to speak of the artistic way of seeing as a felicitating way of seeing.

II

The above statement rests on an interpretative option which has an important point of reference in Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Without going into the details of his interpretation of Dutch painting, it may suffice, to corroborate the hypothesis of an analogy between the way of seeing that it incorporates and that which Wittgenstein attributes to art, to recall perhaps its most determinative element. Hegel stresses the supreme ability of Dutch painting to fix the particular and the momentary: he sees this as "a triumph of art over caducity". The Dutch, he maintains, were not able or did not want to attain, like the Italians, ideal forms or spiritual beauty, but elaborated an expression of the depth of sentiment and the particularity of the individual character, which shows how the individuals depicted also went about their society life, their everyday tasks. Hegel speaks of a feeling "more immersed in the limited", of a "total identification in the *worldly* and the everyday" to which the unfolding of painting in its most varied genres of representation is connected (Hegel 1970, Bd. 15, pp. 124, 127). We read in the *Lectures*: "Precisely this sense of an upright and serene existence is what the Dutch masters also bring to natural objects, adding, in all of their pictorial productions, to their liberty and fidelity of conception, to their love for that which is apparently of little worth and momentary, to the freshness of an open vision and an undisturbed concentration of the whole soul on that which is most closed in on itself and limited, the greatest freedom of artistic composition, a fine sentiment for that too which is secondary, and perfect care in execution" (*ivi*, p. 129).

Hegel stresses how, in the scenes of everyday life, this painting has developed "the magic and the colouristic enchantment of light, illumination, and colouration" and "the entirely living characteristic". This enchantment does not seem unconnected however from that which appears to him to be the theme of Dutch painting: in the representation of "that which is meaningless and

accidental", even the most common scenes "appear so completely penetrated through with pure joy and gaiety, that this joy and gaiety [...] constitute the true object and content [...] it is the Sunday of life which renders all things equal and banishes all evil" (*ivi*, pp. 129-130). Genre painting refrains from representing anything that lies outside the ordinary; it represents individuals involved in their everyday existence and in this it seems to stress the joy of existence. In Dutch painters what is expressed is something like an intense love of life and this not because reality itself is uniformly perfect. As Tzvetan Todorov observes, it is rather the gaze of the painter which, by choosing in the world and transforming it, puts us in contact with beauty; however he does not invent it, he simply discovers it: "Painting is no longer the mirror of beauty, but the source of light that reveals it" (Todorov 2000, pp. 88-89). It is not by chance that the silent admiration that surrounds the praise of the virtues is also found in scenes whose subject is not strictly speaking edifying. The care with which folds of clothing are portrayed or the cleanness of an indoor scene bathed in light, even when what is represented are subjects worthy of condemnation, is tantamount to a praise of the particular and the material. The painter seems to realise that beauty can also be found in the most insignificant object, in the commonest gesture, as long as he is fully able to grasp its quality.

Though within the limits imposed by his systematic construction, Hegel has perhaps come across something important in the message that Dutch painting is sending us. When he speaks of the "triumph of art over the transient and perishable datum of life and nature", he seems to give us to understand that art can raise to the level of beauty even the simplest and most prosaic elements of everyday life. He interpreted this fact as a symptom of romantic interiority, which seeks not so much the objective content valid in itself, but its very reflection, whatever the mirror that produces it. However we evaluate it, one possible lesson to be drawn from Hegel's interpretation of seventeenth-century Dutch painting is the following: nothing is beautiful in itself, but the painter can show that beauty resides even in the most commonplace things, the most ordinary fact. Things seem to be as they were with Wittgenstein's stove: what makes the difference is the gaze. Painters such as Jan Steen, Gabriel Metsu, and Gerard Ter Borch, Pieter De Hooch, and Johannes Vermeer, Rembrandt and Frans Hals help us precisely to discover the beauty of things *in* things, not above or beyond them. One glance is enough to extract it and show it. Hence they teach us to see the world better. The work of art, Wittgenstein was later to write, "forces us – as one might say – to see" the object "in the right perspective but, in the absence of art, the object is just a fragment of nature like any other" (Wittgenstein 1980, p. 4e), it remains part of the accidental "happening and being-so" (*TLP* 6.41).

According to Todorov, Dutch painters were touched by the grace which allowed them to rejoice in the existence of things, to find the sense of the world (of life) in the world itself: they discovered that beauty could inform the totality of existence (cf. Todorov 2000, pp. 115-116). We are not far from the idea of the connection between art and ethics as understood by Wittgenstein.

III

Let us return briefly to Hegel's lectures: in these Dutch painting is connected to the sphere of the romantic form of art which satisfies "the thirst for the present and for reality itself, the contenting oneself with what *exists*, the being satisfied with oneself, with the finitude of man and with what is finite and particular" (Hegel 1970, Bd. 14, p. 196). Hegel speaks of the Sunday of life that renders all equal and that banishes all evil; what follows the Sunday of life however are the working days and for Hegel the romantics were not able to integrate these two antagonistic domains of existence; the question then becomes: how does the reflection of the feast day appear in the days that follow it? What is the relationship between the beauty, the serenity of art and the seriousness of life?

Sebastian Gardner has highlighted the relationship, of both formal analogy and content, which there seems to be between the experience of art and the structure, familiar outside the artistic context, indicated by Wittgenstein's observation: "The world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy" (*TLP* 6.43). The formal analogy is that between, respectively, the world of the happy and the unhappy, and the world of art and the experience external to art. The connection of content consists in this: that the problem posed by the difference between happy and unhappy worlds – their mutual exclusion and incomprehensibility – reappears as the problem of relating the experience of art to the rest of our experience, in so far as the experience of art is the experience of the happy man (cf. Gardner 2002, pp. 295-296). Just as there is no identity between happy and unhappy worlds, nor can the distinction between art and ordinary experience collapse, our task is precisely to understand how these antagonistic existential domains can be co-ordinated or can belong to the same totality.

Dutch painting seems to reassure us of the existence of moments of grace in which the beauty of simply being is revealed. For his part Wittgenstein considers that, aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists; more than a form of integration he seems to be thinking of a sort of gestaltic change, by which, although the facts are the same, yet the world of the happy is quite another than that of the unhappy the world. Everything is as before, nothing has been added or taken away from this change and yet the world has changed *in toto*. Happiness, beauty, sense seem to reside, for Wittgenstein, "in an attitude or style in the acceptance of all the facts" (Murdoch 1993, p. 28). The point is the position taken with respect to the world, facing it as one's own world, a bit like how, in the artistic way of seeing, one is absorbed in the object. This attitude, for Wittgenstein, is not unlike seeing the world, that is to say life, with wonder, like a miracle and not like something merely accidental. Wonder is in fact a sort of response to the particular *non accidentality* with which we grasp the existence of that which exists; this makes it an experience of sense and value, the expression of a form of acceptance of the world, of life. But the wonder for the existence of things seems to be one and the same as that which Wittgenstein calls "art". In this, I believe, the connection between art and ethics which he perceives, has its point.

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