

Intention in Aesthetics

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In what follows, I will try to give an account of the concept of intention as it is used in the field of aesthetics. I will focus mainly on Wittgenstein's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, trying to explain some of the insights, I believe, he has provided on the use of this fundamental concept. This implies, that we first take into account, the various differences in the use of the concept of justification, since intention is often used in aesthetics as a form of justification. Secondly, we have to try to understand how intention could possibly be of some help in trying to understand the meaning of a certain aesthetical object or action. Thirdly, I will offer a way of looking at intention in aesthetics, as a way of manifesting an attitude, trying to claim, that this, is fundamental to this particular activity.

In the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Wittgenstein gives the following example:

One case is, where you give the reason for your doing something. 'Why did you write 6249 under the line?' You give the multiplication you had done. 'I arrived at it by this multiplication.' This is comparable to giving a mechanism. One might call it giving a motive for writing down the numbers. It means, I passed through such and such a process of reasoning. Here 'Why did you do it?' means 'How did you get there?' You give a reason, the road you went. (LA, III, §13)

First, it is necessary to explain the analogy used by Wittgenstein that relates this case to a "mechanism". Wittgenstein is, through this analogy, trying to show us the fact that "a certain thought process", in this particular case a multiplication, only makes sense when there is necessarily one single result (or to put it in a different way: that a particular mechanism produces one single result; and it cannot produce another). Wittgenstein is not arguing here for the existence of a certain type of mental mechanism with the name *multiplication*. The paragraph starts with: "One case is, where you give the reason for your doing something"(Ibid.), that suggests that what will follow is a commentary, precisely, about a certain type of *justification*. What Wittgenstein's example implies is very important for the understanding of Wittgenstein's argument concerning aesthetics. In the *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, Wittgenstein deals with a problem that is related to the previous example. The passage is the following:

Now I am said to have multiplied when I have carried out the multiplication 265×463 , and also when I say: 'twice four is eight', although here no calculating procedure led to the product (which, however, I could also have *worked out*). And so we also say a conclusion is drawn, where it is not calculated. (RFA, §7, 6e)

The most important aspect of this commentary is what Wittgenstein calls "to draw a conclusion". In the case of multiplication, the criteria for drawing a conclusion is a particular result (that one and no other), that makes the process (through which we got the result) necessary only in certain cases. This simply means that in the case of multiplication, "I passed through such and such a process of reasoning" (LA, III, §13) is only relevant when we are asked how we got to *that* particular answer (but depending on our situation, we could for example memorize all the

answers needed). The multiplication is the reason of our result (in the sense of constituting it) and not a justification of our result (in the sense of a possible justification, since there cannot be another). The consequence we have to extract from this difference is that "*reason/justification* doesn't always means the same" (LA, III, §16, n. 2), and in the case of aesthetics it certainly doesn't mean something similar to the case of multiplication. In aesthetics, the meaning of *reason/justification* we use is not, as Wittgenstein describes, "a report of what was done" (LA, III, §15). Being nothing similar to a report, it follows that it can be various different things and Wittgenstein mentions a few examples, "I could have gone this way" or to give a particular process "though I didn't go through this process" (Ibid.). In a footnote to the same paragraph, Rush Rhees gives a description of what we could call a reason in aesthetics, "it may be what we now see would justify it." (LA, III, §15, n. 1) The "now" in Rhees's sentence is very important and it suggests a particular attitude towards the concept of intention in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. The "now" in Rhees's sentence, suggests that a certain explanation or *reason/justification* for an aesthetic action can change; in the case of multiplication this hypothesis is absurd.

The importance of the concept of intention as something that can solve the problem of knowing a certain *use* is questioned in the *Lectures on Aesthetics*. Wittgenstein makes up an example where his student Taylor and Wittgenstein himself are walking alongside a river when suddenly Taylor stretches out his arm, pushing Wittgenstein into the river. When Wittgenstein asks Taylor for a reason for such an action, Taylor replies: "I was pointing out something to you." (LA, III, §18) But a psychoanalyst might have a different opinion, namely that Taylor unconsciously hated Wittgenstein. In the paragraph, following this example, Wittgenstein says:

Both explanations may be correct. When would we say that Taylor's explanation was correct? When he had never shown any unfriendly feelings, when a church-steeple and I were in his field of vision, and Taylor was known to be thoughtful. But, under the same circumstances, the psycho-analyst's explanation may be correct. Here there are two motives – conscious and unconscious. The games played with two motives are utterly different. The explanations could in a sense be contradictory and yet both be correct. (LA, III, §19)

In this explanation, Wittgenstein talks about "games played with two motives"; motives that are clear and motives that are not so obvious (I would like to omit Wittgenstein's reference to "conscious" and "unconscious", although it is very important in the discussion that follows in his lecture). In the example I have just described, the hypothesis advanced by the psychoanalyst can be the correct one, and that hypothesis is precisely about something that isn't obvious, as the reason given by Taylor is. Wittgenstein does not even consider the possibility that Taylor could have more authority on explaining his action, or if the best way of knowing what happened would be to ask Taylor; he simply states that both explanations could be correct. The reason for this is partially given in the previous example. The same way we are unable to give a sort of mechanism for our answers in aesthetics, that mechanism cannot be

substituted by its supposed mental analog—intention. This simply means that the meaning of Taylor's action cannot be directly derived from any mental state he might *have* or be having at that time. The hypothesis that Taylor might *have* the key for our enigma, "which of the two explanations is the correct one", results from the fact that we attribute to Taylor's supposed mental state the meaning of his action. However, if it were simply like that, we would not have access to such mental states. Nevertheless, it would not be only us that would not have access to such mental state, Taylor also would not, in this particular sense. What makes it impossible for Taylor to have access to his mental state is that Taylor doesn't *have* anything in the sense of possessing something (as in "I have a car"). The tendency for us to think about *having* in those terms is analogous to what Wittgenstein says in *Zettel*: "Here meaning gets imagined as a kind of mental pointing, indicating." (Z, §12) This means that Taylor doesn't *have* something that he can point to, and by the same token he couldn't possibly *compare* it with his action, in the same way someone corrects a test (one consisting in writing the solutions for a set of multiplication problems) with a result sheet. Taylor does not have something he can know better by introspection. In the particular case of an intention, it is even strange to know in which moments such an introspection would come in handy or not. Since intention does not really have a duration, which makes it hard for Taylor to know when he is having an intention. In *Zettel*, Wittgenstein makes a claim that shows the absurdity of this conception:

"I have the intention of going away tomorrow. – When have you that intention? The whole time; or intermittently?" (Z, §46)

An answer to this question is impossible and Wittgenstein completes the sequence of this argument with the following claim:

"One may disturb someone in thinking – but in intending? – Certainly in planning. Also in keeping to an intention, that is in thinking or acting." (Z, §50)

The interesting point in Wittgenstein's argument is the possibility of disturbing someone who is carrying out an intention and this tells us something important about the grammar of intention. What we call intention is not a sensation (and so we cannot talk about intention in the same way we talk about pain, for instance) neither is it a particular mental state. When Wittgenstein describes the carrying out of an intention as *thinking* and *acting*, he is describing this concept as, "embedded in its situation, in human customs and institutions." (PI, §337) It follows that I can only have intentions that are relative to determined situations. Therefore, "to have the intention to talk about him" is "to talk about him" and it is in this way that the connection between my intention and *him* is established. I do not need to point at him: I don't need to point to anything at all; this particular problem is related to the Augustinian conception of language. Now if we turn back to the *Lecture on Aesthetics*, it is easier to understand the question, "When would we say that Taylor's explanation was correct?" (LA, III, §19), that leads us to another aspect in the example involving Taylor. In the case of aesthetics, we are already in a particular situation, as Taylor would be in if he were at an appointment with a psychoanalyst. Accepting to be in that particular situation is to accept that, "the psychoanalyst's explanation may also be correct." (Ibid.) A common aspect between the two games is that in both we are

expecting that someone will provide us with reasons and justifications for certain objects and actions, that do not follow necessarily (as opposed to the case of multiplication). Under these conditions, the intentions that I might have in art, that are very important, are important because of the conditions made possible by a particular situation (this is to say that the meaning of my intention depends on certain rules of that practice, that are, in turn, public). Others that are in the same situation as I am, know that importance, and can therefore understand my intentions (as well as I can). In the case of intentions in aesthetics, it is important to draw a distinction between "to understand" and "to find out" or "to guess". In the case of "to understand", we are solely talking about *giving the justification that will be accepted* (Cf. LA, II, 39), and this simply means, "to suggest a particular use". In the case of "to find out" or "to guess", the suggestion is that there is a single answer and the confusion that has to be avoided here is precisely that there is something similar to a key. It is because there is no such thing as a key (that I could hide from everybody), that I can understand other people's intentions. In *Zettel*, Wittgenstein makes some commentaries that clarify this particular point:

I might e.g. guess what continuation will give the other pleasure (by his expression, perhaps). The application of a rule can be guessed only when there is already a choice between different applications. (Z, §307)

In this commentary, Wittgenstein talks about guessing the use of a rule, which I consider an analogous case to the guessing of an intention. First, we have to understand the use Wittgenstein is making here of *guessing*. In the paragraph that precedes this one Wittgenstein says that "[t]o guess the meaning of a rule, to grasp it intuitively, could surely mean nothing but: to guess its *application*." (Z, §306) The paragraph concludes with: "And that can't now mean: to guess the kind of application; the rule for it. Nor does guessing come in here." (Ibid.) This means that Wittgenstein is not here talking about *guessing* in the sense of a *guessing game* where only one answer is possible. This aspect becomes clearer when Wittgenstein uses in his example the facial expression someone might make as a criterion for a determined use. Nevertheless, it is the second aspect of the example that is more curious. Wittgenstein says that in a particular sense I can guess the use of a certain rule if I can choose from a range of possibilities. In the case of aesthetics, we do not have such a list from which we can pick. In aesthetics we have something similar to what Wittgenstein describes in the first part of his example, namely, I make a certain use of a rule, others can smile or not.

Back to the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Wittgenstein approaches the theme of intention in a way that clarifies important aspects about its use in aesthetics. In an example, Wittgenstein describes what he calls "two schools" (LA, IV, §10) that represent two different opinions concerning painting. The first school states that what is important is "the patches of colour." (Ibid.). The second school, on the other hand, says that, "What matters is the expression on these faces." (Ibid.). Wittgenstein asserts that "[i]n a sense, these two don't contradict one another." (Ibid.). And this is the only sense that should concern us here. The fact that both described schools are not contradicting each other is directly related to what I have said before about aesthetics not being in any possible sense analogous to calculus or "guessing games". However, Wittgenstein makes another important remark:

That tiny smile by which you change the kindly smile into an ironic one, is not a purely visual difference (Ibid.)

Further down we can read:

[Suppose you said:] 'It changes your whole attitude towards the picture.' This may be entirely true. How would this be expressed? Perhaps by the smile you make. (Ibid.)

What I intend to stress in this particular example is that the importance of both schools does not rely on them offering a solution for a certain problem (only in that case would it be meaningful to talk about contradiction). Their importance relies in the way they change our attitude towards a certain thing. The differences that can be pointed out, are as Wittgenstein says, not "purely visual" ones, and this forces both schools to reveal their own attitudes when attempting to describe the differences. This simply means that intentions in aesthetics are important precisely because they can be understood; they are part of the game. To be part of the game is more important than it may seem at first glance, because, in part, what can be asserted in aesthetics is already to manifest an attitude.

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