The Face of the Work of Art: Wittgenstein on Expression

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Wittgenstein was clearly fascinated by the human face. But he appears to have been interested in faces not only for their own sake, but also for what we might call the face's meta-philosophical significance. In other words, Wittgenstein seems to have intuited that the way we see the human face is conceptually related to how we perceive other kinds of meaningful phenomena, which he sometimes tellingly spoke of as possessing faces or physiognomies of their own. As he suggested in the *Philosophical Investigations*, for example, a familiar word can strike us as possessing a "face," as if the word had become a "likeness" of its meaning (Wittgenstein 1953, 186). Wittgenstein recognized faces in a wide variety of other cultural phenomena, too, including the compositions of Bruckner, Haydn, and Schubert.

Though it might seem idiosyncratic of Wittgenstein to posit a conceptual connection between faces and artworks, he was, in fact, not alone among important modern thinkers in proposing that particular analogy. Others who have proposed similar analogies include Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Paul de Man, Allen Grossman, Michael Fried, and Susan Stewart. What underlies this surprisingly common analogy, I believe, is a shared intuition that our understanding of the expressiveness of artworks is conceptually related to our understanding of the expressiveness of the human face and body. If we therefore want to hold on to the thought that aesthetic expression is *real*, everything will depend on how we understand the expressiveness of the living human figure. On the other hand, if we're convinced that art is not literally expressive (for whatever reasons), then it's very likely that that belief will, in turn, be reflected in the way we regard the body itself.

Take the poststructuralist theorist, Paul de Man, for example, who like Wittgenstein, considered the face a crucial concept for aesthetics. Unlike Wittgenstein, however, de Man was skeptical of the reality of both aesthetic and bodily expression, including the expressivity of the face itself, which he famously claimed was but the illusory "effect" of language (in particular, the face-conferring trope of "prosopopoeia"). That de Man would take a position on the significance of the face so radically different from Wittgenstein's tells us something important: that the meaning of the face for modern aesthetics is as problematic and contestable as it is apparently philosophically crucial.

This is surely so because of course it will be hard to know what the significance of the face should be for the philosophy of art, when so many of us late-modern individuals feel so uncertain about the meaningfulness of the human face itself. Deep uncertainty, even outright skepticism: aren't these the intellectual moods that for a long time now have characterized our (and our culture's) thoughts about faces, and what they may or may not reveal about ourselves and other persons? And this prevailing skeptical mood, of course, raises challenging questions for my attempt to argue that Wittgenstein's remarks about faces have something to teach us about aesthetic experience. For what are we to make of Wittgenstein's suggestion that cultural phenomena (like words or melodies) have meaningful faces, when there seems to be such widespread doubt about whether faces themselves are actually meaningful in the first place?

For Wittgenstein, meaning is to a word as mind is to a face; but he can see a word as having a meaningful face, only because he already regards the face itself as expressive of mind. Consider, for example, this typical remark:

> "We see emotion."—We do not see facial contortions and make inferences from them … to joy, grief, boredom. We describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give any other description of the features. (Wittgenstein 1967, §225)

If Wittgenstein is wrong about faces, that will surely compromise his physiognomic approach to aesthetic expression. And, indeed, I would not be surprised if many today find it hard to accept what Wittgenstein seems so clearly to be affirming: the immediate perception of mental states.

From poststructuralist theory to evolutionary psychology to cognitive science, a key underlying assumption that unifies so much contemporary thinking about the face (and indeed about the body as a whole) is that its surface is without intrinsic expressive meaning. As the developmental psychologists Annette Karmiloff-Smith and James Russell succinctly put the point: there is "nothing specifically *mental* about human faces" (Karmiloff-Smith and Russell 1994, 253). What they mean is that the face can, by altering its spatial configuration, indicate or refer to psychological content, but the surface (the *flesh*) of the face as such is assumed to be without any intrinsic mental meaning of its own.

The historical roots of this characteristically modern attitude towards the face's appearance go back at least to Descartes, who re-interpreted human beings as composite entities: minds, on the one hand, and bodies, on the other. After Descartes, the very idea of "expression" suffers a profound inner division: there is now, on the one hand, that which is expressed (the feeling or emotion), while on the other, there is the overt bodily expression (a gesture or an utterance). And so, it becomes, for many, self-evident that interpretation or inference are necessary in order to understand the so-called "expressions" of human beings. For as the cognitive psychologist Alan Leslie puts it: "Because the mental states of others … are *completely hidden from the senses*, they can only ever be *inferred*" (Leslie 2004, 164).

As we know, Wittgenstein's later writings give us good reasons to question—even to refuse—this Cartesian picture of the body. Indeed, unlike the better-known French critiques of the Cartesian subject, which provisionally accept, and only then deconstruct, Descartes' binary of mind and body, Wittgenstein simply reminds us that we need not ever accept, in the first place, Descartes' distorting picture of who and what we are. For we are not composite entities: we are simply human beings. In numerous remarks, Wittgenstein gently reminds us that we do not see overt behaviors, interpret them, and then conclude that they are the behaviors of a human being, whom we can infer to be in this or that mental state. On the contrary, as soon as we recognize the living presence of a human being, we immediately see (and respond to) that person's body as expressive of psychological life. And so, Wittgenstein can articulate his simple alternative to the Cartesian

picture in one justly famous sentence: "The human body is the best picture of the human soul" (Wittgenstein 1953, 152). It follows then that the surface of the body need not be regarded as inexpressive, as believed by so many different modern schools of thought. On the contrary, there's no problem at all with the ordinary belief that we can see mental states *themselves* in the very movements of the human face or body. As Wittgenstein said of the face: "'We see emotion.'—We do not see facial contortions and make inferences from them."

But what might all this have to do with the so-called faces or physiognomies of artworks? What Wittgenstein realized is that just as the surface of the human face is intrinsically expressive of psychological states, so too can be the "merely" material surfaces of cultural artifacts: such as words, melodies, and pictures. Of course, Wittgenstein appreciated how tempting it is to think otherwise: and thus to see an expressive quality, say of a picture, and the pictorial surface itself as conceptually distinct, thereby reproducing the Cartesian problem of other minds as a problem about the perception of aesthetic expression.

Touching on this temptation in *The Brown Book*, Wittgenstein reproduces a very simple line drawing of a face, and he asks us to notice how it can strike us as possessing a distinct, particular expression. What interests him is that we are often tempted to draw a further, mistaken conclusion about the relationship between the image and the expression we see in it:

> … one feels that what one calls the expression of the face is something that can be detached from the drawing of the face …. (We are, as it were, under an optical delusion which … makes us think that there are two objects where there is only one. The delusion is assisted by our using the verb "to have"; what [something] *has* [we think] can be separated from it.)
> (Wittgenstein 1958, 162)

And so, when we say that a picture, a face, or anything else, for that matter, "has" a particular expressive quality, we are tempted to conclude that there exists a "relationship" between two conceptually distinct items. But Wittgenstein's important point is that the concept of expression doesn't name a *relation* of any kind: "expression" doesn't connect mind to body, quality to thing, or anything to anything else. What is expressed is present in, and *as*, the expression itself.

And so, to take a different example, when we hear an emotion expressed by a piece of music, that emotion is present nowhere but in the music itself, and so we really *hear* what is in *fact* really *there*. Wittgenstein knew very well how problematic this idea might seem, as is clear from the following remark:

> Think of the expression "I heard a plaintive melody". And now the question is: "Does he *hear* the plaint?"…
> Some would like to reply here: "Of course I hear it!"—Others: "I don't really *hear* it." (Wittgenstein 1953, 178)

We are, by now, familiar with what's at stake in this back-and-forth. Notice, though, that Wittgenstein doesn't definitively settle the matter. He simply gives voice to two possible answers and then seems to ask: which voice is yours?

Intriguingly, this remark about musical perception is followed by a discussion of the possibility that one might be blind to the expressiveness of a human face. The remark about face-blindness reads like this:

> We react to the visual impression [of a timid face] differently from someone who does not recognize it as timid (in the *full* sense of the word) …
> One might say of someone that he was blind to the *expression* of a face. Would his eyesight on that account be defective?
> This is, of course, not simply a question for physiology. (ibid., 179)

Wittgenstein makes clear that the ability to recognize facial expressions is not entirely biological in nature, but a kind of skill that therefore requires enculturation (the mastery of concepts like "timidity"). Whether or not one is *fully* familiar with the concept for a given state of mind will be *shown* by how one responds to its appearance in others. Someone who is blind to a person's timid expression might treat him with cold indifference, rather than with the concern he might deserve and need.

The far-reaching implications of Wittenstein's idea that one might be conceptually (rather than physiologically) blind to the psychological expressions of another person have been most powerfully explored by Stanley Cavell, especially in his discussion of soul-blindness in Part IV of *The Claim of Reason* (Cavell 1979). As Cavell makes clear there, the possibility of refusing to acknowledge (or of being blind to) the soul (or humanity) of another person is, in fact, a standing human possibility, even temptation.

It's telling, I think, that Wittgenstein's remark about face-blindness would come right after his discussion of musical perception. It does so, I suggest, because Wittgenstein regards blindness to a face's expressions as conceptually related to the blindness we might display towards the expressiveness of aesthetic phenomena. It follows as well, though, that such blindness to aesthetic expression is as much in the realm of possibility (and practice) as our being soul-blind with respect to one another. Nothing can stop us from seeing artworks as void of expressive life; just as nothing can stop us from seeing the human face or body as lacking intrinsic psychological expressivity. Indeed, "expression-blindness," to give this condition a name, appears to be an especially powerful temptation in our late modern culture, in both the humanities and the natural sciences.

But just like skepticism about other minds, as Cavell has argued, neither of the two forms of expression-blindness can be philosophically refuted. Cavell's profound insight about skepticism was to see that far from being a mere error in need of correction, the skeptic's position actually expresses an important philosophical truth: that there exists no ground for the meaningfulness of our lives together (such as a conceptual framework of rules), only our fragile attunements with one another, which we ourselves must maintain by caring for our shared sense-making practices. There is thus nothing to stop any of us from refusing to acknowledge those attunements, fragile as they are, which is of course the skeptic's tragic choice. And just so, there is nothing to stop any of us from

withdrawing our mutual acknowledgments (fragile as *they* are) of the expressive meaningfulness of our very bodies, or of the artworks we make, enjoy, and study. The expressiveness of art will indeed be but a projective fiction or illusion in so far as we choose to see artworks in that way.

That choice, however, need not be one we ourselves feel compelled to make, as if it were philosophically truer, and somehow less naïve, to see the expressive qualities of artworks as not *really* there, but rather as the result of some sort of interpretation, inference, or projection. That, I think, is what Wittgenstein was suggesting, when he endowed aesthetic phenomena with faces. Such physiognomic remarks remind us that the very materiality of our artworks, no less than the living flesh of our bodies, has the intrinsic power to express mind and meaning. What's therefore at stake in disputes about aesthetic expression is not only how best to understand art, but also how best to *see* our very selves.

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