

On Not Explaining Anything Away

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Abstract

In this paper we explain Wittgenstein's claim in a 1933 lecture that "aesthetics like psychoanalysis doesn't explain anything away." The discussions of aesthetics are distinctive: Wittgenstein gives a positive account of the relationship between aesthetics and psychoanalysis, as contrasted with psychology. And we follow not only his distinction between cause and reason, but also between hypothesis and representation, along with his use of the notion of ideals as facilitators of aesthetic discourse. We conclude that aesthetics, like psychoanalysis, preserves the very fine phenomena in their fullness.

Introduction

It is commonly accepted that art was very important to Wittgenstein throughout his life, and that he wrote philosophically about art relatively little.

We are sympathetic to the notion that despite appearances, aesthetics as Wittgenstein understands it is central to his philosophical concerns. One way to begin to see how this could be the case is to examine what Wittgenstein means by "aesthetics," which of course amounts to examining how he uses the word.

In this paper we intend to explain what Wittgenstein might mean by a single sentence that uses the word "aesthetics", which we have in Moore's notes on Wittgenstein's lectures from May 1933. The sentence is: "Aesthetics like psychoanalysis doesn't explain anything *away*." Explaining this will necessitate our looking at what Wittgenstein says in these lectures about psychoanalysis, psychology, and explanations.

Examples of explanations

There are at least three types of explanations given in Moore's notes on Wittgenstein's lectures in 1933. These are:

- (i) Psychological explanations are meant to contrast most strongly with aesthetic explanations. "You can find out what people like a given smell or not & whether almost all people do. This is a psychological experiment" (9:26; citations from (Wittgenstein and Moore 2016) are according to Moore's pagination). The idea is that we somehow (typically, scientifically) arrive at a general rule which we use to explain why observed instances obtain.
- (ii) Psychoanalytic explanations are meaningful and justified not because of the supposed hidden processes they unveil, but rather in virtue of actual instances wherein the explanation's value can be tested—typically in conversation/reflection after the fact. The explanation is a good one if the patient takes it up; it makes sense to her given all the relevant particular circumstances.
- (iii) "This isn't the right ending of this piece. What's wrong with it?" (9:32). We seek an aesthetic explanation that will tell us why this isn't the right ending. Wittgenstein suggests that typically we're interested in reasons why the ending is wrong.

Psychology and Psychoanalysis

Wittgenstein's discussion in the lectures of differences between psychology and psychoanalysis is motivated by intriguing vacillation that he finds in Freud's psychological investigation of jokes. Wittgenstein says that according to Freud, "it's characteristic of a joke, that if you laugh, you don't know why you laugh" (9:43). So, says Wittgenstein, according to Freud's theory, there is a psychological process which has two strata: (1) understanding the words without seeing the joke; and (2) another sub-conscious process. At some point, "[one] suddenly says what the other thinks – the other is suddenly found out" (9:37).

Wittgenstein maintains that Freud's explanation can satisfy us in two absolutely distinct ways. It can satisfy us like any scientific theory by helping us to predict certain things. As in the examples, which we presented before, such causal explanations hinge upon general explanatory principles, which are induced from observations. Freud's hypothesis is that there is something common to all jokes – that "it's part of essential mechanism of a joke to conceal something, & to make it possible for subconscious to express itself" (9:44). Hypothetically, this is the meaning of "joke" (9:38). The mechanism is externally connected to the particular case of telling a particular joke, and the explanation, rendered as being afforded by the mechanism, would satisfy us only so far as future experience confirms it.

Yet the very same explanation may also satisfy us by agreeing that this what happened. "Analyst suggests," says Wittgenstein, "Wasn't it as if someone had said so & so, & wasn't this what produced queer effect on you? And: when subject agrees, he must be agreeing that this is the reason (not the cause)" (9:43). The satisfaction that we derive from the explanation, rendered as a representation, is un-hypothetical: we have been offered a paraphrase of the particular joke itself and it made sense.

Wittgenstein's important upshot is that "[the subject's] agreeing doesn't shew that he thought of the reason at the time; he didn't. To say that he was doing so sub-consciously is a mere picture: it tells us nothing as to what was happening when he laughed. It may be a good expedient to talk of sub-conscious processes; but it gets its meaning from the actual verifying phenomena; which are what are interesting" (9:43).

The crux of Wittgenstein's distinction between psychology and psychoanalysis is his distinction between hypothesis and representation. Hypothesis transcends the particular cases, which the general laws, posited by the

hypothesis, cover. Representation, on the other hand, is un-hypothetical in the sense of affording a mere picture as a useful device, which "enables [one] to overlook a system at a glance" (9:38). It inheres in the particular case by means of paraphrasing, giving good similes, which result in a collective arrangement of (often surprisingly) similar cases.

Wittgenstein's critique of Freud, indeed his philosophical fascination with Freud, is due to an ambiguity in Freud's intellectual intuitions. According to Wittgenstein, by thinking that we find out why the subject laughs by means of psychoanalysis, Freud comes close to a muddle between cause and reason. Freud thinks that such analysis brings out concealed meaning. "Now being clear why you laugh is not being clear about the cause," says Wittgenstein, "and if it were, it would not need patient's consent" (9:44). In the last analysis, according to Wittgenstein, "Freud's discoveries are in fact merely of striking ways of expressing certain facts, & seeing them in a system: not causal explanations" (9:47). And "what Freud says sounds as if it were science, but is in fact a wonderful representation" (9:50).

Reasons and causes

Wittgenstein repeatedly appeals to a distinction between reasons and causes. This distinction is important for his discussion of the character of aesthetic explanations. Say we pronounce some piece of music to be terrible, and are asked why. Wittgenstein suggests that, "ordinarily[,] 'why is this terrible?' asks for a reason, not a cause. E.g. I might say: he's missed the most important point. You might ask: Why is it important? And again give reasons" (9:34f).

Here is another example relating to an explanation, for example, of the prevalence of the Greek profile. "How about the Greek profile? Reasons can be given for this—I mean 'reasons' and not 'causes'. It's of the kind: If you didn't do this, it would look top-heavy... The reasons have nothing to do with psychology... Aesthetic discussion is like discussion in a court of law. You don't say 'this is bad or good', but try to clear up circumstances..." (9:31f).

Wittgenstein does ask explicitly, "What is a reason in Aesthetics?" (9:30). His answer is that it is "a reason for having this word in this place rather than that; this musical phrase rather than that" (9:30). So it is a reason – apparently in an essentially ordinary sense – that has to do with the particularity of the thing under discussion. We try to "clear up the circumstances of the thing" with these reasons. This clearing up seems to give us something like an understanding, in the sense that we are satisfied with the discussion. (See (9:34) where Wittgenstein discusses understanding)

The particular thing we're interested in sets the parameters of the discussion – of what it makes sense to say. Wittgenstein offers an example involving a discussion of an arrangement of a flower-bed. One interesting way to explain its beauty is to talk about the particular arrangement and to give reasons for your calling it beautiful. Wittgenstein says here that "you can say much more" than simply "the scent is pleasing to me." This is characteristic of aesthetic reasons, this potential to go on. The "criterion of correctness of aesthetic analysis must be agreement of person to whom I make it" (9:46). In saying that "aesthetics does not lie in finding a mechanism" (9:46) Wittgenstein suggests that the standard for aesthetic reasons is, we might say, intersubjective.

The contrast is with what he calls "causes." Once you know the cause of something, it is, in a real sense, the end of the story; there is nothing more to say. Wittgenstein gives this example: "If we study the occurrence of one element in a dream, e.g. a window, it may mean anything, or its opposite... It is not like rules which will tell you causes of stomach-ache" (9:50). This is meant to be an instance reflecting "the confusion between getting to know the cause & the reason..." (9:50). Rules that tell you the causes of a stomach-ache are general. We know how the stomach works in the context of human anatomy, and we know how various conditions may affect the stomach. Thus a particular patient's stomach ache is an instance of the "general rules." The mechanism is all the explanation we need, and it justifies the correctness of the explanation.

Aesthetic reasons are particular, but those reasons can be far-reaching. "Suppose I hear a waltz played. I am old enough to know how a waltz used to be danced 30 years ago, & therefore how ought one to be played. I know a young man who can't play a waltz, because he's never seen one danced," (9:45). This illustrates how wide-ranging aesthetic reasons may be. It situates the aesthetic object in a very broad cultural context. In this way, it is hard to rule out anything *a priori* as it were, from potentially being (an aspect of) an aesthetic reason.

Wittgenstein's point in the lectures is striking: "Aesthetic reasons are given in the form: getting nearer to an ideal or farther from it" (9:36). It is striking because it encapsulates not only his well-known critical angle, namely, the distinction between giving causes and giving reasons, and with it the distinction between experimental psychology and aesthetics, but also the intriguing allegiance between aesthetics and psychoanalysis – his positive angle on the subject – which is the focus of our present study.

Wittgenstein's use of the notion of 'ideal' is akin to his use of the notion of 'prototype' (Urbild): it is a regulative idea, the primacy of which is due to its heuristic use in providing the 'logical space' for all possible relevant instances. According to Wittgenstein, 'prototypes' can be conducive to giving reasons instead of misdirecting causes by enabling further descriptions, juxtaposing and grouping similar cases, both actual and possible, which collectively yield a "synopsis" – a collective arrangement, a characterization, which may show us the point of a given practice, revealing one's reasons for one's preference by offering illuminating similes, narratives of possible events arranged in a way that renders certain choices as more compelling than others. Wittgenstein denies that ideal has essence: ideals do not have "something in common called 'ideality'" (9:19). An ideal (of a face, for example, or of a certain balance in polyphonic music) is tied to a time and a place, and it plays a special practical role therein. In this sense, an ideal is precisely "an object of comparison – a measuring rod as it were – within our way of looking at things" (Wittgenstein 1998, 30).

Conclusion

For Wittgenstein, ideals are facilitators of aesthetic discourse. They enable us to us to arrive at useful descriptions – descriptions that allow us to see things in a way which can assist us in finding a solution to an aesthetic puzzle. As Wittgenstein suggests, to find a solution to the puzzle why Brahms rejected Joseph Joachim's suggestion to alter the opening of his fourth symphony, namely, to understand what Brahms was driving at – his ideal – one requires what Wittgenstein calls "further descriptions". Such "further descriptions" consist of an assemblage of illuminat-

ing comparisons and similes, which afford us an overview of a system. "All that aesthetics does," says Wittgenstein, "is to draw your attention to things: e.g. 'This is a climax'. It places things side by side: e.g. this prepares the way to that" (9:31). We can make a person hear lots of different pieces by Brahms, or we can draw attention to a contemporary author; for example, that Brahms is some sense like Gottfried Keller.

Wittgenstein offers that, "Aesthetic craving for an explanation is not satisfied by a hypothesis. This is what I mean by saying Aesthetics is not Psychology" (9:39) – "I say all Aesthetics is of nature of giving a paraphrase, even if same words also express a hypothesis. It is giving a good simile" (9:37). So giving reasons in aesthetics consists in re-phrasing, comparing, coming up with good similes in order to illuminate something definite within the space of possibility, so that a new possibility or aspect may come to life. This suggests that aesthetics is grammatically different from science: in aesthetic explanation we can always go on providing further descriptions (see 9:29) due to "an increase in the valence of dimensions along which possibilities of other characterizations may be viewed, framed, discussed, disputed or developed," to use Juliet Floyd's words (Floyd 2018: 368).

This emphasis on the specificity of the particular mode of characterization, as well as on the context of practice – correcting, framing, disputing, affirming, and developing – brings Wittgenstein's positive angle on the nature of aesthetics into a sharper focus. "What I dislike about Psychology," says Wittgenstein, "is perhaps only a muddle – a tendency to explain away. E.g. 'Science is greater than Art, because it shews you the general, not merely the particular'" (9:39). We have seen in what sense psychoanalysis does not share this tendency to explain away. The dia-

logical, un-hypothetical, humane immanence of psychoanalytic explanations sets them sharply apart from the hypothesis-driven, mechanistic causal cranking of psychological explanations.

For Wittgenstein, "Aesthetics like Psychoanalysis doesn't explain anything away" (9:45), because, like psychoanalysis, aesthetics preserves the verifying phenomena in their fullness. Getting nearer to an ideal, or farther from it, presupposes gradual transition (9:2f) – seeing possibilities for filling the gap between instances by means of coming up with illuminating comparisons. "The thing you say in the end," says Wittgenstein, "may not be what you meant in the beginning, though it has a connection through gradual transition" (9:3).

The aesthetic lesson from "not explaining anything away" is that we don't as it were divide through to simplify the fraction. The fraction as it's given is important, not simply what it's equivalent to.

Bibliography

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