

Aesthetics and Rule-Following

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Abstract

In this essay I will point out parallels between Kant's theory of aesthetics and Wittgenstein's discussion of rule following. Although Wittgenstein did not write an aesthetics and Kant did not discuss Wittgensteinian rule-following problems, and although both Kant and Wittgenstein begin at very different starting points and use different methods, they end up dealing with similar issues, namely issues about rules, particularity, exemplarity, objectivity, practice, and as-if statements.

Kant wondered whether a theory of aesthetics would be possible within his transcendental philosophy. In his *Critique of Pure Reason* he said the answer should be "no." But later, when he was writing the *Critique of Judgment*, he realized that the answer should be "yes." He then argued that judgments of taste make what he calls "subjective claims to universality." If I find something beautiful, I will think that everyone should agree. When I look at a painting or hear a symphony that I find beautiful, I think that everyone should find it beautiful as well. This is Kant's starting point. According to him, these are claims to universality and such claims require a priori grounds. The ground is found in what he calls the "principle of subjective purposiveness" (*subjektive Zweckmäßigkeit*). When we perceive an object and find it beautiful, we find it suitable (*zweckmäßig*) for a "free play" (*freies Spiel*) of our faculties of cognition (imagination and understanding) and we find pleasure in this play. Pleasure is always subjective and therefore this principle of purposiveness is subjective and not objective.

I have suggested that this subjective purposiveness comes about in three ways (Wenzel 2005, p. 62): (1) The object is purposive for a play between our faculties; (2) the faculties find themselves purposive for each other; and (3) this play in turn is purposive for "*Erkenntnis überhaupt*," that is, cognition in general, or cognition as such. This is not any particular cognition, but something more indeterminate. Judgments of taste are never objective judgments. Nor do they aim at such judgments. In matters of taste there are no objective rules, but the principle of subjective purposiveness is some kind of substitute for such rules.

Based on this principle we imaginatively reach out to others and think that they should agree. Others normally have the same faculties that we have, and they can perceive the object as well as we do. Hence they should be able to contemplate it and engage in the same kind of free play we are engaging in and thereby find it beautiful. Instead of an objective rule of beauty, which does not exist, we rely on this a priori principle of subjective purposiveness; based upon it we demand agreement from others. This agreement does not arise via rules, but through acts of making judgments of taste. More precisely: instead of being guaranteed necessary agreement via objective rules, we make demands for agreement and we do so implicitly in the act of making the judgment. In the former case we deal with cognitive judgments, in the latter with judgments of taste.

For Wittgenstein the problem begins at a very different point, namely with the observation that words and rules are not mechanisms. One wants to say that there is an agreement (*Übereinstimmung*, PI 201) between act and rules and that there is some kind of quasi-mechanical

guidance by rules. But in fact there is no such agreement and no such guidance. He says that although the words "rule" and "agreement" are "related" (*verwandt*, PI 224) the agreement does not arise via rules. It is rather that we intersubjectively agree in our actions as if we were guided by such rules. Instead of an agreement between rule and action, we find more basically an agreement between actions. That agreement can be implicit, when there is simply no disagreement among the participants. It can also be explicit, when people say: "that is right." The agreement shows in such behavior and this is the basis for the existence of rules. Thus Wittgenstein has tuned things upside down.

When we come to another country where people speak a language we do not understand, we will rely on intersubjective common grounds. Wittgenstein once went so far as to speak of a "common human way of acting" (*eine gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise*). Anscombe translated this as a "common behavior of mankind." Wittgenstein wrote: "The common behavior of mankind [*die gemeinsame menschliche Handlungsweise*] is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language" (PI 206). But how is this supposed to work and what exactly is this "system of reference" (*Bezugssystem*)?

In our everyday lives we observe "regularity" (*Regelmäßigkeit*) and "agreement" (*Übereinstimmung*). We can say that this comes about in three ways: (a) between words and behavior, as if there were a mechanism connecting the two; (b) between the repetitions from one instant to another; and (c) between the people who use the same words. Thus we have three kinds of agreement: between words and behavior, between repetitions, and between people. Wittgenstein became increasingly interested in the latter two, the agreement between repetitions and especially between people. To challenge this idea, he once asked himself whether it might not be possible that one follows a rule privately and only once (PI 199). This would go against the requirement of repetition (b), because one does it only once; and it would go against the requirement of agreement between different people (c), because one does it alone.

A basic point in Wittgenstein is that people need to agree in shared practices and that these practices have wide horizons. This is Frege's context principle turned intersubjective. There must even be agreement not only in "opinions but in form of life" (PI 241). This of course creates problems if we take "form of life" in the plural: You have your form of life, and I have mine; because then the question arises who is right and what a common ground might be (Wenzel 2012). The idea of a "common behavior of mankind" (PI 206) would of course help in avoiding this relativism. But what exactly is this "common behavior of

mankind"? Wittgenstein, it seems to me, is rather quiet on this issue, at least in the *Philosophical Investigations*.

Very differently from Kant, Wittgenstein did not venture into any kind of faculty talk. Nor did he discuss some kind of categorical imperative. He did not try to resolve issues about rule following by turning to faculties of cognition, such as a faculty of imagination (*Einbildungskraft*) and a faculty of understanding (*Verstand*). Nor did he turn to any kind of a priori categories, time and space, schemata, or even reason (*Vernunft*), and try to build on them. It is as if he wanted to avoid Nietzsche's criticism, who accused Kant of solving problems "*vermøge eines Vermøgens*," that is by invoking faculties. To bring out Nietzsche's joke and play with words in English, we may say that Kant solved his problems "by means of means." For Kant there were explanations of this kind, not so for Wittgenstein. This is a central difference between the two. But if we look into the details, similarities will become apparent, particularly in Kant's third *Critique*. Many of the later Wittgensteinian considerations have an aesthetic touch and this allows for connections with Kant.

1. The as-if. When dealing with objective judgments, we think it is the object that forces two judgments to agree with each other. If you say the house is made of stone and I say it is made of wood, then we will go and see and let the facts decide. The house is a third element mediating between your judgment and my judgment. Kant in the first *Critique* uses the Latin phrase "*consentientia uni tertio, consentiunt inter se*" (A 820/B 848). If two judgments agree with the object, they must agree with each other. For Kant, predicates such as "being made of stone" and "being made of wood" come with rules of application. Kant is aware that this is problematic and leads to a regress as soon as we ask by means of which further rules these rules are applied. Although Kant is aware of the problem, he does not go into it. Wittgenstein is very different here, as we see in his rule-following discussions.

But in the third *Critique* Kant is clear from the start that in matters of taste this does not work anyway. The predicate "beautiful" is fundamentally different from a predicate such as "being made of wood." There is no rule of application that would come with it. The object cannot function as a third and mediating element, a "*uni tertio*," by means of which you and I would be forced to agree. An objective rule is completely missing.

Instead, according to Kant, when I make a judgment of taste, I simply demand that others must agree, and I base my demand on the free play that I happen to engage in and on the feeling of pleasure that I feel in this play. On the one hand, I demand agreement as *if* my judgment was objective, which it is not. It is *my* free play and *my* feeling of pleasure and not that of others. There is no objective rule. On the other hand it is as *if* my judgment were merely subjective, which it is not either, because my feeling is based on an a priori principle, namely the principle of subjective purposiveness, and based on it I demand agreement from others. But this agreement is demanded and not guaranteed. The principle cannot fully take the place of the third element, the *uni tertio*. Instead, I must reach out to others more directly. I must demand of others to engage in such a play with their own faculties. They must do something, and I imagine others doing something. This is not quite a shared practice as Wittgenstein has in mind, but it gets close.

But there is a difference. In Kant there is an *intra-subjective* play going on, namely my play of faculties. Kant is here doing some kind of transcendental psychology. Al-

though it is my play, it is not private either; Kant says it is not "personal," because certain ingredients are universally shared, namely the faculties and the principle of subjective purposiveness. But Wittgenstein shies away from trying to give reasons from the inside, the intra-subjective. He prefers to stay more outside, so to speak, on the level of the *inter-subjective*. He observes agreement between practices, and instead of looking for common grounds on the inside he looks for something common on the outside, in traditions, practices, and forms of life.

According to Kant's aesthetics you play with your representations of the object and I play with my representations. We are not identical, neither are our plays. We are individuals, the judgments are particular acts, and there is no rule forcing us to agree. "Beautiful" is not an objective predicate. But from a transcendental point of view, we share the same faculties and the a priori principle of purposiveness is available to all human beings. We are not completely separate individuals, which is important for Kant. Although Wittgenstein once mentions the "common behavior of mankind," he does not give a positive account, and the "forms of life" tend to remain local and in the plural.

2. Exemplarity. Wittgenstein in his rule-following discussions avoids generalizations and prefers to focus on particularity and situatedness. I teach you something, and you try to get it right. You do this by intuition and trial and error until it seems to you that you know what I mean. In the end I might be content with your performance and say "right, this is what I mean," even though I do not know what went on in your head. There is something similar in Kant. For him the free play is not determined by rules. Hence there is something ineffable about beauty and one must play with the object oneself. Objects of art and nature that we find beautiful are exemplars, and so are our judgments of taste. Each judgment is new and unique. It is itself an exemplar. It seems to us that we cannot but find the object beautiful; we demand that others agree. Kant speaks of a "necessity of the assent of all to a judgment that is regarded as an example of a universal rule that one cannot produce" (Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, section 18; see Wenzel 2005, p. 78). Artists produce works of art that incorporate such judgments. Other artists contemplate their works and take them as exemplars, trying to read off the rules as if there were any.

Similar in Wittgenstein, each calculation is something new, a new act happening right there and then. The question of right and wrong relies on communication and agreement through others (Kusch 2006, pp. 177-206). Calculation is social and culturally imbedded. It needs to be taught and the teacher explains a rule by showing and giving examples to the pupil. Although there are objective rules, Wittgenstein points out the basic need for inter-subjective agreement in practice. This is comparable to the Kantian demand for agreement in judgments of taste. Furthermore, often the examples Wittgenstein considers are delicate and fine-tuned, and sometimes they are related to aesthetics, such as aspect switches and absolute pitch (see Wenzel 2010).

3. Free play. In Kant, the free play of our faculties is a play with rules. It is imagination and understanding that play with each other when we contemplate a painting or when we listen to a piece of music. Understanding is the faculty that provides rules, for instance about colors, shapes, rhythm, or meter, when we recognize something as having a certain color, shape, rhythm, or meter. Imagination on the other hand is more like phantasy. It freely combines what is given and produces something new. Imagination plays with those rules of colors, shapes, rhythm, and meter

that the understanding provides. Nevertheless, what imagination produces is not chaos. The free play it is not completely without rules either. It plays with them. It does not produce white noise.

Similarly Wittgenstein often imagines new ways of understanding what someone might have meant in saying or doing something. He often opens new horizons. This is an aesthetic aspect in many of his observations. Even when the object is not meant to be beautiful, for instance when thinking about how to continue a mathematical sequence, there is a certain freedom and openness revealed in Wittgenstein's ways of asking questions. His skepticism about rules creates room for imagination, and his pointing out practices shows interactions between participants in which the rules might be playful and change any time. This play is not meant to be *intra-subjective*. It is *inter-subjective*, but a play it still is.

4. Genius. According to Kant, a work of art seems natural, as if it were produced without any purpose or intention. Art looks like nature. Similarly, nature looks like art when we find it beautiful. It looks like designed or being made for us. We feel that we are part of nature. A genius produces works of art and is like a mouthpiece of nature speaking to us. Geniuses themselves cannot fully explain how they produce their works and where the ideas come from. Other artists try to imitate and to follow them. They try to read off rules although there are no rules of beauty. Similarly, Wittgenstein's skepticism about rule-following practices reveals limitations of rules and replaces these rules by those practices that are more open, flexible, and subject to interpretation and change. Wittgensteinian participants do not fully understand what they are doing, as Kantian geniuses

do not fully understand what they are producing. In Kant it is about taste and works of art. In Wittgenstein it is about everyday activities. But there are often traces of aesthetics, even Kantian aesthetics, in those everyday activities as described by Wittgenstein.

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