WITTGENSTEIN ON AESTHETIC CONCEPTS

Wittgenstein did not write any separate work on aesthetics. However, in spite of being primarily interested in logic and language, he displayed tremendous sensibility towards arts.[1] Three of his philosophical works—*Tractatus Logico Philosophicus*; *The Blue and Brown Books*; and *Philosophical Investigations* contain interesting insight into the problems of aesthetics. His more direct remarks on aesthetics can be derived from his Lecture notes. But since they are not written by Wittgenstein himself, we have to leave scope for errors and distortions.

In spite of the difficulties involved in the interpretation of Wittgenstein's ideas, one cannot deny the philosophical significance of his views. The present paper would attempt to analyse and relate these fragmentary remarks of Wittgenstein into a unified theory of aesthetic concepts. I would attempt to show that Wittgenstein has all along argued on the lines of denying absolutistic aesthetics any scientific status (though the reasons for this denial may have been different at different occasions). In spite of revising his views regarding the nature of language, his views on aesthetics show an inherent continuity. We may start from his earliest comments on aesthetic judgments that occur in the *Tractatus*. In all his works Wittgenstein has held the language of ethics and aesthetics to be on the same level. Assuming the formal similarity of Ethics and Aesthetics, he says :

> "....it is impossible for there to be propositions of ethics ....It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same).[2]

Now let us see what Wittgenstein implies by this 'transcendental' character of aesthetics. He elaborates this in his "Lecture on Ethics" by showing how value essentially transcends the factual domain. Evaluative words like 'good' and 'beautiful', for him, can be used in both a 'trivial' or 'relative' sense as against the 'ethical' or 'absolute sense'. For Wittgenstein, the peculiarity of normative aesthetics lies in this absolutistic usage of value words. This normative usage transcends the limits of language, for scientific language can only reveal the factual.[3]

Thus we can talk significantly only of the relative senses of value words, like "this is a good chair" or "this is the right road". Here in these two examples both 'good' and 'right' have a contextual meaning. And both right and good in this relative sense can be translated into factual propositions. Only this relative usage of value words can be meaningful because the absolutistic sense is essentially nonsensical. Thus he says :

> "....I see now that these nonsensical expressions were not nonsensical because I had not yet found the correct expressions, but their nonsensicality was their very essence. For all I wanted to do with them was just *to go beyond* the world and that is to say beyond significant language."[4]

The above passage makes it very clear that there cannot be a possibility of formulating operational definitions of the evaluative concepts of aesthetics. For any absolutistic usage of concepts like 'the beautiful', 'the good' etc., cannot be translated into any particular empirical sense (or senses). To conclude from it the nonsensicality of the terminology of absolute aesthetics has not been new. Here we see that Wittgenstein shares with the Logical Positivists their reduction of aesthetic, ethical and religious discourse to the level of nonsensical expressions.[5]

I wish to submit that what is most important in Wittgenstein's remarks on aesthetics is not the avowed nonsensicality of aesthetic statements, but what he further concludes from these initial remarks. For this we need to have a close look into the *Philosophical Investigations* and his *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics*. Here he seems to have found a way out. What was primarily an emotive denunciation of aesthetic discourse now takes a constructive turn. Wittgenstein makes it very clear that no essential definitions of general concepts are possible. Here we may recall his often quoted example of game.[6] Wittgenstein proves with the help of illustration that no essence of game can be found which can capture the essential element of all the varied usages of the concept of game.

What holds about the concept of game applies to all aesthetic concepts. Aesthetic concepts like 'beautiful', 'ugly' etc., defy any essential definitions. One cannot lay down any essential characteristics which would constitute all beautiful or ugly things.

Wittgenstein remarks that one way of analysing the nature of concepts is to show how they have originated in language.[7] Tracing the origin of aesthetic concepts, Wittgenstein demonstrates their approximation to interjections. This idea is not novel, it was upheld by the other Logical Positivists. In fact, it is because of their essential similarity to interjections that these thinkers denounce aesthetics and ethics to the level of emotive language. At this juncture Wittgenstein seems to part company with them. The reason he offers is simple — in spite of their origin in interjections, he does not hold aesthetic judgments to be equivalent to them. Marking out the distinction between aesthetic judgments and exclamative expressions, Wittgenstein says :

> "In what we call the Arts a person who has judgement develops (A person who has a judgement doesn't mean a person who says 'Marvellous !' at certain things...) When we make an aesthetic judgement, we think, among a thousand things, we do not just gape at it and say: " Oh ! How marvellous !" We distinguish between a person who knows what he is talking about and a person who doesn't."[8]

And Taylor marks out clearly (in the footnotes) that consistency of reaction is a pre-requisite of a knowing person as against a person who is merely venting his emotions through an exclamative remark. Furthermore, this consistency of reaction implies that there a is mode of deciding to use certain evaluative expressions in the content of a certain set of works of art. However, no evaluative expression can have univocal meaning,[9] all depends on the game we are playing. Thus, the word 'beautiful' can have as many different usages as is the possibility of playing divergent linguistic games with it. Though one can always make it clear as to what usage one is following at which moment. This recognition of Wittgenstein is extremely relevant for aesthetics. For it brings aesthetic judgements very near to art objects, thus saving them from being mere empty generalizations. It is in this narrow and definite sense that aesthetic norms can have their application and not by attempts at discovering the universal essences of aesthetic concepts.

Wittgenstein is conscious of the uselessness of most of our aesthetic concepts. He makes it clear that "....in real life, when aesthetic judgements are made, aesthetic adjectives such as 'beautiful', 'fine', etc., play hardly any role at all."[10]

And one can see from the above remarks that for Wittgenstein to talk significantly about works of art is not to repeat the often repeated cliches but to talk of the evaluation and appreciation of particular objects. It is in the context of these particulars that evaluative concepts of aesthetics become significant. For the meaning of these evaluative concepts would be the language game in which these concepts would occur. This is not a peculiarity of aesthetic concepts but is true of all words.[11] Thus he regards language essentially as a form of life—not constitutive of a system of dead signs, but a living system which is meaningful only in operation. This shows that there is nothing particularly sacred or profane about aesthetic concepts. Since the nature of these concepts is such that they have no univocal usage, the pursuit of an essence which may capture their necessary and sufficient properties would be a futile venture. Thus any discussion of aesthetic concepts, to be fruitful, must presuppose a contextual meaning of these evaluative notions. All definition of aesthetic concepts would therefore be paradigmatic. This shows that in a sense Wittgenstein repudiates the idea of according any specialised status to aesthetic concepts. He says :

> "You might think Aesthetics a science telling us what's beautiful — almost too ridiculous for words. I suppose it ought to include also what sort of coffee tastes well."[12]

The above passage does not imply that Wittgenstein was insensitive to the distinction between the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic. He has only attempted to point out that a serious discussion of aesthetic concepts can only be in their living contexts.[13] It is the ways of living of a culture that reveal the meaning of aesthetic discourse. For, "What belongs to a language game is a whole culture. In describing musical taste you have to describe whether children give concerts, whether women do or whether men only give them, etc."[14]

Wittgenstein did not wish to make aesthetic evaluation mundane by these examples. His attempt was to make it more and

more specific and thus relevant to art criticism. Wittgenstein, in his *Lectures*, has been criticised for making artistic criticism and evaluation very naive because of his usage of the terms like 'correct' and 'incorrect'. Thus referring to Wittgenstein's analogy of a tailor cutting out a suit right and wrong of artistic evaluation, Harold Osborne has attempted to show[15] that 'right' and 'wrong' cannot be used in the same manner in the two cases. This analogy can be applicable only to forgery and second rate art works and not to masterpieces which evolve original criteria for evaluation.

It seems that Osborne has taken the tailor analogy a little too seriously, perhaps more than what was meant by Wittgenstein. For, referring to the use of 'correct' and 'incorrect' in evaluation he says :

> "We talked of a correctness. A good cutter won't use any words except words like 'Too long', 'All right'. When we talk of a symphony of Beethoven we don't talk of correctness.... In certain styles in Architecture a door is correct,.... But in the case of Gothic Cathedral what we do is not at all to find it correct — it plays an entirely different role with us. The entire *game* is different.... 'Correctly', 'Charmingly'. 'finely', etc. play an entirely different role.... The words we call expressions of aesthetic judgement play a very complicated role, but a very definite role, in a culture of a period."[16]

This long quotation of Wittgenstein makes it sufficiently clear that he did not think that the evaluation and appreciation of art is such a simple affair as finding out the correct proportions of cutting out a suit length of a certain design. Seeing the complicated usages of evaluative terms in the language of aesthetics he only wanted to save aesthetic evaluation from mere slogan raising. Thus he holds that what we should attempt to seek in evaluative terms is not their essential definitions but family resemblances between their varied disparate usages.

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NOTES

1. Norman Malcolm's memoir of Wittgenstein shows that he not only was keenly interested in the arts but also displayed considerable skill in music, architecture and sculpture.
   See Norman Malcolm, *L. Wittgenstein : A Memoir* (London, 1958).
2. L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, tr. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinnes (London, 1969) Nos. 6.42, 6.421, pp. 145, 147.
3. "Our words used as we use them in science, are vessels capable only of containing and conveying meaning and sense, *natural* meaning and sense. Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water ... so far as facts and propositions are concerned there is only relative value and relative good, right, etc. "
   L. Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics", *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. LXXIV (1965), p. 7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
5. The works of Ayer, Carnap, Russell and Schlick are replete with this denunciation.
6. See L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford, 1967). Nos. 65, 66, 67, 68, 69 and 70.
7. Thus Wittgenstein says : "One thing we always do when discussing a word is to ask how we were taught it...you get a rough approximation to what kind of language game is going to be played....If you ask yourself how a child learns 'beautiful', 'fine' etc., you find it learns them roughly as interjections....What *makes* the word an interjection of approval ? It is the game it appears in, not the form of words. "
   L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations On Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, No. 5, pp. 1, 2.
8. L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, No. 17, p. 6.

9. Referring to the vagueness of aesthetic discourse, Wittgenstein says :

"For imagine having to sketch a sharply defined picture corresponding to a blurred one. In the latter there is a blurred red rectangle : for it you put down a sharply defined one. Of course—several such simply defined rectangles can be drawn to correspond to the indefinite one—But if the colours in the original merge without a hint of any outline won't it become a hopeless task to draw a sharp picture corresponding to the blurred one ? Won't you then have to say : "Here I might as well draw a circle or heart as a rectangle.....Anything—and nothing—is right"—And this is the position you are in if you look for definitions corresponding to our concepts in ethics and aesthetics.

Ibid. No. 77, p. 36 e.

10. L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversation on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, No. 8, p. 3.

11. In this context Wittgenstein criticises his contemporaries; he says : " (If I had to say what is the main mistake made by the philosophers of the present generation, including Moore, I would say that when language is looked at, what is looked at is a form of words and not the use made of the form of words)".

Ibid. No. 5, p. 2.

Ibid., No. 2, p. 11.

13. Thus Wittgenstein remarks : "In order to get clear about aesthetic words you have to describe ways of living."

Ibid., No. 35, p. 11.

14. *Ibid.*, No. 26, p. 8.

15. See Harold Osborne's paper, "Wittgenstein on Aesthetics" in *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 6 (1966).

16. *Ibid.*, Nos. 23, 24, 25, pp. 7, 8.

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