

RESEARCH ARTICLE

"Engelmann Told Me...": On the Aesthetic Relevance of a Certain Remark by Wittgenstein

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This paper is an attempt at bringing out various aesthetically relevant points alluded to by Wittgenstein in what I call 'the Engelmann remark' – a longish manuscript remark written by Wittgenstein in 1930 and painstakingly discussed by Michael Fried in the context of elucidating what is strikingly new in the work of a photographer like Jeff Wall. One part of this paper is dedicated to summarizing and briefly examining the account given by Fried while another part is meant to clarify some of Wittgenstein's points by way of contrasting their import with the story told by Fried. In this second part Wittgenstein's late observations on aspect change are used to show in which ways these observations may help us to gain a better understanding of the idea of a specific 'perspective' claimed to go with a given work of art.

Keywords: Wittgenstein; Michael Fried; Paul Engelmann; aspect change; realism; everydayness

I. Introduction

The remark by Ludwig Wittgenstein that will be central to my discussion was written in the summer of the year 1930. It reports on an observation by Wittgenstein's friend Paul Engelmann as well as on Wittgenstein's response to and subsequent reflections on this observation.¹ Many readers of the collection *Culture and Value*, where Wittgenstein's remark was

¹ For information on Engelmann and his friendship with Wittgenstein, see Ilsa Somavilla and Brian McGuinness, eds., *Wittgenstein – Engelmann: Briefe, Begegnungen, Erinnerungen* (Innsbruck: Haymon, 2006). Works by Wittgenstein are referred to by the usual abbreviations: *Culture and Value*, 2nd ed., ed. Georg Henrik von Wright and Alois Pichler, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), abbreviated as CV; *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), abbreviated as LC; Manuscript, von Wright numbering, abbreviated as MS; *Notebooks 1914–1916*, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), abbreviated as NB; *On Certainty*, ed. Georg Henrik von Wright and G. E. M. Anscombe, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969), abbreviated as OC; *Philosophical Grammar*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Anthony Kenny (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), abbreviated as PG; *Philosophical Investigations*, 4th ed., ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), abbreviated as PI; *Philosophical Remarks*, ed. Rush Rhees, trans. Raymond Hargreaves and Roger White

first published (CV, pp. 6–7), have had only little to say about it.² A striking exception is the eminent art historian Michael Fried, who drew on Wittgenstein's remark in the context of an extensive account of a number of works by the photographer Jeff Wall. Here, Fried argues for the striking claim that the Engelmann remark (as I am going to call it) 'is arguably Wittgenstein's most original and sustained contribution to aesthetic thought, although it may be only now, in the wake of developments in photography since the late 1970s, that it can be taken in that way'.³ Before proceeding to attempt a critical review of Fried's account I shall quote the entire passage in question:

Engelmann sagte mir, wenn er zu Hause in seiner Lade voll von seinen Manuskripten krame, so kämen sie ihm so wunderschön vor, dass er denke, sie wären es wert, den anderen Menschen gegeben zu werden. (Das sei auch der Fall, wenn er Briefe seiner verstorbenen Verwandten durchsehe.) Wenn er sich aber eine Auswahl davon herausgegeben denkt, so verliere die Sache jeden Reiz und Wert und werde unmöglich. Ich sagte, wir hätten hier einen Fall ähnlich folgendem: Es könnte nichts merkwürdiger sein, als einen Menschen bei irgend einer ganz einfachen alltäglichen Tätigkeit, wenn er sich unbeobachtet glaubt, zu sehen. Denken wir uns ein Theater, der Vorhang ginge auf, und wir sähen einen Menschen allein in seinem Zimmer auf und ab gehen, sich eine Zigarette anzünden, sich niedersetzen usf., so dass wir plötzlich von außen einen Menschen sähen, wie man sich sonst nie sehen kann; wenn wir quasi ein Kapitel einer Biographie mit eigenen Augen sähen, – das müsste unheimlich und wunderbar zugleich sein. Wunderbarer als irgend etwas, was ein Dichter auf der Bühne spielen oder sprechen lassen könnte. Wir würden das Leben selbst sehen. – Aber das sehen wir ja alle Tage, und es macht uns nicht den mindesten Eindruck! Ja, aber wir sehen es nicht in *der* Perspektive.

Engelmann told me that when he rummages round at home in a drawer full of his own manuscripts, they strike him as so glorious that he thinks they would be worth presenting to other people. (He said it's the same when he is reading through letters from his dead relations.) But when he imagines a selection of them published he said the whole business loses its charm and value and becomes impossible. I said this case was like the following one: Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing someone who thinks himself unobserved engaged in some quite simple everyday activity. Let's imagine a theatre, the curtain goes up and we see someone alone in his room walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, seating himself etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; as if we were watching a chapter from a biography with our own eyes, – surely this would be at once uncanny and wonderful. More wonderful than anything that a playwright could cause to be acted or spoken on the stage. We should be seeing life itself. – But then we do see this every day and it makes not the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from *that* point of view.

(Contd.)

(Oxford: Blackwell, 1975), abbreviated as PR; *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ed. and trans. D. F. Pears and B. F. McGuinness (New York: Humanities Press, 1961), abbreviated as TLP.

² Variant readings are given in [[double square brackets]]. The quoted text and its translation contain a few tacit changes. Wittgenstein's wavy underlining (in the von Wright and Pichler edition represented by ordinary underlining) indicates dissatisfaction with the wording of his remarks.

³ Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 77. Most of the relevant chapter was anticipated in Fried's essay 'Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday', *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2007): 495–526, see p. 519.

– So wenn Engelmann seine Schriften ansieht und sie herrlich [[wunderbar]] findet (die er doch einzeln nicht veröffentlichen möchte), so sieht er sein Leben, als ein Kunstwerk Gottes, und als das ist es allerdings betrachtenswert, jedes Leben und Alles. Doch kann nur der Künstler das Einzelne so darstellen, dass es uns als Kunstwerk erscheint; jene Manuskripte verlieren *mit Recht* ihren Wert, wenn man sie einzeln und überhaupt, wenn man sie *unvoreingenommen*, das heißt, ohne schon vorher begeistert zu sein, betrachtet. Das Kunstwerk zwingt uns – sozusagen – zu der richtigen Perspektive, ohne die Kunst aber ist der Gegenstand ein Stück Natur wie jedes andre, und dass wir es durch die Begeisterung erheben können, das berechtigt niemand, es uns vorzusetzen. (Ich muss immer an eine jener faden Naturaufnahmen denken, die der, der sie aufgenommen, interessant findet, weil er dort selbst war, etwas erlebt hat, der Dritte aber mit berechtigter Kälte betrachtet; wenn es überhaupt gerechtfertigt ist, ein Ding mit Kälte zu betrachten.)

– Similarly when Engelmann looks at his writings and finds them splendid [[wonderful]] (even though he would not care to publish any of the pieces individually) he is seeing his life as God's work of art, and as such it is certainly worth contemplating, as is every life and everything whatever. But only the artist can represent the individual thing so that it appears to us as a work of art; those manuscripts *rightly* lose their value if we contemplate them singly and in any case *without prejudice*, i.e. without being enthusiastic about them in advance. The work of art compels us – as one might say – to see it in the right perspective, but without art the object is a piece of nature like any other and the fact that we may exalt it through our enthusiasm does not give anyone the right to regale us with it. (I am always reminded of one of those insipid photographs of a piece of scenery which is interesting to the person who took it because he was there himself, experienced something, but which a third party looks at with legitimate coldness; insofar as it is ever justified to look at something with coldness.)

Nun scheint mir aber, gibt es außer der Arbeit [[Tätigkeit/Funktion]] des Künstlers noch eine andere, die Welt sub specie aeterni einzufangen. Es ist – glaube ich – der Weg des Gedankens, der gleichsam über die Welt hinfliegt und sie so lässt, wie sie ist, – sie von oben im [[vom]] Fluge betrachtend.

But now it seems to me too that besides the work [[activity/function]] of the artist there is another through which the world may be captured sub specie aeterni. It is – as I believe – the way of thought which as it were soars above the world and leaves it the way it is, contemplating it from above in its [[from its]] flight.

II. Fried's Story

In his discussion of Wittgenstein's remark Michael Fried divides his argument into eight parts, which will be summarised on the following pages (II.1–8).⁴ After this introductory discussion, I shall focus on the text of Wittgenstein's remark and try to show why it is that in some cases I prefer to emphasise different aspects from those underlined by Fried.

II.1

To begin with, it is worth noting that Fried describes the story told by Wittgenstein to open his remark as a 'thought experiment'. It is likely that Fried does not use this expression in what one might want to call a theoretically charged sense, and above all we may surely suppose

⁴ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 77–80 ('Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday', 519–25).

that Fried is not aware of the fact that Wittgenstein himself is not particularly fond of this expression and tends to view it critically in various passages of his manuscripts.⁵

One notion Wittgenstein specifically objects to is the idea suggested by the word 'experiment' that even in the realm of thought it is possible to wait and see what – under conditions of non-interference – will happen in order to infer or conjecture law-governed processes supposed to take place in the realm of the psychological. This, however, is to forget that in the sphere of thought there is nothing that might be regarded as corresponding to the observer-independent course of nature or the neutral attitude normally ascribed to scientists or, more generally speaking, to empirically working students of nature. Accordingly, while the metaphor behind the expression 'thought experiment' is not in tune with cases where a story about imaginary happenings or developments is told to illustrate or clarify a philosophical insight, it misleadingly insinuates the existence of sequences of events that take place independently of any observer.

In Fried's view, the idea spelled out by Wittgenstein can be explained in terms of a distinction held to be of central importance by Fried himself. The distinction he has in mind is that between being engrossed or absorbed by something, on the one hand, and what he calls theatricality, on the other. Here, of course, it does not matter whether or not the people represented are either truly absorbed in some activity or behave theatrically; what matters is that they are *represented* either as characters that are oblivious of what is going on or as characters acting theatrically.

In his writings, Fried again and again endeavours to show that entire chapters of the history of art can be accounted for against the background of this contrast. In the present essay he sees Wittgenstein as an author who emphasises the anti-theatrical element ('The thought experiment Wittgenstein proposes [...] belongs to the cast of mind I have been calling anti-theatrical').⁶ The events Wittgenstein imagines as taking place on the stage would be a kind of non-theatrical theatre, as it were. The character or, more generally speaking, the characters appearing there believe that they are unobserved, and for this reason we may (according to Fried) assume that they do not intend to play-act.

As a matter of fact, Wittgenstein does say that the person concerned is someone 'who thinks himself unobserved' (and who would accordingly be a candidate for membership in Fried's category of 'absorption'). But then Wittgenstein goes on to say: we should imagine that the events described by him are taking place in a theatre ('Let's imagine a theatre, the curtain goes up and [...]'). However, if you know that you are on the stage of a theatre, you will only rarely believe that you are unobserved; perhaps you can be said to try to perform the role of a person who feels unobserved – but that is an extremely complex and context-sensitive intention that may easily lead us into absurdities when we try to disentangle its component parts. Some of the difficulties we may begin to see at this point will be taken up below.

⁵ To cite just a few characteristic passages: compare PR, p. 52 ('What Mach calls a thought experiment is of course not an experiment at all. At bottom it is a grammatical investigation' – 1930) with MS 137, p. 128 ('I seem to be making thought experiments. Well, they aren't experiments at all. Rather something like calculations' – 16. 12. 1948). 'We think over our actions before we do them. We make pictures of them – but why? After all, there is no such thing as a "thought-experiment"' (PG, p. 109). 'A thought experiment comes to much the same as an experiment which is sketched or painted or described instead of being carried out. And so the result of a thought experiment is the fictitious result of a fictitious experiment' (ibid., p. 155).

⁶ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 77 ('Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein and the Everyday', 519).

II.2

The second point concerns an aesthetic category which, according to Fried, was 'immensely privileged' for Wittgenstein, that is, the category of the everyday. And in fact, Wittgenstein describes a scene where a person is doing the most common, perhaps even trivial, things one can think of ('some quite simple everyday activity'): the man walks up and down, lights a cigarette, and so on. What we are faced with is, as it were, 'life itself' – something 'uncanny and wonderful' at the same time, as Wittgenstein observes. Fried, for his part, speaks of a *ne plus ultra*, an unsurpassable measure of 'realism'.⁷

At this point, Fried does not bother to explain what he means by 'realism'. And considering that in his *Photography* book his chief authority on everydayness is Martin Heidegger (rather than, say, Wittgenstein himself or Fried's hero Stanley Cavell), one wonders whether the kind of realism Fried has in mind could really help us in trying to grasp the relevant notion of the everyday, that is, that used in the Engelmann remark. The words just quoted from Wittgenstein's text ('life itself') suggest that the idea Wittgenstein is really interested in is not so much that of a form of *realism* (and hence of representing things) but rather that of a special kind of immediacy (and hence of getting or being in touch with things).

II.3

This conception of 'life itself' and the impression that perceiving it would be 'more wonderful than anything that a playwright could cause to be acted or spoken on the stage' is an idea to which Wittgenstein (or someone speaking on his behalf) responds by saying that nothing could be more common than everyday life: to consider it from the point of view of our everyday life would never motivate us to regard it as something uncanny and wonderful at the same time. This objection is then followed by the inevitable reply that, in normal circumstances, this everyday life is never seen from the perspective alluded to here, that is to say: from the perspective of someone attending a performance of a work for the theatre, and hence devoting himself to a work of art.

This difference of perspective, however, is re-interpreted by Fried in a way that is not obviously legitimate: the artist's perspective and that of non-artistic everyday life are contrasted in such a way that they coincide with the perspectives of observer and observed. Fried says that the observed person lives in a different world from that of the observer, even though he is then tempted to take back some of this talk of different *worlds* – but not the division into two perspectives: the observer's perspective, on the one hand, and the observed person's perspective, on the other.⁸ As far as I can see, however, Wittgenstein's description does not justify the conclusion that an observed person can never be said to be in a position to see things from the same – or an analogous – perspective as an observer. It may even be that the possibility

⁷ There is a good deal on what he means by 'realism' in Fried's book on Menzel. But this is obviously not the place to enter into a discussion of these matters. See his *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002).

⁸ In his essay, Fried reports that several participants in a discussion of these matters that took place at Chicago insisted that talk of 'worlds' would not do as a means of elucidating Wittgenstein's idea of a *point of view* or a *perspective*: 'there is in crucial respects only one world, this one, that is seen in those different lights' (Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 364n31; 'Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday', 520n31). Of course, the uniqueness of the world seems to be presupposed in remarks like 'There are two godheads: the world and my independent I' (NB, 8.7.16 [10]) as well as in many well-known remarks from the *Tractatus*. However, the idea of uniqueness does not appear to fit some quite plausible readings of "The World and Life are one" (NB, 24.7.16 [1]; TLP 5.621), for example, and it is obviously difficult to reconcile this idea with remarks like: '*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world*' (NB, 23.5.15 [1]; TLP 5.6) and 'it is also clear that the world of the happy is a different world from the world of the unhappy' (NB, 29.7.16 [1]; TLP 6.43[c]).

of their occupying the same perspective is essential to Wittgenstein's reflections. I will come back to this point below.

II.4

Fried's fourth point amounts to the claim that Wittgenstein relies on a distinction between different modes of objecthood. Here Fried begins by noting that Wittgenstein's argument heavily depends on a contrast between the 'individual things' represented by works of art or seen in the light of art, on the one hand, and 'mere objects' (as one might say), on the other. In this context, the word 'mere' is evidently expected to carry a great deal of weight. And precisely for this reason it is difficult to understand why Fried proceeds to express his feeling that the temptation to use this word should be resisted.

Moreover, he connects the above-mentioned difference between modes of objecthood with an early distinction Wittgenstein emphasises between two ways of looking at objects, that is, the distinction between 'the ordinary way of beholding objects from out of their midst' and 'the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside' (NB, p. 83; 7.10.16). What remains unclear, however, is the way in which the suggested distinction between different ways of looking at things could be expected to explain the supposed difference between various modes of objecthood.

Quite generally speaking, it is a remarkable feature of Fried's approach that, on the one hand, he underlines the in his view notable originality of Wittgenstein's remark, while, on the other hand, he tries very hard to bring out connections he perceives between Wittgenstein's ideas and traditional theories. So the above-mentioned distinction between different modes of objecthood, for example, is inspired by Hegel. And in discussing his next point (II.5) he goes on to bring into play the Kantian category of 'disinterestedness'.

II.5

It is in this context that Fried observes that Wittgenstein relies on a distinction which involves a contrast between disinterestedness or (to quote Wittgenstein himself) 'impartiality', or unprejudicedness, on the one hand, and 'coldness', on the other. Here, Fried points out that in a manuscript remark from the year 1929 (that is, from the year previous to the Engelmann remark) Wittgenstein notes that his own ideal is 'a certain coolness' (CV, p. 2e). But even if we as readers of Wittgenstein decide to stay on the safe side and risk very little by way of interpretation, there will be no peril in suggesting that by speaking of 'coolness' in the earlier remark Wittgenstein meant something entirely different from what he meant by 'coldness' in the later remark.

The 'impartiality' of which Wittgenstein speaks in the Engelmann remark is such that it will stifle any form of arduous passion engendered by an almost habitual attitude of 'enthusiasm'. This impartiality is not a variety of Kantian or other kinds of disinterestedness: it is a coldness that prevents enthusiasm from developing at all or nips it in the bud as soon as it shows any signs of coming to the fore. What is interesting about this impartiality is the fact that it can assist us in distinguishing between objects involving the work of a true artist and objects that do not deserve our enthusiasm for the reason that no artist has left any imprint on them of *his* particular – and possibly 'compelling' – way of looking at things, in other words: his perspective.

The coolness, on the other hand, which is characterised as Wittgenstein's 'ideal' in the somewhat earlier remark alluded to above, is *not* an ideal of aesthetic relevance. What Wittgenstein seems to have in mind is a kind of ideal personal attitude – a coolness that serves the passions as a kind of framework condition without, however, influencing their development. True, this attitude may, in certain situations, have repercussions on our aesthetic judgements, but it

is by no means the result of *specifically* aesthetic competences, nor does its exercise involve such competences.

II.6

What may strike readers as perhaps the most interesting aspect of Fried's approach is elaborated under point (6). What I mean is the idea that at the time of Wittgenstein's remark it was impossible to capture the way in which he tells his story by means of artistic tools available at that time. Accordingly, capturing this way of telling the story would require a new and hitherto unavailable medium. Of course, what cannot be meant by this is the idea that photography as such was either unavailable or not allowed for by Wittgenstein.⁹ Rather, what Fried must have in mind are surely certain specific forms, or uses, of the photographic medium of the kind deployed by practitioners like Jeff Wall, who is one of the artists particularly highly esteemed by Fried.

The second salient idea developed by Fried in the present context is the notion that what plays a most decisive role in our remark is the impression or the ideal of what Fried likes to call 'metaphysical aloneness'. As far as I can see, however, this reading of Wittgenstein's text is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to justify. At any rate, these two exegetical claims – that is to say: both the thesis of the existence of, or the need for, a new medium as well as Fried's observations on metaphysical aloneness – are such that they require further discussion, but it is only the second one to which I shall actually return below.

II.7

Fried goes on to explain that in underlining the achievements of a specifically artistic perspective Wittgenstein makes it clear that without the work of an artist – in fact, without the help of certain artistic or even artificial elements – an as it were self-erasing form of realism would not be possible. For basically the aim of an artist like Jeff Wall is a highly artistic, or artificial, way of representing events intended to appear as if they were not mediated by any medium. Thus, the aim is an extreme kind of immediacy.¹⁰ According to Fried, it is only by employing highly sophisticated and unheard-of types of light-sources and digital forms of image editing that it has become possible to approach the ideal suggested by Wittgenstein. It turns out that this part of Fried's interpretation, too, has two aspects: on the one hand, he emphasises the aspect of the significance of artificial elements or the technical means typically employed by artists; on the other hand, the decisive point is the attempt to use these means to give the impression of absolute immediacy.

II.8

The remark by Wittgenstein that Fried discusses in the essay here given centre stage (and which we have simply called 'the Engelmann remark') consists of a long paragraph comprising almost a page and a half plus a much shorter second paragraph taking up the idea of capturing the world *sub specie aeternitatis* by artistic means and pointing out a second possibility of achieving the same aim. According to Wittgenstein, this second possibility is the 'way of thought', 'which as it were soars above the world and leaves it the way it is, contemplating it from above in its flight'. In Fried's opinion this image is reminiscent of two characteristic ideas of Wittgenstein's later work as we know it from his *Philosophical Investigations*, for example. What Fried has in mind are, first, the methodological idea of a

⁹ For the subject 'Wittgenstein on Photography', see my 'Letters from a Philosopher', in Wittgenstein: *Biography and Philosophy*, ed. James C. Klagge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 188–90, 194.

¹⁰ For the contrast between talk about realism and talk about immediacy, see section II.2, above.

surveyable representation (*Übersichtlichkeit*) and, second, the maxim that philosophy ought to leave its objects of investigation – such as language and mathematics – the way they are anyway (PI, §§ 122, 124).

And in fact, this talk about 'leaving things the way they are anyway' can easily remind readers of certain formulations of Wittgenstein's later writings, for instance of PI, § 124, where he writes as follows: 'Philosophy must not interfere in any way with the actual use of language [...] It leaves everything as it is. It also leaves mathematics as it is, and no mathematical discovery can advance it.' This remark is frequently quoted by writers who use it to object to Wittgenstein as an advocate of what they like to call 'quietism'.¹¹ He is blamed for defending a kind of intellectual laziness, of deliberate abstention from serious theoretical work. Independently of how one wishes to deal with this objection – we can be sure that in this and similar passages Wittgenstein welcomes an attitude that harmonises with the endeavour to refrain from interfering with the language of our everyday activities and of science.

A similar kind of thought is often expressed by Wittgenstein in terms of his distinction between explanation and description: a scientific explanation is given in order to fit the object to be explained into a given mould, whereas in the case of a description one tries to represent it in the same way in which it presents itself without any interference on our part.¹²

Obviously, this idea of an examination which leaves its object the way it is anyway is not without problems of its own. At the same time, I have the impression that in the context of the Engelmann remark of 1930 this idea plays a different role from that played by it in PI, § 124. The latter concerns the attitude philosophers should assume in dealing with the results of scientific work. In the context of the Engelmann remark, however, Wittgenstein is dealing with a specific kind of reflective work supposed to be as suitable for 'capturing the world *sub specie aeternitatis*' as certain works of art. I doubt that what Wittgenstein has in mind here is a philosophical kind of work (in a strict and narrow sense of the word 'philosophical'). He rather seems to think of a mystical ideal of the kind addressed in his early writings, for instance in the following entry from the journal he kept during the first world war:

The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside. In such a way that they have the whole world as background. Could this be the point, after all: that in this view the object is seen *together with* space and time instead of *in* space and time? (NB, 7.10.16 [b–d])¹³

And if readers tend to interpret the second paragraph of the Engelmann remark in terms of the idea of mystical contemplation, they will not be inclined to relate the allusion to a view from above to the ideal of surveyable representation mentioned in *Philosophical Investigations*, but rather understand it as reminiscent of the mystic's way of looking at things as hinted at in Wittgenstein's early writings.

III. A Slightly Different Story

It is likely that here, just as in many other cases of a similar kind, there is no way of giving absolutely persuasive and irrefutable arguments for or against this or that reading. It does seem important, however, to recognise that there is no need to establish a link between the

¹¹ The controversy about Wittgenstein's alleged quietism was initiated by a number of articles by Crispin Wright (as advocate of the allegation) and John McDowell (defending Wittgenstein against the allegation). A kind of summary is attempted in my 'Wittgenstein's Quietism', in *Metaphysics in the Post-Metaphysical Age*, ed. Uwe Meixner (Vienna: öbv&hpt, 1999), 37–50.

¹² See, for example, PI, §§ 109, 124, 496; OC, § 189.

¹³ Anscombe's translation of the last sentences begins with the words 'Is this it perhaps – in this view [...]'.

concluding paragraph of the Engelmann remark and Wittgenstein's *later* philosophy: it can fruitfully be seen in the context of some of his early writings.

But now I propose to have a look at the beginning of the Engelmann remark and thus, as it were, at the *frame* of the remark as a whole. It is surprising that Fried has remarkably little to say about this frame, even though it is quite obviously connected with a central and, as far as aesthetic matters are concerned, particularly relevant set of questions discussed in the context of Wittgenstein's later philosophy.

The set of questions I have in mind concerns the idea of aspect change as we know it, for example, from the consideration of ambiguous pictures of the duck-rabbit type. One possibility of expressing a perception of aspect change much discussed in Wittgenstein's later writings consists in using expressions like 'I'm seeing A as B' or 'Now I'm seeing this object as a rabbit'.

The situation described by Engelmann and reported by Wittgenstein is one involving this type of change: Engelmann is looking at the contents of his manuscript drawer and receives the impression that these contents are so magnificent that they should by all means be made accessible to other people. But as soon as he imagines an edited selection based on this material the very same papers seem to him to lose all value, thus excluding their publication as completely inappropriate.

What does not become entirely clear in reflecting on Engelmann's, or Wittgenstein's, description is the question whether it is the idea of publication in general or that of a published *selection* (as opposed to an edition of the material in its entirety) that causes a change of aspect. But maybe we can afford to leave this question undecided.

At any rate, this is the initial situation that Wittgenstein has in mind throughout and to which he relates the descriptive comparison that Fried prefers to call 'a thought experiment'. We are asked to imagine that we are looking at a theatre stage on which very common or trivial events are taking place in an equally common or trivial way. In the description given by Wittgenstein we are faced with one single person lighting a cigarette, walking up and down, and so on.

Here there are two points that I would like to stress: first, the activities Wittgenstein characterises as 'simple everyday activities' are trivial in the extreme. If a director tried to treat his audience with a whole evening full of goings-on of this type, he could not expect to be praised as someone who knows how to entertain a crowd.

Second, some of Wittgenstein's original German formulations are reflexive in a strikingly ungrammatical way. For example, he says that 'suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves' – that is, strictly speaking, on other occasions the person on the stage does not see *him-* or *herself* in this way!¹⁴ And Wittgenstein's description continues by observing that this is 'as if we were watching a chapter from a biography with our own eyes'. But basically, to talk of one's *own* eyes makes sense only if the person observed is occupied in watching his own actions.

In other words, Wittgenstein smuggles a kind of reflexivity into his description of the situation that will resist most attempts at capturing it by means of a translation and will hence easily be overlooked. But only by occupying a reflexive point of view will the biography we see developing become one that is seen with one's own eyes. And of course, this way of

¹⁴ '[...] so dass wir plötzlich von außen einen Menschen sähen, wie man sich sonst nie sehen kann.' A more literal attempt at rendering these words might run as follows: 'so that suddenly we'd see a person from outside in a way that ordinarily one can never see oneself.' In German, the change from 'wir' to 'man' with its attendant change from plural to singular plus the change from 'einen Menschen von außen sehen' to 'sich sehen' are surely even more striking (and confusing) than these efforts at expressing the meaning of Wittgenstein's words in English.

looking at things would be 'at once uncanny and wonderful' – if indeed it involved a possible perspective!

However, this supposed way of looking at things is not really a possible one. And arriving at this insight makes us recognise that what we see are just ordinary everyday events which, in reality, are neither uncanny nor wonderful. All of a sudden we see what is happening on the stage no longer from that perspective which made such a great impression on us. For from this perspective we could manage to see things only because of our 'partiality', that is, because of our being 'enthusiastic' from the very start.

This state of partiality corresponds to the enthusiastic feeling with which Engelmann looks at his manuscripts and which turns into disappointment as soon as he looks at these papers with impartial eyes. On the other hand, this partiality – this enthusiastic way of looking at things – has the advantage of giving us an idea of what life itself would look like if it were portrayed by a great artist. He who manages (not least owing to his partiality) to see his own life, or a fragment of his own life, as 'God's work of art' may also be able to grasp what it means to represent an individual thing in such a way that 'it appears to us as a work of art' (as Wittgenstein says).

Here it is important to remember that Wittgenstein does not say that the work of art will appear to us as a work of art; what he says is that the *represented thing* will appear to us as a work of art. We must not forget an important general lesson Wittgenstein tries to teach us in the context of his later remarks on aspect change and so on, namely that in this sort of context the little word 'as' functions in such a way that things cannot be said to be perceived *as* these things themselves; they can only be said to be perceived *as* things different from themselves.

As Wittgenstein notes in his 'Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment' (§ 122; PI, p. 205), a case of the former kind would be like an attempt to say at the sight of a knife and fork 'Now I see this as a knife and fork' – that is, the utterance would not make sense. A person seeing his life as God's work of art will see it as something totally different from that sequence of more or less trivial events perceived by someone who perceives it in the way in which it appears to us in our everyday world.

Everyday things and even utterly trivial objects or events may however appear as works of art if they are represented in such a way that we are enabled, or perhaps forced, to perceive them as works of art. As Wittgenstein says, a work of art may 'compel' us to assume the right perspective, that is to say: *that* perspective from which the represented object itself appears as a work of art or can perhaps turn into a work of art.

In saying that a work of art will compel us to assume the right perspective Wittgenstein presumably does not want to claim that the work exercises a kind of causal pressure on the observer preventing him or her from deciding in favour of any other perspective but the 'right' one. What he is likely to mean is that the work is 'compelling' in the sense that in a case where we 'read' (or perceive or interpret) it *with understanding* it leaves us only one single way of considering it. And in certain cases this would involve seeing the represented thing itself as a work of art.

In brief, I think that the aesthetic relevance of the Engelmann remark consists in this: the ways in which we tend to talk about aspect change and our ability to see something as something different may help us to gain a better understanding of the point of talking about the perspective belonging to a work of art.

Moreover, these considerations may contribute to sketching a more accurate picture of the idea that the impressions gained by looking at objects inhabiting field A might help us to grasp what it means to gain corresponding impressions by looking at things belonging to area B. Our example were the feelings of the uncanny and the wonderful acquired by

observing everyday events – feelings that may help us to form an idea of what kind of perspective may be suggested to an observer by an as it were 'compelling' work of art.

If my way of reading the Engelmann remark goes in the right direction, we shall have to conclude that the strictly speaking *aesthetic* import of this remark is less far-reaching than Fried assumes. To support this view, I should like to return to two or three of the points mentioned earlier. In one passage Fried writes that, for Wittgenstein, the category of the everyday is an 'immensely privileged aesthetic category'.¹⁵ Now it must be admitted that, as a matter of fact, in Wittgenstein's thought the everyday or, as he likes to say, the homespun (*das Hausbackene*) is an important category.¹⁶ To underline this commentators will again and again quote PI, § 116, where Wittgenstein says: 'What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.' But obviously this does not reveal anything about the role played by this category in the context of aesthetics, specifically in the context of *Wittgenstein's* aesthetics (if it is legitimate to speak of such a thing at all).

Considering what we know about Wittgenstein's own aesthetic preferences, it is obvious that they were anything but 'homespun'. But this cannot be the point at this stage of the argument. In his reflections on these matters Fried begins by considering the example of the theatre as presented in the Engelmann remark, where Wittgenstein does talk about 'some quite simple everyday activity' performed by a person onstage believing himself to be unobserved. But what Wittgenstein is aiming at here is above all a description of an example chosen so as to throw light, by way of analogy or contrast, on the initial or framing description. That is, the experience of aspect change mentioned in the framing story is meant to be illustrated by an example that may deviate from the original one in various important respects. At any rate, as far as I can see, the given context does not supply convincing reasons for speaking of a particularly privileged aesthetic category.

Possibly one might want to argue that in some of his lectures, for example, Wittgenstein likes to appeal to the field of activities performed by craftsmen in order to support his aesthetic considerations by examples. Thus he likes to mention the activities of joiners and tailors.¹⁷ But these activities are invoked to illustrate or exemplify certain ideas – and not to point out that the products of cabinetmakers and tailors satisfy our highest aesthetic standards or are at least as perfectly capable of displaying the specific features of works of art as Goethe's *Faust* or Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

It is likely that Fried has a number of reasons for claiming that the everyday, the homespun, is a central category of aesthetics; and some of these reasons are surely connected with his preference for photography – and for the works of Jeff Wall, in particular. In this context one will tend to think of his above-mentioned claim that Wittgenstein's 'thought experiment' (as Fried calls it) almost cries out for a new medium that did not even exist in Wittgenstein's day and presupposes the development of modern light sources and digital techniques of image editing.

¹⁵ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 77 ('Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday', 519).

¹⁶ To quote just a couple of typical examples: in his *Philosophical Grammar* Wittgenstein writes that 'thought can only be something common-or-garden and *ordinary*'; 'Der Gedanke kann nur etwas ganz Hausbackenes, *Gewöhnliches* sein' (PG, p. 108). And a few pages later he says: 'In reflecting on language and meaning we can easily get into a position where we think that in philosophy we are not talking of words and sentences in a quite common-or-garden sense, but in a sublimated and abstract sense'; 'Wir können leicht, beim Nachdenken über Sprache und Bedeutung, dahin kommen zu denken, man redete in der Philosophie eigentlich nicht von Wörtern und Sätzen im ganz hausbackenen Sinn, sondern in einem sublimierten, abstrakten Sinn' (ibid., p. 121).

¹⁷ Tailors are for example mentioned in LC, I:13, 28; joiners come in in Wittgenstein's discussion of the right height of a door (ibid., II:9–15).

In my view, this claim is wrong on account of the fact that it ascribes a degree of significance to Wittgenstein's description of the stage scene that it simply does not have in the context of the Engelmann remark. However, the claim is interesting none the less, also because Fried (as we have already seen) attempts to connect the idea of our needing a new medium of art with the relevance of the concept of metaphysical aloneness. He speaks of an 'ideal' of metaphysical aloneness and comments that even in Wittgenstein's day this ideal had long degenerated into a bourgeois cliché. In the Engelmann remark, however, Wittgenstein succeeded, as Fried says, in 'rediscovering, as if on new grounds, the spiritual and artistic depth of such an ideal'.¹⁸

But what can be meant by 'metaphysical aloneness' in the present context? I suspect that what Fried has in mind here is an idea along the lines of the notion of an ineluctable seclusion or isolation or separateness of the individual (whatever these words may be taken to mean). But that cannot really be the intended meaning, if we are truly talking about Wittgenstein, for even the kind of solipsism approved in his *Tractatus* has nothing to do with metaphysics but a lot with language.¹⁹ And the existential, or existentialist overtones of Fried's claim are even more alien to Wittgenstein's way of thinking.

But in spite of all this it seems to me that the claim may be read in a way alluding to something of great interest. Here I am thinking of the reflexivity which Wittgenstein, as I pointed out earlier, succeeds in smuggling into his account. Ultimately, the stage scene is stimulating for the reason that it tends to annul the division between observer and observed: the person seen on the stage is supposed to be seen by me as someone watching himself through my eyes and addresses himself in saying: 'This is life itself!'

Here, the formula using the words 'see as...' is legitimate, if only for the reason that there is a sense in which the observer cannot at the same time be the object of his or her observations. The person onstage is – just as the observer in the audience – supposed to be someone who is seeing something that he or she cannot really see. The whole situation is one that should cancel itself out, for even if its description is not regarded as self-contradictory in the strict sense of the word, it can be seen to involve absurdities if looked at in the proper light.

But to the extent the whole description of the scene functions at all, it will function only because there can be just one person seen by me as someone who can see him- or herself through my eyes. The description would not even begin, or *seem* to begin, to work if there were several people onstage at the same time. And in this case it may be permissible to speak of 'metaphysical aloneness' if one is so inclined. It is a form of aloneness whose necessity is enforced by the logic of this situation itself or, rather, by the logic of its attempted description. And in this case the metaphysical aloneness would, as we have seen, owe its existence either to the observer's enthusiastic partiality or to the perspective whose assumption is enforced by a 'compelling' work of art.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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¹⁸ Fried, *Why Photography Matters*, 79 ('Jeff Wall, Wittgenstein, and the Everyday', 522–23).

¹⁹ For Wittgenstein's solipsism see my "'Ich bin meine Welt'", in *Der Denker als Seiltänzer: Ludwig Wittgenstein über Religion, Mystik und Ethik*, ed. Ulrich Arnsward and Anja Weiberg (Düsseldorf: Parerga, 2001), 193–212, and 'Wie ist der Solipsist in der Fliegenglocke zur Ruhe zu bringen?', in *In Sprachspiele verstrickt – oder: Wie man der Fliege den Ausweg zeigt*, ed. Stefan Tolksdorf and Holm Tetens (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 177–92.

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