

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'That They Point Is All There Is to It': Wittgenstein's Romanticist Aesthetics

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Why is aesthetics important to Wittgenstein? What, according to him, is the function of the aesthetic? My answer consists of three parts: first, I argue that Wittgenstein finds himself in an aporia of normative consciousness – that is to say, a problem with regard to our awareness of the world in terms of its relation to a norm. Second, I argue that the function of Wittgenstein's aesthetic writings is to deal with this aporia. Third, through a comparison with Friedrich Schlegel's writings on allegory, I try to show that the way in which Wittgenstein resolves the aporia renders him a Romanticist philosopher. The point of an aesthetic interaction, for Wittgenstein, is that it can render clear what cannot be described without running against the walls of our cage: the absolute. Through aesthetic interactions we are able to (indirectly) access a ground for norms by which we experience ourselves as unconditionally bound.

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I. Introduction

Aesthetic considerations were at the centre of Wittgenstein's thinking.¹ Why? What, according to Wittgenstein, is the function of the aesthetic? My answer will consist of three parts: first, I will argue that Wittgenstein finds himself in an aporia of normative consciousness, that is to say, a problem with regard to our awareness of the world in terms of its relation to a norm. Second, I will argue that the function of Wittgenstein's aesthetic writings is to deal with this aporia. Third, on the basis of Wittgenstein's aesthetic writings and a comparison to the Early German Romanticists, I will give an interpretation of how Wittgenstein deals with this aporia.

¹ Wittgenstein's writings are abbreviated as follows: 'A Lecture on Ethics', *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 3–12, abbreviated as LE; *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), abbreviated as LC (followed by a Roman numeral for the lecture, and an Arabic numeral for the paragraph); *Culture and Value: A Selection from the Posthumous Remains*, 2nd ed., ed. Georg Henrik von Wright and Alois Pichler, trans. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), abbreviated as CV; *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge 1930–1933; From the Notes of G.E. Moore*, ed. David G. Stern, Brian Rogers, and Gabriel Citron (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), abbreviated as M; *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and Georg Henrik von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1974), abbreviated as OC; Friedrich Waismann, 'Notes on Talks with Wittgenstein', *Philosophical Review* 74 (1965): 12–16, abbreviated as NTW.

The aporia of normative consciousness consists of its being both supernatural, as well as inescapable. Even though ethical norms according to Wittgenstein, are not entities of the natural world and so cannot be spoken of sensibly, still we find ourselves unable to stop searching for answers to questions of right and wrong. Normative beings, so Wittgenstein thought, find themselves inexorably confronted with the question of how to live rightly, but without anywhere to turn to in order to actually find norms that allow for a right life.

In his aesthetic writings, by contrast, Wittgenstein talks freely of norms that render the object of one's aesthetic interaction right or correct. Even those objects that are correct in virtue of something else than the established cultural sensibilities of a particular time and place can be appreciated for their rightness. However, the norm or 'hidden law' to which they correspond cannot be articulated.

This raises a puzzle: how can aesthetic reasons attune us to the rightness of something, without articulating the terms in virtue of which this thing is right? Building on an apparent affinity between Wittgenstein's thinking and the Early German Romanticists, I will offer an interpretation according to which aesthetic practices are such as to move beyond philosophical argument in order to express and experience what philosophy aims for but cannot describe: the absolute, or the ultimate foundation of our normative frameworks. To come to accept an aesthetic reason is therefore to come to accept a way of thinking that first renders possible normative evaluation.

In the following, I will first make explicit what I take to be the aporia of normative consciousness in Wittgenstein's philosophy, specifically in 'A Lecture on Ethics' (Section II). I will then argue that Wittgenstein's aesthetic remarks can be read as a way of dealing with this aporia while also giving rise to a puzzle: How can aesthetic reasons attune us to something they cannot articulate (Section III)? Lastly, I will offer my interpretation of Wittgenstein's aesthetic remarks by reading them under a Romanticist light (Section IV).

II. The Aporia of Normative Consciousness

Call normative consciousness any awareness of anything in relation to a norm to which that thing is taken to conform. The aporia of normative consciousness arises when we are aware of something in relation to an *absolute* norm, that is, a norm that does not derive from any description of what the thing is, but rather holds regardless. Such an awareness is one that Wittgenstein deems *ethical* in contradistinction to an awareness of 'relative value'. The problem with an absolute normative awareness is its grounding: if it holds regardless of any matter of fact, we become unable to say *why* it should hold in the first place. Ethics, according to Wittgenstein, tries to go beyond the boundaries of scientifically verifiable statements and so its statements are, strictly speaking, nonsensical. But more than merely a pseudo-scientific discipline, ethics is also a state of mind that holds sway even if someone were to tell us that its statements were nonsense: more than merely defending an error-theoretical position, Wittgenstein finds himself unable to negotiate the tension between the persistence of absolute normative consciousness and the inability to give a sensible articulation of that consciousness. That is the aporia.

Wittgenstein starts 'A Lecture on Ethics' with some introductory remarks that seem out of place, borderline offensive even. He tells his audience that he will make use of the format of the one-hour lecture to tell his audience something he is 'keen on communicating', rather than give them a lecture about logic, a topic that would rather require a full course of lectures. Moreover, Wittgenstein rejects the alternative of a 'popular-scientific lecture' as a banal medium that does not accomplish anything in the way of understanding and instead satisfies only a 'superficial curiosity about the latest discoveries of science'. Therefore, he will speak about 'a subject which seems to [him] to be of general importance', which, as it turns out, is

not logic or science at all, but rather 'Ethics' (significantly, and unlike words such as 'science' and 'logic', written with a capital first letter; LE, p. 4).

The contemptuous remark about pop-science can be read as a sneer against such works as James Jeans's *The Mysterious Universe*, a book that Wittgenstein detested and thought misleading (LC, III.36). But more significantly, the sneer also rehearses a central argument of the paper. Wittgenstein detests pop-science for two reasons. Most obviously, Wittgenstein found that popularizing science implied a kind of idol worship, an attitude contrary to the scientific mindset itself. Wittgenstein is implying that, contrary to science and logic, ethics is really rather the sort of thing that is of general importance. The layperson's desire to understand science's latest discoveries is then superficial, not only because a truly interested person will have a totally different mindset, but also because, in general, *one should rather be curious about the problems of ethics*. Already anticipating the conclusion of his lecture, Wittgenstein is setting up a dichotomy between science and ethical enquiry and is urging his audience to work up an interest in the latter. However, as we shall see, it will turn out to be impossible to *argue* that ethics is really of general importance, and so thereby the lecture will turn out to be itself an instance of the impossibility to articulate an absolute norm.

Wittgenstein starts the lecture proper with a distinction between the relative and the absolute sense of the word 'good', and argues that only the latter (absolute) sense is the one that ethical enquiry concerns itself with. In its relative sense, 'good' refers to a correct set of affairs *relative to* a predetermined purpose. In its absolute sense, by contrast, 'good' refers to a norm that obtains regardless of any predetermination of purpose and, consequently, cannot be derived from any state of affairs. But whereas judgements of relative value are, ultimately, both unproblematic as well as trivial, judgements of absolute, ethical value present us with a big problem: they are nonsensical.

Judgements of relative value are those that hold true *given a particular goal* and as such are really just describable as statements of fact. Wittgenstein states: 'Instead of saying "This is the right way to Grantchester", I could equally well have said, "This is the right way you have to go if you want to get to Grantchester in the shortest time"' (LE, p. 6). By contrast, judgements of absolute value cannot be redescribed in this way:

Now let us see what we could possibly mean by the expression, '*the absolutely right road*'. I think it would be the road which *everybody* on seeing it would, *with logical necessity*, have to go, or be ashamed for not going. And similarly the *absolute good*, if it is a describable state of affairs, would be one which everybody, independent of his tastes and inclinations, would *necessarily* bring about or feel guilty for not bringing about. And I want to say that such a state of affairs is a chimera. (LE, p. 7, emphasis in original)

Wittgenstein is *not* saying that moral judgements are necessarily in error. Rather, he is rejecting the chimera of a conception of the absolute good as a describable state of affairs (which is different from saying that the absolute good *itself* is chimerical). The problem is, however, that no other register exists in language, other than that of the facts, that is, states of affairs that can be propositionally articulated. Thus, ethics is the nonsensical attempt to say something about that of which one cannot speak: 'Ethics, if it is anything, is supernatural and our words will only express facts' (ibid.).²

² The use of the word 'supernatural' makes clear that Wittgenstein is not just talking about ethical issues, but that he takes these to be deeply entwined with religious matters as well. And so, like ethical statements, Wittgenstein is evincing scepticism with regard to religious doctrines. See CV, p. 61.

With this, Wittgenstein reaches his (in)famous conclusion that all attempts to articulate ethical (or religious) thought is a way of running against the boundaries of language: 'This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science' (LE, pp. 11–12). Wittgenstein started his lecture with a dichotomy between science and ethics, but now it seems that ethics itself is a hopelessly (pseudo-)scientific attempt to capture in words that which is necessarily beyond language. Thus, it seems quite natural to conclude that we should therefore abandon all hope for ethical enquiry. After all, from the essential nonsensicality of any ethical statement, it is only a rather small step to the conclusion that ethics itself is a sham. It is only the very last sentence of the lecture that problematizes such a conclusion: '[Ethics] is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it' (LE, p. 12).

Besides the dramatic break with the earlier arguments purporting to show the nonsensicality of ethics (rather than its respectability), what stands out in this sentence, is the shift from philosophical argument towards a personal *confession*. Instead of trying to convince his audience of the soundness of his conclusion, Wittgenstein merely talks about his own feelings. In conversation with Friedrich Waismann, he explained why this is important:

The ethical cannot be taught. If I needed a theory in order to explain to another the essence of the ethical, the ethical would have no value at all.

At the end of my lecture on ethics, I spoke in the first person. I believe that is quite essential. Here nothing more can be established, I can only appear as a person speaking for myself. (NTW, p. 16)

Wittgenstein's use of the confessional method has been noted by other authors, notably Stanley Cavell. According to Cavell, this medium is closely related to the message of Wittgenstein's later philosophy, particularly its conception of philosophy itself.³ Wittgenstein's later work (in particular the *Investigations*) is not concerned with giving convincing arguments for or against a particular way of thinking, or 'style of thinking'. After all, how would you convince someone of the validity of another way of thinking, if it is exactly one's way of thinking that first renders this or that claim convincing?

In Section IV, I will return to the notion of a style of thought in Wittgenstein, as well as its aesthetic underpinnings. For now, what matters is that Wittgenstein, faced with the impossibility to articulate why the ethical is important, can only confess *that* he feels this way. The hope is then that it persuades people to see things his way. But if they do not, Wittgenstein is powerless to actually convince them. In fact, then, though respect is a quintessentially ethical attitude itself, Wittgenstein's feelings lack the very quality that would render them absolutely normative, that is, expressive of an absolute norm: intersubjective motivating force.

Of course, not every kind of respect is ethically important. For instance, I might feel a deep respect for the sportive accomplishments of Italian cycling legend Gino Bartali. It remains an open question, however, to what extent that feeling also compels me to trying to instil it in others. It seems perfectly reasonable, for instance, to believe this respect must be shared by other cycling fans but no one else necessarily. But this is not the kind of respect

³ Stanley Cavell, 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 66. The confessional register also emphasizes once more that the ethical, for Wittgenstein, is inseparable from the religious.

that Wittgenstein feels for the ethical. After all, this is what makes his lecture of general importance: the fact that the study of ethics is a testament to a tendency of which a human mind must not be free. *Everyone*, regardless of personal likings, should feel the way that Wittgenstein does. Even if, and precisely because, Wittgenstein, *per* his own arguments, is impotent to articulate *why* one should feel that way.

Thus, the lecture on ethics terminates in an aporia: even while it holds that ethical enquiry is the hopeless attempt to give scientific form to that which lies beyond the boundaries of our world, a hint of normative consciousness remains. As Wittgenstein put it himself, again in conversation with Waismann:

This thrust against the limits of language is *ethics*. I regard it as very important to put an end to all the chatter about ethics – whether there is knowledge in ethics, whether there are values, whether the Good can be defined, etc. [...] But the tendency, the thrust, *points to something*. (NTW, p. 13, emphasis in original)

This hint of normative consciousness, the fact that we find in ourselves not mere psychological causation but the inescapable impression that there is something pointing to something else that our language does not enable us to identify, this will subsequently become the defining element of Wittgenstein's aesthetics.

III. The Perception of Fit

In this section, I shall argue that Wittgenstein's aesthetic reflections address, in their own way, the aporia discussed in the previous section: the hint of normative consciousness and the impossibility of its articulation. I shall show, however, that while the aporia haunts the lecture on ethics, Wittgenstein is unbothered by it in his lectures on aesthetics. What Wittgenstein variously calls 'the obscure paradigm' or 'hidden law' according to which something is right, is not a problem, but rather a source of satisfaction even if it does (as it must) remain hidden.

I shall proceed as follows: first, I will try to show that Wittgenstein's point of departure, a critique of psychological approaches to aesthetics, is meant as a way of arguing that what is at stake is not causality but rather normativity. In aesthetic interactions, we search for, ask, and try to understand *reasons why* we do (not) appreciate the object of aesthetic reflection/perception. Second, I will further elucidate what such appreciation consists in for Wittgenstein: far from savouring a pleasure (either in the beautiful, or something else), it is an activity of orienting oneself according to an ideal that is taken to belong to the object of appreciation. That ideal, however, is not something that we can articulate: it remains a hidden law. I will conclude in a third step that this is how Wittgenstein sought to resolve the paradox of feeling the direction towards an absolute, which one cannot articulate: the pointing itself should be taken as sufficient.

One of the most striking features of Wittgenstein's aesthetic thinking is his preoccupation with criticizing psychological approaches to questions of aesthetics:

People often say that aesthetics is a branch of psychology. The idea is that once we are more advanced, everything – all the mysteries of Art – will be understood by psychological experiments. Exceedingly stupid as the idea is, this is roughly it. (LC, II.35)

Wittgenstein finds the idea stupid for two (related) reasons. First, it mistakes a normative process (giving and understanding particular reasons for perceiving an aesthetic object in a particular way) for a purely causal affair (having pleasure because of some feature of an

object). Second, it is, again, a proposal to import the scientific method into a field of human interaction where it does not belong.

As to the first reason, Wittgenstein is at pains to argue that the psychological picture of aesthetic perceiving is misguided. It preoccupies itself with the particular likings of aesthetic percipients (for example, 'I like the colour scheme', 'this part of the song is my favourite'), whereas aesthetics only really gets going once we start asking for the reasons for a particular liking: 'The question of Aesthetics is not: Do you like it? But, if you do, why do you?' (M, 9:27).

If that is the case, psychology would indeed be out of place, because the only kind of answer that *it* could give to the question why would be a causal explanation, and not a reason:

'Why is the smell of roses so pleasant?'

What sort of an answer do you expect?

- (1) All the smells which tickle your nose in this way are pleasant. This would be interesting to some people; & could satisfy a person who meant to ask that question.
- (2) This answer would not remove our aesthetic puzzlement. (M, 9:23)

That aesthetic puzzlement (Why should it be this particular way of tickling the nose that gives us such pleasure?) cannot be removed by psychology because it presupposes a different way of thinking about the matter entirely. It would construe aesthetics as an enterprise trying to first map the entirety of all our likings and then explain those likings in terms of a single causal relationship. That enterprise, to Wittgenstein, must have seemed like a chimera on a par with the 'the absolute good' conceived of as a describable state of affairs.⁴

Hence, Wittgenstein's critique of psychologism in aesthetics goes hand in hand with his rejection of the role of beauty in the same. In both his 1933 and 1938 lectures on the topic (M, 9:19; LC, I.8), Wittgenstein is at pains to point out that aesthetic perceiving has nothing necessarily or even primarily to do with deciding whether things are 'beautiful' or not. The traditional preoccupation of aesthetics with the question of beauty is misleading, in the first instance because it seems to imply that aesthetic appreciation always, or even typically takes a shape similar to 'standing before a painting and saying: "That is beautiful."' ⁵ That is obviously not the case, but more importantly, the preoccupation with beauty seems to imply a single sphere of life unified by one principle, the feeling of beauty, that can consequently be analysed as the cause of all the things we happen to take a liking to. Thus, what happens when we find something that removes our aesthetic puzzlement is not necessarily this or that feeling:

I'm now satisfied; I'm in a state of equilibrium, not of tension.

This may be a good metaphor; but there isn't one feeling which characterises the thousand different cases of equilibrium. (M, 9:31)

⁴ Wittgenstein's anti-psychologism extends to religious matters as well. In the same vein, for instance, he reproaches James George Frazer who, in his *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1983), gave (more or less) reductionist explanations of religious rituals. For instance, the Beltane fires in Scotland, which he takes simply as a remnant of a ritual of human sacrifice because part of the ritual consist of pretending to throw someone in the fire. See M, pp. 328–30. Against this, Wittgenstein argues that this does no justice to the self-understanding of participants in the ritual: '[...] pretending to burn is something which has its own feeling & its own seriousness. And that in other cases a real human being was burnt, only shews that all sorts of different things exist side by side' (M, 9:8).

⁵ Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (London: Cape, 1990), 405.

Thus, Wittgenstein is not rejecting that beauty does not play any role in aesthetics whatsoever, but rather that it should be the central feature to be analysed and explained scientifically.

This brings me to the second reason why Wittgenstein finds the idea of a psychological science of aesthetics stupid. Sardonicly, Wittgenstein says of such a science, 'I suppose it ought to include also what sort of coffee tastes well' (LC, II.2). If one is committed to the idea that aesthetics is about the stuff to which we take a liking, how could you make a principled difference between liking coffee and liking a symphony?⁶ But Wittgenstein wants not only to say that it is a tall order to distinguish between liking an artistic object and liking some other thing. He is also trying to show that aesthetic appreciation need not consist in a liking at all:

If we have a certain arrangement of colours & say it is beautiful, & you suggest that what this means is that it gives us pleasure.

I ask: Why should we use so many different means to get pleasure?

Answer isn't merely that you can't get asparagus in winter; but obviously that what you want is not merely pleasure but a certain kind of pleasure.

And if you want a certain kind of pleasure, e.g. tulips admired with pleasure; why shouldn't you want the tulips without the pleasure? (M, 9:18–19)

It might seem odd to be in a situation of admiring the tulips without taking pleasure in the admiration, but Wittgenstein is not arguing that this is often what actually happens in aesthetic interactions. Rather, he is suggesting that the pleasure we often feel in aesthetic appreciation need not have anything to do with how we think of the tulips from an aesthetic perspective.⁷ In fact, Wittgenstein considers the opposite condition, (unpleasurable) aesthetic interactions, to be all the more revealing of what it is we do in aesthetic perceiving:

You design a door and look at it and say: 'Higher, higher, higher [...] oh, alright.' (Gesture) What is this? Is it an expression of content?

Perhaps the most important thing in connection with aesthetics is what may be called aesthetic reactions, e.g. discontent, disgust, discomfort. The expression of discontent says: 'Make it higher [...] too low! [...] do something to this.' (LC, II.10)

The point of what Wittgenstein calls 'directed discomfort' (LC, II.10–16) is not to argue (against all available evidence testifying to the contrary) that aesthetic perceiving is actually a more or less painful activity. Rather, Wittgenstein wants to show that by focusing on feelings alone, we leave out the more interesting half of the phenomenon we are trying to understand. Those feelings are *directed* to something: an ideal or norm to which the object of perception is supposed to correspond. And it is this ideal which is really what is important.

In other words, Wittgenstein is arguing that aesthetic interactions are interpretative practices, ways in which we try to *understand* the object appreciated (What is it that it belongs to?

⁶ See Rhees's notes about the quoted comment: 'It is hard to find boundaries' (LC, II.2).

⁷ It might be possible, for instance, to find it an aesthetic shortcoming that tulips are so pleasurable. See as well his remark, in a later lecture, on not wanting to listen to a great piece of music: 'I'm not going [to hear the music] [...] because I can't stand its greatness: i.e. if anything, it is disagreeable' (M, 9:26).

What is its paradigm?), rather than savour the feelings incited.⁸ And this, indeed, one can see more clearly in the case of a discomfort, rather than when we perceive with pleasure. After all, once we have already realized the ideal, the sense of direction towards it is also lost. The urgency of trying to understand is removed, and what we experience is first and foremost a feeling of satisfaction. Moreover, it is this being directed towards an ideal that psychology can never make sense of. Because the psychological way of thinking can only yield causes: 'Aesthetic reasons are given in the form: getting nearer to an ideal or farther from it. Whereas Psychology gives causes why people have an ideal' (M, 9:36).

What matters in aesthetic interactions are ideals, not causal relations. Of course, one could say that it is precisely its being removed from the ideal that is the cause of one's discomfort with a particular object of appreciation. But one can only say this in a sense that subtly differs from a psychological study into the causes of one's discomfort:

Saying you know the cause of your discomfort could mean two things.

- (1) I predict correctly that if you lower the door, I will be satisfied.
- (2) But that when in fact I say: "Too high!" "Too high!" is in this case not conjecture. Is 'Too high' comparable with 'I think I had too many tomatoes today'? (LC, II.14)

One would expect Wittgenstein to make a difference between 'efficient' and 'final' cause, that is, between the biological processes that make one think that one has had too many tomatoes on the one hand, and the ideal or norm (the 'telos') to which I am directed in settling the correct height of a door on the other. But the distinction actually cuts deeper, at least when it comes to aesthetic perceiving. He says, namely, that not only are we not positing an efficient cause of our discomfort when we say that the door is too high, he says that we are not making any conjecture whatsoever.

Consider the following, elucidating remark published in *Culture and Value*, with regard to the overture to the opera *Figaro*:

The 'necessity' with which the second idea succeeds the first. (Overture to Figaro.) Nothing could be more idiotic than to say it's '*pleasing*' to hear the second after the first! – But the paradigm according to which everything there is *right* is certainly obscure. (CV, p. 65, emphasis in original)

It is not because it would produce pleasure, that the ordering of ideas appears necessary. But neither is the paradigm, or the norm of rightness in question, a clear one. Of course, sometimes, we have a clear idea about aesthetic norms, for example, the correct width of a lapel on a suit jacket (LC, II.8), the ideal features of a face according to the Ancient Greeks, and so on. These norms are philosophically trivial: it is merely established, socio-historically determined

⁸ This is where Wittgenstein's approach differs from Kantian approaches according to which aesthetic experiences are constituted by a unique kind of (disinterested) feeling. Wittgenstein does not deny that feelings might be important in trying to understand something aesthetically. On the basis of the passages quoted above, however, it is clear that according to him, no feeling amounts to a sine qua non of aesthetic experiences (a familiar commitment, on the other hand, of Kantian aesthetics). At the same time, however, it is important to note that the difference between Wittgenstein and Kant may not be all that stark. One might argue, for instance, that understanding aesthetic reasons and experiencing aesthetic feelings are always intertwined moments of one and the same process of taking on an aesthetic attitude, or of reflecting and/or judging aesthetically. For Kant too, after all, the feeling of disinterested pleasure cannot be thought in isolation from the free play of the (cognitive) faculties of the imagination and the understanding. Getting clearer on the relation between feeling and understanding in Kant and Wittgenstein, Kantians and Wittgensteinians, is a topic for another occasion. Thanks to Richard Eldridge for pressing this objection and pointing the way to further research.

cultural sensibilities that make it the case that 'a suit lapel should be *this* long'. Statements such as these are simply about relative value and, like the statement pointing the right way to Grantchester, they can be rewritten as statements about matters of fact ('given that lapels of this length are all the rage nowadays...').

On the other hand, what is really at stake, aesthetically speaking, is not becoming satisfied that a predetermined or predeterminable ideal has been realized. We see this precisely in the case of awe-inspiring artworks like the overture to *Figaro*, or a symphony by Beethoven: we are struck by an undeniable sense of the necessity of the composition, without being able to answer the question: 'necessary, for what?'

But what is at stake, then? It becomes tempting to think that great art does not abide by any norms we are familiar with, because it posits its own standards. Joachim Schulte, in his reading of Wittgenstein's aesthetics, briefly entertains this idea before dismissing it. He argues that some things that would show up as faults in an ordinary musical composition, could also show up as an intended and meaningful stroke of genius in a sublimely written piece of music.⁹ Of course, Wittgenstein would argue that a work that posits its own standards cannot conflict with them. And if it cannot conflict with them, it is also wrong to say that it can follow them: the entire normative dimension falls away. Schulte resolves this tension by arguing that the standard of sublime, or tremendous works is not actually a standard of rightness or correctness.¹⁰ This is not, I believe, the most fruitful way to read Wittgenstein, not in the last place because he does, in fact, talk about the rightness of great works of art (such as the overture to *Figaro* in the passage quoted above), as Schulte also notes.

Instead, I want to suggest that the important thing about aesthetic interactions, incidentally the thing that comes to the fore dramatically in great artworks, is that we are satisfied about rightness of the work *without any knowledge of the norm in question*. When Wittgenstein speaks of the 'obscure paradigm of rightness', it becomes tempting to think of an ideal model, an Ur-opera, from which all great opera's derive their greatness. Of course, there is no such thing, but the feeling remains that great works of art point in that direction, that it is because of such a norm of absolute value that we believe them to be right, or *absolutely* successful (rather than correct for this or that purpose). Hence, the following cryptic remark in the lectures on aesthetics from 1933:

Goethe in *Metamorphose der Pflanzen*, suggests that all plants are variations on a theme. What is the theme?

Goethe says 'They all point to a hidden law.' But you wouldn't ask: What is the law? That they point, is all there is to it. (M, 9:33)

The hidden law that explains the variations of plants, like the obscure paradigm that explains the necessary ordering of musical ideas in *Figaro's* overture, cannot itself become clear. But neither is this necessary for us to experience the fittingness, or success, of the overture.¹¹ In that experience, what is available to the understanding is something like the judgement

⁹ Joachim Schulte, 'Ästhetisch richtig', in *Chor und Gesetz: Wittgenstein im Kontext* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990), 80.

¹⁰ Ibid. Schulte bases himself on LC, I.23: 'In certain styles in Architecture a door is correct, and the thing is you appreciate it. But in the case of a Gothic Cathedral what we do is not at all to find it correct – it plays an entirely different role with us.'

¹¹ See Schulte, 'Ästhetisch richtig', 81: '[...] der springende Punkt ist, daß [die Ouvertüre zu *Figaro*] trotz der Unmöglichkeit einer expliziten Formulierung gelingen kann mitzuteilen (und sei es noch so indirekt), warum die Abfolge notwendig, natürlich oder richtig erscheint.'

without its justification: normative success without an understanding of the norm that makes Figaro's overture necessary just so.¹²

There is a remarkable parallel in wording between this passage and Wittgenstein's remark to Waismann, quoted at the end of Section II: both the ethical as well as the aesthetic cannot be articulated, but an awareness of them 'points to' something: a hidden law, or obscure paradigm. In his lectures on aesthetics, however, there is a slight twist: here, at least, Wittgenstein is able to draw the conclusion that an articulation of the hidden law itself is also unnecessary when it comes to appreciating the things that correspond to it: 'That they point, is all there is to it' (M, 9:33).

This, it seems, is an instance of the later Wittgenstein's signature move: a therapeutic gesture intended to dissolve a philosophical problem so that peace may now ensue. In this case, however, it seems to just raise more questions. Firstly, if objects of aesthetic appreciation point to a hidden law, why should it be impossible to elucidate that law? Or the other way around, if we cannot articulate a law to which these objects conform, how can we say that they are actually pointing to it? If aesthetics is about reasons why we like something, is it not contradictory to then hold that an actual articulation of why an object is right, is uncalled for?

In Section IV, I will offer an interpretation that I hope will take care of the troubles caused here.

IV. Wittgenstein as a Romanticist

Wittgenstein has argued that aesthetic reasons are supposed to be given in the form of 'getting nearer to an ideal or farther from it' (M, 9:36), but also that it is silly to actually ask what it is that makes a particular aesthetic judgement the right one: that law is and will remain hidden. But if there is no way in which one could know what renders an aesthetic judgement correct, the question arises whether there really is such a thing as giving aesthetic reasons. In this section, I will offer an interpretation of aesthetic reasons as of a persuasive, or 'propagandistic' form. On this reading, the point of an aesthetic reason is not to elucidate the law that renders one's judgement correct, but rather to change the way one views or thinks of something, or: one's *style* of thinking. Style, for Wittgenstein, denotes the framework within which our normal justificatory practices, practices of right and wrong, first get going. It is what early German Romanticists have called 'the absolute', that is, the ultimate foundation of our knowledge claims that bestows certainty upon them while it itself cannot be justified. I will show that reading Wittgenstein under an early German Romanticist light will allow us to make sense of the idea of aesthetic reasons. Aesthetic reasons ground the way in which we make sense of the world, while remaining groundless themselves. Consequently,

¹² Here, I believe we can put Schulte's point (from the previous footnote), a little more strongly: it is not just the case that great art communicates why its composition is necessary 'ever so indirectly'. Rather, we only perceive *that* its composition is necessary, and so (as I will argue in the next section) great art indirectly hints at there being an absolute norm of correctness. Incidentally, this makes Wittgenstein's position different from what is called 'particularism' about aesthetic judgement, the idea that in judging something aesthetically, we make no appeal at all to general principles. For a defence of this view, see Arnold Isenberg, 'Critical Communication', *Philosophical Review* 58 (1949): 330–44. Isenberg shares Wittgenstein's conviction that, because the norm is unavailable to us in judgement, aesthetic judging consists rather of giving 'directions for perceiving'. The particularist line of reasoning, however, typically arises out of a commitment to empiricism which concludes in the belief that there simply are no absolute, general norms. This, as we have seen, is altogether alien to Wittgenstein. See James Shelley, 'The Concept of the Aesthetic', in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, winter 2017 ed. (Stanford University, 1997–), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aesthetic-concept/>. Thanks to Richard Eldridge for pressing me to clarify Wittgenstein's position in this matter.

this understanding of aesthetic reasons, a unique kind of reason that can convince, or persuade (LC, III.33)¹³ without justification, can shed light on Wittgenstein's aporia of normative consciousness.

In the following, I first explicate the 'propagandistic' status of aesthetic reasons: they persuade rather than justify, because they first constitute a framework for justification, or style. The discussion of aesthetic reasons as, in a sense, propaganda will thus lead me into a discussion of the role of style in Wittgenstein's thinking. I will show that, for Wittgenstein, style denotes a framework of thinking that enables us to assess the rightness or wrongness of something and which is therefore unable to be normatively assessed itself. In other, already familiar terms: there is no absolute normative framework. With the Romantics, however, Wittgenstein shares the conviction that the absolute, that of which one cannot speak, can nevertheless be *shown*. Indeed, this is the function of an aesthetic reason: to express the absolute rightness of something (a way of thinking, the choice of musical or painterly composition, the ending of a story, and so on). Artworks or, more generally, *expressive* practices are such that they express more than what is said *stricto sensu*. To speak with Friedrich Schlegel: they are *allegorical*.¹⁴ In saying something other than what they say, they attune us to that which lies beyond the describable world: a paradigm that remains obscure, a law that remains hidden, the feeling that one is oriented towards an absolute norm.

Ordinarily speaking, reason giving happens in pretty much the same way that statements of relative value are redescribed as matters of fact. 'This is the right way to go!' Why? A good reason might be: 'if you want to go to Grantchester, there is simply no quicker way than this one.' So, unless we want to take the scenic route, there is no debating the reason. It is simply a matter of fact.

With aesthetic reasons, things are different. Of course the practice is similar enough: you make an aesthetic judgement about, say, a poem which strikes you as old-fashioned. Why should it strike you so? What matter of fact would explain that the poem is really old-fashioned?

Suppose a poem sounded old-fashioned, what would be the criterion that you had found out what was old-fashioned in it[?] One criterion would be that when something was pointed out you were satisfied. And another criterion: 'No-one would use that word today'; here you might refer to a dictionary, ask other people, etc. I *could* point out the wrong thing and yet you would still be satisfied. (LC, III.9, emphasis in original)

What happens when I point out the wrong thing that nonetheless satisfies you? Is your aesthetic judgement then factually incorrect? I take Wittgenstein to be arguing that the sole proof of a good aesthetic reason is whether it is able to appease the mind that is puzzled aesthetically, in principle regardless of any matter of fact. One might refer to a dictionary, or even conduct a statistical survey that shows relative word usage over time, but unless what one says strikes a chord with you, these reasons will not be good (though it is, of course, possible that the empirical facts will be taken as satisfactory).¹⁵

¹³ In a way, such reasons are not really reasons at all. See also OC, § 612: 'At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*' (emphasis in original). Thanks to Gorazd Andrejc for pointing out this passage to me.

¹⁴ See Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 178.

¹⁵ See the paragraph that immediately follows the one quoted above: 'Suppose someone heard syncopated music of Brahms played and asked: "What is the queer rhythm which makes me wobble?" "It is the 3 against 4." One could play certain phrases and he would say: "Yes. It's this peculiar rhythm I meant." On the other hand, if he didn't agree, this wouldn't be the explanation' (LC, III.10).

Aesthetic reasons do not necessarily elucidate any facts. Rather, they prompt us to change the way we think about the object appreciated, or to see different aspects of it. For instance, an aesthetic reason might make us see the rabbit, rather than the duck, in the famous 'duck-rabbit' picture. I do not simply say 'This is clearly a rabbit, because it has a rabbit's ears', because to one inclined to see the duck, the rabbit's ears are not ears at all, but a duck's beak. *That* reason then merely obliges us to give another reason explaining why those arcs are ears, rather than a beak. And obviously, I cannot here simply say that the arcs are ears because they are located above the rabbit's eye, because to one inclined to see the duck, the arcs are located rather below the duck's eye, thus obliging me to give *another* reason, and so on. Instead of regressing infinitely back down a chain of reasons, I rather say things like 'Look! *This* is how the picture must be looked at', accompanied, perhaps, by some rotating of the picture, some gestures pointing out the rabbit's features, and so on.

What sort of a reason is this? Obviously, no amount of gesturing is going to prove that this really is the way to look at the picture. In fact, merely saying that this is the way to look at something, is hardly an argument for that conclusion at all, even if the statement produces satisfaction in the addressee. If, however, the feeling of satisfaction is the only measure of success for an aesthetic reason, then it follows that aesthetic reasons need only be persuasive and not necessarily a sound justification for a conclusion. In fact, if the goal of aesthetic reasons is to change the way we look at something, and we depend on the way in which we look at it in order to evaluate claims about it as right or wrong, then aesthetic reasons seem to beg the question (that is, they assume what they purport to prove). Of course, not every question-begging reason is persuasive. But if an aesthetic reason does succeed in changing the way in which we look at something, it has done so by other means than sound argumentation. For this reason, Wittgenstein's use of the word 'persuasion' is meant to get at something other and (potentially) more problematic than an activity animated by the force of the better argument. To accentuate this problematic aspect of persuasion, Wittgenstein also calls it 'propaganda': 'I am in a sense making propaganda for one style of thinking as opposed to another' (LC, III.37).

Aesthetic reasons are propagandistic, because they attempt to change what cannot be rationally argued for: style. Style (in Wittgenstein) denotes, first and foremost, a particular form, or way of thinking: a framework for making sense of something and/or appreciating it. It is a framework according to which something (for example, a musical arrangement, or a philosophical argument) appears as necessary or right. More than a collection of linguistic mannerisms, then, style determines 'what can appear as a possible object of thought, because the style characterizes the way one researches and gives reasons'.¹⁶ Thus, the notion of style gets at something much more fundamental, indeed it gets at whatever *is* fundamental: philosophical foundations justifying arguments,¹⁷ and also, significantly, religious belief.¹⁸

¹⁶ Joachim Schulte, 'Stilfragen', in *Chor und Gesetz*, 61.

¹⁷ Stanley Cavell has argued that Wittgenstein's own style of thinking is underpinned by a method of evaluating claims that is, at base, a kind of aesthetic judgement. Stanley Cavell, 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy', in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 68–90.

¹⁸ That religious believing consists in having a particular style of thinking may sound strange, but it is indeed how Wittgenstein thought of religion. I have already noted (ftn. 2) that he does not think of religion in terms of a collection of doctrines, and (ftn. 4) that his anti-psychologism in aesthetic matters extends to religious matters as well. We can now say, further, that Wittgenstein believes that religion, like ethics, is unamenable to philosophical articulation. See CV, p. 89: 'If Christianity is the truth, then all the philosophy about it is false.' See also Mulhall's interpretation that religious language games have no real grammar, since religious statements are necessarily nonsensical: Stephen Mulhall, 'Wittgenstein on Religious Belief', in *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, ed. Oskari Kuusela and Marie McGinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 772. Thus, an argument might be made to the effect that aesthetics stands to the statements of religion as it does to the statements of (philosophical) ethics. That argument lies beyond the confines of this article, however.

And aesthetic reasons, accordingly, are reasons directing one to change the foundations of one's thinking: they are reasons to change what we find convincing or justifiable in the first place. And such a change, necessarily, is without rational justification.

Wittgenstein here shows an affinity with a group of thinkers we now refer to as the early German Romanticists. Central to these writers' concerns was a rejection of the idea that there can be given an ultimate foundation to our knowledge claims, which foundation they referred to as 'the absolute'. More specifically, they argued 'that we could not grasp the Absolute in thought, to say nothing of being able to arrive at it in reality'.¹⁹ This was so, they thought, because any attempt to ground a claim to knowledge itself presupposes another ground, leading to an infinite regress (like the attempt to justify that one sees a duck, rather than a rabbit). The attempt to give such a foundation, that is, philosophy, is thereby understood as a '*longing [Sehnsucht] for the infinite*', as Friedrich Schlegel puts it.²⁰

Philosophy remains merely a longing, according to this interpretation, because it cannot satisfy itself. Instead, Schlegel argues, philosophy finds its fulfilment in, and as art. This is because, contrary to philosophy, artworks say more than they actually do say: their meaning is *allegorical*: '[...] all beauty is allegory. Precisely because it is inexpressible, one can only express the highest allegorically.'²¹ Allegory, a form of speech through which we allude to something else than that which we actually say, can express what is strictly speaking inexpressible. To conceive of artistic expressions as essentially allegorical, means to conceive of them as meaningful (or having a *Bedeutung*) to the extent that they point to (*hindeuten*) something beyond what they actually say.²² Art lends itself, therefore, to the expression of the absolute.

The way in which the Romanticists try to articulate the limits of rational justification may be able to shed some light on Wittgenstein's thinking. Indeed, there is a fruitful line of thought situating Wittgenstein as a relativist philosopher, that is, one who holds that the knowledge we have arises out of (socio-historically situated) practices in which propositions are first meaningful and which are themselves without a stable foundation. Questions of knowledge aside,²³ we already saw that at least some such relativism holds for ethical questions: ethics, that is, the philosophical study of questions of absolute right and wrong, is the nonsensical attempt to articulate the foundations of what we believe right and wrong, which are beyond language. Accordingly, the only thing we can talk about, are judgements of *relative* value, that is, value given particular motivations that are assumed and not themselves justified. Wittgenstein's relativism here recalls Novalis's claim that the attempt to give a philosophical articulation of the absolute 'leads into the spaces of nonsense'.²⁴ But if ethics is senseless, what remains is ethical consciousness, the awareness of an absolute norm.

That consciousness of absolute norms, it seems, may yet be expressed artistically/allegorically, even if it cannot be articulated philosophically. In a lecture headed as 'Harmony between thought & reality', Wittgenstein argues that that which bestows validity upon our

¹⁹ Frank, *Philosophical Foundations*, 24.

²⁰ Friedrich Schlegel, 'Introduction to the Transcendental Philosophy (1800)', in *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings*, ed. and trans. Jochen Schulte-Sasse et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 245, emphasis in original. I here focus on Schlegel's writings, because it is there that the Romanticist conception of the function of art is most explicitly formulated.

²¹ Friedrich Schlegel, 'Dialogue on Poesy (1799)', in *Theory as Practice*, 189.

²² '[Schlegel] understands "meaning" (*Bedeutung*) in the sense of "suggestion", (*Hindeutung*) "hinting at", (*Anspielung*) "indirect allusion"', Frank, *Philosophical Foundations*, 208–9.

²³ For more on Wittgenstein's epistemological relativism, see Martin Kusch, 'Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and Relativism', in *Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Methods and Perspectives; Proceedings of the 37th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, ed. Harald A. Wiltsche and Sonja Rinofner-Kreidl (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 29–46.

²⁴ Novalis, *Fichte Studies*, ed. and trans. Jane Kneller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 150 (§ 466). See also Frank, *Philosophical Foundations*, 24.

capacity for judging right and wrong, a foundational harmony between mind and world, is something beyond language:

And this is general: whatever is fundamental, can't be talked about.

What philosophers mean is what makes it possible to judge rightly about the world: but this is what makes it possible to judge wrongly.

This harmony [between thought & reality] can't be described, & therefore is not in ordinary sense a harmony at all.

It is expressed by expressions/of thought & reality/having something in common. (M, 5:36, emphasis in original)

Schlegel speaks of the absolute paradoxically, that is, as the inexpressible that nevertheless finds expression in allegory. In only a slightly different approach, Wittgenstein sets up a dichotomy between expression and description in order to argue that the absolute is accessible after all, just not as a (describable) matter of fact.

So, how can the absolute be nevertheless expressed? Again, the Romanticist notion of the allegorical is instructive: the allegorical can express the inexpressible because it does so *indirectly*. It expresses the inexpressible by expressing inexpressibility.²⁵ The inexpressibility of the absolute comes to the fore in the richness and individuality of an artwork (which Schlegel argues is the proper object of art criticism²⁶): 'Are not all systems individuals, just as all individuals are, at least in embryonic form and tendentially, systems? [...] Are there not individuals that contain entire systems of individuals within them?'²⁷ If artworks are such individuals that contain individuals (which presumably, contain yet further individuals, and so on), then our understanding of such works is always, to some extent, an abstraction from the wealth of meaning that belongs to an individual artwork. And so, when that activity of understanding is foregrounded, our awareness of our inability to grasp it may grow, like our awareness, indirectly, that there is something that exceeds our grasp: the absolute.

We can now make sense of Wittgenstein's aesthetic resolution of the aporia of absolute normative consciousness. Recall that the aporia consisted of feeling oneself oriented towards an absolute norm, without being able to give sensible articulation to that norm. The impossibility of articulation, or as we may now say, *the indescribability of the absolute* poses serious problems for ethics *qua* study of absolute norms. But in aesthetic perception no such troubles exist, for even if it cannot be described, it can nevertheless be conveyed (and consequently experienced).

Against the background of Wittgenstein's 'Lecture on Ethics', his talk of aesthetic reasons in his lectures on aesthetics seems puzzling: If we cannot intelligibly speak of absolute norms, how can there be such a thing as aesthetic appreciation of objects that are absolutely valuable? His solution, moreover, does not seem to help matters: while aesthetic reasons orient us towards an ideal, that ideal itself (at least in the case of great artworks) remains a 'hidden law'. Here, and with the help of an Early German Romanticist background (in particular, Friedrich Schlegel's philosophy), I have attempted to make sense of this idea, by arguing that aesthetic reasons are not truly reasons at all, but rather 'propagandistic' entities that merely express the

²⁵ 'Allegory [...] is, therefore, a necessary manifestation of the unrepresentability [*Undarstellbarkeit*] of the infinite', Frank, *Philosophical Foundations*, 208.

²⁶ Friedrich Schlegel, 'Fragments on Literature and Poesy (1797)' in *Theory as Practice*, 334 (fragment no. 634).

²⁷ Friedrich Schlegel, 'Athenäum Fragments (1798)', in *Theory as Practice*, 323–24 (fragment no. 242).

rightness of the style of thinking that they propagate. Aesthetic reasons are such as to change the style of our thinking, which first bestows on us a framework for normative evaluation and which remains itself indescribable.

So, how do aesthetic reasons make manifest a style of thinking? They do so, by means other than (direct) description, that is, through allegory: by making us appreciate a dimension of artistic meaning that transcends what is actually there to be described, art points to something beyond our (factually describable) world. In this way, aesthetic perceiving evinces a discrepancy between what is said, and what is meant: the hidden law itself remains hidden, but what matters is merely *that* the object of aesthetic perception points to it, that is, that the artwork can only be understood if we acknowledge that it orients us to something of which we cannot say what it is.

How does this help us understand the ethical orientation towards absolute norms? By way of a conclusion, I would like to consider one of Wittgenstein's more familiar aphorisms on style: "Le style c'est l'homme." "Le style c'est l'homme même." The first expression has a cheap epigrammatic brevity. The second, correct, one opens up a quite different perspective. It says that style is the *picture* of the man' (CV, p. 89, emphasis in original). The remark is puzzling, because the second expression properly translates to 'Style is the very man' and not 'Style is a representation of the man'. Why would one need the idea of a picture to make sense of perceiving 'the very person'?²⁸ Given my reading of the aporia of normative consciousness, I offer the following interpretation: the 'very' nature of our status as persons is given by the idea of absolute normativity, or our capacity to conduct ourselves in accordance with norms that hold regardless of any matter of fact. If that is the case, however, an understanding of ourselves becomes indescribable in precisely the sense Wittgenstein argues that absolute ethical norms are indescribable. A proper understanding of our normative status is rather available only indirectly, that is, *by way of a picture* which expresses that which it is not. Accordingly, the first expression ('Le style c'est l'homme') misses the point entirely, as it is not as if we arrive at an understanding of personhood by appreciating the idiosyncrasies of a person's character. The norms acknowledged as binding by any particular individual must not be mistaken for the absolute norms that hold for everyone.²⁹ But those absolute norms can only be hinted at, that is, through the (artistic) expression of what it means to be a person (or a normative being): the picture of her, which succeeds only if it can point beyond itself. That is the function of art for ethical beings.

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²⁸ You will note that I am here offering a gender neutral reading, which, I readily grant, is at least a partial misreading of what Wittgenstein probably meant.

²⁹ Joachim Schulte, Stanley Cavell, and more recently Charles Altieri all argue on the basis of this aphorism that style renders perceptible a person's character. On my reading, by contrast, it is rather the cheap epigram that says that we appreciate someone's character or personality in someone's style. While that may be true, more fundamentally, style (as *the picture* of a person) also allows for orientation beyond the mere character of a person, towards what makes out her very personhood: that is, it is her status as ethical being that is hinted at by the picture of her. Schulte, 'Stilfragen', 71; Stanley Cavell, 'The *Investigations*' Everyday Aesthetics of Itself', in *The Literary Wittgenstein*, ed. John Gibson and Wolfgang Huemer (New York: Routledge, 2004), 32; Charles Altieri, *Reckoning with the Imagination: Wittgenstein and the Aesthetics of Literary Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 123.

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