



# Midway aesthetics: an aesthetical way to say nothing about aesthetics<sup>1</sup>

*Estética intermediária: uma forma estética para  
não dizer nada sobre estética*

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## **Abstract**

This is a very brief sketch on Wittgenstein's "middle" writings about aesthetical appreciation and aesthetical attitude concerning the objects of art. Even if it takes the tractarian conception of 'aesthetics' as a starting point, the paper is focused on Wittgenstein's (second-hand) class-notes taken from his *Lectures on Aesthetics* and a very specific remark reported by Moore, brought from the *Philosophical Occasions*, where "reasons" for aesthetical persuasion and correction are said to be like those offered in "discussions in a

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court of law". At the end, not much is left for aesthetic appreciation and for aesthetics itself but a certain kind of contextual, circumstantial "appeal to the judge".

**Keywords:** Aesthetics. Wittgenstein. Aesthetical appreciation. Lectures on aesthetics.

### **Resumo**

*Este é um breve esboço a respeito da apreciação estética e da atitude estética frente às obras de arte nos escritos "intermediários" de Wittgenstein. Mesmo que o ponto de partida seja a concepção tractariana de 'estética', o artigo está focado nas notas de aula de Wittgenstein (tomadas de segunda mão) tais como elas aparecem em suas Lições sobre estética e em uma observação bastante específica relatada por Moore no Philosophical Occasions, em que as "razões" para a persuasão e a correção estética são vistas como similares àquelas oferecidas em "discussões em uma corte de justiça". Ao final, não resta muito para a apreciação estética e para a estética enquanto tal, senão um certo "apelo", contextual e circunstancial, "ao juiz".*

**Palavras-chave:** Estética. Wittgenstein. Apreciação estética. Lições sobre estética.

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"Ethics and aesthetics are one", says Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* 6.421. And this is the only instance of the word as such in this book — although we know that what is said about ethics applies all the same to aesthetics as both are part of the mystical realm where "values" only subsist in being absolute, immeasurable, values. Of course, if there can be no ethical propositions there can be no aesthetic propositions either, and it all comes to a matter of mystical experience or feeling. With respect to ethics, "the contemplation of the world *sub specie aeterni*" as "a limited whole" (TLP 6.45)<sup>2</sup> implies that stoic recognition and acceptance of the independence between the will and the world of contingent facts. Very briefly put, and skipping a bunch of details, this is what it means to live a happy life. With respect to aesthetics, "the contemplation of the world *sub specie aeterni*" as "a limited whole"

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<sup>2</sup> References to the *Tractatus* will be given with the numbers of its paragraphs preceded by TLP, as references to the *Notebooks 1914-1916* will be given with the date of entry preceded by NB, and references to the *Lectures on aesthetics* by the number of the section followed by the number of the paragraph and preceded by LA.

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(TLP 6.45) implies that Schopenhauerian, solipsistic, view of the world, where the aesthetical, mystical, feeling concerns the very fact of the existence of the world — *that* it exists. The aesthetical feeling is thus a feeling of overwhelming wonder and has no point of comparison as the whole world is seen and apprehended at once, as a given.

Indeed, this is all more explicitly said in the *Notebooks* (1914-1916), where Wittgenstein identifies the ethical and the aesthetical feeling by means of the fact that there is a world: “Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That what exists does exist”, to say next that this aesthetical point of view of the world is essentially a happy point of view, that this is what it means to view things with a happy eye (NB 20.10.16).

Of course, this happy point of view is also and at same time the point of contemplation of particular objects and of objects of art. When seen *sub specie aeterni* — outside time and space — the work of art is seen in its full significance, as it is seen “as a world”, as “my world”, as “my entire world” (NB 7.10.16; 8.10.16). The work of art seen from this point of contemplation becomes all there is to be seen. If this explains in a way the aesthetical experience as a mystical, ethical, experience, it does not say much about art as such, or about the aesthetical value of particular works of art. Surely, this being an absolute, inexpressible, value, no such thing as an aesthetical theory could ever be given for one to be able to talk about or to express a difference in judgment concerning different kinds of objects. To be sure, the only standard in judgment concerning particular objects would then be the subject’s own feeling of contentment. Wittgenstein agrees with the aesthetical saying that “there is certainly something in the conception that the end of art is the beautiful”, but then he also says that “the beautiful *is* what makes happy” (NB 21.10.16). I may be missing something, but this seems to me to leave us with no way of judging different artistic objects, that is, with no correctness, no standard of appreciation. In fact, it all comes to how transformative an aesthetical experience turns to be: if *beautiful* is what makes one *happy*, then even bad works of art could do the trick. Isn’t it? For, how would we be able to correct someone’s absolute aesthetical, ethical and mystical feeling regarding an object of

contemplation? Remember: the mystical is inexpressible, and it only shows itself — in this case, at least — in someone's happy way of living and seeing the world<sup>3</sup>.

Wittgenstein saying that good art is complete, perfect, *expression* (NB 19.9.16) does not help much either, as the subject's "happy eye" — not the object seen — is our measure of righteousness. The only suggestion for the possibility of someone correcting some else's judgment is given by the *Lecture on ethics'* admonition to a liar when he says that he doesn't want to behave any better than he is now behaving. But even this counseling and advising would go so much as to say that one should want to *see* differently: "Well, you *ought* to want to improve your own aesthetical standards"<sup>4</sup>. How would such an exhortation affect the improvement itself? After all, wouldn't it be necessary to say something about those very standards? However, remember again that with the *Lecture on Ethics* we are still in the realm of absolute value and that no standard of measurement can be given to clarify judgments of absolute value; — those very judgments are actually nothing but nonsense. Wonder and comparison concern contingent, empirical and opposing objects. Supposedly, then, 'good', 'bad', 'right' and 'beautiful' concern still one's own personal, mystical experience, and cannot be explained in any kind of way by means of those mild admonitions for aesthetical improvement. If what one experiences as beautiful makes one happy, then maybe, contemplating a certain artistic object *happily* is the only way of correcting some else's judgment. But, again, if happiness is indeed the criterion, then the standards are completely arbitrary — or else the standards of aesthetic appreciation are in fact subjective<sup>5</sup>.

The *Lecture on ethics* was read publicly by Wittgenstein in 1929, and, as we have just seen, with Tractarian notes and shades. Now, we

<sup>3</sup> See TLP 6.43, for instance.

<sup>4</sup> This example follows Wittgenstein's own formulation concerning an "ethical" judgment of absolute value: "But suppose I had told one of you a preposterous lie and he came up to me and said 'You're behaving like a beast' and then I were to say 'I know I behave badly, but then I don't want to behave any better' could he then say 'Ah, then that's all right'? Certainly not; he would say 'Well, you *ought* to want to behave better'" (WITTGENSTEIN, 1965, p. 5).

<sup>5</sup> If there could ever be such a thing as a "subjective measure of beauty".

could very well expect to have more clear insights about this specific theme in the compiled *Lectures on aesthetics* given in Cambridge in 1938, as they move away from the *Tractatus* towards the *Investigations* — where, by the way, we find one single reference to the word ‘aesthetics’ at the paragraph 77<sup>6</sup>.

However, even here things are very far from clear. Wittgenstein himself recognizes from the start that aesthetics is “a very big and entirely misunderstood” subject of inquiry (*LA I*, 1). Of course, as he goes along, he does not ascribe himself the task of covering it in any kind of (theoretical, definitive) sense; thus, the text can be said to bring understanding and clarification only because it dismisses mistaken, however traditional, aesthetic perspectives. If I am right in my reading of the notes of these lectures, he deploys actually no position of his own that could properly be called “aesthetical” — which partly explains the title of this paper. Unless we accept, however, as authentic, an aesthetical position giving significant place to relativistic alternatives and multi-sided possibilities of what counts as an aesthetical appreciation or as an aesthetical approval.

The *Lectures* central points are indeed those of aesthetical appreciation, aesthetical judgment or aesthetical expression, along with a group of paragraphs aiming to dismiss aesthetics as a science — or, more broadly, whenever aesthetics as a discipline intends to afford causal explanations to “aesthetical reactions” — and notes on the use (or misuse) of aesthetical adjectives and, finally, some notes on our

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<sup>6</sup> But how could such a remark come to help us, if ethical and aesthetical definitions have always blurred boundaries? If “anything — and nothing — is right”, then maybe, as the hypothesis goes below, we should only stop searching for clear cut standards and definitions. This would mean to say that the *Investigations* proceeds to the same kind of attitude here detected (in “the middle texts”) with respect to ethical and aesthetical questions. The full paragraph reads as follows: “And if we carry this comparison a little further, it is clear that the degree to which the sharp picture *can* resemble the blurred one depends on the degree to which the latter lacks sharpness. For imagine having to draw a sharp picture ‘corresponding’ to a blurred one. In the latter there is a blurred red rectangle; you replace it with a sharp one. Of course, several such sharply delineated rectangles could be drawn to correspond to the blurred one. But if the colours in the original shade into one another without a hint of any boundary, won’t it become a hopeless task to draw a sharp picture corresponding to the blurred one? Won’t you then have to say: ‘Here I might just as well draw a circle as a rectangle or a heart, for all the colours merge. Anything — and nothing — is right.’ And this is the position in which, for example, someone finds himself in ethics or aesthetics when he looks for definitions that correspond to our concepts.”

“craving for simplicity” because “complicated explanations are disagreeable” (LA IV, 12)<sup>7</sup>.

For the moment, I won't go through all of this, but will concentrate on some connected aspects of aesthetical expressions and aesthetical appreciation and the absence of a means for judging particular works of art. These aspects are in turn connected — or so I would like to think — to a remark made by Moore which I think clarifies not only the *Lectures* as that single note on aesthetics given at the *Investigations* 77. I think the following will be clearer if I quote Moore's report first. The extract comes from *Philosophical occasions*:

[...] *Reasons*, he said, in Aesthetics, are “of the nature of further descriptions”, e.g., you can make a person see what Brahms was driving at by showing him lots of pieces by Brahms, or by comparing him to a contemporary author; and all that Aesthetics does is “to draw your attention to a thing”, to “place things side by side”. He said that if, by giving “reasons” of this sort, you make the other person “see what you see” but “still doesn't appeal to him”, that is “an end” of the discussion; and that what he, Wittgenstein, had “at the back of his mind” was “the idea that aesthetic discussions were like discussions in a court of law”, where you try to “clear up the circumstances” of the action which is being tried, hoping that in the end what you say will “appeal to the judge”. And he said that the same sort of “reasons” were given, not only in Ethics, but also in Philosophy (WITTGENSTEIN, 1993, p. 106).

The *Lectures* share a considerable amount of remarks with this way of thinking about aesthetics. Of special importance is the sort of move made in aesthetics in order to show someone the “reasons” for an aesthetical appreciation: “to draw attention to a thing”, “to place things side by side”, “to clear up the circumstances”, giving alternative examples, etc. This sort of “reasons” appear repeatedly in the *Lectures*, where Wittgenstein urges us to “look” to these things which contribute, on the one hand, to the aesthetical impressions and the aesthetical reactions involved in the act of appreciating something and, on the other

<sup>7</sup> A fuller account of the *Lectures* central points — and of Wittgenstein's aesthetics broadly conceived — is given by Goyet's *Wittgenstein et le motif esthétique* (2011). See also Tilghman (1973, 1991).

hand, to “look” to these things which constitute the aesthetical expression and aesthetical judgment beyond the mere interjection and the use of supposed aesthetical adjectives such as “beautiful”. Aesthetical judgments depend on the framework of situations and activities, where the mere statement of an adjective can hardly account for the aesthetical experience or for its appliance to an object. Thus, “seeing” a work of art involves gestures, for instance, and facial expressions, attitudes, bodily moves, descriptions, among other things. But, of course, different sorts of appreciation result in different sorts of judgments of approval or disapproval, of satisfaction or discontent.

To state this point more clearly, let me quote three remarks of the *Lectures* that may be directly related to Moore’s report given above:

LA I, 8. It is remarkable that in real life, when aesthetic judgments are made, aesthetic adjectives such as “beautiful”, “fine”, etc., play hardly any role at all. Are aesthetic adjectives used in a musical criticism? You say: “Look at this transition”. “The passage here is incoherent”. Or you say, in a poetical criticism: “His use of images is precise”. The words you use are more akin to “right” and “correct” (as these words are used in ordinary speech) than to “beautiful” and “lovely”.

LA I. 32. I draw your attention to differences and say: “Look how different these differences are!” “Look what is in common to the different cases”, “Look what is common to Aesthetic judgments”. An immensely complicated family of cases is left, with the highlight — the expression of admiration, a smile or a gesture, etc.

LA III. 35. I very often draw your attention to certain differences [...]. What I’m doing is also persuasion. If someone says: “There is not a difference”, and I say: “There is a difference” I am persuading, I am saying “I don’t want you to look at it like that”. Suppose I wished to show how very misleading the expressions of Cantor are. You ask: “What do you mean, it is misleading? Where does it lead you to?”

Of course, important details are here left out of the picture, but these remarks are in a way sufficient to cover three main aspects of the *Lectures*, all of them trying to account for aesthetical appreciation.

The first aspect concerns the *aesthetical experience*. Wittgenstein rejects all sorts of psychological explanations of the experience involved

in seeing a work of art, being impressed by it and reacting to it by means of an expression. In the same vein, as there is no psychological explanation of aesthetical experiences, there is no causal explanations of any other type whatsoever, not even a causal, psychological “description” of how and what happens “behind” the “mysterious” process of aesthetical appreciation and feeling. Aesthetical questions, says Wittgenstein, “are answered in an entirely different way” (*LA II*, 36). And, although he speaks of a “feeling of satisfaction” and accomplishment, this is much more connected to “rightness” and “correctness” than to “beauty”. As the first quote shows, aesthetical appreciation draws your attention to certain characteristics of the work under consideration, leading you to statements of precision, exactness, coherence — expressions that are more closer to ethical expressions than to interjections by means of adjectives.

The second aspect concerns still the aesthetical appreciation, but such as seen from an *observer point of view*. Here is where differences in appreciation lead to differences in attitude: what counts for aesthetical approval or disapproval is not the explicit exclamation for the “beautiful”, but the whole picture of he who approves or disapproves: his facial expression, gestures, smiles, bodily movements, and then, also, the way he chooses and selects things, the way he looks at works of art, the way he wears something he approves, the way he repeatedly listen to Beethoven or reads Keller. Henceforth the importance of considering the surroundings, the circumstances involved, the appreciator activities and moves in his life. Seeing someone else’s aesthetical considerations “involves an immensely complicated family of cases” (*LA I*, 32) — which could reach complicated forms of precise and localized culture.

The third aspect concerns still the aesthetical appreciation, but as expressed by *aesthetical judgments*. These are again not the mere expression of adjectives or of interjections such as “lovely!” As said before, aesthetical judgments are closer to ethical judgments and involve the expression of certain aspects of the work contemplated. They could simply point to similarities, to a difference, to an image in poetry, a transition in music, a form in pictures. They do actually *point to things*



and afford details of these things, and they draw comparisons, analogies and associations. As Wittgenstein says: “What we really want, to solve aesthetic puzzlements, is certain comparisons — grouping together of certain cases” (*LA IV, 2*). There’s therefore no use of “aesthetical adjectives” involved at all.

These are the sorts of “reasons” given in aesthetical appreciation. For Wittgenstein, aesthetical judgments furnish descriptions of what is seen in particular objects. They concern one’s understanding of certain pieces of literature, of music, of art in general, but an understanding that is never isolated from a bigger picture, requiring thus seeing the work’s relations with its surroundings. “Reasons” as “aesthetical judgments” are “of the nature of further descriptions” — and I quote Moore’s report again:

you can make a person see what Brahms was driving at by showing him lots of pieces by Brahms, or by comparing him to a contemporary author; and all that Aesthetics does is “to draw your attention to a thing”, to “place things side by side” (MOORE, 1955, p. 315).

Additionally, that’s all that aesthetics does when it comes to the question of correcting someone else’s judgments. All turns out to be a matter of persuasion. This is said at the last paragraph of the *Lectures* quoted above (*LA III, 35*): in drawing attention to a thing, in placing things side by side, we are actually proceeding by means of persuasion. And this seems to me to be the point of the second part of Moore’s report, for “reasons” as “aesthetical judgments” are made used of to make a person see what you see and by these means to try to appeal to him; however, if the person is not convinced by what you show and does not take part in your appreciation, then that’s the end of the discussion, a statement which leave us, in the end, again, with no criterion for aesthetical judgment. In this case, all that aesthetics can do is to try to appeal and to convince as if “appealing to a judge” in a court law. For matters of clarity, let me quote this part of Moore’s report again:

He said that if, by giving “reasons” of this sort, you make the other person “see what you see” but “still doesn’t appeal to him”, that is “an end” of the discussion; and that what he, Wittgenstein, had “at the back of his mind” was “the idea that aesthetic discussions were like discussions in a court of law”, where you try to “clear up the circumstances” of the action which is being tried, hoping that in the end what you say will “appeal to the judge” (MOORE, 1955, p. 315).

But of course, our dissatisfaction with the absence of a criterion is, for Wittgenstein, already mistaken: this is related to our craving for simplicity — to our craving for a point of agreement in aesthetical judgments and in aesthetical appreciation and to our craving for a definitive, scientific way of appealing to the other when it comes to our own aesthetical standards.

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There is obviously a lot more to be said about Wittgenstein’s “conception of ‘aesthetics’” — as it changes or develops from the *Tractatus* to the *Investigations*, — possibly a lot more about Wittgenstein’s conception of “aesthetical appreciation” and about Wittgenstein’s thoughts on art and contemplation. This cannot be aimed in a sketch paper as this, but is the point of an ongoing investigation and larger research project taking “appeal” and “persuasion” as central words to the question of ethical and aesthetical correction and learning.

However, a partial conclusion may be reached in accordance with the notes of the *Lectures* just reflected upon above. For, if I have not taken it all wrong, this seems to me to leave for a “Wittgensteinian aesthetics” — from the *Tractatus* to the *Lectures* — aesthetical appreciation solely, subjectively, and not much of “aesthetics” itself to be said. This paper would therefore just be a way for me to follow Wittgenstein’s steps and to say nothing, really, about aesthetics.

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