Art, Craftsmanship and Philosophical Method According to Wittgenstein

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[Philosophy for Wittgenstein] was a craft, a discipline...and its value consisted in its being well done. So one should do it well and not preach about it: ...showing not saying was important. Like all crafts, its exercise at its highest produces beauty, a beauty which requires an intellectual effort to grasp...

Brian McGuinness

1. Style and Idea in Wittgenstein’s Works

A philosophical style like Wittgenstein’s, eschewing conventional arguments, employing in their place aphorisms, thought experiments, unanswered questions etc., with its own peculiar kind of beauty, is rare among philosophers generally and unique to him among analytic philosophers. Moreover, that style is intimately linked to his goal in philosophy, eliminating our tendency to pose questions about the nature of meaning, intention, knowledge, etc in the manner of traditional metaphysics and epistemology. Further, the very requirement of dissolving our need to pose such questions once and for all confers its uniqueness on Wittgenstein’s style of philosophizing.

Yet that uniqueness is a puzzling uniqueness, so puzzling that in the course of the last half of the 20th century Wittgenstein has gone from being the very epitome of a hard-nosed logical positivist to a subversive post-modern pseudo-philosopher in the eyes of many analytic philosophers. The latter have come to realize, thanks to philosophers like Richard Rorty, that the similarities between, say Wittgenstein and Heidegger, which have long been noted in the literature, are, indeed, not accidental, but a sign that Wittgenstein was never really part of analytical philosophy at all.

At the same time Wittgenstein’s intense interest in aesthetic matters as well as his assertion that ethics and aesthetics are one have been taken, together with the striking house he built for his sister, along with that peculiar style, to imply that his deepest intellectual commitments lay outside philosophy in a religiously-inspired concept of art that would replace traditional philosophy. While there is a great deal of truth in this view, it is by no means the whole truth.

Brian McGuinness has given us the reason: Wittgenstein approached philosophy as neither a classical modern theorist nor a post-modern artist-ironist anti-theorist but as a craftsman. The thesis to be developed here is that the attitude of the craftsman, as opposed to the artist, is perhaps the most fundamental aspect of his concept of philosophy and thus crucial to understanding both Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy and his view of art, including his own architecture. So our questions are: where does this unorthodox “deflationary” view of philosophy arise? How does it determine his concept of clarity? How does it determine his relation to art? What is the relationship between art and philosophy in Wittgenstein?

All of this has a great deal to do with Wittgenstein’s philosophical debt to Heinrich Hertz which is the key to understanding the peculiarities of Wittgenstein’s concept of philosophy, his philosophical style and its relation to art.
2. Heinrich Hertz: philosophy as “showing” on the basis of perspicuous contrasts

One of the many puzzles surrounding Wittgenstein is his disavowal of his own originality. It seems absurd that such a departure from the traditional way of doing philosophy as the work of the mature Wittgenstein represents could be anything but highly original. Nevertheless, Wittgenstein consistently denied that he was an original thinker. Only recently in the course of re-evaluating Heinrich Hertz’s philosophy of science have we been able to grasp the sense of Wittgenstein’s remarks.4

In stark contrast to Ernst Mach and the Vienna Circle Hertz, which has been up till today erroneously taken to be the only rigorous approach to the philosophy of science à l’époque, Heinrich Hertz developed a method of eliminating conceptual confusions in physics to rival theirs. Whereas the Vienna Circle proposed to deal with the problem of empty abstractions like “absolute space, time and motion” or “force” in Newton’s physics on the basis of a radical, purging, purification of language, Hertz proposed something considerably more subtle on the basis of a more complex conception of what a presentation of a physical theory actually involves.

Whereas Mach & Co. were content to evaluate presentations of theories on the basis of their empirical correctness, logical coherence and simplicity of presentation, Hertz complicated the matter by posing the question “simple for whom?” Thus, in addition to their emphasis upon factual adequacy and structural elegance Hertz suggested that rhetorical appropriateness was also a philosophically significant aspect of any theoretical representation.

Although this difference appeared so slight as to be overlooked by a commentator as astute as Ludwig Boltzmann,5 it was a difference that made a difference, as William James put it. Wittgenstein’s conception of philosophy would be profoundly influenced by Hertz. There would hardly be a discussion of the nature of
philosophy in which he would not make reference to Hertz. The Hertzian view of philosophy implied that there was a teleological and aesthetic moment in the development of physical theory that philosophers of science neglect at their peril. It would become the basis of Wittgenstein’s mature thoughts on the subject in the *Philosophical Investigations* (I, 89-133).

For Mach & Co, the difference between alternative presentations of the same theory was not an interesting question. Hertz insisted that it was absolutely essential to understanding them. He proceeds from the view that in science it is necessary to construct different representations of the same data depending upon whom you want to talk to. He offers us the analogy with presentations of grammar: pupils learning to master their mother tongue require an altogether different presentation of the rules of grammar than philologists do.

The more we consider the analogy (as Hertz himself does not explicitly), the more complex it becomes; for it will soon become clear that students in the course of mastering their mother tongue will require a very different grammar from those foreigners who struggle with the same language, whereas different groups of foreigners will find different presentations of grammar more or less helpful depending upon the characteristic modes of expression in their own language, etc. For these different purposes we need different “pictures” or models of the rules of grammar.

The same is true in physics: a representation that is suitable for theorists is hardly suitable, say, for engineers or for chemists working with the same subject, let alone introductory students. Thus Hertz differs from Mach at the very outset by emphasizing how it is that the normal development of science requires a plurality of representations. He would employ the notion of alternative representation to illuminate the philosophical problems in classical physics.

He reasoned that if the conceptual problems that plagued classical physics arose in the mode of formulating the laws of classical physics as Newton did, an
alternative way of presenting those laws could avoid those pitfalls. The point could be formulated in a Wittgensteinian mode as follows: if conceptual confusions arise in the development of the language of physics, they must be resolved within that language, not on the basis of a theory about it. This principle had already been applied by Wilhelm Ostwald and the so-called “Energeticists” in their attempt to avoid the problems that the notion of force presents for classical physics by treating all observable changes as transformations of energy. This entails basing mechanics upon the concepts of space and time as mathematical quantities and mass and energy as physical quantities.

For energetics the properties of force are derived from fundamental laws and definitions, which function as ways of simplifying notation such that is becomes clear that they are matters of the appropriateness of the theory. In Energetics there are no intangibles; there are no “arbitrary and ineffectual” hypotheses. (PM, 22). However, the idea of a complex fundamental principle offends against our demand for simplicity with respect to principles in an analogous way to Newton’s “force”, i.e., epistemologically rather than ontologically.

Hertz offers us a third possibility in the form of an axiom system which purports to deal with both of these problems in terms of what Helmholtz called “concealed masses and motions”. (PM, 31) In this third presentation of the principles of mechanics all mechanical phenomena are explained in terms of masses and movements, although the masses and movements that enter into explanations are not always perceived by us. Nevertheless, they are in principle identical with the sorts of masses and movements that we perceive and in no way “occult” qualities. In short, Hertz offers a way of going beyond our actual experiences without going outside of experience, i.e., by modeling possible experiences mathematically.

Thus to speak with Kant all of mechanics is represented within the limits (Grenzen) of the empirical, but not within the bounds (Schranken) of the empirically
given. Whether Hertz succeeds or fails in his efforts to axiomatize classical mechanics is a question that need not concern us here, for it is his strategy as a philosopher of science that is so important for Wittgenstein.

This axiomatization of mechanics is not an end in itself (as axiomatization would tend to become in logical positivism especially in the hands of Carnap) but part of a program for articulating the conceptual foundations of physical theory, whose sense is to be found in the ways in which that axiom system differs from the traditional Newtonian presentation and the alternative presentation developed within Energetics. Thus the task of his philosophical “Introduction” to the Principles is to present the two currently available systems of mechanics as an introduction to his own, which in turn is a way of clarifying the conceptual foundations of physics without taking recourse to a radical reform of language. It is prolegomena to all of Wittgenstein’s philosophizing, which in effect extends what Hertz would say about representations of physical theories to language in general.

If we try to summarize the results of Hertz’s achievement for philosophy, we end up with a view of philosophy startlingly like Wittgenstein’s: Philosophy is an activity, not a theory. Philosophical problems are not solved but dissolved on the basis of an alternative representation of the problematic matter. Philosophy does not stipulate how language must be used but shows us on the basis of a perspicuous contrast how our conceptual confusions are attached to particular ways of representing things.

These confusions are linked to different rhetorical aims in developing our representations of physical reality. Philosophy is a matter of inventing new and illuminating ways of representing matters that have hitherto confused us. Skill and imagination are thus absolutely essential to it.
3. Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*

Let us look at the development of the *Tractatus* from the point of view of Hertzian philosophy of science. The earliest surviving thought that went into “Die Abhandlung”, as Wittgenstein himself called it, was the Hertzian notion that logic must take care of itself – as he puts it, at the very beginning of the notebooks (N, 22.VIII.14). Logic must function without the help of a foundational theory.

There is much to be said for the thesis that the published *Tractatus* represents a way of showing how that is possible without producing a theory (of course, it would require a far more substantial study than this to make a full case for the view developed here). Let us examine the seven propositions that constitute the *Tractatus* alone (as the all important numbering system [F, 26, 5.XII.19] suggests to us) with a view to determining what is distinctively Wittgensteinian in it. When we do so we discover that only the last two are properly Wittgensteinian.

1. Die Welt ist alles, was der Fall ist.
   The world is all that is the case.
2. Was der Fall ist, die Tatsache, ist, das Bestehen von Sachverhalten.
   What is the case, the fact, is the existence of states of affairs.
3. Das logische Bild der Tatsachen ist der Gedanke.
   The logical picture of facts is the thought.
4. Der Gedanke ist der sinnvolle Satz.
   The thought is the meaningful proposition.
5. Der Satz ist eine Wahrheitsfunktion der Elementarsätze. (Der Elementarsatz ist einer Wahrheitsfunktion seiner selbst.)
   The proposition is a truth function of elementary propositions. (The elementary proposition is a truth function of itself.)
6. Die allgemeine Form der Wahrheitsfunktion ist: \( \overline{p, \xi, N(\xi)} \).

The general form of a truth function is: \( \overline{p, \xi, N(\xi)} \).

7. Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.

Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.

The first four are identity statements that can be read as stipulating how a series of expressions define each other. They could be attributed to more or less any philosopher concerned with logic from Aristotle on.

Proposition 5 states Frege’s revolutionary view of complex propositions as functions of the truth values of their components and his Leibnizian notion that where there are complexes, there must be simples. These notions would become programmatic for analytic philosophy. Propositions 1 to 5 are thus by no means unique to Wittgenstein. Proposition 6 and 7 alone are distinctively Wittgensteinian.

That fact has largely been overlooked by readers of the *Tractatus*. Those propositions tell us in effect that all of the propositions of logic can be derived from the Sheffer stroke, i.e., not both \( p \) and \( q \), and that once we have grasped that point we shall understand that it is completely unnecessary to develop a *theory* of the nature of the proposition.

This is entirely Hertzian: in fact with the invention of the truth-table we have an alternative means of representing what a set of axioms or a logical theory would clarify now on the basis of a foolproof *technique*. Wittgenstein the craftsman, the mechanical engineer, has invented an ingenious way to implement a Hertzian program for logic.

Proposition 6 asserts that there is a truth-functional connective that can represent every dyadic relation between propositions. Wittgenstein, the philosophical craftsman, invented a purely mechanical technique, the truth table, for demonstrating, “showing”, the logical status of propositions as tautologies,
contradictions or empirical statements. One simply needs to know how to represent propositions and how to apply them to represent states of affairs. Truth tables are a technique for applying the Sheffer stroke to determine the nature of a given proposition. Thus application shows what the sign itself does not about the nature of a proposition (TL-P, 3.262).

With that the whole idea of a philosophy of logic became superfluous in Wittgenstein’s eyes. There is simply no need to talk about the matter and certainly no sense in arguing about the status of specific propositions when we have a purely mechanical, crystal-clear, sure-fire means for showing it at our disposal.

At the same time this Hertzian notion of clarity implied that the Tractatus could not have the deductive form that Frege and Russell required of a contribution to the philosophy of logic. The “truth” of the Hertzian notion of showing as reflected in the truth-table must itself be shown. This imposed what Frege termed an “artistic” form (Fr. 19) on the Tractatus, which was as unacceptable to Frege as its numbering system would be to Ficker (F, 26).

Briefly, the technical achievement in the Tractatus, which was philosophically inspired by Hertz, determined that it had to have a certain aesthetic form. This relation between craftsmanship, technique, and aesthetics determined everything about Wittgenstein’s relation to art throughout his life.

4. The Palais Stonborough: An example of the relationship between art and craftsmanship in Wittgenstein

Paul Wijdeveld’s trenchant analysis of Wittgenstein’s achievement in the construction of the house for his sister is perhaps the most dramatic example of the
way in which Wittgenstein’s “aesthetics” are determined by the concerns of a craftsman. The story is a strange one in almost every respect.

Paul Engelmann, who made the original drawings, was principally acting as a draftsman, rather than a full-fledged architect, for Wittgenstein’s youngest sister, Margaret Stonborough. Mrs. Stonborough systematically frustrated Loos’s student, Engelmann, by strictly ruling out a house built upon functional Loosian principles (the so-called *Raumplanung*). Instead she wanted to have a traditional semi-aristocratic city mansion.

When Ludwig joined the project in late summer 1926 he was able to realize her wishes to build a modern house in a traditional way. Only the smooth, unadorned facade is modern. The classical progression of the windows betrays the architect’s traditionalism. As for the interior, Wijdeveld suggests that it is an effort to purify, to clarify, the essence of classical monumental architecture.

So Wittgenstein would employ the *stucco lustro*, the favored material for churches and palaces since the baroque. The stone slabs of the floor, the unadorned pillars, the naked light bulbs and the two winged doors all reflect what we might consider Wittgenstein’s Hertzian alternative realization of the traditional city mansion reflected in the concerns of an engineer and ultimately a craftsman.

“The lack of ornamentation and the austerity of exterior and interior did not result from the need to create a new architectural aesthetic form from the technical and constructional developments in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but from the wish to clarify the roots of traditional monumental architecture as exemplified by the work of Johann Bernhard Fischer von Erlach, whom he greatly admired.”

His own concern for craftsmanship is most clearly evident in the metal doors and door handles, which reflect the skill of the mechanical engineer. In short, the “beauty” we perceive in Wittgenstein architecture is indeed a beauty that is the result
of consummate craftsmanship, to be compared with the kind of beauty produced by American Shaker craftsmen as Elisabeth Veit has observed. 9

As Brian McGuinness has said, it is a beauty which requires an intellectual effort to grasp. To the end, Wittgenstein shared Loos’s view that architecture was not art. His house, for its un-Loosian character bears that out.

5. Wittgenstein’s mature Concept of Philosophy

Let us turn to Wittgenstein’s mature conception of philosophy as presented in sections 89 to 133 of the first part of the *Philosophical Investigations* with a view to establishing once more the relationship between his Hertzian strategy and his tactical techniques in his mature philosophy. Coming from the Introduction of Hertz’s *Principles* to Wittgenstein’s text we ought to be struck at once by a number of similarities both in philosophical strategy and mode of expression.

Like Hertz, who could marvel at “how easy it is to attach to fundamental laws considerations which are quite in accordance with the usual modes of expression in mechanics, and yet which are an undoubted hindrance to clear thinking” (*PM*, 6), Wittgenstein is concerned with the problem that our usual ways of speaking, like Newton’s, conceal as much as they reveal of reality rather like spectacles that allow us to read but are not themselves “seen” (*PI*, I, 103). We are held captive by a picture (*PI*, I, 115) both in a general sense and in a specific sense.

Generally philosophers have a picture of language as exclusively a matter of representing the world, that at once 1) leads them to consider the logical basis of representation as constituting an ideal language, and 2) systematically prevents them from seeing the most obvious fact about it, namely that there are a myriad
speech acts which are both non-representational and irreducibly different from one another. Wittgenstein's discussion of the nature of philosophy thus begins with a consideration of how we tend to become fixated upon an ideal language when we do philosophy.

Moreover, we are all like philosophers inasmuch as we are so tied to specific, one-sided ways of seeing things that we forget that it is legitimately possible to understand words in startlingly different ways than we normally do. So we associate the word “cube” with the drawing of a cube, but there is also a very real sense in which it describes a triangular prism as well (Pl, I, 139). Although the latter is always there we need to be reminded of that fact occasionally.

Just as in Hertz an alternative to time-honored ways of thinking in physics shows us how those ways of thinking go astray, so Wittgenstein wants to “teach us differences” to paraphrase Kent in King Lear, which was another of the mottoes he considered for the Investigations. Similarly the metaphor of being entangled in our own rules is no less suggestive of Hertz. Further, Wittgenstein likens the confusions of philosophers to people inexperienced with machinery who confuse an idling engine with one that is running (Pl, I, 132); whereas Hertz will describe the role of “forces” in physics as “idling side-wheels” that have nothing to do with the machine’s functioning (PM, 14).

Thus on Wittgenstein’s view the traditional philosopher is “whipped” (gepeitscht) by questions that seem logical but in fact are not answerable (Pl, I, 133), because they are not questions at all; whereas in the very passage that Wittgenstein contemplated as motto for the Investigations Hertz speaks of the the mind of the physicist ceasing to be “tormented” (gequält) by the contradictions in a concept like force or electricity (PM, 9). What the philosopher needs to discover is the spectacles on his nose to put his vain questioning to rest.
What we need in this situation is “eine übersichtliche Darstellung” or a synoptic view (\textit{PI}, I, 122), which shows us what other possibilities there are. We need a “depth grammar” or logical grammar (\textit{PI}, I, 664) that diverts our focus from the seductions of surface grammar and permits us to liberate ourselves from our “grammatical illusions” (\textit{PI}, I, 110) and focus our attention upon a number of simple, commonplace truths, whose very obviousness prevents us from grasping them.

In the preface to the \textit{Investigations}, Wittgenstein had already compared his task to that of a draughtsman (the word “Zeichner” would seem to emphasize professional skill in drawing rather than art) making sketches of a landscape from different directions in order to get a comprehensive overview of something that was most definitely visible but which could not be taken in with a single glance. It is precisely in aid of obtaining said “synoptic view” that Wittgenstein speaks of the needs to discover or invent intermediate cases (i.e., language games) to help lead the philosopher away from the confusing exceptional cases and back to the rule, i.e., away from the tendency to want to speculate about the nature of thought and reality and back to the things we actually do with words.

Thus Wittgenstein sought to develop techniques that would introduce such clarity into the question of, say, what it is to ‘know’ that question would simply cease to interest us as we gained insight into the natural history of an animal that speaks. However, it became increasingly clear to him that, contrary to the situation in the \textit{Tractatus}, a single technique could never suffice to show us how language works; for it is as complex as the human organism itself. He would assemble all sorts of reminders of the complexity and nuances of human knowing and acting in aid of disabusing us of the desire to ask oversimplified questions, employ misleading examples and form crude judgments on the basis of misconstruing the logic of language.
Although an influence from Freud is perceptible here; for philosophy does not become therapy, but a therapeutic art (Pl, I, 133) that seeks to develop a variety of techniques for attaining the goal of disabusing the philosopher of his obsession with seeing the relationship between language and world *exclusively* as a matter of representation.\(^{11}\)

\[\text{“”It is high time for us to compare these phenomena with something different – one may say. – ‘I am thinking, e.g., of mental illnesses.’” (C & V, 55).}\]

In an unpublished early version of section 106 of part I of the *Investigations* Wittgenstein writes:

\[\text{“One of our most important tasks is to express all false thought processes so characteristically that the other says: yes, that’s just the way I meant it”.}^{12}\]

He has to be put into a position where his difficulties cease to be difficulties and he finally attains peace of mind. Wittgenstein’s Hertzian philosophical task was to develop spiritual techniques for doing so. His spiritual craftsmanship is eminently literary without being “art”. What, then, is the relationship of art to philosophy in Wittgenstein?

6. Philosophy and Art in Wittgenstein’s Thought

Wittgenstein considered that his philosophizing stood a definite relationship to art but was, nevertheless, to be distinguished from art. In 1930 the one-time follower of Schopenhauer would write:
“Now it seems to me that there is another way of capturing the world sub specie aeterni apart from the work of the artist. It is – I think – the way of thought, which can fly over the world as it were and the leaves it as it is – observing it from above in flight.” (C & V, 5).

The difference between the two is that philosophy is “unpoetic” and therefore is not art. It is more like religion inasmuch as it simply unveils things as they are with a certain passion or sense of wonder (in this sense he could speak of his way of looking at things as religious, while denying being a religious man). In order to present such a Hertzian clear view of things Wittgenstein strove in the manner of a craftsman to develop a set of spiritual techniques for reminding us of all those incredibly important things, whose simplicity and familiarity prevent us from seeing them.

These techniques amounted to a curious way of writing fiction with a view to reminding us of striking facts that the surface grammar of language tempts us to pass over – e.g., the plurality of activities that correspond to the many modes of “thinking”. This is why he would insist that philosophy must be analytic without its being what is conventionally understood under the rubric analytical philosophy. This too was for him a matter of practicing a craft, one which, indeed, produced objects of great beauty which could only be grasped in the basis of great intellectual effort.
Endnotes


2 Richard Rorty, The Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) passim.


5 Ludwig Boltzmann, Populäre Schriften (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1905), 58.


8 Wijdeveld, “Engelmann and Wittgenstein” (n. 7), 112.


10 William Shakespeare, King Lear, I, 4, 88.
