

MEANINGFUL GESTURES: ART AND AMBIGUITY

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What conditions must be present if there are to be significant judgments of value in the arts? In one sense at least, this is a dumb question since it is clearly open-ended and therefore, in principle, unanswerable. The conditions that would have to be present would include the existence of something called "the arts," as well as the existence of some creature capable of "making a judgment," whatever that may be. Allowing for the sake of this argument that there are such conditions, and that we have some idea of what they may be, we can move to another level of narrative and suppose that there must be something called "standards" or "norms" which our kind of creature would employ in making judgments about the value of the things called "artworks."

The nature or existence of any or all of these things can be questioned, and any complete account of the nature of aesthetic judgment would have to deal with those questions. No doubt a complete account would have to include a metaphysics and an epistemology to match. Even if it were possible to develop such a comprehensive account, this is obviously not the occasion to deliver it.

The point of these observations is that even to begin a limited inquiry, we must start by taking a great number of things for granted, many of which are themselves subjects of dispute and which are topics of inquiry in their own right. Some of the presuppositions in the following remarks have been made consciously after some reflection. But there are others I am sure that I made unconsciously, and which will surprise me if you point them out. (Please do.) For the sake of brevity much of what follows will be stated dogmatically. None of it is intended to be dogmatic. We must begin, as they say, in the middle of things, and since this is no epic journey, we will end there as well. The profit of the excursion, if any, will be in getting one view of a small piece of a very large, probably infinite, territory.

At the very beginning of *Romeo and Juliet* one of the Capulet's servants, seeking to start a fight with two servants from the house of Montague, bites his thumb. The notes in the Riverside edition of Shakespeare's plays say this is "considered an act of insolence or defiance."

What would you think today if you saw someone looking in your direction and biting his thumb? Would you think that he has just injured it somehow and was trying to contain the pain and bleeding? Or would you think that you were witnessing a case of arrested development or improper weaning?

Would it occur to you to ask the thumb-biter at whom he bites his thumb? Probably not. If you did ask, would you consider your action a possible matter of life and death? Certainly not. But Shakespeare's servants do. They are prepared to draw swords and blood on the basis of an answer that amounts to a "maybe." ("No, sir, I do not bite my thumb at you, sir, but I bite my thumb, sir.")

It is the gesture of thumb-biting that develops eventually into the tragedy of *Romeo and Juliet*. From this trivial and now meaningless gesture come the events that have assumed something close to a universal significance. Almost everyone knows the story of *Romeo and Juliet* or at least of *Westside Story*.

There is another famous gesture that comes to mind here—this time not from fiction but from anecdotal history. I believe that it is Norman Malcolm who repeats the anecdote in his memoir of Wittgenstein. The story is that Piero Sraffa, a lecturer in economics at Cambridge, and Wittgenstein were traveling together by train. During the course of their journey, they were discussing the theory of meaning developed by Wittgenstein in his early work, the *Tractatus*.¹ In that work Wittgenstein had maintained that sentences are meaningful because they exhibit the logical form of some state of affairs, in much the same way as a diagram or a picture might be said to exhibit the “logical form” of that of which it is a picture or a diagram. Every meaningful expression, according to this early view, would have to have such logical form in order to be meaningful.

Sraffa is said to have made some gesture with his hand or fingers—not, however, biting—which is still understood today in Italy as a gesture of contempt. He invited Wittgenstein to explain what logical form was exhibited in the admittedly meaningful gesture. Wittgenstein was unable to do so, and he began to rethink his earlier theory of meaning. The result, as you know, was a new and enormously influential theory of meaning, the theory which eventually appeared as the *Philosophical Investigations*.

For the purposes of this essay, there are three topics to be considered, both because they are closely related to the problem of the judgment of value in aesthetics and because they have been much discussed in the recent literature. I find it especially interesting that they are all topics that cut across a number of disciplines. (There is a synergy developing among these disciplines that is exciting to follow.) The topics are most easily stated in problematic form. They are the problems of ambiguity, intentionality, and interpretation.

The term “ambiguity” is usually applied to a word that in a given context may have more than one meaning, and in that context it is impossible to tell which of the alternative meanings is the correct one. “He looked over the bank” or “She is fair” would be examples of ambiguity in this sense. I would like to stipulate an extension of the term “ambiguity” in two ways that are themselves controversial. First, I will claim that there is a kind of systematic ambiguity in any natural language, and second, I will claim that there is a sense in which experience itself may be said to be fundamentally ambiguous. Although I believe that there are detailed arguments to support each of these claims, I will not try to rehearse them here. Instead, I will summarize some of the main ideas underlying these claims and try to make clear what the claims imply and why someone might subscribe to them as policy or procedural rules apart from their metaphysical or epistemological justification.

It was once widely held, and is still held in some circles, that any meaningful statement must be either true or false. Further, it was held that if someone claims to know something the claim is legitimate only if what is known is in fact the case; otherwise, the claim is mistaken.

Claims to know something are always expressed in statements. What this amounts to is that the statements expressing knowledge claims must be true statements. If the person making the knowledge claim really does have the knowledge that she claims to have, then the world must be as the statement says it is; otherwise, the person is simply expressing a belief or an opinion rather than conveying knowledge.

On this view there is ultimately one set of true statements that describe the way things really are, albeit a large—probably infinite—set. In the long run this view has zero tolerance for ambiguity. Meaning must be determinate in order that we can separate true statements from false ones.

There is now considerable evidence that these conditions cannot be met. The meaning of terms cannot be specified with sufficient precision to guarantee the unequivocal use of language. Inquiries into the nature of meaning by people such as Frege, Peirce, Russell, Carnap, Wittgenstein, Quine, and Goodman make it very difficult to support a determinate theory of meaning. Grossly put, their differing lines of inquiry tend to a view that might be loosely characterized as a kind of contextualism. This amounts more or less to the idea that the meaning of an expression depends on the context in which it is used, and that there is no way in which to give a complete or even adequate description of a context that is also a general description, i.e., one that could be specified in advance. If the omission or addition of some circumstance, perhaps a seemingly trivial one, could change the context and so alter the meaning of a term, and if there is no way to tell in advance what that circumstance might be, then the meaning of the term is to that extent indeterminate.

Two places where this indeterminacy of language manifests itself in practice are in the formulation and application of civil law and, more recently, in the efforts to develop computer programs that can “understand” and translate natural language. Composing a law that does all and only what it is supposed to do is notoriously difficult. A large portion of the work of the courts is to make adjustments in the interpretation of laws formulated by legislatures so that the laws will work more or less as we suppose they should work—or as we suppose that the legislatures intended them to work.

Computer translation, once thought to be only a matter of a few years of concentrated effort, has proved to be enormously difficult. Simple substitution programs such as those now available in “pocket calculators” are hopelessly inadequate when it comes to translating sentences. The simple substitution of dictionary synonyms from one language to another is not an adequate strategy for capturing the meaning of foreign expressions.

Art is concerned with the creation and communication of meaning in much the same way as language is. Language no less than art is a way to express or arouse feelings. It is after all as much of a medium for artistic work as stone, wood, canvas and paint. That language can be used to construct statements some of which may be true or false should not blind us to the fact that most of the time it is not used in just that way. Art, like language, is an exercise in symbolic forms, borrowing the latter term from Cassirer.² Central to the thesis of this paper is the idea that some of the ways in which we have come to think about language may be extended with appropriate modification to the ways in which we may think about art. In *Philosophy in a New Key*, Susan K. Langer adopts Cassirer’s insight and sets about testing it in the most difficult of cases, music. The distinction she makes between discursive forms such as those of ordinary language, where meaning develops word by word in linear fashion, and presentational forms such as painting, in which the “meaning” or effect confronts us all at once as an organic whole, remains an extraordinarily useful distinction.³

Language is the medium we use in order to account to ourselves for ourselves. Language appears to be largely a social construct. There are many forms of language, and there are special languages for special activities. Above all, languages are a way of organizing experience. We use language to explain things to ourselves.

Art is one of the important ways we extend language—that is, symbolic forms—to include new areas of thought or feeling as our experience grows and changes. And of course the totality of human experience forms the ultimate context for language. As we observed above, meaning is context dependent and for the most part socially constructed. (Whether we have some innate ability that governs the construction and use of language as Noam

Chomsky has argued is an interesting question, but of no consequence for the position we seek to develop here.) New experiences are likely to include “immediate sensations,” sights and sounds—the presentational, non-discursive stimuli that require “languages” such as those of the visual arts and music. By looking at ordinary language and the long history of efforts to explain how it works, we can get some insight into the much less conventional and more rapidly shifting efforts to create meaning and/or value in the arts, hence, the attention to topics that may seem remote from one’s reaction to the painting on the wall.

Oliver Sacks in his book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*,⁴ describes a patient suffering from Korsakov’s syndrome, a kind of amnesia in which short-term memory disappears. The patient is able to converse intelligently with his doctor, but if the doctor leaves the room and returns, the doctor must reintroduce himself to the patient who has forgotten the just-concluded interview.

Can you imagine waking up here and now with no memories whatsoever? You would have no language, no personal history, no identity, and no clues about just what it is you are seeing and hearing and feeling. Everything would be happening for the first time. Everything would be a surprise. Assuming that at the moment of awakening your memory begins to function; that is, your memory works beginning at the moment of awakening, what would you make of your new experiences? Just trying to imagine that kind of helplessness is painful, but it makes us aware of some of the important things we take for granted because they are so familiar.

The objects around us do not come with labels attached, nor do they necessarily present themselves as objects. It is not even clear that in those first moments of consciousness there would be anything corresponding to a concept of self. (In his *Phenomenology of Mind*, Hegel actually undertakes something like this exercise in order to derive more rigorously than Kant the true categories of understanding, but Hegel fails to accomplish what he sets out to do because he presupposes the neutrality of the language upon which his reasoning is based.)

In one of his novels, Thomas Wolfe (the earlier Thomas Wolfe, he of *Look Homeward Angel* and *The Web and the Rock*) describes a train journey. The protagonist is looking out the window as the train speeds through some anonymous town. He catches a glimpse of a woman opening the screen door on the back porch of one of the many houses whose yards border the tracks. She is in the act of emptying a dishpan. The protagonist tries to imagine the history of events that led up to that moment in the woman’s life, no less complicated or interesting than the events that led up to his being on the train, looking out the window at just that moment when she opens the door to empty the dishpan. He can imagine any number of what are presently called “scenarios,” which would account for his glimpse of another life.

All experience is ambiguous in this way. We make up stories, or paint, or compose, in order to account for, call attention to, or “express” those aspects of experience which we deem important. Some of the stories we classify as literature or art, some as myth or religion, and still others as science. The rules or conventions which guide the classification of stories are different for different categories, but all the stories are based on partial experience, on a glimpse or glimpses of what we think we have seen. We can always tell a different story, one that could account for our glimpses perhaps as well as the story we tell ourselves now. The catch phrase here is that the facts are always theory-laden; dropping jargon altogether, “The facts *never* speak for themselves.”

Assertions like these are calculated to give fits to those who believe in the determinate meaning of at least some words, and who suppose that even if individual terms are ambiguous, meaning may be made determinate by using additional language to plug the loopholes as they develop. As someone who has tried for a long time to teach freshman English and introductory formal logic, I am in favor of almost any program that would make people more aware of the problems (and in advanced courses, the benefits) that ambiguity and imprecision in language can cause under certain circumstances.

Years ago, the dance team of Marge and Gower Champion achieved serious public recognition for its technical mastery of ballroom and modern dance forms. The team would sometimes include in its performances a parody of the classical forms. Mistiming, awkwardness, and inappropriate lifts and holds were funny. But I think that the humor depended almost entirely on the audiences’ knowledge that these were experts deliberately calling attention to the kinds of things that could go wrong in a serious attempt to fulfill the conventional requirements of the dance.

There are two points to be noted here. First, if you thought that the dancers were simply incompetent, the humor, if any, would be quite of a different kind. Second, if you wish to satirize, criticize, or reject the conventions which govern a symbolic form, be it expression, representation, or communication, or whatever, if you are to be effective, then you must somehow show that you have mastered, or have understood, or at least are not ignorant of the conventions you seek to satirize or criticize.

Someone ignorant of the conventions cannot deliberately violate them. If Marge and Gower Champion did not know how to dance, we might still have laughed at their efforts but not because they called attention to the limitation or absurdities inherent in the conventions which governed their performance. Our laughter would have been directed at them, not at the conventions which defined their performance, however remotely. The humor that some people find in the operatic recitals of Florence Foster Jenkins springs from the discrepancy between the established conventions of operatic singing and Mrs. Jenkins’ apparent inability to recognize the difference. But the object of humor in this case is Ms. Jenkins and not the operatic forms which she strives so mightily to make manifest.

The difficulty to be noted here is important: one cannot attack or violate a convention of which one is ignorant. Hence, effective criticism requires that the critic, or artist, demonstrate some mastery or sympathetic understanding of that of which he is critical. Criticism here is intended to include any kind of activity that consists in calling attention to established values for the sake of extending the range of our symbolic forms. The phrase, extending the range of (existing) symbolic forms, is here offered as a first approximation of a definition of creativity in the arts.

When we labor to impress upon our students the virtues of rigor and precision in the use of language, and the resultant values of clarity and truth in the prose they produce, we may do so not because we acknowledge that every meaningful statement must be true or false, but because anyone who undertakes the creation of a work within a given medium or area of discourse is obliged to show that she understands the conventions, or has mastered the skills that have customarily defined such works.

If the work is developing a new area or medium adjacent to an established or familiar one, then the originator needs to provide some indication of a grasp of the original set of neighboring conventions. In the absence of such indications the new work will appear either senseless or trivial. It will appear senseless if it cannot be connected with a set of existing

rules, standards, or conventions for works of its kind. It will appear trivial if its connection with the socially established rules, standards, or conventions is merely personal, that is, if the connection exists solely and uniquely in relation to the peculiar experience of its originator. If I see the ghost of my great Aunt Tilly, and it changes my life so that I become an auto mechanic instead of comptroller-general, then that surely may be considered a dramatic episode on the face of it. But if the "I" in this case is me, here, now, then the drama is local, personal, and in the grand cosmic scheme of things, trivial. On the other hand, if the "I" is Hamlet, and the ghost is his father, then the story is not trivial, at least not *post hoc*, not in retrospect.

What did Shakespeare intend? If E. E. Stoll is correct, Shakespeare intended only to create a smashing good show, and Hamlet's hesitation does not mean anything philosophically or psychologically profound. Shakespeare's audience expected their money's worth, and if Hamlet had not hesitated, the play would have been over much too soon. Here the assumption is that the meaning of a work is what the artist or author intended it to be.

The topic of intentionality is a complex one, and I believe, an unusually slippery one. It is possible to slide without realizing it from one aspect of the problem to another. If asked to explain a passage in a text, students often begin with some variation of "What the author is trying to say is...." This kind of response is inevitable given the way the question is put, but nevertheless it makes me cringe. At first the cringe was on the author's behalf. "Trying to say?" "Trying?" Here we have one of the great works in all of literature, (Why else would we be studying it?), a work such as most of us could not even aspire to emulate, and now you (the poor unfortunate student) whom I know from the hours I have spent trying to piece out the sense of your semi-literate answers on essay exams, *you* have the temerity to suggest that our (famous) author does not quite succeed in saying what he means.

But the implicit criticism of a respected author is not the only reason for the cringe. The other contributing cause is the assumption that the reader already knows what it is that the passage intends; that the intended meaning is accessible in spite of the author's "difficult" use of language. ("Well, if that's what he means, why didn't he just say so?")

How is it that we can know the artist's intention? The problem is especially difficult if we take "intention" to mean a mental or psychological state. As such, intention is something quite different from the physical-temporal object that is the artwork itself. The difference seems especially clear when we judge that an artist has failed badly. We compare our idea of what she was "trying to do" with the actual artifact, and judge the latter to have fallen short of the artist's intentions. But how can we tell just what the artist is trying (unsuccessfully) to do?

Cleath Brooks and Monroe Beardsley, charter members of the movement that was known as the New Criticism when it gained popularity in the 1950s, argue that it is a mistake to assume that one can know the artist's intention as something external to the work itself. The only reliable evidence that we can have of intention is the work itself. Consequently, we can abandon any talk of intention and confine our discussion to the work and the objective properties it exhibits. We can describe the work as it is. We can discuss the choice of materials, of forms, and the relation of parts, but to try to read back from these elements to the state of mind of the person who produced the work at the time she was producing it would be entirely speculative. There is no way such speculations can be confirmed or disconfirmed, so they are of no use as a standard by which to judge the success or failure of a work. We come back to the condition of my original cringe: The artist is not *trying* to do

anything. She has done *exactly* what it is she has done. We are obliged to assume that every word, every piece of the work was chosen consciously and deliberately by the artist, and that he or she would not have done otherwise. This need not prevent us from hypothesizing about possible intentions based on the evidence found in the work, but such hypotheses are our inventions, not the artist's.

It is sometimes useful to distinguish between intention in the sense that we have been using it above, and the more technical term "intentionality," although the distinction is not always easy to maintain. More than a hundred years ago, Franz Brentano used the terms "intentional" and "mental inexistence" in an effort to characterize the content of thought as opposed to the activity of thinking. The objects we think about may really exist, for example, this chair, or they may exist only as the objects of thought, for example, the unicorn in the garden. When I am thinking about the unicorn in the garden, and when you are thinking about it, we have the same object in mind, so communication is possible. Thus meanings were explained as intentional objects.

When we are conscious, or when we think, we must be conscious of something, or we must be thinking about something. When psychology was first trying to distinguish itself as an independent discipline, distinct from philosophy, it was deemed important to find some unique quality or property that would distinguish mental events from physical events and so provide a way of dividing the subject matter of psychology, regarded as the study of the mind or of mental phenomena, from other sciences such as physics, or biology, or medicine. The hope was that the presence or absence of intentional objects would serve as the criterion by which the mental phenomena could be distinguished from the nonmental.

But we do not have direct access to anyone else's intentional objects, only our own. Most of what we can learn of the thoughts of others we learn through language. And most (perhaps all) of the accounts of mental states can be reduced to statements of the form of "He believes that the present king of France is bald," or "She believes that George Bush is incompetent." The clause or proposition following the word "that" in the preceding examples may be regarded as describing an intentional object. The statement as a whole is true or false regardless of the truth or falsity of the subordinate clause. Such statements are said to be "referentially opaque." They are regarded as expressing "propositional attitudes" which are very much like the "states of mind" that were once regarded as the proper province of the newly emerging science of psychology.

In all of the preceding remarks, we have been sparing with what I would call the central philosophical puzzle of our time: the problem of meaning. The problems announced at the outset, those of ambiguity, intentionality, and interpretation, may all be regarded as aspects of the fundamental problem of meaning. At the elementary level, the problem is easily described: Suppose we were to ask, "What is the meaning of the word 'cat'?" Clearly the meaning does not reside in the letters or the form of the term, otherwise we would have to attribute different meanings to upper and lower case cats, and we could discover the meanings of foreign words simply by examining them closely enough. Nor can the meaning be this or that small furry creature that says "meow." I need not rehearse for you the more sophisticated candidates: universals or essential natures. We have already mentioned their more modern counterparts, intentional objects. Where then does meaning reside? Perhaps Archibald McLeish had it right when he rejected all such questions, at least with regard to art, and concluded in a poem that a poem need not mean, it need only be.

NOTES

¹ Norman Malcolm, *Ludwig Wittgenstein, A Memoir. With a Biographical Sketch by Georg Henrik von Wright* (London: Oxford UP, 1958).

² Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1955).

³ Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1951).

⁴ Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for A Hat: and Other Clinical Tales* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985).