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WITTGENSTEIN AND HIS IMPACT ON CONTEMPORARY THOUGHT

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2nd INTERNATIONAL WITTGENSTEIN SYMPOSIUM
29th AUGUST TO 4th SEPTEMBER 1977 KIRCHBERG (AUSTRIA)

WITTGENSTEIN UND SEIN EINFLUSS AUF DIE GEGENWÄRTIGE PHILOSOPHIE

AKTEN DES 2. INTERNATIONALEN WITTGENSTEIN SYMPOSIUMS
29. AUGUST BIS 4. SEPTEMBER 1977 IN KIRCHBERG (ÖSTERREICH)

WIEN 1978
HÖLDER - PICHLER - TEMPSKY

EXPLANATION AND UNDERSTANDING IN THE HISTORY OF ART

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1. Piet Mondrian's paintings from the twenties and thirties may be said to consist of rectangles and no more. Besides black and white, only three colours are used – blue, yellow, and red. The black bands are horizontal and vertical; there are no diagonals or curves. Sometimes, the black stripes top short before the edge of the canvas. A number of the rectangles are limited by black bands on two or three sides only.

These works of art are hardly self-explanatory. What are they? Decorative patterns? Symbolically loaded images? Protests against other types of art?

2. If we turn to expositions of the history of modern art, we find statements like the following: "According to Mondrian, the only way to make a painting autonomous is to treat it purely for what it is – as a vertical plane. Any suggestion of an illusory treatment of space – whether or not it is in perspective – must go . . . To achieve this, uniform components are distributed as evenly as possible over the picture surface" (Maurice Besset, *Art of the Twentieth Century*. London 1976, p. 65). Besset's suggestions can be supported by declarations by the painter, in which he declares that his intention was to achieve "the plastic expression of relationships through oppositions of colour and line" and that he was led to eliminate all lines but the straight ones because they express "the greatest tension", etc. (Piet Mondrian, "A Dialogue on Neoplasticism". *De Stijl*, Vol. II, No. 4. Reprinted in Hans L. C. Jaffé, *De Stijl*. London 1970). Both the art historian's and the painter's own explanations seem to fit the intentionalist pattern of explanation elaborated by Dray and von Wright *et alii* very well.

Using the schema suggested by von Wright in *Explanation and Understanding* (1971), the skeleton of an explanation may be set up in the following way: (First premiss) Mondrian intended to bring about the autonomy of painting. (Second premiss) Mondrian considered that he could not bring about the autonomy of painting unless he dispensed with illusionism in an even more radical way than e.g. the Cubists had done. (Conclusion) Mondrian set himself to dispense completely with illusionism in art.

An argument of this kind seems to be logically binding, and its binding force rests upon the conceptual links which exist between our notions of intention, belief and action. (Cf. von Wright, "Determinism and the Study of Man". In Manninen and Tuomela (eds.), *Essays on Explanation and Understanding*. 1976, p. 425). If Mondrian did have the intention we ascribe to him and the beliefs we ascribe to him, then he was logically bound to perform certain actions when the appropriate circumstances arose, unless he was prevented or changed his mind in the meantime or found more important things to do.

Yet, for various reasons, many philosophers have felt dissatisfied with this type of explanation, feeling that it somehow stands in need of being filled in. Some have wanted to turn intentionalist explanations into deductive ones by spelling out the statements about the conceptual ties involved. Others have felt that intentionalist explanations stand in need of being supplemented with conditions on effective causes. And, more interestingly from the practicing scientist's point of view, some have felt that intentions and beliefs may require further explanation. Attempts to shed light on various aspects of the social space surrounding intentions and works are indeed also referred to as explanatory activities (for instance, how-possible-explanations and why-not-possible-explanations). How are such explanations related to the intentional ones?

3. How, for instance, was it possible for Mondrian to have the intention of bringing about

the autonomy of painting? In order to be said to have an intention of a certain kind and to act according to it, we should normally be required to have a certain competence. The practical knowledge required to form a complex intention like that attributed to Mondrian above consists of a number of skills: perceptual, motoric, linguistic, and cognitive skills. (Think of all the things which are necessary in order to master the concept 'the autonomy of painting'.) There seems, then, to be a necessary link between intentions and certain kinds of skills. The intentionalist pattern of explanation can then be seen to be one of the types of explanation which utilise the conceptual features of action situations.

In order to get a survey of the conditions which are necessary for action, including creative and hermeneutic action (understanding), one might follow Wittgenstein's paths in the *Philosophical Investigations*. In order to be said to perform an action of a certain kind, we must follow some rule which is essentially public. Ways of acting are "practices" or "customs", "uses", "institutions", in Wittgenstein's terminology. Normally, we do not learn a practice by having the rules recited to us, but by example and counter-example. (And in the cases where rules have been formulated, we have to learn the application of the rules by examples and counter-examples.) The ability to make the relevant comparisons is basic to all acting, including the hermeneutic actions we perform when confronted with works of art. (Cf. RFM V, 18: "Die Grenzen der Empirie sind nicht unverbürgte Annahmen, oder intuitiv als richtig erkannte; sondern Arten und Weisen des Vergleichens und des Handelns.") To identify a work of art as a work of a particular kind, we have to learn to subsume it under the appropriate aesthetic practice. The connection between works of art and practices also seems to be conceptual. The *identity* of a work of art depends upon which practice it is related to.

Aesthetic practices presuppose other practices and institutions like education, museums, galleries, economical institutions, etc. The connections between an aesthetic practice and its background institutions is empirical in the sense that the details of the institutions are contingent. That there is a set of background institutions seems, however, to be a noncontingent feature of art.

The conceptual grid which has been hinted at may be visualized in the form of a diagram which is intended as a reminder of the structure of action situations and of the necessary conditions for the possibility of creating and understanding art:



The fabric of social life may be said to consist of conceptual links between intentions, beliefs, actions, practices, institutions, and competences. The basic reason for considering art in relation to society and for paying attention to the abilities and resources at the disposal of artists and beholders is, then, that it is necessary to do so in order to understand art, since art is conceptually linked to skills, concepts, and practices of different kinds. The necessary structure is invested with different values for each practice, which changes over time. It is these contingent, empirical investments of the necessary structure which form the fields of investigation of the historian.

4. When the intentionalist pattern of explanation is presented in isolation and said to be logically complete, it is hard to avoid a feeling of arbitrariness. That feeling of arbitrariness (we suggest) may be removed if the analysis of patterns of explanation is removed from the logicians' domains to the field which might be called "transcendental pragmatics" (cf. the works of K.-O. Apel); that is, if the emphasis is shifted from logical considerations in a narrow sense to considerations of the conditions which necessarily have to be fulfilled, in one way or another, for action to be possible. The intentionalist pattern of explanation does indeed cater for a great number of the explanations to be found in a discipline like the history of art, provided that the notion of intention is qualified in the appropriate ways by distinguishing between institutional and private intentions, etc.

Von Wright has claimed that the intentionalist pattern of explanation is "pivotal in the sense that the other explanatory mechanisms all seem to revolve round this schema as their core" (Manninen and Tuomela, *op. cit.*, p. 413). Unlike influence explanations, how-possible-explanations and why-not-possible-explanations do not seem to be *reducible* to the intentionalist pattern. Accordingly, it seems necessary to recognize that there is not just one pattern of explanation which is *the* distinctive feature of the human sciences.

Rather, the human sciences are distinguished by a plurality of types of explanation, which may be seen to arise out of the structure of action situations.

Concluding note. As usual, I am indebted to my colleagues Gunnar Danbolt in the Department of Art History at the University of Bergen and Kjell S. Johannessen in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Bergen. Cf. our contributions to G. Hermerén & L. Aagaard-Mogensen (eds.), *Contemporary Scandinavian Aesthetics* (forthcoming).

SCHRIFTENREIHE DER WITTGENSTEIN-GESELLSCHAFT

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PROCEEDINGS OF THE SECOND INTERNATIONAL WITTGENSTEIN SYMPOSIUM
29th August to 4th September 1977 Kirchberg (Austria)

WITTGENSTEIN UND SEIN EINFLUSS
AUF DIE GEGENWÄRTIGE PHILOSOPHIE

AKTEN DES ZWEITEN INTERNATIONALEN WITTGENSTEIN SYMPOSIUMS
29. August bis 4. September 1977 Kirchberg (Österreich)

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ca. 530 Seiten, kartoniert;

SUBSKRIPTIONSPREIS bis 30. 10. 1978 ö.S 440,–
späterer Ladenpreis ö.S 520,–

Bereits 1977 erschienen:

LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN
Wörterbuch für Volksschulen

Faksimile der Ausgabe von 1926.

Mit einem bisher unveröffentlichten „Geleitwort“ Wittgensteins
und einer „Einführung“ herausgegeben von
A. Hübner und W. u. E. Leinfellner.

„Geleitwort“ und „Einführung“ in Deutsch und Englisch.
Wien 1977 XXXVI + 44 Seiten, kartoniert ö.S 98,–

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HÖLDER - PICHLER - TEMPSKY
A-1096 WIEN, Postfach 127, Frankgasse 4