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The Sound of Bedrock: Lines of Grammar between Kant, Wittgenstein, and Cavell

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In ‘Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy’, Stanley Cavell proposes two ways of connecting judgments of beauty as characterized by Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and the ordinary language philosopher’s ‘appeal to what “we” say and mean, or cannot or must say and mean’ (‘Aesthetic Problems’, *MW*, 86). On the one hand, Cavell proposes that Kant’s characterization of judgments of beauty may itself be seen as *an instance* of the philosophical appeal to ordinary language—an appeal that aims at clarifying the peculiar ‘grammar’, as Wittgenstein would call it, of judgments of beauty. On the other hand, Cavell proposes that judgments of beauty, as characterized by Kant, ‘model’ the philosophical appeal to ordinary language (86), in a way that may help to elucidate the nature of that appeal, and thereby go some way toward vindicating it. In using the procedures of ordinary language philosophy to clarify the grammar of judgments of beauty while at the same time proposing that those procedures may themselves be seen as partaking of that grammar, what Cavell does, in effect, is turn ordinary language philosophy onto itself—using its procedures to clarify its procedures. Far from being vicious, this circularity is just as it should be: it underscores the way in which ordinary language philosophy, done right, is neither exempt nor takes itself to be exempt from the conditions that make its particular form of intervention called for sometimes, and possible—the conditions, in other words, that make it possible for us both to get lost with our words sometimes and to help each other regain our footing with them.

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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The ordinary language philosopher has no special authority, speaks from no special position, and must ultimately rely on a level of agreement among us that we all must rely on whenever we presume to speak to, and for, each other.

Cavell's first proposal—that Kant's characterization of judgments of beauty may be seen as an instance of the philosophical appeal to ordinary language—is at once insightful and, I will argue, threatening to Kant's overall account of beauty and its significance. It is true, and striking, that in his attempt to bring out and clarify the peculiar nature of judgments of beauty—and thereby of beauty itself—Kant again and again makes claims about the peculiar (normal) *force* of the *expression* of the experience of beauty. Kant appeals to this peculiar force in order to distinguish judgments of beauty from experiences of mere agreeableness or pleasantness on the one hand, and from moral or empirical judgments on the other hand. When we give voice to the experience of beauty, Kant notes, we normally lay claim to the agreement of others—we expect them to perceive the beauty we perceive, just as if it were a property of the object that any competent speaker with eyes in her head could rightfully be expected to recognize. In this, giving voice to the experience of beauty is importantly unlike giving voice to the experience of agreeableness, and *resembles* the expression of empirical or moral judgments (as Kant thinks of them). At the same time, however, there is no way for us to *establish* the presence of beauty, no way of *proving wrong* those who do not find it where we do, or find it where we don't. And in this, judgments of beauty are importantly different from empirical judgments and from moral judgments (as Kant conceives of them): we speak of beauty *as if* it were a property of the object, Kant says, but at the

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same time acknowledge, especially in how we proceed in the face of aesthetic disagreements, that it is not.

I said that Cavell's proposal that Kant's characterization of judgments of beauty may be read as grammatical, in Wittgenstein's sense of that term, is potentially threatening to the overall argument of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Aesthetic Judgment*. The potential threat may be seen both at the level of method and at the level of content. At the level of method, the tendency of both Kant and his interpreters is to take his grammatical reminders as no more than an aid in clarifying *something else*—namely, the different roles played respectively by 'the understanding' and 'the imagination' in the constitution of human 'experience' by way of the 'conceptualization' of 'intuitions'. For Kant, as we will see, our cognitive faculties and their workings, together with every other human capacity and every other dimension of human experience and activity, are part of one all-encompassing and immutable system, as he likes to call it, and should be understood philosophically in reference to that system.

In taking linguistic expression to be no more than a helpful indicator of some underlying reality that is theoretically separable from that expression, and in taking it that the primary aim of philosophy is to elucidate that underlying reality, Kant and his interpreters are in the good company of very many in contemporary analytic philosophy. This general tendency, I should say, is ultimately suspect on *Kantian* grounds; for by Kant's own lights, the workings of our cognitive faculties may either be investigated and known *empirically*, in which case it would not be what Kant takes himself to be investigating and elucidating, or not at all. So there is a good Kantian reason for shifting

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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our philosophical orientation more radically than he himself has done and, following Wittgenstein, taking the language-game—of aesthetic evaluation, for example—to be ‘the primary thing’ (PI 656), and taking essence—of beauty, for example—to be (not merely indicated but) expressed by grammar (PI 371). Part of my aim in this paper is to motivate this shift of philosophical orientation.

The problem for Kant’s overall argument in the *Critique of the Power of Aesthetic Judgment* is that once we effect this shift of orientation, and take Wittgensteinian grammar to express everything we could sensibly have hoped to find and capture in our philosophical quest for essences, two central tenets of that argument come more or less immediately into question: the first is Kant’s claim that judgments of beauty are *unique*, in a sense that will soon be clarified, and the second is his claim that those judgments somehow essentially involve the notion, and experience, of *pleasure*.

Pressing these difficulties for Kant’s overall argument will lead me to Cavell’s second proposal—the proposal that Kant’s grammatical characterization of judgments of beauty can help to shed light on, and vindicate, the philosophical appeal to what we say and mean. While thought provoking, Cavell’s proposal is left underdeveloped in ‘Aesthetic Problems’. It is not clear *how* exactly judgments of beauty as characterized by Kant are supposed to ‘model’ the philosophical appeal to ordinary language. The following passage is the closest Cavell comes to spelling out what he has in mind:

Kant’s “universal voice” is, with perhaps a slight shift of accent, what we hear recorded in the philosopher’s claims about “what we say”; such claims are at least as close to what Kant calls *aesthetical judgments* as they are to ordinary empirical hypotheses (94).

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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But we are not told in *what* respect(s) philosophical claims about “what we say” are closer to judgments of beauty than to empirical hypotheses; nor are we told what Cavell has in mind when he talks about the ‘slight shift of accent’ between the philosophical appeal to what we say and the aesthetic appeal. Cavell then adds: ‘though the philosopher seems to claim, or depend upon, severer agreement than is carried by the aesthetic analogue, I wish to suggest that it is a claim or dependence *of the same kind*’ (Ibid, my emphasis). But he doesn’t tell us *what* kind of claim or dependence he has in mind. In the final paragraph of his paper Cavell makes yet another thought provoking and perplexing suggestion. ‘Kant’s attention to the “universal voice” expressed in aesthetic judgments’, he writes,

seems to me, finally, to afford some explanation of that air of dogmatism which claims about “what we say” seem to carry for critics of ordinary language procedures, and which they find repugnant and intolerant. I think that air of dogmatism is indeed present in such claims; but if that is intolerant, that is because tolerance could only mean, as in liberals it often does, that the kind of claim in question is not taken seriously. It is after all a claim about *our lives*; it is differences, or oppositions, of these that tolerance, if it is to be achieved, must be directed toward (96).

But how exactly can Kant’s elucidation of the grammar of judgments of beauty help *explain* the air of dogmatism carried by philosophical appeals to ordinary language? It seems that the air of dogmatism is supposed to be explained by the fact that the philosopher’s claims about ‘what “we” say’ are claims about our lives. But *how, in what way or sense*, are they claims about our lives? Are aesthetic claims too claims about our

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

lives, and in a similar way? And how is that supposed to explain, or legitimize, the air of dogmatism carried by either kind of claim? Surely, not just any claim we make about our lives carries, or may rightfully carry, an air of dogmatism. I mean in this paper to propose a line of answer to these questions.

I begin, however, with what Wittgenstein refers to as the seeing of ‘aspects’—the seeing of something *as something*. Some years ago, and partly under the inspiration of Cavell’s ‘Aesthetic Problems’, I have found that Wittgensteinian ‘aspects’ too partake of the grammar of Kantian ‘beauty’.¹ Like beauty as characterized by Kant, an aspect as characterized by Wittgenstein hangs somewhere between the subject and the object: it is not a property of the object, and yet we call upon others to see it *as if* it were. Though we have no way of establishing its presence or proving wrong those who cannot see it, and though someone could make a perfect copy or representation of the object without seeing the aspect under which *we* see it, we nonetheless talk about it as if it is there to be seen, and as if those who fail to see it are missing something *about the object*. And yet, for all of their grammatical and phenomenological affinity, it seems clear that a Wittgensteinian aspect is no Kantian beauty.

In Kant’s third *Critique*, however, what he calls ‘subjective universality’—this ‘speaking with a universal voice’ or offering our judgment as ‘exemplary’, calling upon others to see or acknowledge the presence of something whose presence we cannot *prove* or *establish*—is presented as a *peculiarity* of judgments of beauty. Between the full-fledged objectivity of empirical and moral judgments (as Kant understands them), and the

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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mere subjectivity of ‘This sure feels good’ or ‘I like it’, there is in Kant’s systematic theory only room for judgments of beauty. This, it seems to me, is one reason for thinking that Kant’s system—however compelling—is to be suspected.

I do not mean to deny that the philosophical imagination can and perhaps even should draw inspiration from the discovery of grammatical affinities such as the one holding between Kant’s beauty and Wittgenstein’s aspects. My point is just that the construction and maintenance of a philosophical system is only *one* way of pursuing such an inspiration, and might not be the best way of doing justice to the phenomena. Our philosophically interesting concepts, I have found, crisscross each other in complex and often unexpected ways that defy Kantian systematization and call rather for Wittgensteinian local elucidations in the face of particular difficulties.

For example, it may well be true that the experience of being struck by an aspect is closer to the experience of being struck by beauty than it might initially appear. In the *Brown Book* Wittgenstein likens the seeing of aspects to cases in which something—a piece of music, for example, or a bed of flowers—speaks to us, and we feel called upon to say what it says, but at the same time find that we cannot satisfyingly say it. A Wittgensteinian aspect, just like what a thing says when it speaks to us, and, we could add, just like Kant’s beauty, cannot be separated by means of description from our experience of the thing in the way that an objective property of it can be. If I tell you that the thing is red, or round, or weighs 79 kilos, I *may* thereby be telling you all that there is to tell in this respect—all that I know and all that you need to know. If you trust my testimony, you may spare yourself the effort of checking the object out for yourself, and

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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may even rightfully assure other people that the object is red or round or weighs 79 kilos on the strength of my word. But if I come to see, not a courageous face, but a face *as courageous* (see PI 537), then the word ‘courageous’ alone, apart from the *experience* of seeing *this face as courageous*, will not adequately convey what I see. Likewise, according to Kant, the word ‘beauty’ will not adequately capture what we see when something strikes us as beautiful. The concept of beauty is not a ‘determinate’ concept, as Kant puts it (CJ 341). And in the same way, what we experience when something speaks to us typically cannot be separated by way of articulation, according to Wittgenstein, from the thing *as experienced*. To suppose otherwise, Wittgenstein says in the *Brown Book*, is to succumb to an illusion. The illusion Wittgenstein is talking about does *not* consist in experiencing objects as speaking to us—there is nothing illusory about that kind of experience if we see it for what it is—but rather in supposing that it should always be possible for us fully to capture and express what they say, and thereby to separate what they say from our experience of them.²

One may go a step further and *equate* the beauty of something with its speaking to us. Heidegger sometimes seems to be doing this.³ There are arguably moments in which Wittgenstein at least suggests this, as when he talks, in his lectures on aesthetics, about how a piece of music or poetry sometimes gives you experiences that you find yourself wanting, even called upon, but unable to describe.⁴ And Kant himself seems to be moving in that direction when later in the third *Critique* he comes to equate the seeing of beauty with the seeing of what he calls ‘aesthetic idea’, which he defines as a ‘presentation of

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

the imagination that prompts (*veranlasst*) much thinking, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e. no concept, can be adequate' (CJ 314).⁵

The problem for Kant's grand story, however, is that the connection he earlier insists upon between judgments of beauty and *pleasure* seems to have now been severed. To have something speak to you, to feel compelled to give voice to and thereby bring out something about it for no reason external to the thing itself—and so, if you will, disinterestedly—is surely not the same as, nor even necessarily involves, taking pleasure in it. I assume committed Kantians would insist that what Kant says about aesthetic ideas may be shown to fit with things that he says earlier about the place of pleasure in the experience of beauty, and in the content of judgments of beauty; and if the history of Kant exegesis has taught us anything, any number of ways of showing this *may* be found. But what would be the point of insisting on this, given that the precise connection between a feeling of pleasure and the judgment of beauty is something that, so far as I know, no two interpreters of Kant have quite been able to agree upon?

I do not deny that one *could* naturally come to think of beauty as intimately connected with pleasure. I only say that we *needn't* think of beauty in this way, and that it is not clear that we should. In his later work, Wittgenstein comes back again and again to the ways in which we distort our view of the mental phenomena we wish to understand. We try to answer the question of what some mental state or process or act consists in, by combining theoretical considerations and reflection on 'what happens' whenever we, for example, understand or read or mean or see something. When we reflect on presumed instances of such mental items in ourselves, we distort the intended object of our

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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reflection not only by the mere act of turning our attention inwards, as it were, which is no part of what normally happens when we (say) understand or read or mean or see something, or find something beautiful, but also by looking at our experience ‘through the medium’ of the very concept we wish to understand, as Wittgenstein puts it (PI 177).⁶ Thus, if we have come to think on theoretical or proto-theoretical grounds of the encounter with beauty as essentially involving a feeling of pleasure, for example, we will invariably find that feeling present in such encounters, when we reflect on them for theoretical purposes. The phenomenon, to which our theory is supposed to be beholden, thus gets covered up by being seen under a theoretically engendered aspect.

Wittgenstein’s antidote for such theoretically biased findings, as I said, is to describe the relevant aspects of the relevant language-games—relevant, I mean, for the alleviation of some particular philosophical difficulty or confusion—and resist the temptation to explain the language-games by appeal to an underlying, hidden, and immutable reality. Instead of trying to get at and capture the phenomena—understanding, seeing, seeing beauty, and so on—as they are in themselves, as it were, which really amounts to an attempt to *see through* the phenomena to their hidden essence, Wittgenstein urges that we start by reminding ourselves of the kinds of things we say about the phenomena, thereby revealing their ‘possibilities’ (PI, 90). There is a sense in which this is a deeply Kantian move, as Cavell has noted;⁷ but, as I understand the move, it ultimately throws Kant’s work itself into question, for the phenomena under investigation in Wittgenstein are not those typically investigated by the natural sciences, but rather are the ones under investigation in, for example, the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

perception, judgment, knowledge... The Wittgensteinian lesson, at once Kantian and anti-Kantian, is that we get ourselves into philosophical trouble when we attempt to think of *those* as ‘things as they are in themselves’—i.e., apart from a consideration of the humble uses of ‘see’, ‘judge’, ‘know’, and other philosophically troublesome words, and the human conditions (needs, limitations, propensities, institutions...) that make these uses called for and possible. In such moments, it might help to follow Wittgenstein (in reverse) and tell oneself that knowledge, or understanding, or beauty, or the experience of beauty, is not a nothing, but is not a something either (PI 304).

The Wittgensteinian grammatical investigation is a way of becoming clearer about our ‘concepts of experience’ (*Erfahrungsbegriffen*, PI, part II, p. 193), and hence about the phenomena they delineate, without the postulation of Kantian or other mental machineries. This, we saw Cavell proposing, is what Kant may be seen to be doing, and doing rather well, in the Analytic of the Beautiful and later sections of the third *Critique*. I’m suggesting, however, that Kant’s thinking of beauty as *essentially* connected with pleasure is neither justified by the grammar of ‘beauty’ nor useful for seeing it aright.

Let’s us remind ourselves of the intra-systemic, architectonic, reasons Kant had for connecting judgments of beauty with a feeling of pleasure. For it’s not as if it is just obvious that judgments of beauty are based on, or express, pleasure. It was not obvious to Heidegger, for example;⁸ and it was not obvious to the rationalists to whom Kant was, in part, responding. And even Kant moves quite undecidedly between speaking of beauty simply as an object of liking (*Wohlgefallen*)—which makes no necessary reference to a

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

feeling of pleasure, and *may* simply come to saying that we find the beautiful object worthy in a particular way of our and others' *disinterested attention*—and speaking of it as an object of pleasure (*Lust*). One can see how, at some point, everything fell together for Kant, in such a way that judgments of beauty just *had to be* intimately tied to a feeling of pleasure. The system demanded this; and Kant had great faith in his system. 'Without becoming guilty of self-conceit', he wrote in a letter to Reinhold at the time that he was writing the third *Critique*, 'I can assure you that the longer I continue on my path the less worried I become that any individual or even organized opposition (of the sort that is common nowadays) will ever significantly damage my system. My inner conviction grows, as I discover in working on different topics that not only does my system remain self-consistent but I find also, when sometimes I cannot see the right way to investigate a certain subject, that I need only to look back at the general picture of the elements of knowledge, and of the mental powers pertaining to them, in order to discover elucidations I had not expected' (Letter to Reinhold, December 1787, *Kant's Correspondence* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 272).

A good place to begin seeing what has led Kant to insist on the connection between beauty and pleasure is the much-discussed problem of judgment from the first *Critique* (A132/B171-3), a problem to which Kant returns in the preface to the third *Critique* (CJ 169). In empirical, objective, judgments we fit together or 'associate' concepts, which Kant thinks of as rules of unification, and (at the most basic level) sensible intuitions, to form cognitions of objects and so *experience* (*Erfahrung*) as Kant thinks of it (CJ 295); but evidently our doing so cannot itself be *grounded* in concepts or

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

rules, on pain of infinite regress of judgments. It would appear, then, that if our judgments are not to be thought of as merely *caused*, and so as not being true *judgments*, they must be guided by feeling—by a *sense of fit* between concept and intuition, law and particular case. In seeking to communicate our judgments to others we tacitly rely on them to share this sense of ours; for if they did not, our judgments would presumably be ‘empty’ as far as they were concerned: mere formal moves in a formal system, with no connection to the deliverances of the senses—and so, presumably, with no ‘correspondence with their object’, as Kant puts it (CJ 238). This is the presupposition of what Kant calls ‘*Sensus Communis*’. For the most part, our reliance on the *Sensus Communis* remains in the background: our communication with others runs smoothly and effectively enough, serves its purposes well enough, and so long as it does, our tacit assumption of a common sense receives all the validation it needs, by Kant’s lights.

Given Kant’s way of thinking about empirical judgments, as acts of unifying intuitions by means of concepts, and given the seeming impossibility of *grounding* or *securing* judgments in concepts or rules, it is quite understandable why he came to think of empirical judgments as ultimately resting on nothing but a sense, and why he further thought that in communicating our judgments to others we must tacitly rely on our sense being in fact common, shared. What is less clear is why Kant thought that, over and above the communication of empirical judgments, it *must* somehow also be possible for us to communicate directly to others our sense of fit itself—or, as he puts it, the felt ‘disposition of the cognitive powers for a cognition in general, and indeed that proportion which is suitable for making cognition out of a representation’ (CJ 238)—separated or

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

abstracted from the production of any particular, ‘determinative’, empirical judgment (see CJ 290).

I mean, it is one thing to say that if communication of empirical judgments, and hence perhaps the connection between our words and our world, is to be at all possible, it must be possible for us to communicate to others not just our judgments, but also our conviction in them, or lack thereof, and we must on the whole agree in our respective levels of conviction (cf. CJ 238). We should on the whole agree, for example, not only that this or that is a tree, say, but also that it is somewhat or quite uncertain—given its distance, or the dim light, or the quality of the picture, or the thing’s unusual shape or history or constitution—whether it is or it isn’t. But why can’t our judgments and levels of conviction be all that there is for us to communicate and agree or disagree in? Why should there be in addition judgments or claims directly expressive of the disposition of our cognitive powers toward each other upon encountering an object? It is one thing, when you’ve reached bedrock and your spade is turned, to call with a ‘universal voice’ upon the other, ‘Don’t you see?!’. It is quite another thing to call upon the other to share in the experience of the bedrock with you. The Deduction of judgments of beauty, Kant says, ‘asserts only that we are justified in presupposing universally in every human being the subjective conditions of the power of judgment that we find in ourselves...’ (CJ 290). But I confess to have found in myself neither the subjective conditions of the power of judgment nor their relation to judgments of beauty, or for that matter to the feelings of pleasure and displeasure. —Not until I read the third *Critique* for the first time, at any rate, and had Kant suggest them to me.

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

I am saying that it is not clear what justifies Kant's claim that it *must* be possible for there to be judgments of beauty as he conceives of them. I suspect the best answer might be that there just are judgments of beauty, or claims to have perceived beauty; and these judgments struck Kant as having just the inter-subjective force and phenomenological character that one *would* expect of judgments whose object was the very sense of fit between any empirical concept and the intuition it unifies—a sense of fit that, by his lights, is tacitly at work in every empirical judgment. The 'subjective universality' of judgments of beauty struck Kant as just what one would expect of judgments whose subject matter, so to speak, was our capacity to make objective judgments *überhaupt*. He seemed to himself to have found a way to explain, and vindicate, that air of dogmatism that characterizes aesthetic claims, by finding a place for those claims in his system.

And then things got even better, systematically speaking, since judgments of beauty had traditionally been linked, by empiricists at any rate, and by Kant himself in earlier years, to a feeling of pleasure; and

while in the division of the faculties of cognition through concepts understanding and reason relate their representations to objects, in order to acquire concepts of them, the power of judgment is related solely to the subject and does not produce any concepts for itself alone. Likewise, if in the general division of the powers of the mind overall the faculty of cognition as well as the faculty of desire contain an objective relation of representations, so by contrast the feeling of pleasure and displeasure is only the receptivity of a determination of the subject, so that *if the power of judgment is to determine anything for itself alone, it could not be anything other than the feeling of pleasure...* (FI, 208, my emphasis).

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

And also:

An aesthetic judgment in general can... be explicated as that judgment whose predicate can never be cognition (concept of an object) (although it may contain the subjective conditions of cognition in general). In such a judgment the determining ground is sensation. However, *there is only one so-called sensation that can never become a concept of an object, and this is the feeling of pleasure and displeasure...* Thus an aesthetic judgment is that whose determining ground lies in sensation that is immediately connected with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure (FI 224, my emphasis; see also CJ 189).

The reasoning here strikes me as terribly rash. It bears the signs of an eager systematizer. But if we let it pass, then all that's left for us to do is to "discover" that judgments of beauty demand of others that they find the object *pleasing* just *as if* pleasure were a property of it, and everything would seem to fall neatly into place—the system would be completed, once and for all. What would be left for us to do is just to patch it here and there, tighten a few loose screws, and otherwise just make good use of it, whenever that is called for.

But hold on. A Wittgensteinian aspect, like Kant's beauty, is also not a property of the object (PI, II, xi, 212)—it organizes and unifies our visual impression of some perceived object without objectively applying to it. We see the face *as courageous*, precisely without judging that the face, or the person whose face it is, *is* courageous. As in the case of beauty, we may well call upon others to see courage in the face, or feel that if they cannot see it then there is something in or about that face that they're missing; but we've made no empirical, objective, judgment or claim. If someone, or something someone has

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

done, just *is* courageous, then whoever cannot see *that* either is missing some pertinent fact(s) or does not know what ‘courageous’ means; but the person who cannot see the face *as courageous* need not miss *any* fact about the face, and *must* know what ‘courageous’ means. And he is not disagreeing with us either. His difference from us is not a matter of an opinion or belief he does not have, but rather of an experience he cannot (bring himself to) share with us.

The judgment that someone is courageous commits us to indefinitely many further thoughts and deeds. You cannot, conceptually, truly judge that someone is courageous and not expect her to be at least disposed to act in certain ways, and so without being yourself disposed to act in certain ways in relation to her. By contrast, when you see someone’s face *as courageous* there is nothing further that you have *thereby* committed yourself to do, think, or expect of her. This is yet another way of seeing why the aspect is not a property of the object. ‘Aspects’, Wittgenstein says, ‘do not “teach us about the external world”’.⁹ He also says that giving voice to the seeing of an aspect is ‘a reaction in which people are in touch with each other’.¹⁰ This combination of ideas seems to me to echo almost precisely Kant’s saying about the judgment of beauty that ‘although it does not connect the predicate [‘beautiful’]... with the concept of the **object** considered in its entire logical sphere, yet it extends it over the entire sphere of *judging persons*’ (CJ 215).

In seeing an aspect, Wittgenstein says, we ‘bring a concept to what we see’,¹¹ and find, or bring it about, that the two fit each other (PI 537); but we do so freely and disinterestedly, in precisely the sense that we needn’t worry about how this experience

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

fits with other experiences or with the rest of our practical life. In this sense we can say, as Kant says about the experience of beauty, that here the understanding is at the service of the imagination, rather than vice versa (CJ 242); but this is misleading, in part because when we perceive an object under an aspect it is not clear ‘what fits what’, as Wittgenstein puts it (PI 537), and therefore not clear what serves what, and in part because the contributions attributable respectively to ‘the understanding’ and ‘the imagination’ here are, as I shall argue, altogether unlike what may plausibly be taken to be their respective contributions to the making of ordinary empirical judgments.

In seeing an aspect, I’m proposing, we seem to be doing what, in Kant’s story, we do in judgments of beauty, but far more straightforwardly, phenomenologically speaking: we seem to exercise our sense of fit between intuition and concept without making any empirical, objective judgment, and therefore unencumbered, but also unguided, by the tie-ups that place any such judgment in relation to indefinitely many others and to our practical life more generally; and we thereby create an opportunity for ourselves to find out whether our sense is indeed common, by inviting others to see what we see. It turns out that one need not have a sensation of pleasure incorporated into the content of one’s judgment in order to ensure that the judgment is not objective. Virtually any concept may be applied to a sensibly given object non-objectively, as it were. To see this, we do not need a systematic theory of the faculties of cognition and their workings. We only need to remind ourselves of a piece of Wittgensteinian grammar.

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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Should we be satisfied with this expansion of Kant's story—adding the seeing of aspects to the seeing of beauty as a place where a capacity that we have to apply concepts to cases, or universals to particulars, and which is essential to putting our experience into words and sharing it with others, is made explicit? I think not. For I do not think that concept and particular case fit together when we see something as something in anything like the way, or ways, that concepts and particular cases may plausibly be thought to fit together in the ordinary and normal course of human experience and discourse. To take along Kantian lines the seeing of aspects, or the seeing of beauty for that matter, as bringing out in a straightforward manner a basic feature of human experience and linguistic communication as such, is to aestheticize—just as the tradition of Western philosophy has tended to intellectualize—our ordinary and normal relation to our world.

This is especially clear if we take the ambiguous figures that Wittgenstein uses in his conceptual investigation of aspect perception as paradigmatic of the phenomenon. We encounter those figures, as Merleau-Ponty importantly notes, in contexts in which they do not 'belong to a field' of embodied, significant, and temporally extended engagement,¹² but rather are 'artificially cut off' from it,¹³ which is precisely what makes it fairly easy for most people to switch from one aspect to another at will when looking at those figures. And for this reason, Merleau-Ponty says,

Only the ambiguous perceptions emerge as explicit acts: perceptions, that is, to which we ourselves give a significance through the attitude which we take up, or which answer questions which we put to ourselves. *They cannot be of any use* in the analysis of the perceptual field, since they are extracted from it at the very outset, since *they presuppose it*, and since we come by them by making use of precisely the structures we acquired in our regular dealings with the world.¹⁴

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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I think much of this is also true of Wittgensteinian aspects that do not attach to ambiguous figures and are not encountered in the artificial contexts of philosophical or psychological inquiries into perception. Even when an aspect—the courageousness of a face, say, or the similarity of one face to another—strikes us in the natural course of everyday experience, our experience of it is importantly insulated from the rest of our experience. The aspect does not connect with other parts of our experience, does not fit into a temporally extended field of actual and potential embodied engagement, in the way that perceived objects and their perceived properties normally do. This does not mean that the experience of the dawning of Wittgensteinian aspects may not be revelatory of something important about human perception more generally; but it does mean that it is not revelatory in anything like the straightforward way that interpreters of Wittgenstein's remarks have tended to assume. Specifically, it does *not* reveal that anything and everything we see is seen under some determinate aspect.

Wittgenstein says that in seeing an aspect 'we bring a concept to what we see'; but this is metaphorical, and potentially misleading. For, surely, it is not quite a *concept* that we bring to what we see. What could *that* possibly mean from a Wittgensteinian perspective in which possessing the concept of X is not aptly thought of in terms of the ability to categorize given objects as belonging or not belonging to the category of X—even apart from any context of significant employment of the word 'x'—but rather is to be thought of precisely in terms of the ability to use 'x' competently and more or less creatively in a wide enough range of contexts and to respond competently to other people's uses of it? To possess a concept, Cavell usefully suggests, is to be able to 'keep

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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up with the word' (CR, 78). Insofar as it makes sense at all to speak of *application of concepts* in the course of ordinary and normal experience, it happens as we talk, in situations that call forth and give significance to that talk. In the beginning was the deed, or the inter-subjectively *situated* and *significant* act, not an isolated mental act of subsuming a particular under a universal or of aesthetic appreciation. So say, if you will, that I apply the concept of courageousness to my son when I congratulate him for having done something courageous. But if that is what the application of concepts normally comes to, then it is importantly unlike what I do, or undergo, when I see courage in a face, or see a face *as courageous*. The seeing of Wittgensteinian aspects is parasitic on everyday experience and speech, and so if you will on the application of concepts; but it is importantly discontinuous with it and does not reveal in any *straightforward* way what's involved in what may plausibly be thought of as the normal application of concepts.

This is one reason why I have on previous occasions resisted the recurrent suggestion that there is a continuous version to the seeing of aspects, and that it somehow characterizes our relation to the things of the world *überhaupt*—the suggestion that everything we see is seen under one aspect or another.¹⁵ I have not been able to make intelligible to myself the idea that whenever we perceive some more or less familiar object we see it under an aspect; unless that just means that the object is more or less familiar to us, which is altogether different from what Wittgenstein means by 'seeing an aspect'. With Wittgenstein, I just cannot make sense of the idea of seeing a knife and fork *as* a knife and fork (PI, p. 195).

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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It seems to me that many in contemporary analytic philosophy, some of whom under the influence of Kant, take it that since the world as we perceive it is not a mess or blur of sensations (in which case it would not be a *world*) but rather presents itself to us as quite unified and organized into more or less clear and distinct elements, it must be ‘conceptualized’—in the sense that everything in it, every element of it and every constellation of elements, must be seen under some particular concept, which some have proposed is no different from seeing it under some particular aspect. Since I am not sure what those who hold this kind of view mean by ‘concept’ and by perception being ‘conceptualized’, I find it hard to assess the view. But if we identify concepts with the meanings of words, as many in contemporary analytic philosophy are happy to do, or if we take it, more precisely, that the concept *X* applies to an object just in case the object may aptly or correctly count as ‘*x*’, then it seems to me that contemporary contextualism—of the sort championed by Charles Travis—could help us begin to see why the view that everything we see is seen under some determinate concept or another could not be right, or even so much as make sense. For if Travis is right in contending that the very same object, as it is in some particular moment, may in some contexts aptly and correctly count as ‘*x*’ (‘green’, ‘contains milk’, ‘courageous’, and so on), and in other contexts aptly and correctly count as ‘not *x*’, then that object as it is apart from some such context, is neither determinately *x* nor determinately not-*x*. But then, when we perceive it apart from a context in which it would aptly and correctly count either as ‘*x*’ or as ‘not-*x*’, and assuming for the sake of argument that we can make sense of ‘not-*x*’ as naming some

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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particular aspect under which the object may be seen, under which of those two competing ‘aspects’ are we supposed to be perceiving the object?

The answer I want to propose is that apart from our judging some perceived object to be ‘x’, or judging it to be ‘not-x’, in a context suitable for fixing the sense of ‘x’, the perceived object is *indeterminate* in that respect, and indeterminate as well in indefinitely many other respects. Merleau-Ponty says that ‘We must recognize the indeterminate as a positive phenomenon’ (*Phenomenology*, 7)—that is, not as due to some kind of *contingent limitation* of our cognitive or perceptual powers. This is one of the most difficult ideas in his account of perception—difficult both to understand and to accept. Encouraged by a scientific, objectivist understanding of the world, we take it that the world we perceive *is* determinate, so that every indeterminacy in our experience of it is merely in us, and may in principle be overcome with greater focus and closer attention. But the determinate world we imagine we perceive is a world as it is in itself, hence an illusion even by Kant’s lights. If, as Kant has taught us, the objective world is a world structured or constituted by *us*, and if our structuring or constitution of the world is done by way of judgments, then not even the objective world of science is determinate in the way commonly imagined. Rather, we introduce determinacy into our world—good enough for present intents and purposes—where and when we need to, by way of judgments whose content is context-dependent. And since much what appears in our perceptual field appears in contexts in which it is neither determinately x nor determinately not-x, with respect to indefinitely many ‘x’s that *might* apply to it in suitable contexts, it follows that what we perceive is, for the most part, neither

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

determinate nor conceptualized—not if determinacy or conceptualization is thought of as what may intelligibly be captured and expressed by means of words.¹⁶

The reason why so many have opted to think otherwise, Merleau-Ponty suggests, following Husserl, is that they have unwittingly succumbed to the ‘experience error’—they have taken the *relatively* stable and determinate world of science to be primary, and have taken the world we perceive to be derivable from, and fully accountable for in terms of, that objective world. They have taken it that what we *really* perceive is what we (presumably) *know* we perceive. Husserl and Merleau-Ponty argue that we would do better to go in the opposite direction: taking the world as perceived to be primary and understanding the objectively knowable world of science as based on the world as perceived and ultimately accountable for in *its* terms.

Among readers of Wittgenstein’s remarks on aspects, one thing that has further encouraged the idea that everything we see is seen under one or another determinate aspect, and so concept, has been the tendency to over-focus on ambiguous figures such as the duck-rabbit. In the case of the duck-rabbit it seems just obvious that the perfectly determinate aspect that dawns replaces another, equally determinate aspect under which the object had been seen up until the dawning of the new aspect. Here it would help to remind ourselves of other examples of aspect dawning, such as the case in which one is all of a sudden struck by the similarity of one face to another, or by the courageous expression of a face. In such cases, there does not seem to be any plausible candidate for the competing aspect under which the face had been seen up until right before the

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

dawning of the new aspect. We had been seeing the face all right, but not as having some particular, determinate expression or physiognomy.

But the issue here goes deeper than what may be brought out simply by way of a richer diet of examples. It involves a fundamental distinction between how you see something and how you conceive of it or what you take yourself to know of it.¹⁷ It is, I take it, essentially the same distinction that Emerson invokes, in ‘Experience’, when he talks about the ‘discrepance’ between the world he *converses with* in the city and in the farms and the world he *thinks*.¹⁸ Even in the case of the duck-rabbit, it is one thing to think of it, or take it, as a picture of a duck (say), or know it to be meant to serve as such a picture, and quite another thing to *see it as* a duck. Similarly, it is one thing to take the Necker cube as meant to represent a cube going *this* rather than *that* way, and quite another thing to be able to *see it as* going this or that way. As Wittgenstein notes, *seeing* something as something requires that you *attend to the object* in a particular way, and therefore could not be one’s ordinary or habitual relation to the object, could not be *continuous*.¹⁹ What *could* be continuous is a cognitive, judgment-involving kind of relation to an object—taking it to be one thing, or type of thing, or another. But *that* is something that even the ‘aspect blind’, as Wittgenstein describes him, could do. If he could not, his handicap would be far severer than mere *aspect-blindness*.

So it is one thing to *see* something *as* x and quite another thing to conceive of it as x, or judge it to be x. Wittgenstein’s investigation of aspect-perception, far from showing, or trying to show, that everything we see is seen under some particular aspect and in this sense is ‘conceptualized’, rather suggests that the unity of the perceived world is neither

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

brought about nor secured by the application of concepts. And this, interestingly enough, is an insight that Merleau-Ponty, in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception*, credits to the author of *The Critique of Judgment* (PP, xix). For beauty, as Kant characterizes it phenomenologically, is precisely a perceived unity that is not, and cannot, be captured by any available concept or set of concepts, is in this sense indeterminate, and yet for all that is experienced as genuinely *perceived* and as *inter-subjectively sharable* (see CJ 240-1, 287, and 292). Where Merleau-Ponty goes beyond Kant, and beyond virtually everyone else in the tradition of Western philosophy, is in bringing out the way in which this pre-conceptual and for the most part indeterminate unity of the world is a unity *for* and *in relation to*, not our disembodied cognitive powers, but, precisely, our body. The perceived world is a field of actual and potential embodied *engagement*.²⁰

I come now to my final proposal. Others have already noted the seeming affinity between Kant's 'Deduction' of judgments of beauty and Wittgenstein's saying in PI, 242, that if language is to be a means of communication then there must be agreement not only in definitions, but also in judgments.²¹ Cavell finds it important that the German word Anscombe translates by 'agreement' is '*übereinstimmung*', which Cavell suggests is better translated by 'attunement', and that Wittgenstein speaks of attunement *in* judgments (*in den Urteilen*), not *on* (*auf, über*) judgments, which for Cavell suggests that the attunement in question is an attunement apart from which we would not mean the same things with our words and so would be talking past each other—able neither to

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

agree nor to disagree on this or that judgment.²² Cavell's interpretation is reinforced by PI 241, which speaks of agreement or attunement 'not in opinions but in form of life'. Elsewhere Cavell famously characterizes the attunement that Wittgenstein relies on in his procedures and at the same time seeks to recover in the face of philosophically induced distortions as 'a matter of our sharing routes of interest and feeling, modes of response, senses of humor and of significance and of fulfillment, of what is outrageous, of what is similar to what else, what a rebuke, what forgiveness, of when an utterance is an assertion, when an appeal, when an explanation—all the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls "forms of life"'.²³

Both Kant and Cavell's Wittgenstein, then, are concerned with a level of agreement or attunement between us apart from which it would not have been possible for us to either agree or disagree with each other on empirical judgments—for we would not have agreed in the meanings of our words, or, if you will, in our concepts. But if my discussion thus far has been on the right track, then there is a fundamental difference between what the agreement Kant has in mind comes to and what the agreement Wittgenstein has in mind comes to. In Kant, as we saw, speech is pictured as grounded in, and expressive of, acts of 'associating intuitions with concepts and concepts in turn with intuitions' (CJ 296); and the agreement he has in mind is agreement in what strikes us as *good* or *satisfying* or *unforced* fit between concept and intuition. Speech, for Kant, is thought of as parasitic on acts of judgment that are neither essentially linguistic nor context-sensitive in their content.

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

In Wittgenstein, by contrast, and putting it extremely roughly, concepts and particular cases come together through the medium of speech, which in turn is understood first and foremost in terms of *shared practices or activities*. From the Wittgensteinian perspective as I understand it, to speak is first and foremost to enter one's words into a humanly significant situation, to make thereby some more or less definite and more or less significant difference, for both oneself and one's audience, and to become responsible for having made that difference. And from this perspective the meanings of words—and most importantly for Wittgenstein's purposes, the meanings of philosophically troublesome words—are best thought of as their suitability, or potentiality, given the history of their employment, for being used to make specific inter-subjectively significant differences under suitable conditions. It is in *this* sense that philosophical appeals to what we say and mean, or cannot or must say and mean, are claims about *our lives*. In what Wittgenstein likes to refer to as 'doing philosophy', we tend to get entangled because we rely on our words to mean something clear even apart from our using them to make some particular difference (or set of differences) that may reasonably be found to be worth making, and becoming responsible for having made it. We wish, as Cavell puts it, 'to speak without the commitments speech exacts'.²⁴ The ordinary language philosopher's appeal to the ordinary and normal use of our philosophically troublesome words is an invitation to project ourselves imaginatively into situations of significant speech, and is meant as a corrective for this particular form of philosophical fantasy and the philosophical difficulties it tends to lead us into. By contrast, those who take it that the seeing of aspects brings out in a simple and

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

straightforward manner a fundamental element of our wording of our experience seem to me to share in that fantasy.

This means, finally, that the philosophical appeal to ‘what “we” say and mean, or cannot or must say and mean’ has just the place within Wittgenstein’s ‘vision of language’ that judgments of beauty are supposed to have within Kant’s system. Both are supposed to search for and bring out a level of attunement between us that tends to remain implicit and unnoticed in ordinary and normal discourse, and that we tend to lose touch with when we ‘do philosophy’. According to Kant, the two grammatical features of judgments of beauty ‘abstracted from their content’ (CJ 281)—that is, abstracted from the notion of pleasure—are the claim for universal agreement (CJ §32), and the lack of any established procedure for *proving* or *settling* the correctness of our judgment (CJ §33). These two features, Cavell has proposed, also characterize the appeal to ordinary language; and their combination makes for the ‘air of dogmatism’ that he acknowledges as characteristic of that appeal (‘Aesthetic Problems’, 96). But these, as Kant saw well, are precisely the features one would expect of claims that appealed to, and were meant to bring out, a level of agreement or attunement between us apart from which we would not have been able to prove or settle anything objectively, nor, indeed, to truly speak to and understand one another. Kant’s ‘subjective universality’ is the sound of one’s spade turning against one’s bedrock, however we picture that bedrock to ourselves when we do philosophy.

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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¹ I also think that certain moral judgments—namely, those expressive of what Cavell has called ‘Emersonian perfectionism’—may aptly be said to partake in the grammar of Kantian judgment of beauty.

² I discuss these issues in ‘Seeing Aspects and Philosophical Difficulty’, in *Handbook on the Philosophy of Wittgenstein*, Marie McGinn and Oskari Kuusela (eds.), Oxford University Press, 2011.

³ See, for example, ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’, in *Basic Writings*, Alfred Hofstadter (tr.), David Farrell Krell (ed.), Harper Collins, 1993, p. 161.

⁴ See *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, psychology and Religious Belief*, Cyril Barrett (ed.), Blackwell, 1989, 37.

⁵ Guyer and Wood translate ‘*veranlasst*’ by ‘occasions’, and thereby cover up the phenomenological feature of being goaded, called upon, by the beautiful thing—letting it *draw* words from us—that Kant’s word invokes.

⁶ Another point Wittgenstein makes is that even if, implausibly, we did find something—an experience—that occurs every time we mean, or see, or understand... something, there would still be no reason for supposing that this something is what meaning, or seeing, or understanding... consisted in. See my ‘Seeing Aspects and Philosophical Difficulty’.

⁷ ‘The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy’, in *Must We Mean What We Say*, 64-5.

⁸ *What is Called Thinking*, 19.

⁹ *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology*, Vol. I, 899.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 874.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 961.

¹² *Phenomenology of Perception*, 216.

¹³ *Ibid*, 279.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 281.

¹⁵ For three versions of the proposal that all seeing is seeing as, or the seeing of aspects, see Strawson, ‘Imagination and Perception’ (in *Kant on Pure Reason*, Ralph Walker (ed.), Oxford University Press, 1982); Stephen Mulhall, *On Being in the World: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on Seeing Aspects* (Routledge, 1990); and Richard Wollheim, *Art and its Objects* (Cambridge, 1980, especially pp. 205-26)

¹⁶ I take this to be the upshot of Travis’ ‘The Silence of the Senses’ (*Mind* 113: 57-94, 2004).

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
Draft. Please do not quote without permission.

¹⁷ ‘Ordinary experience draws a clear distinction between sense experience and judgment. It sees judgment as the taking of a stand, as an effort to know something which shall be valid for myself every moment of my life, and equally for other actual or potential minds; sense experience, on the contrary, is giving oneself over to appearance, without trying to possess it and learn its truth’ (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 39-40). The distinction between how we see things and what we know or take ourselves to know about them, and the idea that how we see things is, at least for the most part, indeterminate, comes up again and again in Wittgenstein’s remarks on aspects, and precisely in response to the idea that the dawning of aspects shows that we always and continuously see things under determinate aspects. Thus, for example, Wittgenstein asks whether the fact that I have just been struck by an aspect and now see the object in a way I have not seen it before “prove[s] that I in fact *saw* it as something definite” (PI 204f). Or he invites us to consider that while there is no doubt about the possible aptness of the “never” in “I’ve never seen this in that way before,” the “always” in “I have *always* seen this like that” is not equally certain (see RPP I ‘ 512); or that when we say “I’ve always seen it in this way” what we really mean to say is “I have always *conceived* (*auffassen*) it *this* way, and *this* change of aspect has never taken place” (RPP I ‘ 524); or that when you say “I have always seen it with *this* face” you still have to say *what* face, and that as soon as you add *that*, it’s no longer as if you had *always* done it (RPP I ‘ 526); or that to say of a real face, or of a face in a picture, “I’ve *always* seen it as a face” would be queer, whereas “It has always been a face to me, and I have never seen it *as something else*” would not be (see RPP I ‘ 532); or that “If someone were to tell me that he had seen the figure for half an hour without a break as a reversed F, I’d have to suppose that he had kept on *thinking* of this interpretation, that he had *occupied* himself with it” (RPP I ‘ 1020); or that “If there were no change of aspect then there would only be a *way of taking* (*Auffassung*), and no such thing as *seeing* this or that” (RPP II ‘ 436). Mulhall, in his influential reading of Wittgenstein’s remarks, is therefore onto something right when he takes Wittgenstein to be interested in a distinction between what may be called ‘seeing’ and what may be called ‘knowing’, but he spoils the insight, partly by not realizing that not all seeing is the seeing of (determinate) aspects, and partly by taking ‘knowing’ to refer to some sort of a hesitant, clumsy, and so *abnormal* form of relation to things—not recognizing that ‘knowing’, just like

¹⁸ ‘Experience’, in *Essays and Lectures* (The Library of America, 1983), pp. 491-2.

¹⁹ See PI, Part II, p. 210c and p. 211d; see also RPP, volume I, remarks 526, 1021 and 1028.

The sound of Bedrock, Chicago, April 2014.
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²⁰ This is why the way to try to see an object under some particular aspect is to adopt a bodily attitude toward it that fits that aspect.

²¹ See David Bell, 'The Art of Judgment', *Mind* 96, No. 382 (Apr., 1987), pp. 221-244; and Anthony Savile, *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp. 35-7.

²² *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford, 1979), 31-2. In 'Knowing and Acknowledging' Cavell makes essentially the same point: '[M]y interest in finding what I would say (in a way that is relevant to philosophizing) is not my interest in preserving my beliefs... My interest, it could be said, lies in finding out what my beliefs mean, and learning the particular ground they occupy' (in *Must We Mean What We Say*, 241).

²³ 'The Availability of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy', in *Must We Mean What We Say?*, 52.

²⁴ *The Claim of Reason*, p. 215.