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Understanding and Art

by

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I seek to clarify the concept of understanding in two major senses: as a mental ability to understand, and as a mental achievement.

Given the role of concepts in attaining understanding, I examine, in the context of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, the cultural, holistic, self-contained, autonomous, and expressive nature of our conceptual system which determines on an a priori basis, both what and how we understand. What distinguishes the things we can understand from those we cannot is a matter of what is "given" in language, and the requirement of an element of structure in the intentional object. I argue that the achievement of understanding necessarily requires the application of concepts to distinguish and relate impressions, or relate an object of interest to a wider context. I argue that understanding is the ability to order phenomena by means of conceptual judgment; where "judgment" refers to a private, subjective capacity to grasp the applicability of conceptual rules. The understanding-ability however, which is exercised according to a general pattern, is very much related to context. In this thesis, I also strive to distinguish between understanding and the cognate concepts of knowledge, interpretation, and judgment.

By way of illustrating some of the previous arguments concerning understanding and interpretation I focus on a particular case argued by Savile, namely that a work of art, as an historical artefact, suggests a one right replete understanding on which a canonical interpretation is based -- if the work is perceived as the artist intended, i.e. under

the appropriate mental set. I argue on a priori grounds that earlier mental sets which require participation in forms of life are epistemically inaccessible, and that our own perceptions are governed, for the most part, by our own cultural outlook. Furthermore, given the imprecision in meaning of artist's conventional schemata, and the lack of criteria to pick out aesthetic qualities I conclude that the understanding and interpretation of art remains unforeclosed.

With respect to understanding works of art, I argue that these objects are understood cognitively, inasmuch as they involve conventional schemata to picture and represent things in standardised ways. As such, understanding is the ability to knowledgeably perceive impressions as an orderly, structure whole. But works of art also express qualities of form, aesthetic qualities which elude conceptual analysis. The quality of pathos in the Moonlight Sonata for example, is nowhere constituted just as it is in this piece of music, and so must be grasped by a direct acquaintance. Aesthetic understanding then, refers to a capacity to perceive, or directly grasp, the inherent formal order in a work of art by means of a subjective insight. I note that bringing others to notice and understand aesthetic qualities, and to justify their aesthetic judgments, requires the teacher to adopt and inculcate the methods of the critic. Evaluating student understanding in aesthetic matters falls to the teacher's patient observation, and subjective judgment.

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DEDICATION

To Mandy, Vanessa, Emma,

and Florence

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Chapter One

UNDERSTANDING AS A MENTAL PHENOMENON

If the various, and at times conflicting accounts of some contemporary philosophers are any indication there is surprisingly little agreement about the nature of understanding. An examination of the recent philosophical literature shows that writers typically describe understanding as being a state of mind (Moravcsik, 1979), a process (Hirsch, 1978: Franklin, 1983), an operation, and something gained (Mueller-Vollmer, 1983), the act of understanding and the results of that act: distinctions attributed to a writer named Boeckh, by Mueller-Vollmer (1983), and an ability (Parret, 1980). And yet again, as I shall show, Wittgenstein argues against the state of mind view, or taking understanding to be a mental process or experience. Interestingly, and adding to the confusion, Parret, who claims to be following Wittgenstein, observes:

> Understanding is an ability: a person who understands something is able to do certain things. This ability to understand is extrinsic: . . . (1980:8).

Notice how Parret switches the sense of this understanding ability, i.e. from an ability which somehow shows that a person understands something, to an ability to understand. In the first sense, a person who understands something, say the meaning of a word, is able to properly use it. This, if anything is closest to Wittgenstein's view as I shall show later in the chapter. But what of the ability to understand? Parret argues that the ability to understand is

"extrinsic", not a ". . . purely psychological operation internal to speaker/understander, but an operation-in-the-world" (1980:8). But this is not quite so obvious as in the case of ability which shows that something is understood, even if Parret does stress the "contextualism" of the understanding situation. As I hope to show, there are cases, or contexts where being able to understand something is in part, a necessarily private matter which cannot be "extrinsic" in any usual public sense. Before the study can proceed to investigate the role of concepts in bringing about understanding, or the nature of understanding as ability to understand, or what it is to understand a work of art, issues of interest in this thesis, some preliminary clarifications must be made to orient the discussion of understanding in the right logical direction so that the ensuing inquiry can proceed on a sound basis. Simply put, my purpose in this chapter is to indicate the primary and pertinent senses of understanding and establish the proper realm of discourse for future talk about understanding. I leave a more detailed analysis of the constitutive nature of understanding until a later chapter. Of course, my interest is not strictly in the use of words; it is the phenomenon of understanding which is my real concern. But we can only examine what is meant by the phenomenon of understanding by means of the conceptual apparatus at our disposal. So when we talk about understanding in its different modes (senses) we are talking about the ways in which we conceive of it. While my interest is ontological, my means of inquiry is conceptual. Understanding, for us, is understanding as it is articulated in our language. We cannot think about it in any other terms.

Understanding then is what we conceptually take it to be for there is no way of carrying out a check, independent of our conceptual scheme. To understand "understanding", our concepts must be in order. In the major part of this chapter I shall examine and criticise Wittgenstein's arguments against taking understanding to be a mental occurrence, and in so doing I hope to establish a more arguable conception of it.

Senses of Understanding

In the everyday view, understanding is taken to be an affair of mind, a hallmark of consciousness; a sort of metaphorical mental grasping of the data of experience: impressions, details, relationships, wholes, which results in an outcome which serves to guide our further dealings with the world. But the mental realm is closed to inspection so we are said to infer from what people say and do, whether or not, and to what degree, they understand something. I believe the everyday view to be substantially correct, that contrary to the view of some philosophers who either deny the mental component altogether and see understanding as constituted by overtly exercised dispositions (see Ryle, 1963:1-60), or if not that, see understanding as an ability to do certain things under criterial circumstances, without denying the mental life, understanding is, arguably, "inner" in the sense of being a mental ability, or in its other sense, a mental outcome or achievement. Depending on the context, a person could be said to be exercising a mental ability in trying to understand something, or to have achieved

an understanding if successful. I shall argue that while what a person says or does in public may confirm or disconfirm that he or she understands something, the lack of evidence by way of observable behaviour, which constitutes the criteria for ascriptions of understanding, does not correspondingly entail a necessary lack of understanding. I shall try to show that the understanding a person achieves in some circumstances where we speak of understanding, can only be, necessarily, private for the experiencing individual, permitting the exhibition of no overtly exercised abilities, suggesting that in these circumstances, understanding is an internal or mental occurrence. My main task is to provide some justification for these problematic assertions. This I hope to do by showing what I believe are some shortcomings of Wittgenstein's remarks on understanding as laid out in the Philosophical Investigations which I hope will point to a more mentalistic conception of understanding. But first I look at the primary and relevant sense of understanding.

The Oxford English Dictionary (Compact Edition) provides some initial guidance with its first entry for understanding, "1. (without article) Power or ability to understand; intellect, intelligence." In this sense the term is used as a verbal substantive, i.e. it is used as a noun to mean power or ability to understand. In order to understand something we must have the required competence or ability to bring about understanding. In Chapter Three I try to work out what a person must be able to do, necessarily, in order to understand something. When some philosophers talk about the "process" of

understanding I think they are talking about what takes place to bring about or effectuate understanding as some sort of outcome. They are talking about the goings on which precede and perhaps precipitate the attainment or achievement of understanding. The prior activity, or goings-on, refer I suggest, to the exercise of a person's ability to understand. I have no wish to assimilate the mental realm with the physical, and I realize that this latter "exercise" is probably at best crudely metaphorical, but the account is I think, compatible with the logic of our talk about the mind. The other pertinent sense for this study is given by the O.E.D. (Compact Edition) under the second listing for "understand", i.e. "II. To have comprehension or understanding (in general or particular matters)." Understanding is thus something a person has. This sense refers to understanding which is attained, of say, someone's speech, or as a result of hard study. It is an outcome which follows attentiveness to some meaning-context. Understanding may seem effortless in some situations. Just as often, we may need to expend considerable effort to understand something. Understanding the Critique of Pure Reason is definitely an achievement. Even where understanding seems to occur easily, perhaps because of the simple structure of the thing being understood, or because the context is well known, to understand is always a complex business, it does not just happen, as the later discussions will show. I suggest we call this second sense the "achievement" sense of understanding, even though the difficulty involved in achieving understanding varies and we do not always consciously work hard

at securing a meaning. As a result of attaining or achieving an understanding of something, a person may be able to do something, may have an ability to do something in a public way, such as use a word properly, or give an explanation, or solve a problem. I am not sure that we would count such abilities as being understanding, or being another sense of understanding. Wittgenstein seems to adopt some such view which I shall subject to closer examination later in the chapter.

In the first place then, some sort of competence or understanding ability seems to be required if we are to come to understand the things which interest us. I shall argue that understanding proceeds by the application of concepts to distinguish and relate the items which constitute a focus of interest. This involves the subject's having a knowledge of conceptual rules (which may in part, be tacit) and a competency in judgment, i.e. the subject must judge the applicability of the rules in a particular situation. It takes an ability then, to order phenomena conceptually. The ability is general in that the application of concepts is always required, and particular in that the kinds of elements and relations involved vary quite a lot -- the form of the ability is the same but the concepts vary and have their own complexities. Understanding a play by Shakespeare differs somewhat from understanding a mathematical proof, or the workings of a car engine, but still, in all cases, elements are conceptually picked out and related. I have now added the definite article "the", as in the ability to understand, but I am not claiming that there is some unitary ability to understand; ability to understand is very much directed contextually.

Nevertheless, I shall go on to argue that such ability does have a common form regardless of the situation, even if the form does not account completely for our ability to understand in all circumstances. For example, while there may be circumstances where concepts cannot get a grip, as with components of unanalysable uniqueness in persons and works of art -- a major theme of this chapter -- the ability to apply concepts is at least required to delimit the ineffable component (a point argued by Petra von Morstein, 1982:351). In summary, then, the important senses of understanding which will be the main focus in this study are as follows: Understanding is (the) ability to bring about an outcome or achievement, which is also called understanding. We say, for example, a person has the ability to understand problems in geometry. We might also say in the achievement sense, "She has acquired a good understanding of John Dewey's aesthetics". In this sense, understanding is the outcome of the exercise of the understanding ability in a specific context. As a result of understanding something we may be able to do certain things in a public manner which can count as evidence of the achievement of understanding. In Wittgenstein's view, as I shall show, such evidence is criterial, and arguably, understanding is seen as ability to do certain things in a public manner. But with regard to the major senses of understanding as I outlined them i.e. understanding taken as ability to understand, and as the achievement of understanding, I hope that my examination of Wittgenstein's views will serve to substantiate the outline just proposed.

Wittgenstein and Understanding

Wittgenstein does not deny the mental realm. He does not deny, for example, the mental process of remembering. Rather, as he observes:

> What we deny is that the picture of the inner process gives us the correct idea of the use of the word "to remember". We say that this picture with its ramifications stands in the way of our seeing the use of the word as it is (1974a:¶305).

And in reference to mental states and processes he says:

> We talk of processes and states and leave their nature undecided. . . . So we have to deny the uncomprehended process in the yet unexplored medium. And now it looks as if we had denied mental processes. And naturally we don't want to deny them (1974a:¶308).

If I read him correctly, Wittgenstein seeks to establish the grounds for using the terms of a public language. Given this requirement, the correct use of words which refer ostensibly to "inner processes" must be justified in their use, not by introspection, which is uncheckable, but by reference to things which are publicly attestable -- how else could we learn a common language? Words cannot hold private meanings and retain their intersubjective applications. Thus for Wittgenstein, the term "understanding" for example, cannot be justified in its use by reference to a hidden mental phenomenon. He further demonstrates the logic of his position by citing the example of a person's understanding the rule of a mathematical series (this outline refers to: Wittgenstein, 1974a:¶¶143-145). A person might think, argues Wittgenstein, that being able to continue the series is only an application of understanding -- the understanding itself being a state of mind which is the source of the application. The person thinks, suggests Wittgenstein, he knows the application of the rule apart from particular concrete

applications. But this runs into the difficulty that mental states such as depression, excitement, pain, for example, have a limited duration. What kind of state then is this continuous understanding? Furthermore, Wittgenstein argues, if understanding is a mental state it is the state of some kind of mental apparatus, so there ought to be criteria regarding its construction, apart from what it does. And yet again, a person might associate various feelings, thoughts, sensations, or the formula occurring to him suddenly, with understanding. But the formula could occur to a person without his understanding the principle of say, a mathematical series in the sense of being able to continue it. And the same goes for the other accompaniments of understanding. Thus, Wittgenstein concludes:

> We are trying to get hold of the mental process of understanding which seems to be hidden behind those coarser and therefore more readily visible accompaniments. But we do not succeed; or, rather, it does not get us as far as a real attempt. For even supposing I had found something that happened in all those cases of understanding -- why should it be the understanding? And how can the process of understanding have been hidden, when I said "Now I understand" because I understood?! And if I say it is hidden -- then how do I know what I have to look for? I am in a muddle (1974a:¶153).

But if the formula occurring to the subject does not, at rock bottom, justify the use of the expression, "Now I understand the principle", does it follow asks Wittgenstein, that ". . . I employ the sentence 'Now I understand . . . .' or 'Now I can go on' as a description of a process occurring side by side with that of saying the formula?" (1974a¶154). Clearly not. Thus Wittgenstein makes the conceptual claim: "If there has to be anything 'behind the utterances of the

formula' it is particular circumstances, which justify me in saying I can go on -- when the formula occurs to me" (1974a:¶154). Wittgenstein also points out that it is possible for a person to think that at least in his own case, a special experience such as the occurring of the formula accounts for his being able to go on and finish a mathematical series. But once again he argues ". . . for us it is the circumstances under which he had such an experience that justify him in saying in such a case that he understands, that he knows how to go on" (1974a:¶155). Ultimately, it seems we are driven to performances to provide the criteria to ground the use of the term. Wittgenstein accepts that there are mental processes -- the "remembering" example is a case in point. He also refers to the hearing of a tune or a sentence as mental processes. Yet he concludes the discussions I have referred to above by remarking: "In the sense in which there are processes (including mental processes) which are characteristic of understanding, understanding is not a mental process" (1974a:¶154). Wittgenstein seems to be saying that any accompaniments of understanding, exclamations of understanding, various feelings, mental processes and states, the experience, of say the formula occurring to a person, gain their currency as being characteristic of understanding, by being associated with the circumstances which underpin, or justify our use of the term. It is the circumstances which warrant the individual's saying that he understands, just as it is for us, in our judgments of others' understanding. What are we to make of these conclusions? Wittgenstein

does not deny the mental realm, but he clearly abjures the notion that anything mental, in absence of the appropriate public circumstances, can supply criteria for understanding -- for our use of the term. And one can easily be sympathetic to this position. Discussing Wittgenstein's alleged rejection of mental acts, Winch, for example, observes that:

> . . . what Wittgenstein wanted to deny was not the private reference of psychological expressions -- e.g. that "pain" stands for a kind of experience that may be quite 'private' -- but the possibility of giving them a private sense e.g. of giving sense to the word "pain" by just attending to one's own pain experiences, a performance that would be uncheckable (1957:3-4).

But Wittgenstein seems to go beyond this kind of claim and to actually reject the mentality of understanding in any constitutive sense. We might need criteria to ground our use of the term, or any psychological term, as a matter of principle, but still, Wittgenstein's remarks in the passages quoted above seem also to have a bearing on the ontology of understanding; that perhaps understanding is to be seen as a matter of what a person is able to do in some public sense. Some such interpretation is suggested by his explicit rejection of any kind of mental explanation for the phenomenon of understanding, i.e. understanding is not a mental state, process, or experience. It would be one thing to say that a person's understanding is revealed by various kinds of publicly available evidence which function as the logical criteria for one saying of someone that he understands, or that a person is right to claim on his own behalf that he understands, but Wittgenstein seems to argue against any mentalistic account which

would explain the achievement of what is evidentially revealed. I find it difficult to be certain what Wittgenstein's position is given his somewhat enigmatic approach to conceptual questions. Taken as a whole, however, these remarks from the Investigations make me think that Wittgenstein would reject the view that understanding is actually a mental phenomenon which we judge as having gone on in persons on the basis of what they go on to say and do. His criterial account thus seems to supply in a constitutive sense, an account of what we are to take understanding to be. What then in his view is understanding? In one passage he seems to see it as an ability:

> The grammar of the word "knows" is evidently closely related to that of "can", "is able to". But also closely related to that of "understands". ('Mastery' of a technique) (Wittgenstein, 1974a:¶154).

One understands a word when one can, is able to, apply it in appropriate circumstances, or one understands a calculus when one can, is able to multiply correctly. Baker and Hacker prefer to say of Wittgenstein's view on this point that "understanding is akin to an ability" (1983:343), but not an ability in the prior sense I talked about as the ability required to come to understand something. This ability is the ability to do something in a public sense, such as properly use a word, or give an explanation. One reason Baker and Hacker give to justify this tentative approach is that "There are different kinds of understanding which do not correspond in any straightforward way to different kinds of abilities" (1983:344). Put another way, understanding does not always seem to entail a specific ability to do something in a public manner. These two philosophers point out that behaviour manifesting

understanding is not itself understanding, but evidence for an ability which is more properly understanding, and further that such evidence is "criterial" (Baker and Hacker, 1980:341), which seems to mean that it is logically required according to use and convention. Criterial evidence thus counts as the rules which govern ascriptions of understanding to persons. The evidence is criterial for an ability. Using a word properly is thus evidence that a person has an ability which is, as Baker and Hacker put it "more properly understanding". Thus if my interpretation of these points is correct, in the view of Baker and Hacker, behavioural evidence is criterial evidence for an ability, which is understanding, but sometimes it is difficult to know what ability is involved since behavioural evidence is not always forthcoming or clearly involved with a specific ability. I shall take up this point later because it is important in the development of my own position. In the next and last section of this chapter I want to try to show that Wittgenstein's account of understanding as I have interpreted it, is to some extent flawed, and that there are good reasons for sticking to the mental account of understanding.

Understanding as a Mental Phenomenon

We do normally look to performances, ask for explanations, and check that a person uses a word, a formula, or a technique correctly in appropriate circumstances before concluding that a person understands something, and in this regard we take a behavioural approach in that we seek evidence of understanding. However, while such evidence can assure us, or justify our thinking that understanding

has taken place (further performances, responses, may cause us to modify or change our judgment), or has in limited degree, or has not occurred, and so in that finding-out sense is necessary, the absence of evidence of understanding need not entail that understanding has not occurred. A person might, for example, understand something, be able to demonstrate the substance of that understanding, i.e. by giving an explanation, or by applying knowledge and skill -- criteria of understanding -- but not feel disposed to do so. Surely it is feasible that an individual could think something through, reach a conclusion, and gain an understanding of something, without saying a word or moving a muscle. But this runs into the difficulties Wittgenstein is at pains to expose. Why should this or that aspect of the inner experience be the understanding? In any case, a person might privately think he understands but be mistaken. And Wittgenstein would only accept a person's claim to understand something, as a criterion of understanding, if certain public circumstances were commensurate with the claim.

I want to argue that Wittgenstein overplays the circumstances aspect of understanding to the detriment of the first-person perspective, and further, that there are a priori reasons in some cases why "circumstances" would be of little use in grounding self or third-person ascriptions of understanding; that in such circumstances, understanding does not consist in a straightforward ability to do something which results in there being criterial evidence of that understanding. The individual's claim, in such cases, is authoritative, the understanding is, in part, necessarily private. I shall now try to provide some substance for these claims.

In her memoir, "A Sketch of the Past" Virginia Woolf (1979) observes that she cannot fully convey in her writing, memories of some of her past impressions. She talks about the difficulty of describing any single human being, of capturing certain feeling states she experienced in special places, or indeed of describing the atmosphere surrounding her mother. Woolf observes that many "instincts, affections, passions, attachments" which changed month by month and yet bound her to other people, but for which she can find no single word, are left out of her sketch. Talking about her elder sister Stella, Woolf says that she was the more modest satellite to their more positive and definite mother. And yet, says Woolf,

> . . . she had character. Very gentle, very honest, and in some way individual -- so she made her own impression on people . . . . Her charm was great; it came partly from this modesty, from this honesty, from this perfectly simple unostentatious unselfishness; it came too from her lack of pose, her lack of snobbery: and from the genuineness, from something that was -- could I put my finger on it -- perfectly herself, individual. This unnamed quality -- the sensitiveness to real things . . . (1979:112).

The memoir writer's difficulties nicely illustrate Mikel Dufrenne's point that "The lived world is much richer than the world elaborated by science and mastered by technics" (1983:210). Our understanding of some complex individuals -- persons, works of art -- eludes complete articulation. Ultimately you must meet the person in question, view the art work, in order to grasp for yourself its phenomenological or uniquely owned pervasive quality which Dufrenne calls "expression". Expression,

says Dufrenne,

> . . . has the unity of a physiognomy or even a form of behaviour. Just as we identify an individual by a certain air which he has and which no particular sign can determine exactly, so the work [of art] has a certain quality which it radiates and by which it is animated through and through, even if we cannot delimit the quality with exactitude . . . . Expression is a quality . . . and qualities do not allow themselves to be decomposed or composed. Just as we cannot determine those precise patterns which constitute a person's unique style, we cannot isolate those specific patterns which constitute a work's expression . . . . Expression is grasped in a single act and as an indecomposable unity (1973:326-327).

No description will ever quite do justice to such uniquely constituted qualities. Even where an expressive quality is given a name, as with for example talk of the quality of pathos which is found in the Moonlight Sonata, you must still listen to the music to understand what is meant by the term, for it cannot be applied to the music on the basis of the usual conceptual rules (a point I owe to Sibley's (1965) analysis of the logic of aesthetic concepts). The precise interrelations of features which constitute the character of this expression of pathos will in some respects, be uniquely owned by the Moonlight Sonata. In applying the term "pathos" therefore, we must apply it on the basis of the singular impression of the quality rather than by finding general conditions somehow exemplified in the work. In respect of the constitution of its expressive quality, the work is not an instance of a class possessing other members. Imagine works which express pathos in the style of the Moonlight Sonata. Since there is, necessarily, only one item in its class, no generalizations can be made regarding the character of the

expression. The musical quality which Beethoven presents to us is uniquely constituted by that piece of music. Saying that it expresses pathos does little to capture the quality as it is in itself. It may be the case, as Virginia Woolf discovered, that a person's (her sister's) very own individual quality was to go unnamed, a difficulty not attributable to the writer's lack of a good vocabulary. In trying to describe a person's style or an aesthetic quality expressed in a work of art, we are ultimately driven to say it is this quality, the quality which pervades the person or the work. Even where a metaphorical description is given, without meeting the person, or hearing the work, we should have only the barest intimation of what is meant. Ultimately the quality must be grasped at first-hand, it cannot be translated or adequately conveyed by any conceptual means on the basis of general rules. The richness of complex individuals, such as persons and works of art, eludes to some extent the descriptive power of general concepts. The residue of singular meaning which is found uniquely constituted in such individuals must be understood directly. The understanding a person reaches of an essentially unanalysable phenomenological pattern can only be private for the experiencing subject; and in this case, "private" means necessarily private. We cannot make public our understanding of a quality we find composed in a strictly unique fashion. Our experience of such a quality is "felt" rather than arrived at by any discursive means, and as such we cannot describe its nature except in terms of metaphor and even here, the subject, if pushed for further details, will ultimately have recourse to some kind of ostensive gesture.

I would argue therefore, that where aspects of what we understand are necessarily private, on a priori grounds, understanding as an ability entails only a private, subjective ability to understand these somewhat ineffable impressions. Being private to the experiencing subject I suggest that understanding in such cases -- is an internal or mental affair. The concept of mind might not be without its difficulties but in the sense I am using it, it is intended to account for the inner life of thought and feelings which we can keep to ourselves. I use the term "necessarily private" with regard to the content of a person's understanding in the above examples, on the grounds that one necessarily unique aspect of an individual is non-generalizable, non-conceptual, i.e. it is logically impossible for there to be another item similarly constituted; there is only one item in the class (see Petra von Morstein (1982) for a detailed analysis of "necessary uniqueness" to which my account is indebted). It now becomes difficult to see what a person could do, in regard to the above examples, in a public sense, which would provide criteria for the more public expression of understanding in terms of an ability.

The equivocation of Baker and Hacker on the matter of understanding as being "akin" to an ability is quite instructive on this point. They caution, for example, "But although doing so-and-so may be a criterion of understanding such-and-such, one must not jump to the conclusion that understanding is the ability to do so-and-so (Baker and Hacker, 1983:344). And further, they note that

"We may speak of deepening our understanding of a late Beethoven string quartet, although there may be little if anything we can do as a result " (Baker and Hacker, 1983:344). The many qualifications that Baker and Hacker are obliged to make belies, I think, a problem or weakness in Wittgenstein's approach (as it has been taken in this paper) which relies on criterial evidence of understanding to the exclusion of inner, subjective understanding. That weakness is further demonstrated when Baker and Hacker ask, "In what sense does a person who understands women have an ability which the person who does not understand them lacks, other than the ability to understand women?" (1983:344). Here, note the locution change from an ability which follows on "understands" to an ability to understand in some other than public sense. Remember that in Wittgenstein's view, outward criteria are logically required for ascriptions of understanding, and, arguably, to ground discussion of the phenomenon of understanding. Baker and Hacker, however, can do no more in answer to their question on understanding women than to respond "The quest for philosophical understanding is not obviously best described as an attempt to acquire an ability to do something [in a public way]" (1983:344). Thus, in the view of Baker and Hacker the deepening of understanding for a person ". . . may amount to no more than a generous empathy or effort of imagination" (1983:345). Quite so, but where now are the all-important ability criteria? Their acknowledgement of these difficulties adds credence to a more mental view of understanding. The kind of understanding of a person just

discussed is perilously close to the understanding Virginia Woolf hinted at in relation to her sister, i.e. to her unnamed quality, and which entailed no outward ability do do something. With such a quality you just grasp it or you don't. Wittgenstein, however, is quite aware of such cases of private understanding which shows in his remark "If a [musical] theme, a phrase, suddenly means something to you, you don't have to be able to explain it. Just this gesture has been made accessible to you" (1967:¶¶157-158). There can be understanding then which is not given sense by reference to public criteria. I suggest that taken in the light of my arguments regarding necessarily private understanding, Wittgenstein has provided a cogent counter-example to the idea that understanding consists in an ability to do something in a public manner. Wittgenstein's emphasis on the indexical "this" indicates the directness of the phenomenological one-to-one relation of listener and music, a situation I discussed earlier in reference to understanding persons and works of art. But more important, it seems here as if Wittgenstein has suspended his stricture that "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria'" (1974a:¶580) and is, in effect asking the reader to reflect on his own musical experience, from a first-person perspective. I suggest that it makes sense to speak of understanding in distinction from circumstantial criteria in other contexts as well. It is possible, for example, to understand a mathematical series and keep quiet about it. You would of course be expected in this case to be able to give an explanation if asked.

In a variety of circumstances people are accepted as knowing things about themselves, by acquaintance, without recourse to public criteria. A person does not have to look in the mirror, for example, to see if he is sad. Such talk is meaningful precisely because persons can think private thoughts and understand things in ways which are not reducible to public performances. Now it may be that Wittgenstein is simply trying to establish the public grounds for using a psychological term, but if so, some of his remarks betray a curious behaviourist tone. Understanding is not, it seems, in his view, a state of mind, a mental process, or a special experience. It is not just that hidden mental phenomena cannot ground our use of the term "understanding": understanding cannot sensibly refer to any such phenomena. Understanding cannot go on in a hidden medium. Even the individual subject -- we may conclude from one of Wittgenstein's remarks -- must have recourse to the "particular circumstances" to justify his thinking he understands the principle of the mathematical rule (see Wittgenstein, 1974a:¶¶153-154). Yet it seems counter-intuitive to think that the individual must also base his own self-ascription of understanding on the basis of what he or she is able to go on and do. Of course, the crucial objection by Wittgenstein would be that sometimes we only think we understand, that our public performances show that we were mistaken in holding such a belief. One could counter by saying that just as often, circumstances confirm our belief that we did understand something,

and as I have argued, in some situations the understanding we reach is necessarily private, not dependent on any ability to do something in a public manner.

I conclude, though not without some remaining doubt about what Wittgenstein's position really is, that while circumstances may serve to manifest the public criteria by which we justify a judgment that somebody understands something, and thus in the sense of learning a language are necessary and prior to self-ascriptions of understanding based on acquaintance, by nature understanding is a mental phenomenon. My position, in the rest of the study will be that in order to understand something one needs an appropriate sort of ability, that something takes place in a person's consciousness which results in an outcome or achievement of understanding and as a result of this achievement a person may or may not be able to do something in a public manner which counts as criterial evidence for the judgment that somebody understands something. But the evidence requirement, I submit, is a separate question from the person's ability to understand something in the first place. In the chapters which follow, I shall, without further argument take understanding to be a feature (ability or achievement) of mind.[1]

Notes

1. I am grateful for, and have benefitted from the criticisms of Professor Le Roi Daniels which were directed at an earlier version of this chapter, read at the Forty-second annual meeting of the

Philosophy of Education Society, April 13, 1986, Montreal, though I am entirely responsible for the arguments presented.

Chapter Two

WITTGENSTEIN, CONCEPTS, AND UNDERSTANDING

It will be my commonplace contention that understanding takes place by means of applying concepts to sort out and relate our impressions. I shall assume without much debate that we acquire concepts such that we can organize our experiences in a rule-governed manner by being inducted into a way of life; what Wittgenstein calls "forms of life", which function as the "given" for the initiate (see Wittgenstein, 1974a:226). We acquire concepts, that is, by living in a community, speaking its language, engaging in its common pursuits and practices; by participating in a culture. The term "forms of life", as I understand it, refers to and includes the various activities of a community, and the culturally relevant ways in which they are conducted: one thinks of the speaking of a language, various religious practices, the life of the family, making art, etc., though it must be admitted that Wittgenstein nowhere elaborates on this vital concept. Different cultural groups engage in the activity of painting, for example, but the ways the activity is conceived of and the resulting artistic productions can be very different -- attuned in fact to the artistic assumptions which govern the social practice of making art. Gier, who emphasizes the cultural interpretation of "forms of life", and to whom my account is indebted, notes that specific forms of life such as "praying" and "being certain" are common phenomena and that "It is therefore cultural styles that differentiate among various peoples, not the specific life forms" (1981:27). One might reflect on the fact that even where communities

share the same language and many other institutions, as is the case with Canada and Britain, the flavour of life in these two countries is quite different. I shall argue in Chapter Five that certain consequences follow from our having the culturally constrained outlook, or mental set that we do which prevents us, on a priori grounds, from understanding and interpreting works of art from the past in ways available to contemporary audiences. Not surprisingly, we find references in Wittgenstein's work to the importance of custom, practice and training with respect to learning a language (1974a¶5): obeying a rule (1974:¶¶199,202,706; 1967: ¶318): and in giving explanations (1967:¶419): this is how you say it, describe, explain it, judge it, do it. In another society things could be, and often are, seen differently. "An education quite different from ours" says Wittgenstein, "might also be the foundation for quite different concepts" (1967:¶387). We do not always see eye to eye on issues with societies different from our own because in some respects we can't; one side or the other lacks the relevant concepts. Forms of life -- the activities of a society and the ways in which these activities are conducted -- I shall accept as being the well-spring for our having the concepts that we do and our habits of employing them.

I shall examine the nature of understanding more specifically in the next chapter. But in order that I do not beg too many prior questions I want to try to bring out some of the salient features of the conceptual scheme by means of which understanding

takes place, as seen through the perspective of Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy. Arguably, Wittgenstein is a major, if not the major contemporary figure who has shaped our recent thinking about concepts.

Pre-eminently for Wittgenstein, concepts are expressed in language (in Chapter Six. I shall discuss the use of concepts or schemata in the visual arts); he notes ". . . a concept is in its element within the language-game" (Wittgenstein, 1967:¶391). It is by means of words and phrases, used in appropriate circumstances that we characterize particular events, situations, objects, feelings, etc. It may be that children and animals make their primitive needs known to us without employing words, yet it seems clear that language with its built-in rules of use is the primary instrument for expressing the concepts by means of which we organize reality. Language provides an intersubjectively valid and regular way of expressing feelings and making references to various objects, events, etc., among other functions. To understand the logic of a word's use, is to understand the rules which govern the application of the term, and this, fundamentally is to appreciate its meaning. The rules, or circumstantial criteria which govern the application of an expression are at the same time rules which betray or constitute the logic of a concept. Correctly describing our impressions is one way in which we sort them conceptually. The rules for language use thus serve as the rules for applying concepts. The rules constitute concepts.

With regard to the term "language-game", Wittgenstein observes "I shall call the whole, consisting of language and the activities into which it is woven, the 'language-game'" (1974a:¶7). Here one thinks of the whole range of a society's activities and the practice of using language in various contexts. But Wittgenstein also calls such separate activities as: giving orders and obeying them; reporting an event; translating a foreign language; making a joke and telling it; asking, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying; "language-games" (see Wittgenstein, 1974a:¶23). It seems that the one big game of using a language is comprised of an almost unlimited variety of smaller games which nevertheless bear the stamp of the larger enterprise. Wittgenstein uses the term "game" in connection with the various linguistic activities to highlight their diversity of form, analogous to the diversity among the pursuits we call games which have no one thing in common but fall under the same general heading. Speaking a language does not consist in one essential activity. Instead, like the multiplicity of games which lack a common structure, the uses to which we put language, are in Wittgenstein's view, "related to one another in different ways" (1974a:¶65). Rather than finding something common to all games, Wittgenstein says, ". . . we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities in detail" (1974a:¶61). As it is with games, so it is with the different uses of language. Because we can give reasonably precise definitions in some cases, we should

not expect to be able to ascertain, in all situations, logically complete definitions which can serve unerringly as standards or rules for the correct employment of words. In Wittgenstein's view, language lacks that kind of determinacy. It may be that a person could, if asked, justify his use of a word or phrase, even if, in the event, the word was used without the speaker's having consciously consulted a set of criteria. In other situations, the logical justification for the use of an expression (concept) becomes problematic, especially where there is no sharp, consistently held definition. A concept such as "work of art" lacks precise boundaries. In principle we cannot define "work of art" by appealing to, or by drawing together, a set of necessary and sufficient conditions which must be met for a work to be art. If we could, we should have a rule for making art, and such is anti-thetical to the inventive, open-ended nature of the art-making enterprise which involves a degree of originality and the exercise of talent on the part of the maker who essentially instigates, rather than simply follows a principle or rule of organization (a Kantian idea which I pursue more fully in Chapter Five There are some rules for making art, but art is not fully rule-bound. Arguably, in a case such as this, the criteria which govern the use of the concept are tacitly incorporated into the practice (as they are with all concepts) of applying the concept and the practice which matters most in this case is that of the members of the art establishment: critics, artists, historians. Even so, given the evolving nature of the art enterprise, the concept "art" is constantly

being challenged and modified to accommodate new possibilities. Listeners can thus be forgiven for being sure of the art status of a Schubert string quartet, while entertaining doubts about an entirely silent "performance" given by John Cage while seated unmoving, at a piano. Concepts may thus lack a strict determinacy of sense by being necessarily open to some extent as with the concept of art, or by being contested, i.e. in this latter case there is no shortage of criteria, but there is disagreement about which criteria are logically necessary and sufficient. The concept "indoctrination" for example, necessarily requires that there be a teacher and a learner. The teacher must, necessarily, have the intention to get somebody to learn something, he must adopt some teaching method, and he must teach something, a content. But in saying that someone is indoctrinating are we concerned primarily with intention, i.e. the intention to get the learner to acquire an unshakable belief: or method -- usually represented as being less than rational with respect to the logic of argument or adequacy of evidence cited; or must the subject-matter involve a doctrine? Or is indoctrination a logical combination of the above? During the past twenty years, philosophers of education have stressed each of the above possibilities (for a good summary of the main points of view, ending in the claim that a person is indoctrinating if and only if non-rational methods are employed in teaching someone something, when other, rational methods are available, see Cooper, 1973:43-45). The application of this concept is very much a matter of interpretation, first in the matter

of deciding which criteria to adopt, second in the application of the criteria. I make the above points to show that while we distinguish our impressions, i.e. pick things out under a general heading on the basis of conceptual criteria or rules, the rules themselves are not always logically exclusive or uncontested. Furthermore, whatever criteria or conditions may be involved to justify the use of a term, the actual application still involves an element of personal judgment whose function it is to interpret the applicability of the rules in particular cases. Interestingly, Wittgenstein points out, in this regard, "If language is to be a means of communication there must be agreement not only in definitions but also (strange as this may sound) in judgements" (1974a:¶242). We must be consistent in our application of concepts and this implies that we judge according to established norms of practice. Even so, the subject must at some point grasp the applicability of the rules in concrete circumstances for himself or herself. So a necessary element of interpretation is built into all our use of concepts whereby the vagaries of individual cases are reconciled with a general conceptual pattern. In any case, Wittgenstein seems to argue against the very idea that a concept can be defined to avert any doubt about its use when he asks:

> How should we have to imagine a complete list of rules for the employment of a word? -- What do we mean by a complete list of rules for the employment of a piece in chess? Couldn't we always construct doubtful cases, in which the normal list of rules does not decide? Think e.g. of such a question as: how to determine who moved last, if a doubt is raised about the reliability of the players' memories? (1967:¶440).

This is not to say we can never apply a concept with certainty; it is rather to say that borderline cases can always crop up which tax the power of the rules to guide our judgments. The possibility of there being doubtful cases can never, in principle, be ruled out.

Minimally we can say of concepts, and here I am thinking of the expressions of ordinary language (though the same remarks could apply to visual concepts, what Gombrich (1969) calls "schemata", or any other conceptual patterns) that they are applied on the basis of criteria, or rules of use, what Wittgenstein has called the circumstances of use. The criteria, in effect, delimit the range of logically appropriate applications and guide our judgment that certain particulars warrant being categorized as being particulars of a certain kind. In some cases, where criteria are logically incomplete, or contested, a concept may be indeterminate in some of its applications -- I discuss this point more fully in Chapter Four. But, in any case, the idea that a concept can be so defined that no doubt could ever enter into our judgments concerning its applicability would seem to be a pipe-dream, in Wittgenstein's view. Concepts must always be judged applicable or not by a judging subject, thus an element of interpretation is necessarily included. The judging is more difficult in some cases than others.

In Wittgenstein's view, concepts are ". . . the fixed rails along which our thinking runs, and so our judgment and action goes according to them too" (1967:¶374). "Concepts" he says,

"lead us to make investigations; are the expression of our interest, and direct our interest" (1974a:¶570). Thus, we are led to ask the questions that we do as a function of the concepts we have which enable us to formulate the questions in the first place. The system of concepts we use thus somewhat ineluctably patterns our forms of inquiry. Our concepts constitute the rules according to which it is appropriate or inappropriate to speak of understanding something. That something has a meaning, and is therefore in principle understandable, is indicative of its value -- that it has a place in a conceptual scheme conditioned by our forms of life. Our concepts reflect and inspire the selectivity of our interests. Thus it is no use, for example, expecting children to make classroom discoveries for which they are unprepared. Without the necessary conceptual background they would not know what to count as a discovery, let alone how to go about making one. But why do we think of some things as being understandable and not others? We do not look upon gravel, for example, or trees, as things to be understood. In one respect I think it is simply part of the "given" that gravel and trees are not conceived of in that way. It is not part of our way of looking at the world to find meaning in gravel, trees, jars of marmalade, etc. In a relevant passage, Wittgenstein wonders why a word can be understood, but not a penholder. Perhaps we could understand a penholder, he thinks, if we had given it a meaning; by pointing and uttering words. But then he asks:

> How does this pointing and uttering work? It works only as part of a system containing other bits of linguistic behaviour. And now one can understand a penholder too; but does this understanding contain the whole system of its application? Impossible (Wittgenstein, 1974b:¶71).

Clearly, talk of understanding a penholder is at odds with our conception of what sort of thing a penholder is, and with the normal pattern of application for the term "penholder". To say, "I understand my penholder better than anyone else" would be aberrant in more ways than one. A single application of a term must respect the logic of its application in general. In rather more complex cases, the "logic" might simply be a reflection of accepted practice for which we cannot establish fully determinate rules. Nevertheless, things are, or are not, understandable by virtue of the way our concepts take them. Their being understandable is a function of the logic of our discourse. To a child learning a language, a thing's being understandable, or not, is a given. But arguably, what we understand are meaningful, or relational wholes. It is not given, for example, that we should understand gunpowder, atoms, or measles. We can, however, understand the chemical composition of gunpowder, the structure of an atom, the pathology of a disease. We can understand, in the direct object sense, sentences, jokes, theories, poems, paintings, and individual persons which are all in one way or another, complex wholes. Broadly speaking, we understand such things when we grasp how various constitutional factors are related. Conversely, we understand a single word, or a move in

a chess game where these things are placed in their proper contexts. But in both cases, we grasp relationships. Are we to understand the chemical composition of gunpowder, its destructive power, its potential for winning wars, what? Once the structural focus is made evident, understanding can proceed. Poems, jokes, indeed any item deemed understandable in the direct object sense already, or inherently, denotes the idea of parts related to form a whole. I pursue these points more fully in Chapter Three when I focus on what is involved in being able to understand something.

Another important feature in Wittgenstein's thinking concerning concepts is his notion of system. Concepts do not function alone but are logically affiliated with other concepts. We explain the correct use of a concept through the medium of other concepts which comprise the rules of use. Conceptual rules bear logically on other rules. A person could not, logically, be said to understand the theory of relativity if he is ignorant of its major premises and arguments. Understanding is thus logically related to knowledge (to be discussed in Chapter Four), indeed, on occasion the terms can be used interchangeably. "Languages" says Wittgenstein, "<u>are</u> systems" (1974b:27). In our society, a person does not talk to trees, or penholders, and expect to be understood, although one could easily imagine a tribe which believed trees were alive in some deistic sense and worshipped tree spirits. Trees and penholders are conceptualized as part of a system which prompts and logically justifies our ideas about them. When we think or talk about such

things the talk is governed by rules which reflect other conceptual relationships. When we make a wrong move, logically speaking, these other relationships are affected. For Wittgenstein, "A sign does its job only in a grammatical system" (1974b:21), and "To understand a sentence is to understand a language" (1974a:¶199). A word is meaningfully employed as part of a system comprised of a complex of rules -- the way, for example, the single move of a chess piece makes sense against the background of the entire range of possible moves as permitted in the rules of the game. The game is played according to rules which have no other purpose than the orderly progression of the game; they are internal to the game of chess. And the same thing by analogy appears to be true in Wittgenstein's view, in the case of language. "Only in the stream of thought and life do words have any meaning" says Wittgenstein (1967:¶173). Thus, for Wittgenstein it appears that words, sentences, mean something inasmuch as they have a place, are part of a larger whole consisting of affiliated and contrasting concepts and the customary language practices of a culture, which taken in context with a society's other cultural activities, reflect a lifestyle, a way of being in the world. Charles Taylor (1980), albeit with no reference to Wittgenstein, argues for the holistic nature of language seen under an "expressive" theory of meaning. How is it, he asks, that the bits of a medium we use when we talk, make music, paint, build symbolic objects, say something? In the "designative" theory, Taylor notes that words mean something by referring to things,

states of affairs in the world. Meaning is thereby, objective, unpuzzling. By contrast, he says "expressions" are the expressions of a subject, expressive meaning is embodied, made manifest in a medium, rather than being inferred from signs. We see, for example, joy or sorrow in a face. Furthermore, expressive meaning can only be made available, or manifested in the medium of expression. Such meaning, notes Taylor, is not explained by a relation with something else but only by another expression. Isolating terms and tracing correlations with other things cannot work for expressive meaning. Paradigm expressive objects -- faces, works of art -- function as wholes which can't simply be broken down into parts to show that the whole is an aggregation of the parts. But Taylor goes on to discuss the logical priority and power of these two approaches to explain linguistic meaning, and in so doing he draws upon various historical sources from the eighteenth century Romantic vein, namely Herder and Humboldt. Using these sources, Taylor points out that arguments which see the source of inventing and learning a new language as resting in crying out and referring to things assumes that the children in question already understand what it is for a word to stand for something, and that, he says, is just the mysterious thing. Anyone can be taught the meaning of a word in this way once he has a language. One can see overtones in this account of Wittgenstein's criticisms of the Augustine picture of learning a language by ostensive definition, i.e. by pointing to things and calling out their names. Such teaching, argues Wittgenstein

assumes a child already has a language but not this one. The child, that is, can already think but not speak. And "think" would mean, says Wittgenstein "talk to itself" (1974a:¶32). Taylor argues that the capacity to recognize X as the right description of something is invoked in our capacity to use language; that is, we are reflectively aware that it is so. Learning what a word stands for involves the reflective awareness of the language user. Language is not just a set of words which refer to things, it is the vehicle of reflective awareness -- a capacity only realized or expressed in speech. Thus to be able to designate things, to grasp the signifying relation you have to be able to speak, to give expression to this reflective awareness. Expression realizes the capacity says Taylor, so is fundamental. But we need this expressive capability, realized in language to actually constitute and manifest our ideas, which do not properly exist before their expression in language. Language is thus not just a conveyor of thought but is constitutive also. Language is therefore the capacity to speak, to express/realize the reflective awareness. The use of a single word presupposes the capacity as background. But to have the capacity presupposes possession of a language. This conclusion, argues Taylor, points to the holism of language, the idea that language as a whole is presupposed in any one of its parts. Taylor says that implicit in this thought is the point that a word has meaning in our language because

of its relations with other words:

> . . . a word like 'triangle' couldn't figure in our lexicon alone. It has to be surrounded by a skein of other terms, some which contrast with it, and some which situate it, as it were, give its property dimensions, not to speak of the wider matrix of language in which the various activities are situated in which our talk of triangles, figures, measurement, geometry, design-creation, and so on (1980:295).

A word therefore, only makes sense in this "skein" of language. The expressive theory thus offers a different picture from the objective designative view. Taylor observes that in the expressive view:

> Language is not an assemblage of separable instruments, which lie as it were transparently to hand . . . . Rather it is something in the nature of a web, and to complicate the image, is present as a whole in any one of its parts. To speak is to touch a bit of the web, and this is to make the whole resonate (1980:295).

As the capacity to use language is expressed in the activity of speech, so language is being constantly reshaped in use, new terms and meanings replace old ones but only inasmuch as they connect with the web, never in any unconnected, autonomous sense. Taylor argues that if language is viewed as the expression of this special reflective awareness then we become aware not just of things in the world, by our descriptions of them, but also aware of new ways of feeling and responding to things. Expression constitutes what it expresses -- talking about things is one aspect of language use. The constitution of emotion, another. It is through language that we express/realize a way of being in the world, that of reflective awareness. Taylor observes:

> We now see language capacity as residing in the possession of an interconnected lexicon, only one part of which is used at any time. We see that the individual term is defined in relation to the others (1980:300).

In his discussion, Taylor uses the "web" metaphor to characterize the holism of language -- words have meaning because of the place and relations they have in the web which consists of other terms similarly related, and contrasted. Thus, in a literal sense, a spider's web, for example, is a complex and orderly structure. Each portion of the web connects with other portions similarly constructed to constitute the web, made effective as a whole. Wittgenstein favours "system" as his metaphor to convey the sense of language as an internally structured whole of words and sentences, and the logic of their rules of use, manifested in our various linguistic practices. One can find references to the expressive function of language in some of Wittgenstein's remarks, he notes, for example:

> What we call "understanding a sentence" has, in many cases, a much greater similarity to understanding a musical theme that we might be inclined to think . . . . For understanding a sentence, we say, points to a reality outside the sentence. Whereas one might say, "Understanding a sentence means getting hold of its content; and the content of the sentence is <u>in</u> the sentence" (1969:167).

Thus, understanding a sentence may mean understanding its point of reference. What the sentence is about, is not the sentence itself but what it refers to. Alternatively, in say, poetic language, a sentence does not so much communicate a message which is informative, in the way a linguistic reference is, as possess or make

available an intrinsic meaning owned by just this group of words. Elsewhere Wittgenstein observes, "We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it cannot be replaced by any other" (Wittgenstein, 1974a:¶531). I can communicate a message, the same message, by using different sentences which are close enough in meaning to say the same thing. Hamlet's Soliloquy, however, consists in just one set of words. The meaning is tied to the form in which they are presented. Form and content coalesce. But expressive meaning is not just poetic. Language serves to express ideas and feelings which are at the same time, constituted, rather than simply conveyed symbolically, by language. Thus, Wittgenstein observes, "Knowledge is not translated into words when it is expressed. The words are not a translation of something else that was there before they were" (1967:¶191). The words we use thus make the knowledge manifest. We don't infer from the words to some other, more primitive thoughts or ideas which are more properly knowledge. Thus, in some of Wittgenstein's comments, language exhibits the characteristics of expressive meaning outlined by Taylor. The medium of expression serves to constitute the meaning and make it manifest or available to its users. Like expressions in faces and works of art, what is expressed in language cannot ultimately be separated from the medium of expression. The meaning and the medium constitute a whole, and this seems to be true even when language is used referentially. Clearly as Wittgenstein points out in his

discussion of language-games, language has many functions no single one of which is the function of language. Language is used to express thoughts and feelings, and to refer to things in the world -- frequently by means of one and the same sentence. We express our disgust and censure of a corrupt regime by describing its belligerent acts and cruel treatment of political prisoners in emotive terms. Language has its different purposes which seem appropriate in different contexts, i.e. poetic language is expressive, subject related, i.e. related to a perceiving subject who directly grasps the expressive quality, the language of science is objective and seeks to establish the laws of an independent material reality. Nevertheless, given his critical remarks about learning a language by ostensive definition, I think Wittgenstein would agree with Taylor that to understand the signifying relation one must have acquired the reflective awareness which comes with possession of a language. Expression of the reflective awareness, realized in the power of speech seems to be fundamental, and consists in our capacity to reflect on the appropriateness of using this or that word in a particular context. But there are other reasons for seeing the expressive theory at work in Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy as I shall try to show below.

Not incongruously, Wittgenstein enriches his notion of language as system, with all the holistic connotations, by putting forward the idea that language is also self-contained, i.e. not dependent upon a material reality to underpin the sense of its words, expressions. This view appears in statements such as "A name has a meaning,

a proposition has sense in the calculus to which it belongs. The calculus is as it were autonomous. Language must speak for itself" (Wittgenstein, 1974b:63). And again, Wittgenstein notes "The connection between 'language and reality' is made by definitions of words, and these belong to grammar, so that language remains self-contained and autonomous" (1974b:¶97). The meaningfulness of language which is directed at say, giving descriptions of events in the world, would, on this account, be constituted, not by references to some material reality which underpin words and sentences like a gold-standard, but by the logical relations and interlocking functions of terms as they are used within the system of language. Giving descriptions, referring to real things, is a language-game like any other, and as such, is governed or given its warrant so to speak, by the in-built rules of the game which are learned as one learns to participate in the activities of a culture, and use the appropriate language. Hence the importance of training, in Wittgenstein's view, in enabling the initiate to get the knack of using concepts. Meaning is thus constituted, expressed by the calculus, or system, which comprises language as a whole, even when the use of words is referential. Without the system there could be no meaning to be expressed, and no way to make references.

In learning a language, however, a child must break into the system by using bits and pieces of language while being ignorant of the complexities of the broader enterprise. The little bits children start to use must contain something of the pattern of reflective awareness, if they did not we should never be able to

make a beginning; always requiring capacities yet to be acquired in order to understand the first move. Nevertheless, learning to speak, is, I think, a question of getting a knack for using language since we must acquire the reflective awareness needed to understand what to do, or what is being done with words, to grasp the signifying relation, for example. In this regard, children must ultimately "get it", just as they must understand the point of the rules of a game, and go on to play themselves. But of course, with language acquisition one must understand the rules without having played before. One must get on the inside of the activity to understand its point; getting a knack is something you ultimately do for yourself. But of course by living among language users, and by being socialized and trained in the use of words, the task is made easier.

Wittgenstein rails against the idea that samples can provide at rock bottom, the meanings of terms: "Do not believe" he says "that you have the concept of colour within you because you look at a coloured object however hard you look" (1967:¶332). That is, by looking at a coloured object you do not automatically see it as "coloured", as instantiating a colour concept. Wittgenstein continues:

> Red is something specific" - that would have to mean the same as "That is something specific" -- said while pointing to something red. But for that to be intelligible, we must already have to mean our concept 'red', to mean the use of that sample (1967:¶333).

A person must already have the concept "red" to pick something out as being red. We project the concepts we have to make sense

of our impressions. Hacker cites the above colour example and makes a point apropos of the autonomy of language and concepts:

> One cannot conceptualize without concepts and hence one cannot in general justify a conceptual scheme by reference to a reality as described in terms of that scheme (1972:164).

At rock bottom, all there is to justify the discriminations we make is the logic of language, of concepts. The connection between language and reality is made by definitions. The rules of grammar or circumstantial criteria ultimately justify our use of terms. So the rules of grammar for Wittgenstein connect language with the reality we can see and touch, but a reality which comes to us through the organizing power of our conceptual scheme.

Summing up the main points of the chapter: our conceptual scheme is interpretive of reality; for other cultures, with other forms of life, things can be seen differently. Our conceptual scheme is, to some extent, orderly and rule-governed, but such is tempered by the possibility of a lack of determinacy in our use of concepts, especially in cases where criteria are not logically limiting, or in cases where criteria are contested. And in any case, all concepts require that their applicability to particular cases be interpreted by a judging subject. The things that we can understand are, in a sense, already marked out. That is, it is already given that we are able to understand some things but not others, depending upon the systematic way our concepts take them. But in addition, what we understand are relational wholes, or structures which we can conceptualize in terms of features and relationships, although

some things in virtue of possessing an element of necessary uniqueness elude complete conceptualization. I discuss understanding in relation to structures in the next chapter. Following Wittgenstein, and Taylor, our conceptual system seems to be holistic in that words are used and understood against the whole backdrop of our linguistic practices. Words acquire meaning by being connected to the larger web of language -- other words, rules of use -- which give them a place in a linguistic practice which expresses/realizes the reflective awareness required to understand the use of words. Furthermore, according to Wittgenstein, our conceptual scheme, which consists primarily of verbal expressions, their logical affiliations, and our rule-governed linguistic practice is self-contained in that we need concepts to make sense of reality rather than the other way around. For the initiates of a culture, our concepts are to a large extent, given, and represent the ways in which the world is to be understood. Our concepts are modified as events in the world influence our thinking and our future responses. Words and expressions drop out of use or change their meanings to keep pace with evolving styles of life. But on a priori grounds, the world for us is the world we conceptualize, events in the world can never, in themselves, be the cause of our seeing things the way we do. Changes in our concepts occur as our view of things undergoes gradual shifts influenced by newer ways of taking things. But such changes are always constrained by the existing network of concepts which determines the shape of reality in the first place. New discoveries which contradict earlier ideas are never completely new but arise

out of a given epistemological tradition. Clearly our concepts would be ineffective if reality and our responses to it were not to some extent regular and predictable, given our induction into certain forms of life. And of course, events in the world do affect the way we think about it. But the world is always an interpreted world, as are the events which characterize it. What matters most in the construction of meaning are our habits of response, our ways of taking things, which become embodied socially as rules of grammar and which fit into the already existing pattern of rules.

In the following chapters I shall assume that we acquire concepts or rules according to which we judge our impressions as being of this or that kind by being inducted into the forms of life of a culture.

Chapter Three

CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING

In this chapter I want to try to explain, in a general way, the nature of understanding. I suggested in chapter one that we always understand something, that understanding takes place in a context, and that a person must have the ability to understand in order to understand. I concluded that in one sense, understanding is an ability possessed as a quality of mind. I now want to ask what is involved in coming to understand something. My question is therefore a constitutive one and resolves itself as: what is the nature of understanding as a mental ability which results when properly exercised in an outcome or achievement of understanding. The question reflects the ambiguity of "understanding" which can be taken as an ability, or achievement of mind. Simply put, I want to know what a person must be able to do, necessarily, in order to understand something. Here I am not thinking of some rigidly monolithic ability which can suffice to bring about complete understanding in all situations, there are too many contextual differences for that to be the case. Nevertheless, while there may be some points of difference in what is involved in coming to understand say, a mathematical proof, and understanding a poem, there is some common ground also. I want to try to isolate whatever pattern of regularity there might be in the attainment of understanding, regardless of context.

In whatever situation where we seek to understand something,

the object of attention must be known to us conceptually. Things which are completely alien such that our concepts could get no grip would be incomprehensible to us. Confronted by the behaviour of a strange tribe we might not be able to explain it. We might hazard a guess but given our lack of certainty, or inability to confirm our interpretations, we could not be said to understand what the people were doing. Wittgenstein affords an example:

> . . . one human being may be a complete enigma to another. We learn this when we come into a strange country with entirely strange traditions; and what is more, even given a mastery of the country's language. We do not understand the people (1974a:223).

I do not know if "complete enigma" is the accurate term. All human groups obtain food, care for their young, have family relationships, build shelters, and so have some common pursuits. Of course, the strange tribe might not conceive of these activities quite as we do. I take Wittgenstein's point to be that we would not be able to understand the strange behaviour if it falls outside our system of classification, i.e. if we cannot place it in relation to familiar ways of behaving. It is doubtful whether we could ever fully understand such behaviour as do the tribesmen themselves because our way of conceiving of such things, given the differences in our forms of life, would not evenly match that of the alien culture. On a priori grounds we cannot fully adopt the tribesmen's outlook even if we learn their language because our own way of conceiving and responding to things would ineluctably get in the way. Our own conceptual scheme constitutes, for us, the way things objectively are. We begin to understand things inasmuch as we are able to see them in relation

to the beliefs, practices, traditions, of our own culture. This is what makes an indigenous understanding of other cultures so difficult, though not of course completely impossible.

In whatever situation where we seek to understand something we must be able to bring to bear the appropriate concepts. In order to be able to understand, even in principle, a mathematical proof, for example, we must have the correct idea of what a proof is designed to achieve, of what the symbols are used for, of what counts as a sound argument etc., and this presupposes all sorts of prior knowledge of the mathematical enterprise which grounds the aims and procedures adopted in proofs. Proofs do not exist in isolation, they are part of the larger mathematical tradition which is comprised of a network of aims, procedures and rules united by the logic of inference. But besides requiring the relevant background knowledge, including knowledge of the criteria which constitute our concept of a proof i.e. a proof is a construction designed to reach a conclusion by sound argument inferred from a set of premises, a person must be able to judge what sorts of concrete things count as proofs if the appropriate steps in understanding are to follow. Understanding thus, necessarily, requires the possession of concepts to guide such discriminations. I shall take it that to possess a concept means that a person can make discriminations in concrete circumstances according to general rules, i.e. the person knows which rules to apply in a situation, and can successfully judge what sort of thing a particular is, even

if the rules in question cannot be explicitly stated. The application of conceptual rules is ultimately a matter for the inquiring subject who must decide which rules are appropriate, and go on to apply them without further guidance, or we should require rules to guide the rules and so on. To apply a concept thus requires the exercise of personal judgment. At some point a person must be able to just "see" in the sense of a personal insight, that certain rules do apply in a given situation, for explanations of rules do come to an end. I shall address this point more fully in the next chapter.

But as the situations we must cope with grow in complexity so too does the range or network of concepts or rules we need to invoke to make sense of a particular situation. Furthermore, the events, jokes, the workings of a car engine, a painting, or anything else we can logically be said to be able to understand, consist of features organized by various sorts of relations: spatial, temporal, causal, inferential, metaphorical, syntactic, mechanical, and so on. The world for us is the world we conceptualize and the relations which hold in situations of interest are also distinguished conceptually. Furthermore, the meaningful things of life are embedded in the larger scope of human affairs. The job of understanding thus rests in determining not just the features and relations which constitute the object of interest, but also requires us to focus on, or at least be aware of, the relation of an object to its background or context, i.e. the wider affinities, influences, implications, causes, etc., depending on the purposes in hand.

Things are meaningful and hence understandable inasmuch, and depending on the place they have in the world as it is organized by us conceptually. The concepts we are at home with determine both what we logically can understand (i.e. structures, see Chapter Two), and how for the most part we do understand. Our network of concepts provides the rules for the game of understanding. Philosophers attempt to make the rules embodied in practice explicit in order to eliminate conceptual confusion and uncertainty. The network, or scheme, works for those who have the requisite knowledge of the rules, tacit or otherwise, established by convention and use, and are able to judge their applicability in the relevant kinds of circumstances. For example, it would be correct to call a particular act, an act of "punishment" if the person in question were an authority figure administering something unpleasant by way of retribution to a transgressor. The concept "punishment" invokes a network of features, or other concepts which are logically affiliated to form the pattern which functions as a standard or rule for use in discriminating concrete cases. It is easy to see how the idea of a network comes in. Each of the features or conditions noted above requires its own conceptual rules. Concepts thus build on other concepts. However, this is a simple example, in other complex and perhaps more interesting cases the rules cannot always be so clearly specified, nor are they always uncontested.

Perhaps it would not be too much of a distortion to say that facility in applying concepts (rules) to determine the kind of thing we are dealing with, its features and the ways in which they are

related, and its connections with the wider context, largely accounts for our ability to understand. But this suggestion must be filled out and made more precise.

I argued in Chapter Two for the idea of elements organized into some sort of relational whole to distinguish the things we talk of as being understandable from those we do not. I noted that once the aspect of structure is brought into focus, understanding has something to work on. Much of our everyday speech in circumstances where we seek to understand something reflects notions of parts, relationships, wholes. Detectives, for example, look for the pattern in a crime or series of crimes -- similarities in choice of victims, times, places, methods. They talk of figuring things out, putting the pieces together, of seeing the big picture. In a variety of problem situations we speak of attending to the details, of finding links, of seeing the wider consequences, of determining the causes or effects of a phenomenon. Puzzled by a turn in a play we wonder what the connection is with what previously occurred. To understand a difficult passage in a philosophical argument, or perhaps worst of all, a set of instructions for assembling a child's toy, we re-read the earlier statements and read ahead a bit, to make sure we understand the meaning and implications. Frequently we understand the significance of a comment or unexplained incident when we think of it in the light of a previous discussion, or in connection with a later event. Then we get the point. A series of happenings assumes a meaningful form once a piece of previously unknown intelligence is revealed. Now we understand why this or

that. Bits of knowledge are threaded together to provide an explanation which reveals perhaps a causal relationship.

A single word may carry with it several possibilities of meaning. For example, a man who shouts "Out!" could be giving an umpire's decision in cricket, giving an order to leave a room, or answering a question about somebody's whereabouts. We look to the context, or structure of use, to pin down the meaning precisely. Furthermore the use of even one word in a meaningful way presumes a degree of language mastery which reflects the holistic nature of language. We cannot, it seems, do without intimations of a background structure even with reference to the meaningful use of a single word. The man's response becomes understandable once we are aware of the context.

Depending on the familiarity and complexity of the situation of interest, understanding will require a greater or a lesser degree of imaginative effort. If a problem situation is incomplete in respect of the details and relationships involved, the inquirer will have to imagine a configuration or structure that is completed in some way -- what other factors could be involved, how could they be related to the matter in hand? Bringing a fresh perspective, seeing new possibilities, breaking trammelled ways of thinking, asking insightful questions which shed light in a problem area are characteristics of the boundary breaker, evidence perhaps of an original mind at work. Knowledge is necessary to provide the conceptual background from which research questions can originate. Discoveries are made by knowledgeable inquirers. The original

thinker, however, can imagine solutions to hitherto unformulated questions. Because the applicability of rules is a matter, ultimately of a personal judgment -- an interpretive insight beyond the reach of rules -- we cannot make the judging procedure wholly explicit. We are unable to say just how, as individuals, we grasp the particular as an instance of the pattern: you see that it is.

The notion of understanding as the grasp of a structure consisting of interwoven or related factors is echoed in some of Wittgenstein's remarks concerning philosophical understanding. For Wittgenstein, a central task of philosophy, if not the central task, is to remove confusion surrounding our use of concepts. He notes that "A main source of our failure to understand [the logical structure of a concept] is that we do not command a clear view of our use of words" (Wittgenstein, 1974a:¶122). We do not manage to see the working of a concept, given in a word or words, in its many possible applications, all at once, at a single stroke. This is not surprising given the somewhat untidy nature of language. Concepts do not always function, or conform in all respects to essentially pristine definitions (see for example, Wittgenstein's discussion of "games" and "family resemblances", 1974a:65-67). Rather, as Baker and Hacker put it:

> The structure of our conceptual scheme is embedded in our dynamic linguistic practices, in the welter of grammatical rules and their methods of application which constitute the logical connections of language (1983:270-271).

To get an overall picture of a concept, a surview of the criteria or rules which govern its logically proper applications -- their necessary

linkages in the larger scheme of concepts, requires the careful plotting and describing of episodes of accepted usage. Philosophical investigations in Wittgenstein's view therefore, are conceptual investigations (see 1967:¶458). The task of philosophy is to describe the actual workings of language so that we can get clear about, not the whole scheme of language for that is too complex, but at least the bits we use. Philosophical understanding thus becomes a matter of getting clear about the necessary affiliations and disjunctions in the pattern of usage of an aspect of language we are interested in. But as Wittgenstein remarks:

> Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in 'seeing connexions'. Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate cases (1974a:¶122).

Getting a clear view may require some painstaking digging into a concept's social history. The necessary connections which subsist in the complex web of usage, similarities among various acceptable applications, recurrence of criteria, linkage with other expressions, points of overlap among "family resemblance" terms, might not be readily apparent or obviously consistent. Inventing imaginary situations to try out a concept in new ways can help reveal central, peripheral and perhaps logically absurd cases. Criteria can be tested, modified, accepted or rejected. Such "intermediate cases" permit a process of trial and error to be carried out by means of which the paradigmatic form (if there is one) may be determined, some confusions thereby dispelled, an understanding of the structure of the concept attained. The notion of structure in this case is

is presented as the pattern which characterizes the concept in its proper applications, i.e. the necessary and limiting criteria involved, and the relations with other concepts. We understand the concept when we get a clear view of its structure. Wittgenstein likens understanding a language to the understanding we get of a calculus once we learn its history or practical applications -- when we find a surveyable, rather than a strange or unfamiliar symbolism. "In this case" says Wittgenstein, "'to understand' means something like '"to take in as a whole"'" (1974b:40).

Thus far, in the present chapter, and in Chapter Two, I have tried to give a brief account of some of the salient aspects of the conceptual scheme which serves as the rules of understanding. Drawing largely from Wittgenstein, I noted that understanding takes place by means of applying concepts, and that we acquire abilities of application by being participating members of a cultural tradition. The rules for discriminating and relating our impressions are given to us a priori as our society's way of making sense of experience: a way of being in the world, but not necessarily the only way. I noted that an item's being understandable is indicative of its value as a focus of human interest. To be understandable an item must be counted as meaningful in the systematic way our concepts take it, and must present some kind of organized, or organizable pattern or whole. I drew attention to the paradigmatic expression of concepts in language (and here I include art, science, mathematics, etc., as forms of discourse which employ conceptual schemata -- although as I indicated in Chapter One, understanding works of art is not

entirely a conceptual matter) and I noted the holistic, and interpretive character of concepts. And lastly, I pointed to their self-contained character. This outline reveals a picture of a "framework" which we project on to our impressions, which we therefore approach with expectations at the ready, a framework which we learn to feel at home with, and by means of which reality is constituted for us.

I subsequently noted that a person possessing a concept expressed in ordinary language, is able to apply it in a rule-governed way (i.e. he or she can apply the criteria, which in effect constitute the concept), learned as part of a practice, such that he or she can pick out an aspect of experience as being an instance of a relevant kind of thing. But I noted also, that such an ability involved an element of judgment where a person can apply conceptual rules in a concrete situation. Judgment is guided by rules but judgment must at some point bridge the gap between the rules and the particular without reference to still more rules. I suggested that understanding could largely be accounted for as an ability to apply concepts to determine the elements and relations in an object of interest, or the affiliations of an object in a wider context. In several examples, understanding a proof, the logic of a concept, and others, I showed the importance of parts and relationships, of structure, including the background context from which any object of interest must emerge and connect.

We should, however, resist the temptation to think of a structure in any fixed sense. Wittgenstein posits the idea of understanding

a concept in terms of getting a clear view of its workings. of "seeing connexions", but here, structure is something dynamic and abstract -- a pattern established in rule-governed usage which reflects the regularity of certain criteria, and connections with other concepts. In other circumstances, the structure of a thing to be understood could be quite concrete as is the case with the workings of a car gearbox. In the case of a proof, the structure is logical in nature. In the case of an art work, a painting, which is a material thing, the structure we care about is the one constructed perceptually in terms of colours, shapes, tones, textures, and spatial relationships which may be organized according to certain schemata, i.e. common way of picturing things; or it may be entirely non-objective, simply a play of forms. Yet again, perhaps we know some of the details in a situation but cannot figure out how they relate. Here one thinks, for example, of a murder mystery in a novel or the pathology of a new disease. Also, understanding may focus not so much on the constitutive make-up of a thing though that is important, as on its wider implications and connections. We may want to understand, for example, the ramifications of a new law, how it has taken effect among the people involved. The important point to remember is that "structure" in an understanding context can assume diverse forms. Hence talk of improving understanding by reference to getting ". . . at the agent's ability to interrelate material, and to see larger connections between parts of the information supplied" (Moravcsik, 1979:210) must always be linked to specific forms of subject matter since attention to one area will not

necessarily develop ability in another. The ability to understand mathematical proofs will not for example, be developed along quite the same lines as the ability to understand the works of Shakespeare, even though both involve grasping elements and relationships. The caution then, for educators, is to avoid talking of understanding as a generalized ability to relate while being unconcerned with some specific material. If the ability to understand historical concepts is valued, then attention to the works and practices of historians will be needed. If the ability to understand philosophical thinking is required, then the study of philosophical works and practice at writing in the philosophical vein will be needed. If understanding as achievement is to be progressively attained and coherently ordered, material cannot be presented to students haphazardly without, that is, careful attention to the central concepts of a discipline organized in a logically relevant manner manner, with due attention to the intellectual capabilities of the students. Paul Hirst makes many similar points in his classic article "Liberal Education and the Nature of Knowledge" (1972). Though not without his critics, Hirst at least realizes that the acquisition of knowledge and understanding resulting in the development of mind, reminiscent of the Greek idea of paideia is a serious business that cannot be left to any old idiosyncratic way of proceeding.

Two writers on the subject of understanding helped me to bring my ideas into sharper focus. In a recent article R.L. Franklin says that we often speak of coming to understand "as fitting data together, of finding structure, or form, or order" (1983:310). We

notice, he says, "a pattern". As well, Franklin points to the notions of connecting and separating as running through our talk of understanding. Sometimes, he says:

> . . . to succeed in understanding is to make a whole out of what was previously fragmented, or disconnected; sometimes it is to divide what was previously confused. . . (Franklin, 1983:310).

More precisely he argues:

> If we consider something a whole without knowing its internal structure, to understand it will be to distinguish and relate its parts. . . . . If we consider it an element in a larger pattern, to understand will be to connect it with its context . . . (Franklin, 1983:310).

He illustrates these contentions with the example of a gearbox (which I borrowed above), i.e. we can understand its place and function in the system as a whole, or we can understand its internal working mechanism, as a separate component. He notes also that ". . . the two sorts of understanding typically reinforce each other" (Franklin, 1983:310-311). Franklin's account reflects quite closely the observations A.N. Whitehead made almost fifty years ago regarding understanding. In the first place, argues Whitehead,

> . . . understanding always involves the notion of composition . . . . If the thing to be understood be composite, the understanding of it can be in reference to its factors, and to their ways of interweaving so as to form that total thing (1938:63).

Whitehead says this is the "internal mode" of understanding. The "external mode", in Whitehead's view, ". . . is to treat the thing as a unity whether or no it be capable of analysis, and to obtain evidence as to its capacity for affecting its environment" (1938:63). In Franklin's terms we "connect it with its context". Furthermore,

to complete the correspondence, Whitehead states that "The two modes [of understanding] are reciprocal, either presupposes the other" (1938:63). For Franklin they "typically reinforce each other." Both writers posit the idea of a whole being analysed into its constituent parts and showing how the parts combine or relate to form the whole, and also of seeing the whole as an element connected to a larger context. We understand a part when we understand its place in a wider setting, we understand a whole when we understand how its parts are interrelated. Understanding thus reflects the systematic and holistic character of our system of language and concepts. Whatever we understand is embedded in, or emerges from a conceptualized background, or form of life. I would point out, however, as does Franklin, that the different constitutive natures of the things we can understand prohibits the articulation of a definition of understanding with respect to some constant or necessary kind of element, relation or kind of structure.

I now want to try to draw together the salient points of the discussion in order to ascertain what a person must be able to do, necessarily, in order to understand something. As I have repeated, understanding requires the possession of concepts. It is by means of concepts that we are able to distinguish and classify the thing to be understood, and to determine that it is logically possible for it to be understood. The subject must be able to judge that an item or aspect in question is an instance of this or that general concept. Furthermore the inquiring subject must be able to determine

what salient factors are involved and how they combine or relate to constitute the object of understanding. It is by means of applying concepts to distinguish the kinds of elements and relations involved that the structure of a thing is revealed and so can be grasped as a coherent whole. On the other hand, understanding may consist in being able to see a connection between some factor and a larger picture. Each focus of understanding necessarily presumes the other. Drawing upon the chess model once again, we understand a move in a game of chess when we relate it to the other moves that preceded it, and could follow. We understand the game when we understand the function of the pieces and how they can be made to work together, to defeat an opponent. A player needs what Whitehead calls the "internal" and the "external" understanding. But in addition, in order to approach the game with the right expectations, the prospective player must already have some understanding of the functions of games, diverse as these are. He or she will require some understanding of the purpose of rules and what it means to abide by them. In this way, the player sees the game of chess as belonging to a background of games activities; as part of the social institution of games playing.

The account given so far sees understanding proceeding according to conceptual rules. It is understanding in the rational, discursive sense and can be verified by attending to a person's linguistic responses, i.e. giving descriptions, explanations, using a word correctly, and to other kinds of performances -- pointing, drawing diagrams, solving problems etc. I do not suggest, however,

that concepts will be sufficient to guide our understanding in all circumstances. I do suggest that in all circumstances, understanding will necessarily proceed, at least in part, by applying concepts. Even where an object is in part ineffable, as is the case, for example, with the component of necessary or unanalysable uniqueness which is attached to persons and works of art, concepts are necessary to delimit the ineffable component. In the view of Petra von Morstein:

> We can make explicit the limits of the features constitutive of necessary uniqueness, but not their quality . . . . But a unique aspect of an experience is constitutive of the pattern that includes classifiable, conceptualizable factors: it is limited by conceptualizable factors . . . (1982:351).

I may not be able to analyze, or fully describe the necessarily unique and individually owned aspects of my grandmother's personality, which I grasp phenomenologically, but I do at least know that the personal quality in question belongs to my grandmother. Similarly, to appreciate the particular expression which pervades a piece of music will be to appreciate it in respect of its intrinsic qualities, not, that is, in accordance with general rules, even if the expression is to some extent metaphorically describable. For to some degree, the constitutive make-up of the expression will be uniquely owned by just <u>this</u> piece of music. Thus, while concepts guide the understanding in all circumstances, there may be ineffable aspects in individuals which elude conceptual understanding and which must be grasped intuitively as particulars not subsumable under rules.

I shall conclude this chapter by giving a general account of understanding in the mental ability sense I have been discussing.

First, I suggest that the term "order" be adopted to express the notion of parts related in a rule-governed manner. Anthony Savile distinguishes between the mere relatedness of the bits and pieces which happen to be scattered before him on a table, and which assume no particular dependency on one another, and the order found among the parts of his typewriter. The typewriter parts are ordered, Savile says:

> . . . in that their relations are explicable by reference to the place they have in the system that they help realize. Order thus implies relatedness, but not vice versa (1982:101).

I think the term "order" serves well to express the idea of parts related to form a structure we can understand, in both the internal and external senses of understanding (following Whitehead) -- the order created in a given whole, or the order established with respect to an element and a wider context. In either case, understanding proceeds by an ordering of factors which must, of course, have been previously distinguished. Depending upon the circumstances, it may be the case that the subject grasps the order already present in an object of interest -- as when one reads and understands a given mathematical proof, recipe, or philosophical analysis. Alternatively, if the situation is vaguely defined or otherwise unclear or inchoate the subject achieves understanding by establishing an order among the factors involved. To encompass these possibilities, I put forward the conceptualization that understanding is the ability to see or establish an order among the things which constitute a focus of interest by means of applying concepts. Simply put, and

with a change of grammar, understanding is the ability to order phenomena by means of concepts. However, as previously noted, while concepts may serve as rules which guide such ordering, to do the actual ordering, i.e. to distinguish and relate the factors of a particular situation, necessarily requires the personal ability to judge that certain rules do indeed apply or fit the given situation. I say "judge" to capture the logical point that no set of rules can fully determine its own applicability in the particular case. After explanations have been given, a person must ultimately judge, or interpret for himself that the concept fits the occasion or that the situation embodies a correct instantiation of the conceptual pattern. I shall explore this point more fully in the next chapter, but here I note in conclusion that understanding is the ability to order phenomena by means of conceptual judgment.[1]

Notes

1. This chapter was presented as a paper to the Annual Conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, June 4, 1986.

Chapter Four

UNDERSTANDING AND ITS RELATION TO KNOWLEDGE, INTERPRETATION, AND JUDGMENT

In this chapter I want to critically examine and clarify the nature of the relationship which pertains between understanding and the cognate concepts knowledge and interpretation. It will be my purpose to show how understanding differs logically from these closely related concepts. In addition, I shall address the point made previously, that understanding necessarily requires the exercise of a personal competence I have called "judgment" whereby concepts are connected appropriately to particular impressions.

Understanding and Knowledge

First, I reiterate that the concept of understanding I am working with is that analysed in the previous chapter as the ability to see or establish an order among the impressions which constitute a focus of interest by means of conceptual judgment. Put simply, understanding is the ability to order phenomena: to grasp or comprehend the relationships which pertain in a situation, or object of interest, or between an object and its wider context. Where the ability is successfully exercised, understanding in the form of an achievement results. Put this way, understanding is different from being able to state a knowledge of facts possessed as discrete items of information. Understanding requires us to relate relevant facts

into a suitably coherent pattern, and this is to go beyond mere knowledge of the facts themselves. Perhaps it can be argued that to know a fact in all but the most trivial of senses requires some minimal comprehension of the meaning of the terms in which the facts are expressed, i.e. to distinguish such knowing from a parroting of memorised responses. But aside from this, simply knowing a collection of facts would not count as understanding. If, however, the facts are organised to reveal significances, implications, or provide explanations, then such ordering would be the work of someone who understands. A student who knows that Edmonton is a city in Alberta, and knows also that Edmonton houses the legislature will not realise that Edmonton is also a capital city unless he or she knows the rule that a capital city houses the seat of government. If the student says Edmonton is a capital city because the legislature is located there, then he understands why Edmonton is a capital city. He also knows why it is so. The knowing and understanding are semantically equivalent in this context. But in either case, the student must make the right connections. Knowledge of the facts of the case is not to be confused with understanding or knowledge in the structured sense.

By being directed at aspects of order, or the attaining of a grasp of the structure of a situation, understanding requires the possession of concepts which serve as rules for distinguishing and relating the cognisable elements (facts) subsisting in the focus of interest. To be able to understand something a person needs the

kind of general conceptual knowledge which can function as rules. Such knowledge may be stated in propositional form but such knowledge is not in itself the same thing as understanding. An example may serve to illustrate this point.

A person who knows the theory of trigonometry will know that the various formulae, methods of computation, and tables of reference constitute a viable system for solving specific sorts of problems. The subject will know that trigonometry is a system for computing unknown angles and unknown sides of triangles using the known factors in a pre-formulated set of ratios which make use of reference tables. He or she will know what kinds of problem situations are amenable to the procedures of trigonometry. But such knowledge is not, in an inert state, the same thing as an understanding of trigonometry. If, however, a student is able to use such knowledge in reference to a concrete problem, i.e. pick out something as a problem possessing the relevant characteristics, and see which ratio of the three possible ratios is applicable in that situation, and effect a solution, then the student's knowledge is activated, applied in such a way that the problem is organised and solved. Knowledge of concepts is therefore necessary for understanding to occur, but the knowledge must be appropriately employed. A person must be able to use his knowledge in order to understand something. We might say that knowledge of the rules of trigonometry is a necessary but insufficient condition of understanding. A person might demonstrate his theoretical knowledge of trigonometry as a system, by explaining how trigonometry enables us to solve certain kinds of problems in certain ways. But even here the student's knowledge

of such details must be connected up and expressed in the correct theoretical order, such that the steps, as they are explained, make sense in terms of the aims of the system. And of course, understanding could be demonstrated by the student's being able to distinguish and solve the right kind of problems. We would accept the solving of problems without explanation as a criterion of understanding, but not vice versa, for it is the application of one's knowledge of principles or rules to particular instances that is the ultimate proving ground. The ability to see in a particular set of impressions the necessary instantiation of elements and the possibility of these elements being combined in the appropriate ratio which leads to the solving of the problem is what distinguishes knowledge of the rules from understanding. Thus, while a person's knowledge of the rules is necessary, a person can misunderstand, or fail to understand in the event, by misapplying the rules. A student who cannot solve problems with the required degree of consistency, i.e. in mathematics a problem is correctly worked out or it is not, and who responds to methodological questions by reciting definitions or by offering disconnected information about ratios and tables will likely lack the coherent understanding outlined above. Of course, pending the solving of actual problems, a good explanation of the rules of trigonometry would count as a criterion of understanding, but in this case, the criterion would be defeasible.

In another situation, with for example, the narrative of a novel, a student might show his understanding of a sequence of events by

giving an explanation of the protagonist's behaviour as depicted in the story. He or she might be asked to account for Henchard's (the mayor in The Mayor of Casterbridge) final decision to drown himself. The student must go beyond simply stating what happened and try to sympathetically account for Henchard's motivations, and responses to the chain of events Henchard himself set in motion. The student must try to give an interpretation of the significance of various incidents which led ultimately to Henchard's last desperate act. Such an interpretation would provide evidence of the student's grasp of the dynamic elements and relationships in the tragic story.

In the direct object construction, which is of interest in this thesis since I shall focus on the nature of understanding in relation to works of art in the next chapter, some distinction between knowledge and understanding can be maintained. It is possible for example, for a person to know a piece of music in the sense that he or she can correctly identify it when played. But such recognitional knowledge is short of understanding. A person might recognise a piece of music as being a performance of a violin concerto by Prokofiev and say as much. He knows the piece to identify it yet responds to someone's talk of the music's quality of "steely glitter" with a blank look and takes no further interest in the playing. He knows the piece by recognition, but from this brief encounter it seems unlikely that he understands it in the sense of caring to and being able to follow the unfolding rhythms, themes, harmonies and discords with eager anticipation such that the quality

of steely glitter can be heard as pervading the work. In a similar case, it is possible to know a person by her appearance without having a deeper feeling for her personal qualities. One could, of course, "get to know" the piece of music and the person better, and this would be suggestive of understanding. The knowing in these cases would, however, have to include an appraisal of the music's form, of its tonal and thematic relationships; and in the case of the person take note and get a feel for the complexities of a person's moods, attitudes, and behaviour as manifestations of a personal style. We might in these cases, speak of a knowing by acquaintance, a sort of direct grasping of an individual pattern (I shall discuss this point in more detail in the section on aesthetic understanding, in Chapter Six) as well as a knowing which is more readily statable and descriptive. But as is evident, the distinction between know and understand in these latter examples becomes blurred. In other circumstances, the distinction seems to disappear altogether.

It is when the circumstances of knowing go beyond the knowing of the facts of a case, or the knowing of conceptual rules, or recognitional knowledge and encompasses the knowing why or knowing how of states of affairs that the term "knowledge" becomes close or equivalent in meaning to understanding. For example, a person might know that her friend's marriage has broken up and the friend has left her husband. The observer might also know how the situation came to pass -- she knows the reasons why her friend moved out.

In this case, knowing why or knowing how could do duty for understanding why or how. In knowing why the marriage failed, or how the failure came to pass, the observer is able to piece together details of actions and other impinging events, which hindsight now suggests, may have usurped the stability of the household. The important elements of the situation are thus distinguished and connected to provide an explanation which causally links the chain of occurrences. Knowing why the marriage failed amounts to seeing a suitable order or pattern in the facts of the case, and this is to understand why the marriage failed. In this situation, the terms knowing how, and understanding how, would also be interchangeable.

What these points seem to come to is this: knowledge of facts and bits of information, and recognitional knowledge, in particular cases is not understanding, nor is the simple possession of general conceptual baggage, although to speak of knowing facts and rules in any intelligent sense is to suppose a person understands the meaning of the terms used to express facts and rules. In coming to understand something a person must be able to use his or her conceptual knowledge to distinguish, and relate, relevant facts and items of information into a coherent order. A person's understanding can be demonstrated in the form of an explanation or in the correct performance of a task. As I noted in Chapter One, however, our understanding of persons and works of art will be, in part, necessarily private, not amenable to conceptual analysis. Where we speak of knowing in situations which call for a grasp of structure, as in

knowing why and knowing how, such usages seem to be quite consistent with the notion of understanding.

Understanding and Interpretation

Before attempting to find the points of distinction between understanding and interpretation, I want to present in outline form, a current and in my view convincing account of the role of interpretation as a mental occurrence whereby a person makes out a meaning, rather than as the public explication of meaning. I shall attend to the latter sense later in the chapter.

Hirsch, the literary theorist, notes that an interpreter ". . . must first construe or understand a meaning before he explains it to others" (1976:19), and he distinguishes between the "prior activity" called "understanding" and the public "explication of meaning". But still, he argues in favour of using the term "interpretation" to fuse both functions because he says "they do go together wherever any representation is explicated" (Hirsch, 1976:19). So for Hirsch, "interpretation" refers to the prior understanding, and explication of a text. Of course, a reader often has to engage in what is also known as "interpretation" in order to first understand a text's meaning. And Hirsch, despite his stipulation, seems to employ the term in just this way. His use of the word "construe", and the account he gives of "understanding" certainly implies such a usage, as will become clear below. I feel justified therefore, in turning to Hirsch in order to throw some light on interpretation in the logically prior sense of determining the meaning of something.

For Hirsch ". . . linguistic interpretation follows a general pattern which governs our coming to cognitive terms with our world" (1976:32). Here the sense of interpretation seems to be the attaining of meaning, rather than the explication of meaning. The account Hirsch gives of interpretation mirrors that given by Gombrich in Art and Illusion regarding our perceptual interpretation of the visual world, including works of art, which I address in Chapter Six. Hirsch cites Gombrich as providing an instance of a general interpretive pattern which incorporates from a scientific perspective what Hirsch calls "the primary of the hypothesis" (1976:32). More pointedly, Hirsch observes that ". . . all cognition is analogous to interpretation in being based upon corrigible schemata, . . ." (1976:32). The "schemata", which he says we construct to allow us to understand "the stable self-identity of physical objects" (Hirsch, 1976:31), despite the partial and differing spatial perspectives we have of them, correspond he says ". . . very closely with what we call meanings in our linguistic experience" (Hirsch, 1976:31). This means I think, that in the first place, we must possess models or concepts to which the differing views of physical objects can be related, in order for them to be judged perceptions of the same sort of thing. In the case of language, we must be in possession of a range of possible word meanings to be able to construct corrigible schemata or textual meanings. In order to figure out the meaning of a text we must have some prior knowledge of the rules of language use as a basis for our assumptions. A key point in Hirsch's argument seems to be that "A schema sets up a range of predictions or

expectations, which if fulfilled confirms the schema, but if not fulfilled causes us to revise it" (Hirsch, 1976:32). I take Hirsch to be saying that in our reception of speech and textual material, we respond to words and expressions in a state of readiness due to our knowledge of word meanings such that we are able to project or construct a likely or hypothetical textual meaning which seems initially feasible, but which may, on further consideration need to be revised; if that is, our initial assumptions are upset by further factors or relationships we see in the text which are inconsistent with the meaning thus far postulated. Hirsch goes on to argue that the "universality" of this "making-matching" process and of corrigible schemata ("making-matching" is a key expression in Gombrich's (1969) account) ". . . in all domains of language and thought suggests that the process of understanding is itself a process of validation" (1976:33). To understand, therefore, seems to mean on this analysis, to make a valid interpretation. The schema or constructed meaning is made to conform with the cues given in the text. Understanding is seen by Hirsch to be a ". . . validating, self-correcting process -- an active positing of corrigible schemata which we test and modify in the very process of coming to understand an utterance" (1976:34). The process of validation, which can otherwise be thought of as interpretation in the construing sense, is not easily separated from the concept of understanding outlined above, Hirsch now argues. We understand, it seems, by making a trial shot at grasping the meaning of something -- by setting and testing hypothetical meanings

which may stand, or need to be revised in the light of our experience with the text.

Read in conjunction with Gombrich's explanation of visual perception, to which I shall refer in the next chapter, I find Hirsch's "validation of corrigible schemata" account of linguistic interpretation which evolves into an account of understanding, quite convincing. Given the ambiguities and vaguenesses which are an irredeemable aspect of language use, the account of interpretation as tentative, probing, testing, has the force of necessity. We should remember, however, that for Hirsch, cognitive meaning is authorial meaning. i.e. what the author intended the work to mean at the time of writing. Inasmuch as readers and critics may make a number of different and yet valid interpretations over time, such interpretations elicit "significances" (see Hirsch, 1976:2-3) and these may be different from what the work meant to the author. Eagleton (1983) notes of Hirsch's distinction, i.e. between meaning and significance, that it is clear that a modern production of Macbeth made relevant to nuclear warfare could never be what Macbeth means from Shakespeare's viewpoint. Nevertheless, Eagleton argues that the distinction cannot be maintained in an absolute sense. It is not possible, says Eagleton, to completely distinguish between what the text means, and what it means to me for:

> My account of what Macbeth might have meant in the cultural conditions of its time is still my account, inescapably influenced by my own language and frames of cultural reference . . . . The meaning of language is a social matter: there is a real sense in which language belongs to my society before it belongs to me (1983:70-71).

I shall assume that the meaning of a text, play, work of art, is the meaning legitimately elicited by generations of readers even if, as does happen, works are subject to successive and different interpretations. I shall address the question of the artist's intentions more directly in Chapters Five and Six.

Before proceeding to outline some distinctions between understanding and interpretation, it is reasonable to wonder why interpretation in both senses, i.e. the construal, and explication of meaning, is necessary. If the cultural objects and texts which we focus on, with the aim of understanding them, gave no problems with regard to consistency and determinateness of meaning there would be little need for interpretive activity in gaining understanding, or for expert explications to aid other readers' understanding. But of course, this is not the case. We speak of interpretation when a text or situation may be taken in a number of ways. In terms of my analysis of understanding, we may see different possible meanings in the intentional object and have to judge which is the most appropriate. Or it may be the case that no obvious order or meaning is forthcoming so we must interpret the text in Hirsch's hypothetical validating sense to try to determine a coherent meaning. I want to illustrate the inherent interpretability of textual material (taken in the broad sense of speech, written material, film, visual art, etc.) by focusing on an aspect of Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, itself subject to much interpretation.

The interpretation of Wittgenstein's texts, in the public sense

of exegesis, is a minor industry in philosophy. Writers do, of course, advance reasons why a favoured view should be considered as correct, or more defensible and perspicuous than others. The plethora of attempts to explain, for example, the Philosophical Investigations highlights the point that readers, even expert ones, do not always agree about its meaning, or implications. There may be a number of reasons for such disagreements. Wittgenstein favours a somewhat enigmatic and fragmentary style of writing which issues in rather terse, unqualified statements. And language use, in any case is fraught with ambiguities, lapses in logic, and instances of indeterminacy in the sense that we cannot always be certain whether an expression means one thing or another, or just what it does mean in a given context. We interpret the meaning in a text when we try to ascertain an internally consistent and logically justified reading, and in so doing, we gradually eliminate other, weaker hypotheses we might have formed. In the role of critic we would try to explain to others the meaning we have justifably (in our view), elicited from the text.

Interestingly, and by way of example, Baker and Hacker criticise a view they say is sometimes attributed to Wittgenstein's Philosophical Investigations, namely that "every expression is necessarily vague to some degree" (1983:217). If this were true then we might never reach a satisfactory understanding -- there would only be interpretations. Baker and Hacker argue that the correct interpretation of vagueness, attributable to Wittgenstein is that ". . . there is no

such thing as an explanation that forestalls every possible doubt about how to apply an expression" (1983:225). If all expressions are necessarily vague to some extent, say Baker and Hacker, there would be no point in calling an expression "vague" in the sense that a vague term is one where there is "significant disagreement" about its correct forms of use. The term "vague" would be deprived of meaning. A vague explanation of a term's use is defective only in the light of more precise explanations. But Baker and Hacker further argue that a term's lacking determinacy of sense (thus contributing to the need for interpretation) is different from vagueness. A term's lack of determinacy is rather, say Baker and Hacker:

> . . . the possibility of there being irresolvable disagreements in judgments about its applicability (what Waismann christened 'open texture'). The crucial point is that an expression may be indeterminate in sense and not be vague; i.e. that 'open texture' is compatible with agreements in judgments (1983:218).

I take it then, that while the term "work of art" lacks a fully determinate sense, i.e. it is "open textured" in that new works may challenge present practice in applying it -- problematic borderline cases can always crop up -- when we call the Mona Lisa a work of art, the term is not vague in its sense. The Mona Lisa has come to be seen as a paradigmatic example of a work of art.

Baker and Hacker claim that their criticism of the faulty interpretation, in the light of their "correct interpretation" will help us to understand Wittgenstein's conception of meaning (see 1983:217-227). Whether or not their view is correct (I think it is), is a moot point.

We cannot rule out further possible interpretations in a work of this depth and complexity. If however, these arguments prove sufficiently convincing to Wittgenstein' : scholars, then perhaps Baker's and Hacker's interpretation would be considered canonical, and hence represent the way Wittgenstein should be understood on this point.

As the above discussions show, our understanding does not always proceed automatically. We may have to follow this or that possibility, test and refine a tentative meaning which we construct, in relation to the overall context, before we achieve an understanding. Even then we may discover that we only thought we understood; further reflection in the light of a hitherto unrealised connection or possible meaning may show that our understanding was only partial, or that we had, in some respect, misunderstood a passage. But whether we are observing an incident in the street, reading a set of instructions, or viewing a work of art, in labouring to find a coherent meaning, we are engaged in interpretation, in one sense of that term; the other sense being reflected when we explain what we understand. It is true that in many day-to-day situations we just grasp what is said, or understand what we observe, without consciously pausing for thought. Here, we do not think so much of interpretation -- we just seem to understand. When, however, several interpretations of the same thing are possible, as with, for example, Wittgenstein's duck/rabbit picture, then whatever we see (successfully) is under this or that interpretation (see Wittgenstein,

1974a:section xi). Our seeing the duck or the rabbit is an interpretive-seeing. The picture can be seen as a duck or a rabbit, but not in both aspects at the same time. To see either aspect or animal configuration, a viewer needs the appropriate duck or rabbit schema. A viewer suitably employs his visual knowledge of rabbits and ducks, and the ways in which these things are depicted, in order to see the configurations as instances of these concepts. In Hirsch's terms, the schema the viewer constructs matches the configuration. If we ask a viewer what he sees, and he says "I see a picture of a rabbit" (but not a picture of a duck) we conclude that he sees the picture as a rabbit picture -- he makes the rabbit interpretation. The viewer, however, might think he just sees what there is to see, rather than seeing-by-interpreting. It might be reasonable to say in this case, that the viewer understands the picture by interpreting it as a picture of a rabbit. Since the picture is strictly indeterminate as between its ambiguous possibilities, there is no one correct interpretation. More generally, and following Hirsch, it seems that we reach an understanding of texts that are rich in meaning by interpreting them, i.e. by constructing meanings or schemata to fit the occasion.

With these preliminary forays in mind I shall now try to point out some distinctions between understanding and interpretation in its prior, construing sense. To begin with let us consider the following example. In the State of Oregon, a usual type of road sign reads "Basic Speed 55 m.p.h." A motorist reads the sign,

drives at that speed and is given a speeding ticket. The policeman explains to the puzzled driver: "Fifty-five m.p.h. is the recommended speed for normal conditions. It is raining so you should have slowed down." The driver interpreted the sign but did not understand it, either through lack of knowledge, i.e. by coming from another state he was unaware of the rules, which must be applied when one reads and acts on the sign, or if not that, then possibly by a failure of judgment -- by wrongly applying the rules in this case. The rules could be summarised thus: Fifty-five m.p.h. is the optimum speed for normal driving conditions. You may increase your speed by up to five m.p.h. in excellent conditions, and you must reduce speed by the rate required for safe driving in poorer than normal conditions. Your judgment is deemed appropriate by the accepted standards of safe driving practice, i.e. not too fast, not too slow, taking fifty-five m.p.h. as the norm. If the driver had correctly interpreted the sign, as demonstrated by his acceptable driving behaviour, we would say that he understood the sign. As it turned out, the driver's interpretation was incorrect, he misinterpreted and hence misunderstood the sign. We would not say he understood the sign but got the meaning wrong. When we say someone understands something, there is the connotation that the person got the "message" or meaning right, i.e. he or she understands correctly according to some standard or criterion. We tend to speak of "my interpretation", or "my understanding" to

suggest a degree of tentativeness or uncertainty. But the third person locution "he understands X" is not semantically equivalent to "he has interpreted X". Interpretations can be inaccurate, or mistaken, as the case of the driver above shows. As Wittgenstein observes "When we interpret we form hypotheses which may prove faulty" (1974a:212). It may be of course, that in some cases, interpretation is ongoing, never final or definitive. As I shall show in Chapter Six, works of art are problematic in this respect, and may with the passage of time sustain further interpretations, in both senses discussed so far. Arguably, if works of art are open to future possible orderings or interpretations, understanding is never final, complete for all times. However, I leave further discussion on this point until later.

The terms "understanding" and "interpretation" are closely related conceptually in that interpretation -- in the hypothetical, validating sense -- facilitates understanding. Understanding as an achievement of mind is frequently, in effect, the best interpretation, according to compelling reasons and textual evidence. Nevertheless, some distinction can be maintained between the two concepts by noting that interpretive hypotheses may be wrong, i.e. we may interpret but misunderstand, and by arguing, like Wittgenstein does, that "Before I understand, several interpretations, several explanations may pass through my mind, and then I decide on one of them" (1974b:46). There may be several interpretations in a situation, but only one correct understanding. But importantly, Wittgenstein points out that:

> Of course sometimes I do interpret signs, give signs an interpretation; but that does not happen every time I understand a sign. (If someone asks me "What time is it?" There is no inner process of laborious interpretation; I simply react to what I see and hear. If someone whips out a knife at me, I do not say "I interpret that as a threat".) (1974b:47).

When understanding proceeds unhindered, the notion of interpretation as the conscious testing of possibilities is inappropriate. In the everyday use of language we understand one another reasonably well. If every utterance were to be variously interpreted the business of life would be thrown into chaos. Often as not, participants in the to and fro of conversation just share the same interpretations without needing to explain their meanings. In such cases, we more naturally speak of understanding, rather than interpretation.

When we engage in interpretation in the more public sense of explaining the meaning of something for the benefit of others, for example: a literary text, a series of historical events, a person's behaviour, some findings in experimental physics, then a distinction can easily be made between a person's understanding and the verbal statements which issue in the course of explaining what is understood. As I mentioned earlier, Hirsch points out that a person must first understand a meaning before he or she can explain it or interpret it publicly for the benefit of others. The understanding we attain of some object is different from the public analysis of what is understood. Interpretation as explication is conceptually distinct from either the prior goings on of understanding or the achievement of understanding. But a more interesting question which may be

asked at this point is this: is it the case that the difference between the understanding of meaning of what is understood, and the public interpretation of meaning is just that understanding occurs in the mental realm whereas interpretation is a making public of what is understood? In some cases, perhaps it is. If a student is explaining in his own words a passage from a science text covering the workings of the public water system for example, then provided the explanation shows how the relevant factors in the system function together the teacher would accept the explanation as a criterion of understanding. The student would have publicised his understanding of the text's meaning by giving his interpretation of it, which is, by the teacher's judgment, a correct interpretation. I see no reason in this case to assume that the meaning understood cannot be made explicit. Since the text is given in general discursive terms the student's understanding of meaning can be discursively explained, or interpreted. But the correspondence between what is understood and what comes out in the verbal interpretation is not complete for what cannot be made explicit is the personal element of judgment which is exercised in coming to understand the text. In order to understand the meaning of the text the student must construct the relevant schema, see this meaning as the proper one. The student must judge that a schema matches or captures a textual meaning. Ultimately, the appropriateness of the textual meaning elicited involves an element of personal judgment whose function it is to interpret the applicability of the posited schema. As I shall argue below, the element of judgment which is

at work in all cases of understanding (including aesthetic understanding) -- i.e. a personal competence exclusive of the governance of rules -- means that a person's achievement of understanding will, in part, elude explicit interpretation.

But besides this factor, which remains to be discussed, there are other reasons for arguing that a person's understanding may not be fully explicated. And I am thinking here of our understanding of works of art which is of particular interest in this thesis. In our response to art we may grasp qualities of mood, form, and feeling which we cannot fully describe. As I noted in Chapter One, the unique constitutive make-up of the expressive qualities of works of art resists conceptual analysis. Understanding is direct, intuitive. Our grasp of such qualities is in part, necessarily private, and hence elusive, on logical grounds, of complete public explication. Wittgenstein pertinently asks in this regard "Is there a difference of meaning that can be explained and another that does not come out in an explanation?" (1967:¶156). By way of answering the question he observes "Soulful expression in music - this cannot be recognised by rules" (1967:¶157). This remark is reminiscent of Mikel Dufrenne's comment which I referred to in Chapter One, i.e. expressive qualities are "undecomposable". We cannot isolate the factors and explain how they combine to constitute a work of art's expression which must be grasped as a whole. In the case of "soulful expression" in a piece of music, during the playing , if you are a sensitive listener, you just grasp it. We become aware of the expression by first-hand

acquaintance -- as we do analogously of the pervasive style of a friend's personality. It is directly "felt" rather than cognitively apprehended. Our grasp of such qualities is difficult to put into words. I shall focus specifically on non-discursive aesthetic qualities in the next chapter. Also, with highly abstract works of visual art it may be difficult to explain what is meaningfully experienced. Consider for example, the non-representational "action paintings" of Jackson Pollock. Even if a critic explains that Pollock's paintings are to be seen as the record of the creating process rather than as intended statements (see Gardner, 1970:727-728) what we understand of a work so bereft of anything recognisable may amount simply to a grasp of the logic of the work's form or structure, which cannot be readily translated into words. There is no "content" in the usual iconographic sense of that word; the viewer can only attend to the work's colourful configuration, as it presents itself. Critical statements can hardly serve to accurately evoke the phenomenological understanding one gains of the work itself. But even with respect to a poem (or other work of literature), which is at least constructed using the words of a common language, no interpretation can convey the meaning it manifests in its original format. "Do not forget that a poem," says Wittgenstein, "even though it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information" (1967:¶160), as a science textbook is, for example. The poem has the structure of word meanings that it has; to understand its meaning requires that we respect the integrity of

its form. No doubt critics can issue perspicuous and insightful statements, read passages with enlightening emphasis and feeling, or translate a line into other imaginative terms which hint at the original meaning. And such acts may very well lead others to a better understanding of a work. But these activities are to be distinguished from the first-hand grasp of meaning which a personal reading of the poem inspires. The understanding a person reaches of the individually owned meaning of a work of art cannot it seems, be straightforwardly translated into explicatory public statements which correspond directly with what is personally understood. A person's understanding in these circumstances cannot be made completely explicit. I think that the arguments I shall put forward in connection with aesthetic understanding in Chapter Six, will reinforce this point. As I shall go on to argue below, the element of judgment which is at work in all cases of understanding means that a person's own achievement of understanding will necessarily elude explicit interpretation to some extent.

Summarising the discussion so far: In this thesis, understanding is seen as the ability to grasp the structure or rule-governed order of a situation. Success in this endeavour results in the outcome or attainment of understanding. In cases where understanding is not straightforward, where there are ambiguities, where terms are vague in meaning, in short, where meaning is unclear, we speak of interpretation. I accepted as being logically correct, Hirsch's account of interpretation as the tentative, hypothetical positing of (linguistic)

meanings which are tested and modified in response to textual cues, in the course of attempting to understand something. Interpretation we may say, is the construal or making out of meaning where several meanings are possible or where a clear consistent meaning is elusive or obscure. While understanding and interpretation are closely allied, (indeed my task is made difficult due to the recent tendency to simply conflate the two terms, as Hirsch does) the two concepts may be distinguished in important respects. We might, for example, interpret something, as did the Oregon driver, and be mistaken. To interpret a situation does not mean we necessarily understand it. Our interpretive hypothesis may be false, as Wittgenstein points out. In the case of understanding however, there is the conceptual requirement -- reflected in Wittgenstein's analysis of the criteria of understanding outlined in Chapter One -- that the subject understands correctly. One cannot, logically, understand something but be wrong about it. Struggling to understand something may be called interpreting, and the reader will ultimately opt for the most compelling interpretation as the way the text is to be understood. The reader's acceptance of an interpretation may be later found to be inaccurate or false in certain respects showing that he misunderstood after all. Where a personal interpretation is made public, explained to others and is judged to be valid on the basis of reference to the text, the force of argument, and respected critical agreement, then such an interpretation is at the same time, the way the text is properly understood. We start to interpret,

look to alternatives, read something in a different light, find new implications and relationships where the going is less certain, where the achievement of understanding is, to some extent, blocked. But while there may be several feasible interpretations of the same thing, we do not speak, similarly, of several possible understandings. The achievement of understanding carries the force of truth. Also, where understanding just immediately occurs, as with Wittgenstein's knife example, we react without conscious interpretive effort.

The term "interpretation" can never function in a straight swap for "understanding" in the senses outlined. I am not concerned here with the expressions "my interpretation" or "my understanding" which both suggest a degree of tentativeness. I am concerned with the notion of understanding as the correct attainment of meaning. Strictly speaking, a person who is engaged in interpreting a text in the prior, construing sense would not be busy understanding it (though he might indeed be making the right moves) for that remains to be seen. Rather, we might say, he would be trying to understand it. Even where a prior interpretation, in the construing sense, comes to be counted as the understanding achieved, we should have to make the qualification "valid" interpretation. We would say, on the grounds of a person's public utterance, he has interpreted "correctly" to mean he understands. The two terms, it seems, are never completely congruent.

Turning to the public, explicating sense of interpretation: Understanding is prior to and distinct from statements which make

public what is understood. Logically a person must understand what he is to explain if what he explains is his understanding. In other circumstances a person might explain his own interpretation of a textual meaning which later proves to be mistaken. In this case however the distinction being drawn is that between what is understood and what comes out in explanation of such understanding. It is a further and more complicated question to what degree we can articulate what we understand. I have argued that a tacit component of judgment, a personal competency which functions outside the governance of rules, militates against a complete correspondence between meaning understood, and meaning explained. This point however, is tentative as yet, requiring further discussion in the next section. There is also the point that a work of art is not translatable inasmuch as we attend to what is individually and uniquely made manifest. A work of art just is the object that it is; with respect to its own uniquely constituted qualities it cannot be interpreted without some loss or distortion of meaning. My arguments concerning aesthetic understanding in Chapter Six should serve to make this clearer.

The relation of understanding and interpretation, in both senses discussed, is complex, and at times these concepts run closely together. Nevertheless, sufficient points of distinction may be drawn to avoid conflating the two notions.

Understanding and Judgment

I have made several references in the preceding pages to a

tacit component -- a personal element of judgment -- necessarily at work in the achievement of understanding. I noted that while a person may require a knowledge of conceptual rules or criteria to guide the understanding of a situation, in practice understanding does not run automatically from a mere possession of such knowledge. Ultimately, each person must just "see" for himself or herself that certain concepts rather than others must be invoked to correctly characterise a situation, and this requires the understanding subject to exercise a personal element of judgment which cannot itself be guided by yet more rules. Thus, while some students, for example, may acquire sufficient knowledge to be able to match a list of words with their definitions in a vocabulary test, or to satisfactorily recite the principles of load and stress in post and beam arrangements, or state examples of moral precepts, it requires a further step and the aid of a personal competence to use words correctly in an unrehearsed conversation, or to incorporate a soundly designed post and beam arrangement in a construction project, or to decide on a course of action given the dynamics of an actual moral dilemma. There is a logical gap between a person's conceptual knowledge -- the general rules which govern his seeing a situation in this way or that, or as being of a certain kind -- and the actual conceiving of a situation in terms of those rules. And being able to state word definitions, engineering principles, moral precepts, etc. does not ensure that such conceptual knowledge will be properly invoked. I have been guided in my choice of the term "judgment"

to indicate that understanding is to some degree, an art, by a famous passage in the Critique of Pure Reason. Kant notes that "understanding" is the faculty of rules. Rules are concepts. And judgment, says Kant is the faculty of ". . . subsuming under rules; that is of distinguishing whether something does or does not stand under a given rule . . . (1933:A132,B171). By means of "judgment" we are able to determine the nature of our impressions, to see something as a so and so. But the crucial point follows when Kant goes on to say:

> If it is sought to give general instructions how we are to subsume under these rules, that is to distinguish whether something does or does not come under them, that could only be by means of another rule. This in turn, for the very reason that it is a rule, again demands guidance from judgment. And thus it appears that, though understanding is capable of being instructed, and of being equipped with rules, judgment is a peculiar talent which can be practised only, and cannot be taught. It is the specific quality of so-called mother-wit; and its lack no school can make good (1933:A133,B172).

Conceptual rules and their applications can be explained up to a point. Reasons can be given to show why an object is an object of a certain kind. But strictly, this amounts to making the rules or criteria (for the use of an expression) explicit. After showing a child, for example, that a creature has the necessary qualifications to be called a dog, it then becomes a matter for the child to make the connection and indeed to recognise other, and perhaps somewhat different-looking dog-creatures.

In all cases where we seek to understand, we must at some point be able to just grasp that the object of interest is conceivable

or explainable in terms of such and such factors and relationships, or that an object connects with a wider range of elements in certain ways. This must be the case or we should be subject to an infinite regress: always appealing to one more set of rules for guidance in interpreting the current set. But beyond the criteria which govern our conceiving of a situation in this or that way, there are no supra rules which may be appealed to in cases of doubt to guide the applicability of a subsidiary set of rules in a particular case. Applicability may be disputed, but such disputes cannot be settled by appeal to a higher court. Hence it becomes a matter of logical necessity that each person must be able to grasp the propriety of using concepts in a given set of circumstances according to the logic of the concepts themselves. Criteria must eventually be seen to match the circumstances without further ado. And here, according to Kant, is where the "peculiar talent" of judgment comes in. But by being a matter for each individual to make good on, in absence of guidance from yet more rules, this judgment cannot be discursively analysed. It is rather, a private, subjective competence: the art in understanding. We cannot know, in the individual case just how this subjective competence is constituted or exercised; we just know that it somehow bridges the gap between rules and impressions.

On an educational note, if as Kant says, judgment is a personal talent which can be exercised but not taught, we have to assume that judgment can at least be attuned to the demands of our culture, for without agreement in judgments there could be no regularity in

our lives. In this sense, a person's judgment can perhaps be refined and developed by practice and experience in a social world. To develop the judging capacity in their students, teachers will have to create the conditions which require the exercise of judgment, and then evaluate and discuss the products of such judging. Clearly there is a place for teaching by means of examples and exercises. Some rule or principle is taught, say in mathematics, and questions are supplied which exemplify or embody the rule in question. Students employ their knowledge to solve problems in the appropriate manner. But as Kant points out, while such examples may serve to sharpen the judgment "Correctness and precision of intellectual insight, on the other hand, they more usually somewhat impair" Kant, 1933:A134,B173). Examples, says Kant, rarely fulfil the requirements of the rule and they weaken the effort required to understand the universality of application, outside of such set experiences. Thus, it becomes especially important that students try their hands at solving their own self-generated problems and teachers construct imaginative and unorthodox problem situations for students to work on in an unaided fashion. While Kant goes on to say that those lacking in natural talent can never dispense with examples, i.e. can only appreciate the applicability of the rules in certain model situations, it goes without saying that the teacher must provide opportunities for the exercise and development of judgment in as free and wide-ranging a manner as each child can manage. The pedagogical point remains however, that such competence can be

practised, exercised, but not specifically taught or examined, and such exercise is a matter for the student, No matter what directions, or explanations, or problem cases a teacher provides, the student must act upon them, see the relevance of rules in the concrete situation.

In the light of these remarks concerning the tacit element of judgment, the suggestions I made in the previous section, that a verbal explication or interpretation cannot serve to straightforwardly publicise the achievement of understanding seen to be sustained. Interestingly, Kurt Mueller-Vollmer, writing in the context of literary theory draws a distinction between understanding and interpretation by arguing for a personal factor akin to "judgment" discussed above. Mueller-Vollmer asserts that:

> No explication or exegesis of textual meanings ever replaces these or my understanding of them. For example, the concretization of a literary text through acts of understanding is one thing; the critic's statements about these acts or what is constituted through them, quite another. (1983:48).

This writer is suggesting that a person's experience in constructing the meaning of a text is not equatable with critical statements he might go on to make concerning the how and the what of understanding. The rationale for claiming such a distinction between the concepts of understanding and interpretation rests in Mueller-Vollmer's view that the understanding of complex verbal expressions requires a tacit, interpretive component he calls "hermeneutic competence". This special competence is acquired, says Mueller-Vollmer, by being a member of a cultural group; by gaining understanding ". . . of

the language, customs, literary codes, and conventions of that culture . . ." (1983:58), and by being a student of literature. Talking about how one achieves understanding is not the same thing, made public, as the personal achievement of understanding, because in giving an interpretation, the critic, says Mueller-Vollmer, takes a reflexive stance towards the how and the what of his understanding. I assume therefore, that if a critic's task is to explain to others how they might approach a text and understand it as he does, then by virtue of the hermeneutic component, his explication will never be quite equal to the task. One's understanding of a piece of prose which requires the tacit component to help concretise the meaning, i.e. interpret the text according to one's knowledge of word meanings, rules of grammar etc. cannot therefore be fully expressed in critical statements.

Bearing in mind the role of judgment in coming to understand something, and recognising the distinction between understanding, knowledge, and interpretation I turn now to examine arguments concerning the understanding and interpretation of works of art from the past which should serve to illustrate, in a particular case, some of the difficulties involved in using these concepts.

Chapter Five

A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ANTHONY SAVILE'S HISTORICIST THESIS

A recognised feature of the art education curriculum as it is found in Canada and elsewhere, is the requirement that students be brought into contact with great art of the past, either in the original, or through the media of slides, prints, etc., -- with the aim that they come to understand and value it. But given the differences between our modern outlook and the cultural biases of the earlier ages, special difficulties attach to this teaching task. The teacher may wonder what perceptual perspective is appropriate for a given work. Should the art work be viewed as was originally intended by its maker, or is it legitimate to view the work, influenced by our own preoccupations and predispositions? The views expressed in Anthony Savile's version of the historicist thesis and my critical analysis of them are pertinent to securing an answer to the teacher's questions.

Briefly, Savile argues that for art works to pass the test of time, a sign of their excellence, they must be understood in the light of the concepts and values relative to the period of their inception. Importing ideas not yet conceived, or in currency at the time into the understanding and interpretation (explication) of artefacts from the past is to exceed the bounds of what was logically possible for that age to consider, and consequently could play no part in the formulation of its motivations and actions. The upshot

of Savile's view is that the modern viewer should strive to respond to an art work in a manner which respects the aesthetic norms used by the artist and seek to shed the cultural impedimenta of his own later age. Furthermore, Savile holds that every work affords a "canonical interpretation" deriving from the work's receiving a full or "replete understanding" of the artist's intentions which are couched in a publicly accessible form, according to rules known to artist and audience of the time.

Plainly enough, art works are produced under particular historical circumstances, and what they "say" will be presented in terms which reflect the cultural norms of the age. Yet there are problems associated with the historicist position, and Savile's version of it. Rather than reproduce all of Savile's subtle and complex arguments in detail I shall elucidate and criticis two tenets of his thesis, and in so doing, suggest a logically defensible alternative for the viewing art teacher. The two tenets in question are that when viewing art works from the past a student can transcend his modern mental set, and that for each work there is a one right "canonical" or "optimal" interpretation secure for all time.

The Intransigence of Mental Set

Savile is anxious to secure a central role for the artist's intentions, in respect of understanding works of art. He writes ". . . the features of art that give rise to historicism are those deriving from identification of works of art by reference to their authors' minds, . . ." (Savile, 1982:270), and, "It is this we depend

on in thinking of art as something to be understood, . . . (Savile, 1982:270). In Savile's view, for a work to be understood by reference to an artist's mind we must understand the work as the artist intended, respecting therefore, the cultural constraints of the period in which it was produced. But in the "autonomous" (Savile, 1982:42) view of art, as language and cultural outlook change over time, so inevitably does the interpretation a particular work inspires. In the autonomous view, as Savile puts it,

> . . . the way in which we see and understand signs, and the interpretations we find them able to bear, depend on the mental set we bring to them. This set itself depends on the total set of beliefs and dispositions we happen to have at the time (1982:43).

Consequently, the interpretation a work inspires is bound to change as the later audience is encumbered by beliefs and dispositions that post-date the work. On this view, thinks Savile, we become "creatures of our present mental set" (1982:44), and as such, are denied access to past traditions as they were lived. We are unable to experience a work as could the artist's intended audience, hence the historicist conception becomes increasingly unattainable, unless we can transcend our modern mental set. Savile argues, however, that while the interpretation of a poem or painting ". . . is usually well thought of as a case of aspect-perception, of taking the signs in a particular way" (1982:44), and so is dependent on mental sets, ". . . we can ourselves" he says, "do something by way of selecting or changing those mental sets" (1982:44) largely by discounting or including considerations in our interpretation which were, or were not, relevant

at that time. In this regard Savile says ". . . our will does have a certain empire over our perceptions: (1982:44).

Obviously it is crucial for Savile's case that the modern viewer should be able to respond to say, the temple of Athene Nike, as the architect intended that the aristocrat of fifth century (B.C.) Athens should, or to bring to the viewing of a church wall-painting by Giotto, the religious and artistic suppositions of a citizen of early fourteenth-century Padua. And the ability to do these things goes beyond incorporating or discounting considerations into, or from our own outlook, difficult as that may turn out to be. It may require that we select and adopt a mental set with very little in common with our own. Rather than address all of Savile's arguments I shall focus on the proposition which underpins and is necessary to his view, namely that we can change our mental sets to suit the occasion. I shall argue that on a priori grounds, it is not possible to take a point of view strictly outside one's own culturally biased mental set, which will necessarily pervade and engender whatever understanding we can come to.

If we think of mental set as an outlook determined by our living in a particular cultural environment, then by virtue of the concepts, habits, customs, ways of doing things, which we learn and make our own, we shall approach the world with ready expectations. It is not as if a mental set is something we can just opt for or disengage ourselves from. Mental set is acquired by living in a particular society and participating in its social practices. It determines

a priori the way we see the world. As I noted in Chapter Two, Wittgenstein pertinently remarks "What has to be accepted, the given, is -- so one could say -- forms of life (1974a:¶199). For Wittgenstein, ". . . the speaking of a language is part of an activity, or a form of life" (1974a:¶23). Forms of life I would suggest, are not simply the kinds of activities a society engages in, rather they should be thought of as the ways in which a society's activities are socially transacted. All societies have language, but the different patterns of usage amount to different ways of being in the world. Wittgenstein's "forms" require that there be activities, but "form" cannot be identified separately from a particular activity. Importantly, what distinguishes, and perhaps separates people of different eras and cultures are not the different activities they engage in, though of course that does enter into it, and indeed some activities such as using a language are trans-cultural, but what may be called "cultural styles" (Gier, 1981:27).

The various social activities which constitute forms of life, such as speaking a language, playing games, making and responding to art, are, to some extent, rule-governed activities we engage in, in culturally-specific ways. In an important sense, to understand the cultural practices and norms of a community, one must be a member of, and participate in, its socially constructed activities. As Wittgenstein points out, for example, "One cannot guess how a word functions. One has to look at its use and learn from that" (1974b:34). The rules governing the use of expressions (and visual schemata) can

only be learned, and understood, with certainty, in the appropriate social context. After finishing a meal as a guest with a Canadian host family recently, a visiting Polish scientist proclaimed in all seriousness, "I'm fed up". Speaking a language correctly requires the right inflection, the right facial and body gestures, and simply knowing when to use a phrase. To the foreigner, many words and expressions turn out to have an unexpected meaning which may not come out in a dictionary. Similarly, in the playing of a game such as tennis, many things, such as how hard to hit the ball, or how to anticipate your opponent's moves, are left out of the rule book. As I shall show later, art is a special case when it comes to rules, but minimally, making and responding to art, are to a degree, institutionalised activities, their practices sanctioned by members of the art world. (I don't suggest that art-making and responding to art are fully rule-governed, nevertheless such activities are not fully open either or it would be pointless to speak of art and aesthetic education.) Essentially, the rules for these kinds of activities, i.e. speaking a language, playing a game, making art, are learned in the doing, from others already initiated into the practices. This is what Wittgenstein means, I think, when he says, "To obey a rule, to make a report, to give an order, to play a game of chess, are <u>customs</u> (uses, institutions)" (1974a¶122), and "I cannot describe how (in general) to employ rules, except by <u>teaching</u> you, training you to employ rules" (1967:¶318). Such rules of practice are not always explicitly defined and must be learned as one learns the accepted

ways of proceeding. Judgment is involved in the speaking of a language, the playing of a game, the making of art; judgment in correctly applying the rules according to accepted standards; judging what is the right thing to say, or the right move to make, or in the case of art, the right brushstroke, or the appropriate interpretation. Yet, as I have noted in earlier chapters, judgment is not fully limited by rules, i.e. it cannot be learned as a matter of act or formula, if it could there would be no pithy remarks, skilful moves in a game, or art works manifesting talent. Such things would be, in a sense, pre-ordained and learnable. But judgment, the tacit component of understanding, which is exercised where the rules must end, is still appropriate or inappropriate within the confines of a culture in which it is exercised. "This is how you say it, play it, do it",we might say to a child. As I noted previously, judgment can be practised but not directly taught. We cannot capture the essence of judgment in how-to injunctions. Consequently the development of appropriate judging habits is necessarily tied to the customs and training relevant to a particular culture at a particular time. To be sure that you understand cultural norms, you have to be there, learn the rules and how to apply them at first-hand. One cannot expect to understand with certainty, the customs and outlook of an age which shape our judging practices, by investigating them at a temporal distance via its surviving relics, artefacts and recorded thoughts. Yet a competency in judging according to accepted norms is required if the modern viewer is to be able to make appropriate perceptual judgments when

attending to the art works of an earlier age. The viewer must be able to pick out schematised aspects and take them in the intended way.

If the modern student of art is personally excluded from participating in the forms of life which shape relevant judging habits, and if he or she can only get on the inside of them by living the life they institute, I conclude that the student is logically prevented from approaching the art of the past with the right contemporary mental set. Granted that the student could discover what some of the methods and assumptions were that guided an artist, to act in accordance with these assumptions, to see the world as he did and hence to understand his art in the spirit of the time, would still require the kind of practical insight the student is prevented from acquiring. And given his exclusion from the forms of life in question the student is, in any case, prevented from testing the validity of his interpretations.

As an art work is shaped as an object of its time so are we. We don't choose to see the world as we do, our outlook is "given" as Wittgenstein would say, as the pre-condition for the intelligible participation in community life. What we understand, we understand in ways that are conditioned by our cultural outlook. Even as we strive to describe and explain artefacts from the past we do so primarily under the constraints, assumptions, and rules that govern our own practices of describing and explaining. We can, of course, acknowledge, on some grounds of evidence, that an artist operated

under different assumptions from our own, but our capacity to understand how the artist saw the world, and intended his audience to understand his work is constrained in part, by the linguistic and artistic conventions into which we have been socialised. Strictly speaking we don't so much understand according to our outlook so much as understand by means of it. On a priori grounds we cannot step outside our mental set since it is only in virtue of having a mental set -- consisting of acquired perceptual dispositions, customary ways of conceptualising and judging things -- that we can understand anything at all. Our own mental set is the touchstone of reality. Ultimately, we must understand the cultural achievements of the past through the medium of our own outlook which ineluctably embodies the knowledge, beliefs, and values by which we ourselves organise and assess experience. I conclude that the degree to which we can adopt the mental set of an earlier age will be circumscribed by the degree of difference between our own forms of life and those of the earlier age, and by our interpretation, governed as that largely is by our own ways of seeing the world, of the available evidence of the earlier outlook. We may be able to modify our own mental set to a limited degree, by taking note of evidence which seems to us to be relevant to attaining a valid historical interpretation of a work of art. But Savile is surely mistaken to argue that we can select or change our outlook to actually conform with that of an earlier age. In this respect I believe he misrepresents his case when he argues in this regard that ". . . our will does have a certain empire over

our perceptions" (Savile, 1982:44). Perhaps it is true to say that we are able to see aspects in a drawing, for example, now as this, now as that, and as such, our perception is subject to our will. But what is seen as a readable sign depends on an interpreting guided by possession of the relevant schemata, and ability in judging their application, which is acquired as a function of one's own cultural tradition. Savile does not deny the dependency of aspect-perception on mental set, but the perceptual freedom he cites, it must be acknowledged, is a freedom to function within a cultural framework, not to step outside of it.

Clearly, the problems which the modern student will encounter in trying to adopt an alien mental set as I have outline them, already suffice to throw doubt on the veracity of Savile's arguments regarding the possibility of understanding a past art work in its contemporary vein. Nevertheless, Savile's arguments are worth pursuing because they illustrate further contours of his version of the historicist perspective which bear pertinently on the logic of understanding and interpretation, and in the process of criticism and clarification we might be able to suggest an answer to the art teacher's question.

The Canonical Understanding and Interpretation

In Savile's view ". . . a proper understanding and appreciation of a work of art . . . must go through some canonical interpretation which does not change over time. . ." (1982:61). This view is the mainstay of his historicist-inspired thesis that for an art work to

pass the test of time, a sign of its excellence, it must do so under a stable public interpretation or explication. Savile argues that the artist must express his intentions by a method accessible to his audience if he expects to be understood, ". . . they understand his work" notes Savile, "by retrieving his intention from it" (1982:64). Thus the work is to be understood "by a system of rules and conventions" (Savile, 1982:63). known to artist and audience alike. Savile refers to those "mutually known principles of publicity" (1982:73) which enable us to locate the artist's "determinate thought" (1982:74). For Savile, the "canonical interpretation" of the artist's signs ". . . must be that which yields the best available contemporary reading of them" (1982:64). Savile rejects both a reading taken at some arbitrarily chosen time after the work's completion because it <u>is</u> arbitrary, and the best interpretation the work actually received from its original public because the latter could have missed something we now recognise in the work. Thus, in Savile's view, every work affords a canonical interpretation which is available if the signs are read correctly. The "autonomous" view of art is criticised by Savile because it permits different interpretations as changes occur in cultural norms over time, and because it denies the contemporary audience the possibility of reaching a full understanding of a work, subject as it is to "perpetual <u>aggiornamento</u>" (1982:50). For Savile, there must be a necessary limit to the interpretations that can legitimately be made, and that limit -- the canonical interpretation -- derives from the work's receiving a full understanding of the artist's

intentions which are couched in an accessible format. Savile claims that ". . . when that understanding is suitably replete it will contain what is necessary for us to know what to make of the object" (1982:144). Once a full understanding is attained, then the audience would have the key to make the best available contemporary interpretation. Should it seem to us that a full understanding has not been reached by the work's contemporary and later audiences, then we would have the prerogative to strive after it. Simply put, the work of art is seen by Savile under a semantic conception. The beholder is to understand the artist's mental meaning which is codified in a public language of signs. A correct and replete understanding is seen as the precursor to the public canonical interpretation.

What Savile is offering here is a closed system, and in respect of works of art I find the view problematic. I doubt that art is quite the determinate affair Savile makes it out to be -- the unambiguous communication of intentions by way of a language of signs. Savile does concede that there could be ambiguity in a work, which is under the artist's control, which is not also "exploitable", i.e. necessary to the work. But he thinks this prospect is unlikely in paradigmatic cases where art passes the test of time, though he concedes that it is possible, so changes the appellation "canonical" to "optimal" (1982:73). The thrust of the argument, however, is in favour of the complete understanding, and canonical interpretation taken as being unique and stable.

There is reason to believe, however, that the use of signs

(schemata) in the semantic sense Savile adopts, does not permit the kind of precision in the relationship of intention, meaning, and understanding that Savile is suggesting. Our verbal language, for example, requires careful interpretation on the part of speaker and listener. The same words may carry different possible connotations. Precise definitions risk seeming arbitrary, and still require the use of explanatory words more or less precisely defined. As Wittgenstein shows in his analysis of language-games and family resemblance terms, the idea that language really functions beneath the surface according to strict rules is an idealist fiction. The rules or criteria for the use of words may fall short of covering every possible exigency, and rules require pragmatic interpretation in their application. Meanings of terms may be vague in some contexts. It is not always possible in such circumstances to remove all doubt about a sign's meaning, while remaining faithful to actual linguistic practices. This suggests that there is a built-in possibility of indeterminacy in our use of language, and I would argue, by analogy, in the artist's use of schemata also. We cannot always be sure that an image is an image of an X, and only an X, for example. But besides the discursive similarity which art bears to language through its conventionalised use of schemata, which supports Savile's notion of our being able to retrieve the artist's "determinate thought" from an art work, art is also a highly intuitive affair which eludes to some extent, the rule-governed order of language in its rational, communicative role.

Inasmuch as we are talking about a work of art, and not just

the communication of intentions it is questionable whether or not the creative process is of such a nature as to enable an artist to have a precise intention which he conveys to his audience by the conventional possibilities of his medium, such that the art work becomes simply that symbolic expression of the prior intention. As I noted earlier, Kant disavows the rule-guidedness of the creative process in any fully determinate sense. For Kant, "genius", the special talent of the artist which derives from a natural endowment and gives the rule to art ". . . cannot indicate scientifically how it brings about its product . . . " (1952:308). If it could, we should be able to make art to order. So even if the artist has a quite definite intention, for example, to paint a picture of a country house, such an intention could not be directly translated into art by simply following conventional rules, nor yet fully account for the meaning manifested in the finished work; and by "meaning" I refer to both the conventional schematised elements and a work's aesthetic qualities. The notion that the meaning of a work of art can be fully accounted for in terms of a realised intention, in a semantic sense, loses credence once we consider the Kantian view that:

> . . . where an artist owes his product to genius [which he must if the work is to be fine as opposed to mechanical art] he does not know how the ideas for it have entered his head, nor has he it in his power to invent the like at pleasure, or methodically, and communicate the same to others in such precepts as would put them in a position to produce similar products (Kant, 1952:308).

According to Kant, the making of art is not fully amenable to rational methods which the artist, once having acquired the necessary knowledge

and skill, can invoke at will. Nor may the artist summarise his methods such that others could learn from him and so become artists themselves. Put simply, there are aspects in the making of art which contribute to the work's final form or configuration, and hence its meaning, which cannot be discursively articulated as prior intentions. To see a work's meaning as wholly residing in transmitted intentions, and Savile does speak of a "replete" understanding in this context, which we may expect to see conventionally realised in a work is thus to take a depleted view of art. In appealing to Kant I am trying to show that the making (and understanding) of art is both more subjective and elusive than the communication of rule-governed intentions. (My source of Kant's arguments regarding the non-discursiveness of artistic production is specifically: Kant, 1952: 303-344.) Of course, as Kant insists, if art is not to be the result of mere chance it must have some end. The artist must focus his attention and efforts in some intended direction: the making of an abstract collage from found materials perhaps, or the naturalistic painting of a portrait. And therefore, some rules do attach to the achievement of such ends inasmuch as they are conceptualisable. If you want to paint a life-like portrait then there are certain rules known to artists to be followed.. But if, as Kant argues, art is a product of genius, then the way an intention is managed and brought to form cannot be something accomplished strictly onthe basis of instructions and knowledge of conventions. The creative processes involved in making art are to some extent, ineffable. All the knowledge and training in the

world cannot make someone into a poet or a painter. In the language of Kant, making art requires the exercise of imagination, and such a view would find ready acceptance among art teachers. But whereas in one sense, imagination is subject to rules, and to some extent the will, as when we conjure up images in the mind of objects we are familiar with, when it comes to the making of art, imagination in Kant's philosophy, is spontaneous, creative, and does not function strictly according to known rules. Kant says that making art requires the exercise of imagination working in freedom from, but nevertheless in harmony with understanding. And here, "understanding" is seen as a faculty of concepts which functions as rules for the ordering of intuitions, or sense-impressions. But whereas in our normal perceptive dealings with the world, imagination, according to Kant, functions productively as an a priori faculty to give shape to sense impressions i.e. synthesises or gathers intuitions and unites them to create an order or pattern suitable for a specific concept to be applicable (see Kant, 1933:A77-78, B102-104, A118-A128, B152), and thus provides the link between the reception of impressions -- the sensibility, and the faculty of concepts -- the understanding; with respect to the making of art, imagination functions freely, not as governed by a specific concept. In this case, says Kant, the imagination furnishes a rich source of material -- what Kant calls "aesthetic ideas", in contrast with ideas which are rational, discursive -- for bringing about the end of the work. An aesthetic idea, for Kant is a ". . . representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the

possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. concept, being adequate to it . . . " (1952:314). Imagination functions creatively, free from the governance of rules and, says Kant, imagination enables the artist ". . . to find out ideas for a given concept [the end or intention of the art], and besides, to hit upon the expression for them . . ." (1952:317). As Kant further explains:

> Consequently, the imagination is represented by it [genius, the talent which gives the rule to art] in its freedom from all guidance of rules, but still as final [purposive] for the presentation of a given concept (1952:317).

The artist may have a goal which underpins the direction of his work, but it is the productive imagination working freely but in harmony with the understanding that is the primary creative agent serving to realise such a goal in a formal expression. Thus, while a class of art students may be given the same assignment, how they bring it off artistically will be a matter for the imaginative capability of each student since the free exercise of imagination which is at the same time directed to some end, which is the essence of artistic genius, is precisely the creative part of the art-making enterprise which cannot be captured in how-to rules. Granted that claims may be made regarding the realisation of intentions in identifiable meaning-bearing properties, though such claims are by no means unproblematic given the possibility of indeterminacy as a logical feature of symbol systems, a work of art is also realised as an expressive entity in ways which elude discursive analysis. There are aspects in the making of a work of art which contribute to its meaning which cannot be "intended"

in any prior discursive sense. An artist cannot always explain why he does things in a certain way in a painting, why his art work follows the course that it does, except to say perhaps that something "works" or it does not. The aesthetic "ideas" Kant talks about which are produced by the imagination, cannot be discursively derived nor built up from units of aesthetic meaning since they are inaccessible to rules or theories. Aesthetic ideas cannot be arrived at or engendered by wilful or rational means. An aesthetic idea which helps the artist realise his intention, says Kant:

> . . . cannot become a cognition, because it is an intuition (of the imagination) for which an adequate concept can never be found . . . . the aesthetic idea might, I think, be called an inexponible representation of the imagination, . . . (1952:342).

Aesthetic ideas, in Kant's system, never achieve the status of rational ideas which are conceptual, and language cannot render them intelligible. Considering these arguments of Kant's, I think it would be inappropriate to think that the meaning of a work of art can simply be a matter of realised intentions. There may be a prior thought, but the form of its ultimate realisation cannot be intended by a wholly rational, discursive process. If Kant's arguments about the ineffability of the creative process are correct, and I think that essentially they are, then a work of art, if it is to be a work of fine or creative art, is realised to some extent in ways the artist cannot have consciously or semantically intended, ahead of time. The artist must have some intention if a work is not to be an entirely fortuitous affair but

a work of art and whatever meaning it has, especially in regard to its singular aesthetic qualities, can never be wholly taken as the concretisation of determinate intentions. Perhaps it is the non-discursive element in the making of art that leads some to the thought that a work of art evolves to some extent, in progress, that the artist proceeds in part, by means of intuition or feeling for the "rightness" of the evolving structure of the work, rather than by simply acting out intentions or following a theory of art.

Kant's somewhat outmoded picture of the mind as a collocation of distinct but interacting faculties may throw the status of some of his arguments into doubt. How could Kant possibly know, for example, that the imagination does the things he says it does, i.e. synthesises impressions in accord with the concepts of the understanding, aside from its necessary role in the intellectual system he lays out? Strawson says that Kant's theory of the synthesis of sense-impressions by means of the productive imagination:

> . . . is exposed to the ad hominem objection that we can claim no empirical knowledge of its truth; for that would be to claim empirical knowledge of that which is held to be the antecedent condition of empirical knowledge (1966:32).

And certainly, Kant's statements concerning aesthetic ideas are a bit obscure to say the least. But the reason for such seeming obscurity, I suggest, is that Kant is attempting to address an area of human consciousness, which by its nature is elusive of precise and detailed analysis. It is that part of human mentality which engenders creative thought outside of recipe, formula and how-to instructions and is generally called talent. If we could arrive at a summary of the

universal necessary and sufficient conditions which define talent then we could all become great artists, and thus none of us would be. But Kant's arguments do serve to illustrate in an ingenious way the more general point whose truth cannot be doubted, that a work of art, if it is genuinely art, cannot be produced entirely according to rules and conventions which are quite deliberately followed in order to transmit an intended message which once realised, becomes a work of art capable of being unambiguously understood. And if the focus of modern philosophy is the structure and use of language, then the term "imagination" and Kant's treatment of it in the artistic setting does convey the appropriate notion of the mind's free and creative activity which cannot be embodied in rules of procedure. We may question some of the details of Kant's arguments regarding imagination from the faculty psychology standpoint, but not his central point that its exercise is necessary in the production of art, and that such exercise cannot be entirely a matter of following rules and employing conventions. The role of imagination thus limits the degree to which a work of art may be thought of as a product of articulate intentions.

The central point here, I think, is that the artist cannot just work methodically according to "mutually known principles of publicity" as Savile puts it, and create an original and enduring piece of art. Furthermore, what an art work expresses in virtue of its necessarily unique and hence unanalysable qualities cannot be "read off" from a work according to a knowledge of rules. Such expression rests with

the formal character of the work as a whole, as I argued in the previous chapter. In this regard a beholder's aesthetic understanding can be described as direct, insightful, not achieved or guided by any "public principles". By the same token, it is difficult to see how such qualities of expression could form part of the artist's original conception, in Savile's public rule-governed sense. Given the vagueness to which words and visual schemata are subject, the built-in possibilities of indeterminacy (and need of interpretive judgment), the unanalysability of aesthetic qualities and the necessary restriction that the creative process involved in making art eludes to some extent, being captured in how-to rules, I conclude that making and hence responding to art will not be quite the determinate affair Savile makes it out to be. The artistic enterprise lacks the kind of pervasive rule-governed structure Savile needs to secure his case.

Notwithstanding my previous objections, by what procedure does Savile propose to come by the canonical interpretation? If, as he suggests, we are to understand the artist's intentions, as manifested clearly in the work, then we must know the kind of assumptions the artist was working under, what might be called his theory. Savile explains that we can only make correct aesthetic judgments about a work of art if we know to what category it belongs, e.g. it is a painting, and which stylistic considerations are in force, e.g. the painting is in the French Impressionist style. Savile calls such considerations the "primary aesthetic" and notes "We need to identify the primary aesthetic of a work if we are to say in an interesting

fashion what the work is like" (1982:75). In assigning a style, however, we rely on certain aesthetic considerations (Savile is vague here but I assume he means we need to know the significance of colouration, of symbolic devices, of conventional schemata) which also come into play when we strive to ascertain the best available interpretation. By whatever means we assign a style to a work, argues Savile, we shall have to rely on the artist's "methodological assumptions" (1982:76), which Savile calls the "secondary aesthetic" (1982:76), of the artist. On the historicist view, says Savile, we rely on the secondary aesthetic, to identify the primary aesthetic (style and category) and to determine which reading is canonical (interesting to note Savile slips back to "canonical" from "optimal"). Savile argues:

> . . . we rely on the secondary aesthetic both to identify the primary aesthetic of the work we appreciate and understand, and to determine which reading of the text within the primary aesthetic is to count as canonical (1982:76).

But this leads to a problem. If all we have at our disposal is the art work from the past, then to understand the work we need to know the artist's secondary aesthetic or methodological assumptions, but to know the secondary aesthetic we need to understand the work. Also, even if we do have access to the artist's assumptions by some other route we may need to translate them in order to know what they meant for him and to do that we need to translate them in the light of the appropriate historical outlook. But I have already given some reasons why we cannot, on logical grounds, take a position strictly

outside our own mental set, which a knowledge of the secondary aesthetic in its historical context clearly requires. There appears to be no way to break into the circle. Thus, the canonical interpretation, which on Savile's view, we attain by reading the signs according to the artist's own assumptions (and those of his public), which also determine the category and style of an art work, begins to look increasingly unattainable, any reading of the work being inevitably infected, to some degree, by our own interpretive outlook.

Savile attempts to overcome this dilemma by arguing that if we have a ground for suspecting that the secondary aesthetic of one age is different from another, then this same ground enables us to identify it. If no grounds suggest themselves, then he says, we can assume no different aesthetic from our own is in force. But the fact that, for example, the ancient Egyptian method of drawing the human figure looks strange to us, and hence indicates that different aesthetic assumptions from our own were in force, does not in itself, provide us with the means to correctly understand and interpret Egyptian wall paintings. Lacking first-order methods of verifying our interpretations, i.e. by viewing such paintings with the requisite mental set -- as though through the eyes of the artist or his intended audience -- we can only make hypotheses as to their meaning. We decide through our modern eyes what we think the Egyptians were about; an element of uncertainty is built-in. Savile does not elucidate what we may take to be grounds for our suspicions that a different secondary aesthetic from our own may be at work, nor does he

explain how we may make use of such grounds to secure the secondary aesthetic. Contrary to his claim, I suggest that Savile offers no conclusive way of ascertaining the secondary aesthetic of an artist, from what we see in a work, when these same aesthetic considerations are antecedent to a proper understanding and interpretation of the work.

Art works are a product of their historical contexts and this entails that certain perceptual dispositions are required on the part of the audience if they are to be understood and interpreted in the contemporary vein. Yet I have argued that on logical grounds we cannot appreciate works of art just as an artist's original audience might have been capable of doing, even if we can inform our judgments with pertinent information from the art works, and other information about past cultural conditions.

In order to provide the art teacher with some guidance in these matters I offer the following observations: While art making is an intentional activity, I believe Savile overemphasises intention in respect of our understanding of art works. I suggest that Savile's discursive characterisation of what the artist seeks to achieve, i.e. render his determinate thoughts in readable signs such that they can be given an optimal or canonical interpretation is simply too clear cut, and results, in my opinion, in a depleted view of art. It is conceivable that a work could have a meaning not consciously intended by its maker, but which successive viewers are able to retrieve from their perceptions of the work. It is feasible that an artist structures

his work in progress in that each addition to the work creates new relationships and possibilities to which the artist responds intuitively rather than according to a plan. Furthermore, Savile's talk of a "replete" understanding, suggests that a work's meaning is immanent in the work, lying in wait for the intended ideal viewer to come along: one who is perceptually attuned to give the signs the one correct reading. I have two responses to this. One is that, as I have already mentioned, Savile's conception of art as a precise rendering of the artist's intentions in signs, in my opinion is a depleted and problematic view. Art works, as bearers of meaning, have a built-in possibility of indeterminacy. We may have to interpret features in a work simply to find out what its meaning-bearing properties are. And this runs counter to Savile's idea of the unique or replete understanding. And second, a work of art is realised by a perceiving subject. Savile however, recommends that ". . . we think of understanding in terms of the details of the object itself" (1982:39), but it is the nature of such details that may be in dispute, especially in regard to those aesthetic qualities which require a special sensitivity on the part of the viewer. The perceiving subject has a role to play in determining how art works so appear. I suggest that how a work of art appears as ordered, and meaningful, will depend on the configuration a work of art sustains in the viewer's perception: what aspects are brought to the fore, what recede as background, the concepts embodied in the viewer's perception, and the viewer's insightful grasp of felt (aesthetic) qualities. Thus if the notion of the precise communication of intentions

is de-emphasised and instead we ground our understanding of a work in how it appears to us from our own, in part, inevitable point of view, then talk of a replete, final understanding begins to look inappropriate. On this view, we are likely to see more in a complex work as we live with it, find new points of interest, and experience it over again. What a work says to us through its signs and schemata and shows us of its intrinsic qualities will not be completely settled and fixed, but open to possibilities as different perceptual emphases are brought to bear. Talk of understanding as replete, and interpretation as canonical, is tenable only if the subject's role is seen as receptive, rather than constructive of the work's order and meaning, and there are good reasons to favour the latter view, given the importance of mental set in shaping what we are able to perceive and understand.

Bearing in mind that strictly speaking, the mental set of an earlier age is epistemically inaccessible to us, that we are logically bound to understand things largely from our modern point of view, the teacher can move his students, to a degree, towards an historical understanding of a work of art. We might have grounds for suspecting that the aesthetic considerations of an artist differ from our own by looking at, for example, how elements in a painting are depicted: figures, perspective, subject matter (aside from other aesthetic and historical data which remain from a past age). We may have to determine the artist's methodological assumptions, his theory which guided the primary aesthetic, from a "dialogue" with the work. On this view

however, our own perspective is necessarily tied to the way we understand and go on to interpret the work, i.e. in the public, explicating sense.

Determining what an appropriate interpretation of a work of art from the past might be thus depends not on getting hold of a replete understanding which is "there" for all time in the work if we can but locate it, rather we come to make an interpretation in the light of historical evidence we can muster from the work and elsewhere, but one which is based on our own understanding of the work as it appears to us.

In the next and concluding chapter, I examine in some detail what it means to understand a work of art in both cognitive and aesthetic senses and I try to show how the methods of the critic have significance for the practical conduct of aesthetic education.[1]

1. An earlier version of this chapter was presented to the annual meeting of the Far Western Philosophy of Education Society, held at Arizona State University, Tempe, December 7, 1985.

Chapter Six

UNDERSTANDING WORKS OF ART

Like the other activities of a community which help comprise a culture, making and responding to art emerge from a socio-historical context shaped by a language, other societal interests, intellectual, artistic and aesthetic preoccupations; an outlook. Works of art are created and appreciated (valued and understood) against a background of ongoing artistic achievement, theories of art, philosophical and historical scholarship, art criticism, and other cultural manifestations of a society. We learn what to think, say, and feel about art, not by being citizens of the world, or by being part of a universal tradition of art-making, but by being members of a particular society, by living or having a form of life. What is called art in one place or period, might be called religious or political propaganda in another. For some, art has a social purpose, for others it must be purpose-free, attended to aesthetically, i.e. in a contemplative, disinterested fashion. And in our society, the range of objects which have achieved the status of art shows a bewildering diversity and looseness of the bounds of the concept "work of art". But with art, as with anything else, the rules of conceptualization determine what can or cannot be understood, what is or is not art, what attitudes are appropriate in our response to art, and such rules, even if subject to wide interpretation, are inherited and learned as part of a cultural tradition. The anarchic status of Western art in the twentieth century reflects a cultural outlook.

Furthermore, as I argued in the previous chapter, our own socially acquired perceptual dispositions (mental set) prevent our understanding the art of a past age in an indigenous manner. Learning to make perceptual judgments requires not just that we become aware of the different ways of picturing things that artists have used but that we correctly perceive such images. And just as we cannot learn to use a language properly if isolated from a speech community, so we cannot make perceptual judgments with certainty, if we are excluded from the native practice of judging. We must, as Wittgenstein admonishes, look to the use of a word, or in this case, image, to be sure of its meaning, i.e. its living use. Thus, we approach works of art with certain expectations, as Gombrich (1969) would say, which govern our responses, even if, as sometimes happens, artists set about deliberately disrupting our habits of response. Here I am thinking, for example, of the work of the cubist and surrealist artists.

I have argued that understanding is the ability to order phenomena, i.e. to distinguish and relate impressions by means of conceptual judgment, according that is, to socially constructed rules. Such judging, when successful results in an outcome or achievement which is also called understanding. We ascribe understanding on the basis of criterial evidence: according to the logic of our conventional use of language which is directed at public performances. As I pointed out in Chapter One, however, criterial evidence with respect to our understanding of necessarily unique components of persons and works of art may be difficult to obtain: the understanding

being to some extent necessarily private, i.e. conceptually elusive. I pointed out that conceptual understanding does not infer complete understanding, at least with respect to necessarily unique and hence unanalysable features, which are nevertheless delimited by other conceptualizable features. I noted that due to contextual differences in the focuses of understanding no specific feature or relation can be advanced as being necessary in an object of understanding, although some conception of structure is necessary in the sense of an ordering of elements. In this chapter I want to invoke the sense of understanding as ability and achievement developed earlier to guide discussion of what it means to understand works of visual art; to bring others to an understanding, and to evaluate such understanding. Given this definite context, the rather general outline advanced earlier can be made more specific and detailed. But the intention to explain how we come to understand works of visual art could be seen as presumptious and ill-conceived -- as if one could give a general account of the understanding response to what are richly unique and individual artefacts and creations. Just as, for example, no single account can serve to explain how we come to understand a range of individual persons with all of their idiosyncrasies, so no general account of understanding can do justice to the richness of individual works of art. Nevertheless, while it may be true, that each work prompts us to respond to it as one of a kind, art, to be art, will presume, to some extent a common mode of response on the part of its intended audience who will approach works of art with certain expectations. In this respect works of art are common cultural phenomena to which we respond on

the basis of our socially acquired habits of perception and to which the artist must pay heed if he wants to be understood, or even if he wants to reshape our vision, or deliberately thwart understanding. Such habits of perception are guided by conceptual rules which enable us to order our impressions schematically, i.e. according to some internalised standard visual patterns -- I deal with this more fully below. At the same time, we can say that art works, like persons, demand attention in virtue of their singular and irreplaceable qualities. Thus, while it may be the case that we attend and seek out whatever meaning a work of art schematically (conceptually) shows, we must also attend to a work's intrinsic formal qualities if we are to grasp the work as a complete pattern. Without some prior understanding of what counts as a work of art, and the logically appropriate response to it we would not know where to begin in distinguishing something as a work of art or in striving to understand it. Our perceptions must get some grip in a rule-governed sense or an object would be unrecognisable and incomprehensible as art. Thus, while in every case a person must attend to the character of just <u>this</u> work of art in order to understand it, and such understanding once attained will be, in part, relative to just this work of art, our responses are to some extent, rule-governed also. Furthermore, I can, through the medium of language, arrive at some conceptualization of the character of the understanding response when an object is viewed as art even if the specific content of understanding rests, and is in part, relative to just <u>this</u> or <u>that</u> intentional

object. An analysis of what it is to understand works of art is a question belonging to the logic of language since it is by means of language that we conceive and discuss such questions and guide others towards an appropriate understanding. My account of what it means to understand works of visual art will have to attend to the common patterns of response to the more general properties of art works -- what may be called the cognitive response -- and equally, attention will have to be given to the nature of the response to art works as they individually are in themselves, to what may be called the aesthetic response. The purpose of this chapter will be to present conceptualizations of these modes of response.

The Concept of Art

I noted in Chapter Three that in order to pick something out as a proof and go on to understand it in the appropriate way a person requires prior knowledge of what sorts of things are called proofs, i.e. knowledge of the aims and procedures adopted in proofs, and a considerable background knowledge of the mathematical enterprise which grounds those aims and procedures. Proofs make sense to a person who already has some experience and understanding of mathematics. A person who knows that a proof is a construction which logically links a set of assumptions to a conclusion in an internally consistent manner would have a rule to guide his distinguishing and handling of proof structures. But where a definition of a proof might be widely accepted and acted upon by

mathematicians and lay persons, there is no reliable definition of what makes an object a work of art, there are nevertheless, many established examples of works of art. In our society we learn to approach works of art with certain expectations and assumptions. Knowing that an object is a work of art may lead us to suspend our everyday concerns and attend to the work as an end rather than as a means of decoration, titillation, or propaganda. We may assume that insofar as a work of art has a cognitive content, as for example, with Goya's painting of the firing squad, The Third of May, no truth conditions apply to the artist's images as they would to a reporter's statements concerning actual events, for as Kenneth Clark points out Goya's work is not ". . . the record of a single episode, but a grim reflection on the whole nature of power" (1973:87). We may assume, as does Susan Sontag ". . . that the knowledge we gain through art is an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than a knowledge of something . . ." (1982:142-143). Art may be said to deal with an imaginary world constructed by the artist rather than as presenting a record of actual events, or even if that is the aim, we do not necessarily appreciate it as such. To take such a view is to emphasise that art is a self-contained realm and that art must be appreciated on its own terms. For the moment, these assumptions may be put to one side, for if we can't determine an object's status it makes no sense to speak of understanding it. A person must know that the object before him is a work of art to legitimately

speak of understanding it as a work of art, to adopt the appropriate perceptual stance. Yet, as I noted in Chapter Two, the concept "work of art" lacks precise boundaries; it is open to the extent that new cases can always crop up which challenge and perhaps ultimately extend the range of acceptability criteria. While it may be the case that no concept is completely determinate in meaning given the element of interpretive judgment needed to grasp a suitable application, and given that no concept can be so fully explained that every possible question or doubt about its applicability can be settled in advance,according to the explanatory standard; with the term "work of art" the lack of determinacy of sense is due in part, to the inventive nature of the artistic enterprise itself, and to the inclusion of non-discursive, uniquely constituted qualities of form which, as we say, are grasped directly. The making of art cannot be fully captured by how-to rules. There are of course some rules which guide our thinking about making art -- the attaining of this or that end -- but each art work is produced to some extent, as Kant puts it, by the exercise of a special "talent". The would-be artist cannot learn how to make works of art by simply studying the practices and exemplary works of other artists; as Kant observes ". . . we cannot learn to write in a true poetic vein, no matter how complete all the precepts of the poetic art may be, or however excellent its models" (1952:308-309). In Kant's view, the artist requires:

> . . . a talent [genius] for producing that for which no definite rule can be given: and not an aptitude in the way of cleverness for what can be learned according to some rule; and consequently originality must be its primary property (1952:307-308).

Genius, or talent provides the inspiration or governing rule of composition, while artistic training provides the artist with the technical means to execute the work. Thus, if we accept Kant's view that "fine art is only possible as a product of genius" (1952:307), then we accept that a work of art cannot be created by following a list of instructions. A precise list of rules for making art, which would provide a closed definition of the concept of art, would defeat the element of originality inherent in the art-making process. I think Kant is right in holding this view, although the notion of originality must be sometimes interpreted in the light of the artist's theory rather than in the properties possessed by the object produced or presented as art (of course where the artist's theory or intentions are unknown, or must be interpreted on the basis of other fragmentary evidence, our chief focus of understanding will be work itself). For example, in the modern tradition we might conceivably accept a copy of something, or a mass-produced item as art if it satisfied some requirement of artistic choice which manifested an original approach. We tend to know the original when we see it, as that is, a contrast or departure from what has been already established or become entirely a matter of convention. It is an element for which no how-to rules can be formulated in advance. From Kant we learn that the concept of art is necessarily open in respect of its component of originality; we cannot therefore specify a complete list of necessary

and sufficient conditions which an object must satisfy if it is to be called a work of art. And this point leads to another difficulty for the viewer. It may be the case that in the past, the making and appreciating of art was reserved to a particular group, namely artists and their patrons, and the proportion of the public who were wealthy, educated, and with enough leisure to take interest in such things, but at least art was recognisably art, i.e. by being presented in frames, on stands, in private houses and museums. Of course those objects which were judged to be art attained their status from the art community; for the general public their art status was fait accomplis. Now however, given the influence of various anti-art impulses such as Dada and Pop, it may be impossible to tell an object's status by simply looking at it with certain established criteria in mind, particularly as some art objects have a recognisably utilitarian function in the everyday setting. And it seems that the public still have the controlling decisions about what is or is not art made for them. As Stephen Goldsmith points out, Duchamp's readymades, the most infamous of which is a urinal he entitled Fountain, and which he offered to a New York jury in 1917 (it was rejected), both challenged our ideas about the nature of art, and at the same time, according to some philosophers, confirmed the institutional nature of the "art world" by giving a good example of

its power to confer the status of art on things. As Goldsmith puts it:

> As an intriguing physical presence, the readymade destroys the framework of art. Put simply, if a toilet or a bottle-rack can provide rewarding formal satisfaction, anything can. Art, as a privileged, isolated category, no longer exists. As a vehicle for the communication of ideas, however, the readymade reaffirms the traditional art world. The found object is art because an artist of special sensibility felt he could convey an important aesthetic idea through it (1983:198).

While it is true that Duchamp disavowed the art status of the ready-mades, this artist at the same time, says Goldsmith, limited the production of the readymades, signed and put them on show in the traditional manner of the artist. And while it is true, notes Goldsmith, that anyone could put a urinal on show, the artist did so, and did so for a reason. The reason becomes the factor needed to distinguish the readymade as art work, from the everyday object. Thus it is not what a thing looks like, its physical properties that make it art so much as the idea or concept it conveys. Hans Richter, himself a participant in Dada activities, notes that "The ready-made was the logical conclusion of Duchamp's rejection of art and of his suspicion that life was without meaning" (1965:88). Duchamp declared that a thing was art because he chose it as such. Furthermore Richter quotes Duchamp as saying that the choice of objects was "never dictated by aesthetic delectation" (1965:89). And if a person did take an aesthetic attitude towards even a urinal? "'Let him!' was Duchamp's reaction" says Richter (1965:89). Richter goes on to observe:

> Of course, the bottle-rack and the urinal are not art. But the laughter that underlies this shameless exposure of 'all that is holy' goes so deep that a kind of topsy-turvy admiration sets in which applauds at its own funeral (the funeral, that is, of 'all that is holy') (1965:90).

We admire, then, the idea behind the tongue in cheek presentation of these things as art, and the irony is that Duchamp's clever tilt at the elitest mentality of the art world was itself absorbed into the tradition it sought to condemn, though as Goldsmith notes, Duchamp, in practice,acted as if the readymades were art objects, so their status retains an ambivalence. However, further attempts to define the bounds of art must contend with the now de facto art status of the most unartistic of things -- in the traditional sense -- a urinal. But still, Duchamp's gambit depended on the existence of a background of artistic achievement to which his ready-mades are connected even if in parody. What is or is not art is ultimately decided by members of the art world who have inherited certain assumptions about art which are subject to modification as the art enterprise continues to evolve. Borderline cases produced by the avant garde may take some time to digest; for the ramifications to sink in, to see how they can be connected with the tradition of art. If anything can be art, the concept loses its meaning. Anarchy of this sort is prevented by a "rites of passage" whereby an object made or selected by an artist, under some theory of art, achieves art status in the eyes of the art community, i.e. as judged by critics, artists, collectors, and scholars, who are recognised as

possessing the appropriate values and expertise. "Work of art" is thus an open concept which gradually enlarges its range of acceptability criteria. The existing range of cases, paradoxically, cannot serve to derive a set of rules to determine the necessary and sufficient properties future cases must possess. When we speak therefore, of understanding in relation to works of art, this can only mean understanding in relation to art objects whose status is already established since we cannot know what direction future cases may take. By acting as an accredited member of the art world (in virtue of having received the appropriate education and training), the art teacher determines what student productions are acceptable as art -- albeit in what for convenience' sake is dubbed the sub-category of "child art", and what objects can be presented to students and understood as art. Unfortunately there are no simple techniques which can be learned as a matter of instruction whereby students can become as autonomous in their discriminations of what is or is not art, as there are, for example, with mathematical proofs. Furthermore, as I shall argue later in the chapter, the discrimination of formal or aesthetic qualities: those qualities possessed intrinsically, that a work of art has of and in itself, seems to require a special sensitivity, or awareness, which is acquired, if at all, by engagement with art in an appropriate cultural and educative context rather than by judging in accordance with rules. There is, however, no straightforward way to develop such sensitivity. The teacher does his or her best and hopes. I address this point in more detail

towards the end of the chapter. Before moving to a discussion of cognitive understanding in relation to art I want to make a few remarks about the artist's intentions.

The Artist's Intentions

Arguments are sometimes advanced in favour of the view that to understand a work of art, particularly in respect of its iconography or images, a viewer must take the work as the artist intended. It may be possible to elicit other meanings from the work but the correct meaning is the meaning the artist had in mind when he made the work. We may have access to the artist's intentions by attending to his or her own words about a particular work, or from reliable reports of the artist's motivations and goals. Understanding is achieved on this view when the artist's intended meaning, as expressed in the meaning-bearing properties of a work, is recovered under the guidance of a knowledge of the artist's theoretical position and the stylistic conventions in force at the time of making. Sometimes we must simply elicit the intended meaning as it is manifested in the work, especially if the artist is long dead, and here we rely on the artist to make his meaning clear.

Without doubt the artist's intentions are relevant to a work's meaning, for an artist is guided by having some end in mind for his art. Even if a work is produced by chance happenings, a conscious decision would have had to be taken to invoke the effects of chance, and a viewer would be better placed to appreciate a work if he knew

the artist's goals. With long established and familiar works which have been the object of much critical analysis and debate, we may rely upon our knowledge of the artist's style and the conventions employed: ways of depicting the human figure, the use of perspective, etc., to elicit the meaning of the work, rather than by worrying too much about what the artist may have specifically had in mind. Our attention can simply focus on the work. But with newer forms of art, amongst which we now include readymades, some knowledge of the artist's reasons for presenting an object as art will be necessary if we are to be able to respond to it appropriately as art. As Zumbach argues:

> Information about the artist's intentions is always relevant, and sometimes necessary, viz., when a new art form is emerging, and there is no other paradigm in terms of which we can learn what goals to ascribe to the art work. However, we do not need such information when the artwork falls into an already established medium (1984:155).

Clearly, individual circumstances bear on our quest for understanding as it is affected by artistic intentions. We may not have access to intentions other than as they are embodied in an art work, and as is common with complex works, there may be subtleties of meaning which cannot be fastened securely to a specific intention. A work may sustain different interpretations over time, validated by critical agreement, which cannot concur with original intentions. The artist, quite simply, might not be the best or only authority on what a particular work makes manifest or represents. The artist may be considered to be just one source of

guidance regarding the meaning of a work of art, set free on completion to make its own way in the world. Nevertheless, as noted above, there may be cases where our knowledge of existing conventions may be inadequate to guide our understanding, as was the case with Duchamp's Fountain. Here, as with all new art forms which break away from the art we are familiar with, a knowledge of the artist's reasons for presenting an art work as he does will be necessary to guide our perceptions of the piece. (I debate the question of the relevance of intentions in the specific context of my discussion of Anthony Savile's historicist thesis in Chapter Five which argues in favour of the importance of intentions in the acquisition of "canonical" understanding.) Although individual circumstances will be the best guide to judging the importance of intentions in securing a meaning, I shall generally assume in the pages which follow that the meaning of a work of art is that acclaimed by respected critical opinion, even if interpretations may vary over time.

Cognitive Understanding of Art

The notion of understanding developed so far, which borrows heavily from Wittgenstein's views on language and concepts, refers to the systematic ordering of impressions by means of conceptual judgment. We require concepts to make sense of objects in our world: to pick them out, to analyse and relate their elements of structure, and to relate them to other items of interest. The objects we can understand

emerge from a background of tradition and practice. And objects are understandable according to how they are taken by an entire framework or system of rules. Furthermore, as I discussed in Chapter Two, what justifies our discriminations and judgments, at rock bottom are the rules themselves -- the logic of concepts. On a priori grounds, concepts represent the ways in which the world, for the most part, is to be understood. Understanding takes place by means of applying concepts as expressed in the grammar or rules of language, to impressions, and we acquire the appropriate abilities of application and judgment -- the use of concepts -- by living in a particular socio-cultural environment. Thus we approach the world with ready expectations using our conceptual scheme as a device to sort out and relate our impressions. And the applicability of conceptual rules requires the interpretive judgment of a perceiving subject to match impressions with concept. Drawing from Wittgenstein, I have argued that the rules themselves are not free from indeterminacies with regard to the logic of application, and that no definition can ever free us from the possibility of doubtful applicability in certain cases. Thus it appears that the most consistent or coherent interpretation, of say a text, becomes the understanding achieved, although in cases where understanding seems automatic, we don't talk so much of interpretation, we just say we understand. But an element of personal interpretive judgment is involved in all cases of cognitive (and aesthetic) understanding. A cognitive understanding, achieved through the employment of concepts is objective, true, as

assessed by intersubjective and logically valid criteria. A person demonstrates his or her understanding of something, discursively, according to standards immanent in the form of inquiry or discourse. In the case of a scientific proposition such as, "All bodies are extended" a student provides an explanation of what the proposition means. But works of art, do not strictly, propose anything in the true/false sense of making a statement; they show us visual patterns which may or may not have a referential function, but which we nevertheless perceive or comprehend according to rules. Thus in the case of visual perception, which is a seeing according to conceptual rules, the element of interpretation is inescapable, as it is in all rule-governed understanding. In the cognitive sense, we understand a work of art -- a painting, a sculpture -- when we grasp what it shows and its content may be representational, abstract, or include elements of both. Thus, whether a painting naturalistically depicts a landscape separately identifiable as say a portion of the Yorkshire Moors, or shows an imaginary landscape with something of the character of a geographic region but with no specific view in mind, or shows a somewhat stylised and abstract landscape as for example, a work of Georgia O'Keefe might, or is completely non-objective, we interpret that artist's marks as comprehensible or not in virtue of our knowledge of visual concepts, or schemata. We can interpret Wittgenstein's duck/rabbit picture correctly in the duck aspect or the rabbit aspect because we know about ducks and rabbits to be sure, but primarily because we are familiar with the conventions

for representing such things. Unable to find any recognisable features in a purely abstract work we may conclude, in absence of any other evidence, it is to be taken, or understood, as content-free, a point I owe to Gombrich (1969). In striving to understand a work of art we "read" the painting for images we already know. An outline makes sense to us when we are able to perceive it as say, a duck or a rabbit; it is recognisable for us in this or that aspect, or interplay of aspects. As Wittgenstein observes of such interpretive seeing:

> This shape that I see - I want to say - is not simply a shape; it is one of the shapes that I know; it is marked out in advance. It is one of those shapes of which I already had a pattern in me; and only because it corresponds to such a pattern is it this familiar shape. (I as it were carry a catalogue of such shapes around with me, and the objects portrayed in it <u>are</u> the familiar ones) (1967:¶209).

The catalogue of shapes Wittgenstein refers to, it might be said, are the kind of generalised patterns we carry around with us, by means of which we are able to take sense impressions as familiar, or not. They act as the rules of perception. To interpret an ink blot as a butterfly we require a pattern for judging by, i.e. prior knowledge of what makes a set of impressions count as an image of a butterfly (see Gombrich, 1969:183). We select from our "catalogue" of shapes, or knowledge of possibilities, in order to make visual sense of something. The cognitive understanding of a work of art is therefore directed towards the work's content which is constructed out of elements we find meaningful in virtue of our knowledge of the image-making possibilities of the medium, and the rather more specialised

knowledge of the particular stylistic considerations of an artist or school of artists. A landscape by Cézanne, say La Montagne Sainte-Victoire, for example, relies to some extent, on contemporary modelling techniques to represent space and volume, trees, mountains, hillsides, houses, but the work has a strong geometric quality which tends towards abstraction and flatness. Such treatment occurs within the idiom of landscape painting but at the same time, manifests the unmistakable style of the painter. To understand the work of Cézanne we must know how he has taken and yet altered existing conventions. Understanding in the cognitive sense is conceptual, in accord with the practices and conventions we assume are relevant to the art work. Such understanding is ability to order impressions: to find a coherent visual pattern which corresponds to concepts. In the case of art, the concepts are schemata -- standard and conventional ways of picturing and representing things. Blobs of paint on a canvas assume a meaningful structure as we are able to perceive or make out familiar shapes and outlines, grasp spatial relationships by knowing the import of overlapping figures, variations in size, density of hue, gradations in tone, and realise the significance of these elements in the overall composition. Visual perception, which might be described as an interpretive-seeing, thus functions to distinguish and relate the elements and aspects of an art work into a known and hence understandable configuration or structure. We may say at this point that cognitive understanding in relation to works of art refers to the viewer's ability to distinguish and

relate parts, to knowledgeably perceive the elements, aspects and relationships in a work. To understand cognitively is to be able to perceive impressions from the art work under the guidance of concepts: to discern from amongst the shapes, colours, textures, lines, tones, representations of objects one knows. To understand cognitively, in the case of art, means the ability to knowledgeably perceive impressions as an orderly structured whole or composition and not just a congeries of parts. Here one's knowledge of the meaning of figurative overlap, of perspective, of tone and hue, density of shapes, is important. To understand in the achievement sense, is to have attained a knowledgeable grasp, by means of perception, of what a work shows as an ordered whole. The parts of a work are seen to function together, inasmuch as they do, to constitute the work as a whole. We understand a part when we notice its place and role in the whole it helps realise. We understand the whole work when we perceive the interplay of shapes and forms as contributing to the articulation of the composition.

In the classroom, a student's statements about what a painting shows, its content, which may count as evidence of cognitive understanding, may be judged true or false, correct or incorrect by the teacher. A student can describe what he or she sees in a painting. The student may refer and point, if necessary, to this or that aspect. The teacher can help the student to perceive other aspects which may have been missed, or to perceive the work from a different point of view, assuming the student has a knowledge of the relevant

schemata. However, I do not want to give the impression that understanding works of art is quite the determinate, objective affair described above. Art like language is subject to ambiguities and indeterminacies in meaning. There may be doubt about the applicability of schemata in portions of the work. We may be unsure what if anything in a cognitive sense certain brushstrokes mean. It may not be a simple matter to clearly demarcate the meaning-bearing properties of the work and draw the appropriate perceptual conclusions. Furthermore, as Wollheim (1980) points out, changes in criticism, in the practice of art, or changes in the broader intellectual climate may influence our perceptions of a work such that we now pay heed to features in a work previously unnoticed or thought to be irrelevant, or see things in a new way. Thus a work may sustain several interpretive responses, rather than one correct, objective, final and complete understanding. The above account of cognitive understanding has to be qualified therefore, by saying that what we perceive in an art work may be subject to degrees of indeterminacy, given that no concept can be so defined as to wholly eradicate the likelihood of doubtful applications, and given that what we perceive as being an objective fact about what a work of art shows may be interpreted differently in the light of new findings in art history, for example, the ongoing restoration of Leonardo's Last Supper has revealed a much more brilliant palette and resolution of detail than was hitherto realised (see Bertelli, 1983), and other disciplines, and a changed intellectual outlook. Thus as Jones points out, the objectivity of

our descriptive statements concerning art works retains a somewhat provisional air:

> . . . some descriptions do characterize how the work is, although it is a contingent matter at any one time which group of utterances are agreed to constitute those descriptions (1969:131).

And Jones goes on to comment on the effects of this lack of finality on the nature of our understanding of works of art:

> To the extent that a work is always open to subsequent and different takings, one's understanding [in the cognitive sense] is always logically incomplete; but to the same extent it is logically inappropriate to lament this fact (1969:131).

In Chapter Four, I referred to Hirsch's account of the acquisition and understanding of literary meaning and I mentioned that I would give some attention to the work of Ernst Gombrich, whom Hirsch cites as providing a somewhat similar account to his own but in the visual arts area. I now wish to make good on that promise and furthermore to acknowledge my intellectual debt to Gombrich whose influence I am sure, is evident in this section so far. First, I shall outline Gombrich's position on the nature and method of artistic representation, and visual perception, and then I shall make some points of criticism and clarification. Hopefully these discussions of Gombrich's classic and influential book Art and Illusion will serve to flesh out some further contours of the cognitive understanding of art.

Briefly, Gombrich (1969) holds that the artist will begin his quest to capture and naturalistically represent a motif with a concept

or schema -- a sort of standardised way of picturing something. The schema is the familiar starting point, and nature is perceived in its terms. Gombrich notes:

> The artist will be attracted by motifs which can be rendered in his idiom. As he scans the landscape, the sights which can be matched successfully with the schemata he has learned to handle will leap forward as centres of attention. The style, like the medium, creates a mental set which makes the artist look for certain aspects in the scene around him that he can render. Painting is an activity, and the artist will therefore tend to see what he paints rather than paint what he sees (1969:85-86).

Forms of representation, says Gombrich, ways of picturing things, are tied to the purposes of society and the artist makes and matches schemata to the motif to meet those requirements. The artist's vocabulary is a selective screen which admits features for which schemata exist, or can be made to fit, within the potentialities of the medium. There is, in Gombrich's view, no "neutral naturalism" or objective copying of nature, only a limited range of possibilities for interpreting and transposing impressions into the terms of the medium. Representation proceeds through a "rhythm" of schema and correction, making and matching. The artist's visual concepts, or models of what things are generally depicted as looking like -- akin to Wittgenstein's catalogue of patterns, are adjusted to meet the needs of the situation. A naturalistic view is held to be correct, or realistic, if we would derive no false information from it. But for Gombrich, all art is first and foremost conceptual. Without prior categories, he says, we could not begin to sort our impressions. And the beholders of art works, says Gombrich, follow a similar path to that of the artist in their perceptual

quest for meaning. Importantly, viewers approach art works with their minds attuned with ready expectations, what Gombrich calls "mental set" -- an understanding of what they are expected to look for. Mental set, says Gombrich, ". . . comprises the attitudes and expectations which will influence our perceptions and make us ready to see, or hear, one thing rather than another" (1969:186). It is a state of readiness to project what we know onto what we see as impressions. Reading an image is described by Gombrich as "testing it for its potentialities, trying out what fits" (1969:227). Seeing is conditioned by habits and expectations, and our understanding of art depends upon the socially-acquired mental set. The meaning we elicit or read as being in an art work depends on our capacity to interpret what we see according to patterns, schemata, stored in our minds. In interpreting a work, we select from our knowledge of possibilities a pattern that fits. An interpretation is a tentative projection, a trial shot at securing a meaning. The artist relies on the public's skill at taking his schematised hints. Thus, says Gombrich:

> . . . it is the guess of the beholder that tests the medley of forms and colours for coherent meaning, crystallizing it into shape when a consistent interpretation has been found (1969:242).

We must know the conventions to know the aspects presented. Knowledge makes us interpret. Small details in a work which appear ambiguous tend to disappear, says Gombrich, when everything falls into place. So, in Gombrich's view, the process of perception:

> . . . is based on the same rhythm we found governing the process of representation: the rhythm of schema and correction. It is a rhythm which presupposes constant activity on our part in making guesses and modifying them in the light of our experience (1969:271-272).

We must have some means to make a first guess in order to make sense of what we see, and false guesses are eliminated by trial and error. Perceptions are thereby held to be prognostic, confirmation is never more than provisional, but refutation is final. Gombrich argues that the kind of mental set described above is essential for our interpretation of other than representational art works as well. With cubism, for example, Gombrich says each interpretive hypothesis is knocked out by a contradicting one. Cubism incorporates contradictory clues which resist attempts to apply the "test of consistency" to secure a coherent reading. "In cubism", notes Gombrich, "even coherent forms are made to play hide-and-seek in the elusive tangle of unresolved ambiguities" (1969:285). Ultimately we must accept a cubist work as a flat pattern with tensions. But even abstract and non-objective works derive some meaning from the perceptual habits andmental sets we bring to representational work. And, Gombrich notes, we can only discover the absence of meaning in the representational sense, and take a work simply as traces of the artist's actions, in that we can apply the traditional consistency tests. Following Gombrich, and in keeping with Hirsch's account it seems that our perceptual interpretations, when freed from contradictions evolve into the way an art work is understood, although as Gombrich points out, perceptions are never final, so our understanding

remains unforeclosed; a return to a work might yield a richer perception.

While I tend to support Gombrich's arguments as outlined above there are some problems with them which deserve further consideration. The first problem concerns the status of his arguments: are they logical, empirical, what? and there are really two sets of arguments which interest us here. One set attends to the question of how artists make works of art which give the illusion of reality depicted in a picture, the other set refers to the process of perception itself. While I am primarily interested in this thesis in the beholder's perception and understanding of art works, rather than in the making of art, these concerns run together in Gombrich's work, and in the view of some writers this alignment creates problems for his model of the process of representation as schema and correction. A further problem related to Gombrich's idea that though art is conceptual and uses conventional means to represent things pictorially, there is, nevertheless an objective standard of representational accuracy. I shall look first to this latter question, then proceed with the aforementioned problems.

Gombrich claims that for the artist, there is no "neutral naturalism", direct copying of nature. Art is conceptual; the artist requires the relevant schemata to catch the natural motif in the appropriate, i.e. realistic, way. And I assume, given Gombrich's dictum that without prior categories we couldn't sort our impressions, that schemata are therefore necessary on <u>a priori</u> grounds. The naturalistic image is

attained as a result of a process of trial and error, of schema and correction, of making and matching. The artist adapts his methods to fit the situation. But at the same time, Gombrich notes in the Preface to the second edition of Art and Illusion, ". . . the undeniable subjectivity of vision does not preclude objective standards of representational accuracy - A wax dummy can be indistinguishable from its prototype . . ." (1969:xi). While concepts and pictures are not true or false, says Gombrich, there may be correct and incorrect descriptions and representations. A portrayal of something, a view of the Tivoli, may be correct, i.e. realistic, says Gombrich, if the viewers ". . . who understand the notation will derive no false information from the drawing . . ." (1969:90). So on the one hand, realism in art is a matter of employing conventions, which can be read as naturalistic by those attuned with the appropriate mental sets, on the other hand, there are objective standards of representational fidelity or faithfulness to nature based on an informational equivalence of natural motif and picture.

It seems as if Gombrich has retreated somewhat from the consequences of his view that art is a conceptual, conventional matter such that given the right mental set any system of symbols could represent anything realistically, or as Goodman says "Realism is relative, determined by the system of representation standard for a given culture, or person at a given time" (1976:37). Art, like language offers an interpretation of reality. But this view offends a basic intuition that realistic paintings do seem to resemble the

objects they portray. Yet, as Blinder (and Goodman (1976)) points out, informational equivalence as a standard of naturalism is easily undermined:

> A mechanical drawing of Notre Dame will give us far more information about the cathedral than an impressionist painting, but is surely not a more naturalistic representation (1983:255).

We may conclude that if art is a conceptual matter, and on a priori grounds I think it is, then what we count as being naturalistic in the sense of resembling nature will be more a matter of what we have been led by artists, and our habits of perception to perceive as being naturalistic, rather than a matter of absolute likeness.

I think Gombrich is on safer ground when he sticks to his conceptual "All art originates in the human mind" (1969:87) position. In this case our judgment that a picture is realistic in that it resembles nature, becomes a matter of knowing the standards in the system. As Goodman suggests, "That a picture looks like nature often means that it looks like nature is usually painted" (1976:39). Resemblance becomes a product of painterly practice and our socially acquired habits of vision. The standards of naturalism, we might say, are set by, are internal to, the system of representation in force. Thus the question of objective standards of naturalism would be ill-conceived if it be thought that a judgment of resemblance is possible on any absolute grounds, for it could be argued that it is only in virtue of having a system of representation that the notion of realism in painting is intelligible. There is something analogous here with the discussion of the autonomy of language outlined in Chapter Two.

Arguably we can only describe the world linguistically in that we have a language, equipped with its own rules, for doing so. Furthermore it is language itself, operating according to its own built-in rules of discourse that allows us to refer meaningfully to the world in the ways that we do. Ultimately we judge the fidelity or accuracy of a verbal description, not by its relation to points of reference but by the logic of definitions, or rules of grammar, since it is only by means of such rules that we can construct the descriptions we do. Making pictures which represent or refer to independently identifiable items (or at least, imaginary commonplace things) has a kinship with the language-game of describing items in the world which is given its warrant, is grounded in a meaning sense by the rules of the game which are learned as one begins to use language appropriately. The rules of language at rock bottom, Wittgenstein would say, connect us logically with the world as we can know it, a world that appears to us courtesy of the organising power of concepts. Analogously we might say, it is only in virtue of having a schematic system of representation, possessing its own conceptual rules of order which are understood by those possessing the relevant mental sets, that artists can produce pictures which may be taken as naturalistic, as resembling nature. Thus, in analogy with the system of language, the structure and use of schemata, artists' ways of commonly painting nature, may be said to underpin what is or is not taken as naturalistic in a painting. Art like language we may say, is autonomous, and functions according to its own internal rules rather than as a

reflection of reality. This is not to say that a painting might not elicit a similar perceptual response to a real thing; it is to say that such possibilities could not come about because somebody "copied" reality. This is also not to say that judgments of resemblance between say a portrait and a person cannot be made for as Goodman points out in a footnote:

> . . . judgments of similarity between a picture and nature in selected and familiar respects are, even though rough and fallible, as objective and categorical as any that are made in describing the world (1976:39).

The criteria of resemblancehowever, depend upon mental set and the currently operating representational standard. I think these points are implicit in Gombrich's view that all art is conceptual. I mention them not so much in criticism of Gombrich's conventionalism, as for clarification, given his talk of "objective standards of representational accuracy".

Given that I basically accept Gombrich's accounts of perception and artistic representation it is crucial that they can be shown to be soundly argued. Yet some critics say that Gombrich's account of perception as ". . . based on the same rhythm as found governing the process of representation: the rhythm of schema and correction" (Gombrich, 1969:271) has a rather stultifying consequence. In Blinder's view:

> . . . if perception is understood as essentially interpretive, and interpretation is explicated in terms of classificatory schema, then Gombrich's account of naturalism leaves no room for the "escape to the object" which is crucial for an objectivist model of schema and correction (1983:255).

Thus the problem seems to be this: How can we possibly tell if a

"naturalistic" schematic representation of reality has a degree of objective correspondence if our only access to the reality represented is via an interpretive schematic perception? Wollheim (1973) also notes that Gombrich's schema and correction analysis of perception and representation leaves no "'exit to the object'" (1973:283), which he says is necessary for the possibility of correcting a schema "so as to bring it more into line with the object" (1973:283). The correction of schemata used in representation must, argues Wollheim, have an appeal outside the circle of those schemata. Such an appeal is blocked once the schema and correction analysis is applied to perception. Blinder notes that in Gombrich's account, artists use pictorial symbols, which they learn from other artists, to transpose a three-dimensional world on to a two-dimensional surface. The symbols are experiments in picture-making, "hypotheses which must be tested to see if they work, and corrected or rejected if they do not. But corrected according to what?" (Blinder, 1983:254). Nature is <u>also</u> a product of interpretation. Since perception requires some kind of schemata we don't have access to reality in-itself which Blinder argues, is basic to Gombrich's objectivism. If what we see, and further, if how we naturalistically render our vision, are both subject to the organising power of our mental sets, then the conventionalist's conclusion follows from Gombrich's arguments. Both the perception of nature and its naturalistic representation are relative to the concepts we employ. We have no way therefore, to test the accuracy of a representation for its fidelity of resemblance other than by the

standards of representation at work. Thus, as Goodman observes:

> Realism is a matter not of any constant or absolute relationship between a picture and its object but of a relationship between the system of representation employed in the picture and the standard [i.e. traditional or customary] system (1976:38).

A painting is thus realistic because it looks realistic to us. Realism, in an objective sense proves to be a will o' the wisp; as I noted earlier in the analogy of the autonomy of art with that of language, the use of schemata may be said to underpin what is or is not taken as naturalistic in painting.

Considering Gombrich's commitment to perception as interpretation, for example, visual impressions, he tells us, are grouped by the "'conceptual habits' necessary to life" (1969:298), and "The innocent eye is a myth" (1969:298), I think the criticisms of Gombrich's attempts to avoid the relativistic conclusion are justified. Given his adherence to the priority of concepts in both perception and the making of representations, the objectivity of judgments of naturalism can only rest with the standards our minds have been trained to accept. Thus, on the conceptual view, the artist requires schemata to picture nature naturalistically. But what the artist observes as the object of his art is a nature interpreted in the terms of his art. The artist tends to see what he paints, says Gombrich, ". . . the sights which can be matched successfully with the schemata he has learned to handle will leap forward as centres of attention" (1969:85). The style (the schemata in use), like the medium, says Gombrich, creates a mental set which makes the artist capable of matching

impressions with a schema. Depending on the aim of the work, what the artist paints is brought up to the standard required by the style by a process of trial and error. The artist uses his limited repertoire of techniques to capture the motif in the appropriate way, modifying what he paints until the schema corresponds with images perceived. The matching of schemata with impressions calls for the artist's interpretive judgment. The viewer, in turn, uses his knowledge of what nature is usually depicted as looking like to understand and judge the degree of naturalism. Once Gombrich's arguments are understood in the conventional vein, shorn of attempts to establish an objectivity which comes from outside the system of representation, then I think the difficulties implied by the schema and correction analysis are resolved and the arguments appear to be logically sound. It seems undeniable that in order to represent something, an artist must have the conceptual means to sort his impressions and put them into the kind of two-dimensional terms that viewers are accustomed to find meaningful. And given the different and changing aspects that nature presents, some probing experimentation seems necessary, an evolution of work in progress. Furthermore, when it comes to making judgments about what art works show, then given the uncertainties and ambiguities inherent in the interpretive application of concepts or schemata to impressions, some tentative process of trial and error in the acquisition and understanding of meaning seems unavoidable. I feel justified therefore, in turning to Gombrich for assistance in my attempts to explain how we are able to understand works of art in

the cognitive sense.

But it should be pointed out that there are no infallible procedures for securing meaning when it comes to works of art, whatever "tests of consistency" may be applied. To be sure we require mental sets to understand art, but a definite conceptual meaning may be elusive given that it is within the purview of art to present the fantastic, the mysterious, the impossible in the form of images. The Belgian surrealist, René Magritte, for example, relies upon our habits of perception in order to disrupt our commonsense beliefs about reality. Suzi Gablik observes:

> What happens in Magritte's paintings, is, roughly speaking, the opposite of what the trained mind is accustomed to expect. His pictures disturb the elaborate compromise that exists between mind and life (1985:112-113).

And Gablik goes on to discuss the various ways Magritte has found to introduce ambiguity and paradox into his work, which she calls the "crisis of the object"; for example, an object may be given a property it doesn't have under normal circumstances (Gablik, 1985:123). Magritte's work, says Gablik, betrays the doubting, questioning temper of the philosopher. She says Magritte repudiated the notion that his paintings had specific meanings:

> For Magritte, paintings worth being painted and looked at have no reducible meaning: they <u>are</u> meaning. To be able to define the meaning of images would correspond to putting the impossible into a possible thought (Gablik, 1985:12)

Magritte himself notes that "People who look for symbolic meanings fail to grasp the inherent poetry and mystery of the image . . . . they express a wish that everything be understandable" (Magritte

quoted by Gablik, 1985:11).

Thus, artists such as Magritte may make use of images we ordinarily have little trouble in understanding but juxtapose and combine them in ways which resist our ordinary perceptual orderings and this forces us to question what we ordinarily take for granted as the structure of everyday reality.

Aesthetic Understanding

Having discussed what it is to understand a work of art in light of its cognisable features, i.e. features the appearance of which is governed by conventions and about which we may have knowledgeable perception, I turn now to the kind of understanding which is attained of a work of art as an object in the world in its own right -- of the appearance of an object as it is in itself. We may say that cognitive understanding focuses on the content of a work: the physical and objective properties of colour, line, shape, texture, which are organised by the artist so as to be meaningful in terms of generalised patterns or schemata which serve to picture or represent things we know. As viewers, we bring to bear our culturally inculcated powers of perception, governed by a mental set, on whatever works of art we choose to contemplate. And in this sense of understanding, we employ the schematic rules we have learned as members of a society, to discriminate and relate our impressions of the work, to grasp the order. But to speak of understanding in this way is to create a false dichotomy, for the content of a work, if it has one, is also

structured, formed into just this configuration. It is in the particular appearance that an individual work of art presents that our aesthetic interest lies; and here I am speaking of the way the artist has brought off the work as a whole.

A work of art is both form and substance. It is substance or content formed and neither form nor content may be abstracted without losing the work, just as for example, we cannot separate the body of a seashell from its shape. The shape must be that of the body of the shell. Thus, in viewing a work of art, content is inescapable. Even a non-objective work presents strokes of paint organised in some way though it may be content-free in the cognisable sense. There can only be a form where something is formed. Thus in viewing a work of art aesthetically we inevitably attend to what if anything it schematically shows or represents because we are primarily interested in how it is shown. Content then, is not irrelevant, but the manner of presenting the content is the focus of aesthetic interest. And thus interest centres on what may be called a work's aesthetic qualities -- qualities for which we may find an apt metaphor, e.g. in Chapter One I spoke of the quality of "pathos" in the Moonlight Sonata, but qualities which elude discrimination on the basis of criterial rules, for as Sibley points out:

> . . . the features which make something delicate or graceful, and so on, are combined in a peculiar and unique way; that the aesthetic quality depends upon exactly this individual or unique combination of just these specific colours and shapes so that even a slight change might make all the difference. Nothing is to be achieved by trying to single out or separate features and generalizing about them (1965:74-75).

Sibley's conclusion is that the employment of aesthetic concepts to attribute aesthetic qualities to works of art, and he cites the following list of examples: "unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, sombre, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, trite, sentimental, tragic " (1965:61), is not done by following rules or by appealing to conditions found exemplified in a work. Thus the use of a term such as "unified" cannot serve as a description of the particular quality of unity an individual work may exhibit such that experience of the quality itself becomes unnecessary. For the work will be unified in its own way. Aesthetically, we are concerned with a work of art's unique and singular way of appearing and presenting itself. The aesthetic response focuses on an object as it is in and of itself rather than on what, if anything, it schematically refers to or represents. What matters to us aesthetically is the way a work is structured, how it offers itself for our contemplation rather than as a means of communication or for some other end extraneous to the art work. A scientific theory may be presented on a blackboard, in a notebook, or on a table napkin and what we read in each case will serve to convey the claims of the theory quite adequately. A work of art however, or a person for that matter, are irreplaceable individuals requiring us to have first-hand acquaintance with them if we are to appreciate and understand their singular, and in part, necessarily unique aspects. You can't be said to "know" -- in all the intuitive and empathetic senses of that word -- a person you have never met, no matter how much information you may have gathered about him. The same thing is

true, analogously, of a work of art. You must experience a work of art for yourself, for in certain respects, it is not, cannot be, like any other. If an art work lacked a marked character of its own we should say it was perhaps imitative, contrived, or derivative, lacking the spark of originality we value and expect to find in all genuine works of art. So you can't, for example, appreciate Rembrandt's Portrait of a Young Woman (and here I use "appreciate" to mean discern and understand the work's singular qualities) by looking at photographs. You must visit the Musee des Beaux Arts in Montreal and stand before the work. What all this adds up to is that to take an aesthetic interest in a work of art, or any other object for that matter, means that we are interested in its form or individual way of being, sometimes referred to as a work's style. Thus, when we view a work of art aesthetically, for such is the way any object attains aesthetic status, we attend to it for its own sake, as an end in itself. And this raises the question of the legitimacy of our taking the aesthetic attitude to be the appropriate way of approaching works of art, a question which I shall address below. For now, I want to emphasise that in our usual way of taking it, the term "aesthetic" is invoked to describe a way of attending to things which focuses on their inherent qualities, aspects and meanings. We could say that when we perceive something aesthetically we consider its formal qualities, not what it may otherwise advocate, or how well it does it job, or the information it may contain. Nevertheless, where a work of art does carry a conceptual meaning, our aesthetic response does not just discount it and simply see, for example, a representational

painting as an interesting composition of coloured shapes. We don't forget, for example, that Goya's Third of May, 1808, is a picture of a firing squad doing its job -- for this is the content or substance of the work without which there would be no painting. But accepting this, instead of restricting our interest to the kind of uniforms the soldiers are shown as wearing, or with the number of victims, or even with an overall conceptual grasp of what is depicted, in the aesthetic response we are concerned with Goya's visual and painterly treatment of the subject. That is, we attend to the painting as a painting of a firing squad in action, for how else are we to pick it out, but essentially we are concerned with the artist's insightful rendering of the form of the experience represented. Susan Sontag observes that, of course, works of art present information and sometimes refer to the real world, but that nevertheless:

> . . . the knowledge we gain through art as an experience of the form or style of knowing something, rather than a knowledge of something (like a fact or a moral judgment) in itself.
>
> This explains the pre-eminence of the value of expressiveness in works of art; and how the value of expressiveness - that is, of style - rightly takes precedence over content (where content is, falsely, separated from style) (1983:142-143).

That is, in the case of the Goya, for example, we attend to the expression or atmosphere of terror and organised brutality we find in the work. We respond with feeling to the expressive qualities of the work, as we do, analogously, to the pervasive qualities of a person's character and presence. Put another way, we respond to such felt qualities, which may be called aesthetic, directly or

or intuitively, rather than by means of discursive analysis. As far as understanding goes in the aesthetic sense we just grasp aesthetic qualities by a direct perceptual acquaintance with the work considered as a whole. Here I am using the term "acquaintance" in Russell's sense wherein he says, "We shall say we have acquaintance with anything of which we are directly aware without the intermediary of any process of inference, or any knowledge of truth" (1967:25). Aesthetic understanding is attained by perceiving the inherent formal order of the work, but the order is, one might say, understood directly, or intuitively felt, since, as Sibley points out, the precise combination of features which serve to express a pervasive aesthetic quality will be limited in each case to a particular work of art. Thus we cannot arrive at an understanding of the intrinsic order of the quality by analysis -- the form of the quality must be grasped first as a whole -- then of course, the curious person might try to work out how specific features seem to relate to generate the expression. A sombre mood in a painting, for example, may be attributed to the muted cool tones used to render the image. But such features may not be generally relied upon to necessarily create a sombre mood. In other works such tones may be present and the mood be lacking. Yet again, a painting may be sombre but use none of the same tones and hues. To explain how we get in touch with such qualities and perceive their distinctive natures is therefore no easy matter. Our usual way of giving explanations, is stumped for lack of consistent and complete criteria. I noted in Chapter Three that in the application of concepts

to sort and relate impressions, an element of subjective, interpretive judgment -- which cannot be made further explicit (for more discussion on this point see Chapter Four, especially the sections on interpretation and judgment) -- is needed, on logical grounds, to ultimately grasp that a set of impressions conforms with a concept. In other words, when we perceive something as a something, the ultimate ground for our doing so is an act of insight on the part of the perceiving subject. In the usual non-aesthetic case, there may be rules to guide our perceptual judgment, but at rock bottom there are no rules to decide upon the applicability of the rules; you just "see" that they apply, or they do not. I suggest that with aesthetic qualities the more subjective, insightful component of our capacities to perceive and understand is predominant. We interpret a set of received impressions as being for example sadlike, or unified, by an act of insight into its formal order. That is, we are able to just grasp that the pattern reminds us in some indeterminate way, of the pattern we find exhibited in other more cognitive or discursive situations, or, we just grasp the pattern as it is in itself without giving it a name, as was the case with Virginia Woolf's sister, whose personality was said to have an "unnamed quality". Yet the objection may be raised that without the guidance of rules we have no means of discriminating an aesthetic quality in the first place. But we may still have a perceptual access to these sets of impressions without the aid of rules, for the patterns presented are of the manner of appearing of an object that is otherwise conceptually discriminated.

We know that what we are dealing with is a work of art, the formal qualities of which are constitutive of a larger pattern that is in other respects conceptualisable. Aesthetic qualities emerge from and are limited by conceptualisable factors (see page 63 where my reference to an argument by Petra von Morstein serves as my source for this point). The qualities in question are therefore owned by an object which is otherwise conceptualisable, and these qualities become noticeable when we adopt a focus of attention which is primarily formal, i.e. directed at the art work's individual way of presenting itself, rather than to what it may hold in common with other art works by way of content. We focus on an aspect of an object which is already marked out in our attention. I suggest therefore that aesthetic understanding refers to a capacity attached to each individual, to perceive or directly grasp, the inherent formal order presented by an aspect of a work of art by means of a subjective insight. Thus, when we attend to a work for its own sake we may find that from different perspectives it is at once expressive of sadness, is unified, balanced, and is all of these things in its own peculiar fashion. I realise that this outline is not very informative. Indeed it amounts to no more than saying aesthetic understanding is akin to a knowing by acquaintance, or that it is direct, intuitive understanding. But with the aesthetic realm we are dealing with the fleeting, intangible, felt qualities of experience in its singular aspects and such are not so amenable to conceptual analysis which relies on the standardisation of experiences by general patterns embodied in language and art to

do its work.

Before proceeding to discuss briefly, some of the educational implications stemming from the logic of aesthetic concepts, I want to follow up a question raised earlier about the relation of the aesthetic attitude to our approach to works of art, for it is important to know how a work of art is to be taken if it is viewed and properly understood, qua art.

The Aesthetic Attitude and Art

Among the cognoscenti the approach to art that is considered appropriate is the aesthetic. As I noted above, to view a work of art aesthetically is to contemplate what it shows, for its own sake, not that is, for example, as contributing to the decor of a room, or with the intention of increasing one's knowledge of a period of history, but in respect of its manner of presentation of subject matter, roughly speaking its qualities of form. With highly abstract art, talk of content may be redundant and the form or structure of the work is simply the formed materials of art. In other circumstances, content is not irrelevant but as narrative or description, content takes second place to formal structure. Strictly speaking, a work of art is valued aesthetically for the satisfying perceptual experience it precipitates rather than for its own sake in any absolute sense. When we say we attend to a work for its own sake, this means we attend for the sake of the satisfaction it inspires, i.e. the feeling

of the "rightness" of the configuration of the work which pleases us on account of its being the appropriate solution to what the work seems to be attempting. In the orthodox view, as an object of aesthetic contemplation, a work of art is held to be purpose-free, autonomous, in that our interest is with the work itself. To view a work of art as a work of art is to view it aesthetically, as free from any worldly purposes, in short, as an object of disinterested attention. Analogously, to take an interest in a person as a person is to attend to him or her as an end, not as useful for the fulfilment of some personal goal. The appropriateness of the aesthetic approach to art as art lies with, or is justified by the preferences of the cultural elite in our society rather than with the strict force of logic. Prior to the eighteenth century the idea that art had no purpose beyond its own display would have been incomprehensible. The objects we take to be art from the past were part of the living fabric of society -- the Parthenon was a temple, Phidias' statue of Athena was an image of a goddess to be worshipped, individual portraits were a record and testament to a person's importance, a landscape painting of an estate served as an impressive display of wealth and plenty. Art was full of moral, social, and religious purposes. Nowadays it is assumed that a work of art gains its warrant on the basis of its own internal purposes and not by being a means to some outside end such as moral uplift or religious enlightenment. Such an assumption is widely accepted by the critics, connoisseurs, and artists who comprise the art establishment and set the prevailing

standards and attitudes to art, though as Edward Lucie-Smith points out, special interest groups such as the feminists, Black and American Hispanics, and homosexuals may use art to get across their own points of view. Speaking of the "Gay Rodeo" series of paintings by Delmas Howe, Lucie-Smith observes:

> . . . this is still an art which emphasises the power of imagery, is less concerned with style than with group identity, and wants its meanings to be generally accessible. Such work defiantly negates the hermitic tradition associated with classic modernism (1984:276).

One wonders how long the aesthetic, disinterested view of art will withstand the influence of such groups, each striving to communicate its own ideology and attain group solidarity in the fact of a hostile world. Nevertheless, given that the aesthetic view of art largely prevails, in our society, art is distinguished from religious artefact, political propaganda, or pornography, for example, in that as art it can serve none of these ends. The ends of art are internal to the logic and coherence of art rather than serving to evoke religious ecstasy, promote ideological conditioning, or stimulate sexual excitement. Art is considered to be a self-contained realm. We are interested in what art formally shows or exhibits rather than in what it might otherwise promote or advocate. Thus we would accept Picasso's Guernica as a depiction of the horrible experience of war, as the evocation of the quality of an experience, rather than as a document designed to elicit specific anti-Fascist sentiment, whatever the artist's intentions. If this seems to betray an effete mentality which puts aesthetic interest above or outside the issues of life, then that

would seem to be the price art must pay for the privilege of being able to work with any subject whatsoever without thereby automatically taking on the usual connotations of the subject of interest. A work of art may therefore, as art, portray a sexually deviant experience without being at once pornographic. The portrayal in question may have pornographic associations but inasmuch as the work is adjudged to be art it cannot at the same time be pornographic, for as art, the work is purposefree. A remark of Kant's in the Critique of Judgment echoes the modern aesthetic or formalist conception of art, viz. "Fine art, . . . is a mode of representation that is intrinsically final . . . ." (1952:306), by which I think he means that art can have no purpose beyond its own ends or purposes which are internal to the work, i.e. "intrinsically final" means internally purposive. The end of art is to attain its own peculiar form of coherence and order as exhibited in each individual work of art. The appropriate posture of the viewer is to attend to such order as it is inherently displayed in a work of art, but without, I would want to say, assuming a separation of form and content.

Aesthetic Education

Since aesthetic qualities, by being uniquely constituted in each case, cannot be discerned and understood by methods of analysis under the guidance of general rules, to talk of developing an understanding ability in aesthetic matters is problematic. It may be that through years of attentive exposure to art, individuals can develop

a heightened sensitivity and a readiness to clear the mind and attend to the peculiarities of each art work, and in which case such persons may be more likely to be able to grasp aesthetic qualities than others. But there can be no sense to talk of developing an ability to understand aesthetically which is educable according to a preconceived pattern. In other words, there are no learnable rules which may be used to guide the aesthetic understanding of works of art, although under favourable conditions, i.e. with the aid of a sensitive teacher, a person might become more aware of, and at home with the mode of attention that the aesthetic response requires, i.e., contemplative, disinterested. We develop our ideas about the aesthetic realm, about aesthetic judgments (the perception of a quality and the verbal attribution of an aesthetic term) it seems, as we do about other kinds of judgments, by living in a culture. Wittgenstein, for example, suggests:

> The words we call expressive of aesthetic judgment play a very complicated role, but a very definite role, in what we call the culture of a period. To describe their use or to describe what you mean by a cultured taste, you have to describe a culture. What we now call a cultured taste perhaps didn't exist in the Middle Ages. An entirely different game is played in different ages (1970:8).

And elsewhere, in reference to understanding music, Wittgenstein says:

> For how can it be explained what 'expressive playing' is? Certainly not by anything that accompanies the playing. -- What is needed for an explanation? One might say a culture. -- If someone is brought up in a particular culture - and then reacts to music in such-and-such a way, you can teach him the use of the phrase "expressive playing" (1967:¶164).

The persuasive implication of Wittgenstein's remarks is that a youth brought up in a musical household will likely respond more intelligently

to say, the haunting, romantic temper of Brahms' first piano concerto, than will, for example, a street urchin, or a person from a country with different musical traditions. For it is important to remember that music and the other arts do not simply serve to convey or communicate thoughts and feelings we already have independent of these art forms, simply by being human. Whatever qualities we find expressed in the arts are in the art forms. Recalling the points made by Taylor regarding expressive meaning, which I discussed in Chapter Two, the medium of expression serves to constitute meaning and make it available as well. What is expressed, and here we are talking about aesthetic qualities, cannot be separated from the medium. Without the art form there would be no aesthetic quality. Meaning and medium constitute a whole. Paradigm expressive objects -- faces, works of art -- cannot be analysed to discover expressions or to to work out their constitutions, at least, not without grasping the expression first and working from there. There may not be rules which can be followed in our search for aesthetic qualities, which must be understood or grasped directly, but that does not mean that such qualities are equally accessible to all, regardless of place in history or cultural orientation. Wittgenstein says, "We don't understand Chinese gestures any more than Chinese sentences" (1967:¶219). A smile expressing pleasure, joy, or satisfaction, in one society may serve as an expression of nervous annoyance in another. One needs a cultural background of the appropriate sort to appreciate aesthetic qualities, for one must be familiar with the aims and forms of art, and with the relevant

attitudes and responses. The haunting, almost love-lorn quality we find in the Brahms' piano concerto requires a listener schooled in the traditions of western Romanticism to be comprehensible; or at least a person sufficiently immersed in a culture in which such values still permeate to some extent. It is Wittgenstein again who brings out the importance of background in understanding expressive gestures. In this case,he speaks of gestures of wishing:

> One says: How can these gestures, this way of holding the hand, this picture, be the wish that such and such were the case? It is nothing more than a hand over a table and there it is, alone and without a sense. Like a single bit of scenery from the production of a play, which has been left in a room by itself. It had life only in the play. (Wittgenstein, 1967:¶238).

Brahms' music, we might say, has its proper audience, listeners whose sensitivities are attuned to these musical forms. Any gesture, whether given in body language or in art, will be estranged, without sense, like a single bit of scenery from a play if it is taken out of its proper context. What we find meaningful depends on the relation of the object of interest to our common field of reference, to its place in our forms of life. In a sense, art must educate its audience. As interested viewers we are inspired by each art work to respond to qualities which can only be manifested in that medium in that way. But art is also a product of a complex socio-historical process and our responses are largely moulded by the society we live in and the company we keep. The question of pressing interest to teachers, however, is that given the difficulty in objectively referring to, analysing and describing aesthetic qualities, how can children be

taught to understand works of art aesthetically? And if there is to be such a thing as aesthetic education, how can teachers know when understanding has been attained, and to what degree? I shall take it that to understand aesthetically means that a person is able to grasp phenomenologically, that is, directly, at first-hand, the order inherent in a formal aspect of a work of art. A viewer would perceive a quality, which might not be named, as an overall impression, a gestalt, by means of an immediate subjective insight into the form or singular pattern presented. And a work of art may be complex such that it exhibits several aspects of form. Brahms' concerto, for example, may be heard as heartfelt, passionate, and yet sound reminiscent of the classical style of Beethoven. Clearly, getting students to notice and understand the nature of such qualities can be no easy matter. Sometimes a teacher will notice a quality in an art work which some students miss, and no amount of talk and pointing will bring them to see, at that moment, what he sees. But given that we approach each work of art aesthetically, as an individual, in its own right, and given that talk of developing a general ability to understand aesthetically is logically inappropriate, what is the teacher to do in the way of enhancing his or her students' chances of getting in touch with and grasping aesthetic qualities? Sibley (1965) gives an account of the methods critics use to support their aesthetic judgments which I think is pertinent to the teacher's task. By "judgment" Sibley means the subject's noticing and characterising of a quality. Judgments such as "a poem is tightly-knit or deeply moving" (Sibley,

1965:62), require a special sensitivity, or taste, on the part of the judging subject, says Sibley, for as he points out "If someone did merely follow a rule [in making an aesthetic judgment[we should not say he was exercising taste . . . (1965:73). Aesthetic judgments must respect the logic of aesthetic concepts which Sibley argues are not applied on the basis of rules or conditions, except negatively, e.g. under certain conditions a picture may not be described as fiery or gaudy or flamboyant. Sibley provides the following list of words to indicate examples of the variety of terms used in the critical discussion of aesthetic qualities: ". . . unified, balanced, integrated, lifeless, serene, sombre, dynamic, powerful, vivid, delicate, moving, trite, sentimental, tragic" (1965:61). Such words, says Sibley, frequently have uses in other, non-aesthetic contexts, whereas terms such as "graceful, delicate, dainty, handsome, comely, elegant, garish" (Sibley, 1965:62) function predominantly as aesthetic terms. While words from the first list are used metaphorically in the aesthetic context, words in the second list, including such terms as "lovely, pretty, beautiful" (1965:62) are not, says Sibley, since the aesthetic use is their primary use. Very briefly, Sibley notes that by way of justifying our critical aesthetic judgments and getting others to see what we see in a work of art we may point out non-aesthetic features which are easily discernible -- this or that figure, darker and brighter colours -- and by doing so, bring someone to see the qualities we are interested in. Sibley says, "In mentioning features which may be discerned by anyone with normal eyes, ears,

and intelligence, we are singling out what may serve as a kind of key to grasping or seeing something else . . ." (1965:83). Or we may just point to the qualities and say "See what energy and vitality it has" (Sibley, 1965:83) and this may do the trick. Sibley notes that some remarks may serve to link aesthetic and non-aesthetic features. The viewer may be shown, for example, how certain lines and points of colour give the work vitality and energy. In addition, says Sibley, we make use of similes and metaphors such as "'the light shimmers, the lines dance, everything is air, lightness and gaeity;" (1965:83). Did Sibley perhaps have Renoir's Dance at Bougival in mind when he wrote that line? We make use of contrasts, comparisons and reminiscences, says Sibley, and I give one of his examples regarding a painting "Don't you think it has something of the quality of a Rembrandt?" (1965:83). Sometimes the critic returns to the same point, notes Sibley, and talks about the same shapes, using the same similes and metaphors, just as if the repetition, the paying of closer attention will help. Or, as critics, we may talk around what has been said, apply other related metaphors. Finally, Sibley says that the rest of our behaviour is important, i.e. "tone of voice, expression, nods, looks, and gesture" (1965:84). An appropriate gesture "may make us see the violence in a painting" (1965:84) says Sibley. And yet, in spite of all such efforts, the teacher or critic may fail to influence his student's perception since we cannot prove either by argument or evidence conditions that something, for example, is graceful or exquisite. The teacher at rock bottom must use his or

her imagination and ingenuity to find ways relevant to the object in view, to direct attention to its aesthetic qualities. The great difficulty is that such uniquely constituted qualities are not readily translatable into some other medium, and must, ultimately be experienced for oneself. "You have to see it like this," says Wittgenstein, "this is how it is meant" (1974a:202), if you try to put what a work of art shows into other terms, something of the uniqueness of the quality is lost for it cannot be other than it is and retain its identity. It may be that a student comes by his aesthetic understanding after repeated exposure to a work of art, with and without the aid of the teacher. On one occasion, something may click, and an aspect of the work is seen as it wasn't before. The student just suddenly gets the point about say, the teacher's remarks concerning the ethereal atmosphere of Samuel Palmer's painting Coming From Evening Church, though there might be no specific reason we can identify for the triggering of the new insight. Arguably, a student's first-hand experiences in working artistically (or attempting to) with a medium will alert him or her to problems faced by artists in finding the right form of expression. By getting the feel for what it is like to artfully construct something (or perform in a dance or a play), and by taking heed of the teacher's critical comments, a student may become more sympathetic and knowledgeable about the nature and point of the artistic endeavour. Furthermore, the richness of a child's background in other culturally relevant respects cannot but help in the

appreciation of art. I don't mean by that, that art will serve to evoke memories of previous experiences -- some sad music makes the child think of his grandmother's funeral, for example, for such effects are outside the purview of art. I mean rather that a background rich in experience of imagery and language may serve to aid a student's aesthetic understanding of art works. A child lucky enough, for example, to have had parents and teachers who value the development and mastery of language, and experience of literature so that books, stories, and much attention to drawing and painting are a significant part of life, and who thus has an extensive familiarity with the use of metaphor in relation to say beautifully illustrated stories will be well placed to both grasp the aesthetic qualities found in art works and give some appropriate hints regarding the nature of his understanding. Familiarity with the use of metaphor may enable a student to perceive qualities he might otherwise have missed. A student is more likely to be able to frame his own apt metaphors and thus get in touch with, or give a focus to his aesthetic perceptions if he has grasped the logic of metaphorical description and has the capacity to reach into his own experience as a source of metaphor. Such a student is more likely to be able to see a work as expressing a nightmarish, mysterious quality, for example, according to his teacher's way of putting it, if he or she has the required degree of language mastery. And such mastery becomes important when students are asked to reflect upon and try to verbalise their own felt experiences of an art work. Education thus builds upon education. Students

who already have a culturally rich background will thereby have a good source of reference for the sort of contrasting, comparing, and reminiscing Sibley talks about, i.e. being led to understand what a work shows of itself because of its relations and association with other works, pictures, poems, etc., which serve as grist for the making of imaginative connections. Of course, the teacher takes his class of children at whatever stage of development he finds them and works with them from there. This fundamental rule of education has been taken by some however, to mean that what is extant in the life of students now should become the content of an aesthetic education, i.e. pop culture is more immediate and appealing to students, let us therefore concentrate on what the students know and find relevant. Ross (1984), for example wants to throw out the "High Arts" curriculum from schools -- which takes as its focus the lasting artistic achievements of the past -- in favour of a curriculum that is based on local concerns, is non-esoteric, and incorporates popular and traditional folk or "vernacular" arts so that aesthetic education will be relevant to the pupils lives (see Ross, 1984:33-48). Yet, as I noted elsewhere in response to Ross's prescriptions:

> There is no denying the legitimacy of the pupils' interests in the popular arts for educational reasons, yet schools also exist to introduce us to more complex ways of feeling and thinking as embodied in great works of art (Richmond, 1985:186).

Ross's concerns are that the High Arts are elitest. They are, "the artistic predilections of a social minority" (Ross, 1984:28) as he puts it, and they are pursued he says, as commodity items in a patronage

system. These charges may be true, but by the same token, the works of great artists embody an originality and richness of insight into the forms of human experience that is just too valuable to miss. We don't, for example, turn our backs on the beauty of the Acropolis because ancient Athens was a slave economy. Monet's paintings of the sights of Paris, and the French countryside, rendered in terms of colour and light could be a revelation to a working-class child growing up in a grey mining village or steel town. Education must serve to develop and extend, to show other imaginative ways of conceiving of reality which go beyond the all too concrete (and limited) familiarity of one's own world. Given the brief period allotted to art study in schools, educators are duty bound to present the best that mankind has to offer, even if such works of art are complex and difficult to understand. For many children, such brief exposure to great art may be the only experience of such art they get under educative conditions, whereas the media are unrelenting and ever-present in their purveyance of the more popular forms of music, art, etc. This is not to denigrate such things altogether, nor to suggest that the curriculum must offer a steady diet of the art which is valued by the art establishment; Rock videos, for example, offer tremendous potential as an art form. But the attractiveness and social relevance of these inventions is no reason to ignore our cultural heritage.

Importantly, students must be encouraged to adopt the kind of open, contemplative, disinterested attitude required of the aesthetic response, what Collinson calls "welcoming and respectful" (1973:198),

such that they become willing to give something a chance, no matter how strange, or how far outside their range of experience it may be. With the teacher's aid, students might be able to overcome the ingrained tendencies we all have to ask of a work of art "What is it supposed to be?", "What does it mean?" as if some handy explanation can be given. Rather, the teacher can inculcate the aesthetic posture which entails that we do not ask what something is, but see that it is something, an object worthy of attention in its own right. Speaking of the expression of feeling in a work of art, Wittgenstein observes:

> And you could say that in so far as people understand it, they 'resonate' in harmony with it, respond to it. You might say: the work of art does not aim to convey something else, just itself (1980:58e).

Aesthetic education would seek to enable students to appreciate (value) and understand the in "itself" of art.

It should be apparent that a subjectively felt experience of an aesthetic quality is not explicable to the degree that one's understanding of a newspaper report, or a quadratic equation is. As I have noted, aesthetic qualities are uniquely composed. A painting which expresses a quality of melancholy, for example, does so in its own special way. In Chapters One and Four, I relied on this feature of aesthetic qualities to argue that our understanding of the nature of such qualities is, to a large extent, necessarily private, not explicatable. In applying the term "pathos", for example, to the Moonlight Sonata, we do so on the basis of the singular and immediately felt impression of the quality rather than by finding general conditions exemplified in the work, i.e. the quality is that of pathos because the work is

played slowly and invokes a certain range of tones. The particular quality of pathos, I argued, is not an instance of a class possessing other members similarly constituted. Thus, I argued that no statements can be made, which rely on general concepts, to characterise the make-up of the quality -- to indicate to others who have not heard it, what it is like. You must grasp the quality as it is, by an act of insight, i.e. the individual's personal and private way of comprehending the order displayed in the formal pattern. Even a metaphorical description gives only a hint of the nature of the quality which must be experienced at first-hand. Aesthetic qualities are essentially irreplaceable, non-translatable. I used the term "necessarily unique" to describe the constitutive make-up of aesthetic qualities. Some unique things are conceptualisable -- a person's idiosyncratic walk through a hotel lobby may be unique -- never before exhibited -- but it can be captured in concepts expressing space and time coordinates (see Petra von Morstein (1982) to whom I owe the inspiration for this point). The Moonlight Sonata, however, does not belong to a range, or potential range of cases. There may be other idiosyncratic walks through hotel lobbies, but there is, necessarily, only one Moonlight Sonata displaying just this quality of pathos. The quality cannot be captured in discursive terms, it has a life of its own. Aesthetic terms are applied on the occasion of the single and necessarily unique manifestation of a quality and thus while such terms serve to give some indication of what to expect, i.e. we have an idea about what "pathos" means from its literal applications, such a term cannot make public the nature of the

quality as it is subjectively experienced in itself. The use of metaphor, and other primarily aesthetic terms, such as beautiful, pretty, etc., is, however, about the best we can do, verbally, to try to make our experience and understanding public. Clearly, any notion of the teacher's assessing in a quantifiable manner the nature and degree of a student's aesthetic understanding of a work of art is ill-conceived indeed, as is any plan to set objectives for student achievement in precise, behavioural terms. It may be difficult in some cases to even give a quality a name. It may be difficult to decide whether a work of art displays a "vibrant" quality or a "rhythmic" quality -- there could be subtle intimations of both qualities. What the teacher can do, however, is to teach students to employ the vocabulary and methods of the critic. Students can, by the use of metaphor, give some verbal account of their aesthetic judgments, they can refer us to details plainly visible in a work, and point directly to aesthetic qualities. Sibley's account of the critic's way of justifying his judgments is valuable here. The student may not be able to offer a proof for the veracity of his judgments but by referring to further details, by pointing and gesturing he may provide an account, compelling enough to substantiate his judgments. Furthermore, as Wittgenstein says "But isn't understanding shewn e.g. in the expression with which someone reads the poem, sings the tune?" (1967:171), and indeed it is. The teacher may observe the way a student contemplates a work, returns to it, refers to it at odd moments, discusses it with other students. It may be difficult to determine whether a student's

interest is aesthetic or merely curious, thus the evaluation of a student's aesthetic understanding may take some time and involve a period of observation in which many small indications, i.e. comments, questions, written accounts, facial expressions, positions, gestures, expressed interests are taken note of. In any case, the understanding of a work of art is rarely a one-shot affair; repeated experience of the work may be required to absorb its complexities of form. And a student's understanding, or grasp of qualities may be partial rather than complete, though there can be no objective demarcation in numerical terms to differentiate levels of aesthetic understanding. At best, the teacher must make a subjective appraisal of a student's accomplishments, on the basis of his observations of the student's visible and audible responses and this in a rather imprecise fashion, if he or she is to satisfy the school's administrative requirements. Ultimately, the teacher must balance the student's critical statements against his or her own aesthetic judgments, and other respected critical judgments, which serve as a standard, which is to say that we assume that the teacher's sensitivites are the trustworthy ones, at least in the beginning of a programme of aesthetic education.

At this point I close this chapter on understanding works of art -- a complex and problematic philosophical question indeed -- and end this thesis by noting the work herein is merely an introduction to a vast and exacting topic. Further work is needed to elucidate our subjective grasp of unique particulars, found attached to persons and works of art, for which at present we possess only the merest intimations.

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