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**«AESTHETICALLY, THE MIRACLE IS THAT THE
WORLD EXISTS».
WITTGENSTEIN ON THE EXPERIENCE OF
EXISTENCE AND AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE**

1.

Most of the time we experience things and that things are in a certain way, but sometimes it also happens to us to experience that things are. To express this idea in a manner that echoes Wittgenstein's remark on the mystical (TLP 6.44), most of the time we experience how things are, but sometimes we also experience that things are.

What is it like to experience existence? To illustrate, consider how Coleridge describes this experience.

Hast thou ever raised thy mind to the consideration of existence, in and by itself, as the mere act of existing? Hast thou ever said to thyself thoughtfully, It is! Heedless in that moment, whether it were a man before thee, or a flower, or a grain of sand, – without reference, in short, to this or that particular mode or form of existence? If thou hast indeed attained to this, thou wilt have felt the presence of a mystery, which must have fixed thy spirit in awe and wonder. [...] If thou hast mastered this intuition of absolute existence, thou wilt have learnt likewise, that it was this, and no other, which in the earlier ages seized the nobler minds, the elect among men, with a sort of sacred horror. This it was that first caused them to feel within themselves a something ineffably greater than their own individual nature (quoted in Arendt 1978, 144-145).

In this report we find features which are common to most accounts of the experience of existence (hereafter referred to as 'EoE'): there is a distinction between experiencing how things are – it is a man, a flower, a grain of sand – and that things are – « It is!»; the experience is imbued with a particular pathos, which is one of awe, wonder, but also of sacred horror; this pathos is a response to the appreciation that existence is a mystery.

EoE plays a pivotal role in a great variety of philosophical and literary projects, especially in the first half of the twentieth

century¹. To name just a few relatively well-known examples where the role of EoE is self-consciously highlighted, it is central in Sartre's philosophical novel *Nausea* (Sartre 1938), in Heidegger's *What is Metaphysics* (Heidegger 1929), in Pessoa's *Fausto* (Pessoa 2018) and of course, as we shall in detail in this paper, in Wittgenstein's early philosophical work.

Now, while pondering about the nature of this experience, one might wonder whether it has anything to do with aesthetics. Can the sort of wonder evoked by the mystery of existence be an aesthetic wonder? For a positive answer to this question, consider how Murdoch describes what she regards as a paradigmatic experience of beauty.

I am looking out of the window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important (Murdoch 1967, 82).

A few lines later, she comments the source of this aesthetic experience as follows:

[...] we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones, and trees. 'Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical' (Murdoch 1967, 83).

On Murdoch's interpretation of her own experience, when «there is nothing but kestrel», the source of her aesthetic pleasure is not how the kestrel is, but rather the fact that it is. So Murdoch here seems to be endorsing what we might call the existential view, that is, the view according to which to experience the sheer existence of something can be a source of aesthetic experience. In articulating this view, Murdoch is making an explicit reference to Wittgenstein, but she does not explain any further whether and how Wittgenstein links EoE with aesthetics. My aim in this paper is to argue that the

¹ For an historically informed discussion of the experience of existence in western philosophy, see Arendt 1978, 121-51, Pareyson 1979; 1992. For recent works on the experience of existence, see Billon 2022, Balaska 2024, Capobianco 2024, Zanetti 2022, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, 2025d, 2025e, forthcoming 1, 2.

existential view just outlined can indeed be found in Wittgenstein's early remarks on aesthetics².

The plan of the paper is as follows. I shall begin in §2 with Wittgenstein's description of EoE in the *Lecture on Ethics* (LE) and in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (TLP). In his account we shall find the same features we witnessed in Coleridge's report: the existence of the world is met with wonder; the source of wonder is not how the world is but that it is; wonder depends on the apprehension that the existence of the world is an absolute miracle, that is, a mystery, an event in principle unexplainable.

Wittgenstein suggests that it is possible for us to view the existence of the world as an absolute miracle. But did he also believe that it actually is one? In other words: did he also believe that the existence of the world is indeed unexplainable? In §3 I shall look at two main textual pieces of evidence to support a positive answer to these questions.

Then, in §4, I will gather passages that suggest that for Wittgenstein EoE is connected with aesthetics. To clarify how Wittgenstein perceived this connection, I shall especially look at his account of the view *sub specie aeterni* (hereafter referred to as 'SSA') for this is the perspective from which objects can be seen as works of art. I will provide textual evidence to support the claim that for Wittgenstein EoE and the view of things SSA are the same kind of experience. On this ground, in §5 I shall explain how Wittgenstein envisioned the link between EoE and aesthetic experience.

In §6 I shall discuss Wittgenstein so-called 'Engelmann remark'. In this passage we find a description of what might occur when one sees some particular object or event SSA. I will argue that the phenomenology outlined by Wittgenstein in this passage becomes meaningful when we understand that viewing things SSA opens our eyes to the fascinating mystery of existence.

In Engelmann remark Wittgenstein asserts that the role of an artist is to enable us to see objects from the «right perspective»—a perspective from which any object can be viewed as a work of art. In my interpretation, this perspective is one in which things are perceived in light of their miraculous existence. Therefore,

² I shall confine my analysis up to remarks written in 1930. For recent critical overviews of Wittgenstein's reflections on aesthetics after 1930, roughly from his 1933 lectures onward, see Budd 2011, Hagberg 2014, Schroeder 2017, Schulte 2018, Appelqvist 2023.

according to Wittgenstein, the artist's role is to create the conditions that allow us to recognize the miracle of existence. To achieve this, artists require insights into the conditions that either facilitate or impede the experience of existence. From Wittgenstein's remarks we can discern the outline of a theory concerning such conditions and derive suggestions that artists can adopt to evoke in us a sense of aesthetic wonder related to the miracle of existence. In §6, particularly in §6.3, I will explore some of these conditions and their relationship with art.

Although my primary aim in what follows is exegetical, I also believe that the existential view is true. Therefore, one of the overarching goals of this paper is to articulate a view worthy of discussion in its own right. Since Wittgenstein's remarks are often sparse and brief, and frequently lacking explicit arguments in their favor, I will occasionally supplement his ideas with arguments and claims that I believe are consistent with his remarks. Through this approach, I hope to gradually develop a coherent and defensible perspective on the source of aesthetic experience.

2.

In order to help his audience to understand what he means by «absolute or ethical value», in LE Wittgenstein mentions three experiences, the first of which he describes as follows.

I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it I wonder at the existence of the world. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as 'how extraordinary that anything should exist' or 'how extraordinary that the world should exist' (LE 8).

In TLP (6.44), Wittgenstein describes as «mystical» the fact that the world is, contrasting the fact that the world is with how the world is. This difference is also noted in LE.

I could of course wonder at the world around me being as it is. If for instance I had this experience while looking into the blue sky, I could wonder at the sky being blue as opposed to the case when it's clouded. But that's not what I mean. I am wondering at the sky being whatever it is (LE 9).

So, the experience described in the lecture, wonder at the existence of the world, is the experience of the mystical, that is, the experience that the world is.

When feeling wonder at the existence of the world, one might ask: why does the apprehension that the world exists evoke such a

sense of wonder? In LE Wittgenstein might be read as providing an answer to this question. He says that it is possible to describe EoE in another way, namely as «the experience of seeing the world as a miracle» (LE 11). Ordinarily, a miracle is an event which we have never seen and which strikes us as unexplainable. To illustrate, Wittgenstein says that we would regard it as a miracle if some person in the audience suddenly grew a lion's head and began to roar. However, our ordinary way of looking at things is such that we presuppose that each event has some explanation. This is what he describes as the «scientific way of looking at a fact» (LE 17). But «it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared» (LE 10). The fact can still be described as a miracle, but only in a relative sense, that is, as something that we are not yet able to explain given what we currently know about the functioning of the world. By contrast, an absolute miracle is an event that, in principle, cannot be explained. Wittgenstein draws the distinction between relative and absolute miracle to clarify that the experience of wonder at the existence of the world can also be described as the experience of seeing the world as an absolute miracle. And this provides an answer to our question: in EoE we feel wonder because we somehow see that the existence of the world is in principle beyond explanation. So, Wittgenstein's account of EoE mentions the same features we found in Coleridge's report: in an EoE we are not struck by how the world is, but by the fact that it is; this makes us feel wonder; wonder is a response to the presence of an absolute miracle or, in Coleridge's words, an absolute mystery³.

3.

Wittgenstein suggests that it is possible for us to view the existence of the world as an absolute miracle. But did he also believe that it actually is one? In other words: did he also believe that the existence of the world is indeed unexplainable? There are at least two main textual pieces of evidence to support a positive answer to these questions.

First, in LE (9-10) he says that to speak of God as the creator of the world is an allegorical way of describing what one experiences when one describes one's experience as the experience of wonder at the existence of the world. And he adds that when we try to

³ See Zanetti 2023 for a detailed comparison between Wittgenstein's and Coleridge's experiences.

remove the allegory and to state the fact that it purports to describe, then we find that there is no such fact to be described. So, he is not claiming that there is something, God, whose creation explains the existence of the world. He is talking about God's creation of the world because this is one way in which people might feel inclined to speak when they wish to describe the astonishment or wonder they experience when they are struck by the existence of the world. But the real miracle is not that God created everything, but rather that everything exists with no possible explanation. This is how a world is seen when it is seen as an absolute miracle. If God, ex hypothesis, were something, then it would be part of the whole (or identical with the whole itself) and its own existence will be an absolute miracle⁴.

Second, in TLP we find a passage that clearly indicates that God (or any other candidate first cause, for that matter) can't count as an explanation for the existence of the world.

The whole modern conception of the world is founded on the illusion that the so-called laws of nature are the explanations of natural phenomena.

Thus people today stop at the laws of nature, treating them as something inviolable, just as God and Fate were treated in past ages.

And in fact both are right and both wrong: though the view of the ancients is clearer in so far as they have a clear and acknowledged terminus, while the modern system tries to make it look as if everything were explained (TLP 6.371-6.372).

Both the conception of the ancients and the modern conception of the world entail that everything can in principle be explained (in other words, they both accept some version of the principle of sufficient reason). The former ground all explanations in God and Fate, whereas the latter in natural laws and events. In this way, both conceptions entail that there are only relative miracles. But both conceptions are wrong because there is at least one thing which is beyond any possible explanation, namely the existence of the world itself. In the case of the ancient, it is easy to appreciate this point, for by presenting God and Fate as the supposed termini of explanations, we clearly see that these foundations are themselves unfounded. In the case of the modern conception of the world,

⁴ For a similar interpretation, see Elliott 1993, 59.

though, it is harder to appreciate the point, for this conception proceeds under the assumption that there is nothing more than natural events and natural laws. But there is at least one thing which natural laws and events can't explain, namely the existence of the whole itself (which includes all natural events and their laws).

So, it seems that for Wittgenstein it is indeed the case that the existence of the world is beyond any possible explanation. One of the fundamental aims of TLP and LE is thus protect us from the illusion that everything is in principle explainable⁵. The scientific way of looking at the world extinguishes our capacity to feel the sort of wonder that responds to the (correct) apprehension of the absolutely miraculous existence of what exists: «Humans have to awaken to wonder – and so perhaps do peoples. Science is a way of sending him to sleep again» (CV 7-8 [5-6]). As we shall see shortly, Wittgenstein believed that the artist plays a key role in preventing us from succumbing to the wonderless slumber of science.

4.

Thus far, we have explored why the existence of something can evoke wonder or fail to do so. However, we have yet to establish any reason to believe that this sense of wonder is related to aesthetics. In this section I will discuss some textual evidence which suggests that for Wittgenstein there is indeed some connection between the wonder of EoE and aesthetic experience.

First, in introducing the subject matter of LE, Wittgenstein clarifies that the comments he is going to make about ethics also apply to «the most essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics».

My subject, as you know, is Ethics and I will adopt the explanation of that term which Professor Moore has given in his book *Principia Ethica*. He says: «Ethics is the general enquiry into what is good». Now I am going to use the term Ethics in a slightly wider sense, in a sense in fact which includes what I believe to be the most essential part of what is generally called Aesthetics (LE 4).

This «essential part» is also connected with a subject matter that can be indicated with other expressions «each of which could be substituted for the above definition» of ethics.

⁵ For interpretations that put an emphasis on this aspect, see Churchill 1994, Cahill 1996, Cooper 1998, Kidd 2018.

Now instead of saying «Ethics is the enquiry into what is good» I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into what is valuable, or, into what is really important, or I could have said Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living, or into the right way of living (LE 5).⁶

These passages are consonant with what we find in TLP, where Wittgenstein claims that «Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same» (TLP 6.421)⁷. In LE Wittgenstein says that we can make a relative or an absolute use of the expressions that we typically use in articulating our ethical appraisals. These are expressions such as ‘value’, ‘importance’, ‘meaning’, etc. He claims that only absolute uses matter for ethics. And then, in order to clarify to his audience why he thinks that there is indeed such thing as absolute value (absolute importance, absolute meaning, etc.), he mentions the experience of wonder at the existence of the world. So, this suggests that for Wittgenstein EoE should have some connection with aesthetics, at least to its «most essential part».

Second, in the Notebook 1914-16 (NB) there is a passage which connects explicitly aesthetic experience with EoE and which I think nicely encapsulates Wittgenstein’s view on this matter: «Aesthetically, the miracle is that the world exists. That what exists does exist (NB 86)⁸». As we know from LE, the miracle he is talking about should be understood as an absolute miracle⁹. Therefore, Wittgenstein seems to imply that in aesthetic experience, we can feel a type of wonder that is akin to what we experience when we appreciate the miraculous existence of the world. In other words, the wonder inspired by existence can be an aesthetic wonder.

These passages already give us some hints to understand Wittgenstein’s view on the connection between EoE and aesthetics. But to articulate his view further – and to evaluate the

⁶ On this connection between ethics, aesthetics, and religion see Barrett 1991, Tilghman 1991, Appelqwis 2023.

⁷ For works on the connection between ethics and aesthetics in early Wittgenstein see Barrett 1984, Collinson 1985, Tilghman 1991 (ch. 3), Wilde 2004, Varga 2009, Appelqwis 2013, Moyal-Sharrock 2016, Friedlander 2018 and Zanetti 2025a.

⁸ Another translation, the one proposed by Churchill 1994, 397, could be: «The artistic wonder (*das künstlerische Wunder*) is that the world exists». See Barrett 1990, 71-2 for discussion on the translation of this passage.

⁹ This point is also made without argument by Churchill: «‘Miracle’ here (Wunder) should probably mean only awe-inspiring, or inexplicable, without reference to divine agency» (Churchill 1994, 397, fn. 7). In this paper I argue for Churchill’s interpretative hypothesis.

interpretative hypothesis defended so far – we should look at Wittgenstein’s account of the view SSA, for Wittgenstein says that «The work of art is the object seen sub specie aeternitatis» (NB 83e). If it turned out that EoE and the view SSA have nothing to do with one another, then we would have some reason to reject the claim that Wittgenstein is defending some version of the existential view. However, I think that what we find is that for Wittgenstein EoE and the view SSA are the same experience, or at any rate two different members of the same family of experiences.

Both experiences appear to share the following features: (a) they are related to the mystical; (b) they involve the same feeling; (c) they have the same object, namely the world. Let’s see each point in turn.

(a) We know that EoE is the experience of the mystical, namely that the world exists. But the mystical is also explicitly connected with the view of the world SSA.

6.44 It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists.

6.45 To view the world sub specie aeterni is to view it as a whole – a limited whole.

Feeling the world as a limited whole – it is this that is mystical.

The fact that the world exists is the mystical, but the mystical is also to feel the world as a limited whole. Since feeling the world as a limited whole is to view it SSA, we can conclude that the view SSA is the one we are occupying when we are seeing that the world exists.

(b) Moreover, both experiences involve the presence of a feeling. In LE it is wonder. In the view of the world SSA we feel the world in a certain way which is described as mystical. Although Wittgenstein does not explicitly say what this feeling is, we know from LE that it is a feeling of wonder in the case of EoE and so we can conclude that this is also the feeling involved in the view of the world SSA.

(c) Finally, EoE and the view SSA share the same object: the world. The mystical feeling of the view SSA is related to the world as a limited whole, and the experience of wonder at the existence of the world is related to the existence of the world. The two worlds are the same. In TLP the world is the whole, and this is explicitly said. But the world must also be the whole in LE. If we were to

assume that by 'world' Wittgenstein meant something other than the whole, we wouldn't know how to decide which part of the whole Wittgenstein would mean by 'world' and anyway any chosen part would be arbitrary. Furthermore, we wouldn't be able to explain why a part of the whole should evoke wonder (unless we explained the wonder for the existence of the part in terms of the most fundamental wonder for the existence of the whole). So, the world that is experienced in wonder when its existence is seen as an absolute miracle must be the same world that is experienced as a limited whole in the view SSA.

There is one more piece of textual evidence for the claim that EoE and the view SSA share the same object, the world, and hence are the same kind of experience. In NB Wittgenstein makes the following remark about the phenomenology of SSA:

The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside.

In such a way that they have the whole world as background.

Is this it perhaps – in this view the object is seen together with space and time instead of in space and time? (NB 83e).

As we shall see in some detail in the next sections, here Wittgenstein is making important observations about the transition from our ordinary way of looking at things (seeing things «from the midst of them») to a way of seeing things that is able to appreciate the mystery of their existence (seeing things «from outside», with «the whole as background»). But for the purposes of the present question – that is, whether EoE and the view SSA are the same kind of experience – the most important part of this passage is the last sentence, when Wittgenstein distinguishes between seeing an object «together with space and time» and seeing an object «in space and time». Why does he contrast these ways of seeing? Here is how I believe we should understand this contrast. When we use the expression 'sub specie aeternitatis' one might initially interpret the term 'aeternitatis' as referring to eternity conceived as a temporal dimension. Consequently, one might be inclined to think that viewing things SSA means viewing things within the context of time. However, there is a distinction between eternity (and space) and the whole (or the world). The crucial point here is that eternity itself is just one aspect or part of the whole. Since the whole encompasses everything, it includes

time as well. Therefore, to view things with the whole as the background is not simply to see things against the backdrop of eternity (and space), or within the context of space and time. Rather, it is to see things together with eternity (and space), with the whole serving as the encompassing background.

We can express the same point using slightly different terms. When we consider the whole, we are contemplating the entirety of existence. In doing so, our focus is not on how the world is structured, or the specific objects that constitute the whole. Instead, our attention is directed towards the whole itself, irrespective of its internal composition. However, time and space are themselves objects within (or aspects of) the whole. From the perspective of the whole, a bird exists on the same fundamental level as space and time – they all exist and thus equally belong to the totality of what exists. Granted, they each play different roles within the whole. However, in terms of their existence, they are all equivalent. This is why, when we view a bird with the whole as background, we are not simply seeing it within the framework of space and time. Rather, we are seeing the bird together with space and time, as all these elements coexist within the broader context of the whole.

If this reading is correct, then the best way of describing how we see some particular thing when it has the whole as background is not as a thing viewed from the point of view of eternity, but rather as a thing viewed from the point of view of the whole¹⁰, the same whole which strikes us as wonderful in EoE.

So much, I think, can be taken as textual evidence for concluding that EoE and the view SSA are regarded by Wittgenstein as the same experience or at any rate as closely related¹¹.

5.

Now we have all the elements for explaining how Wittgenstein thinks about the connection between EoE and aesthetics. Or, at any

¹⁰ For a different interpretation of the view *sub specie aeternitatis*, see Appelqvist 2013.

¹¹ See also Elliott 1993 and Friedlander 2018 for similar yet slightly different interpretations. See Tilghman 1991, ch. 3, for a very different interpretation from mine. Tilghman thinks that Wittgenstein is understanding the view *sub specie aeternitatis* in a Spinozian fashion, as a view which allows us to see the thing's *essence*, whereas I think that the view allows us to experience its *existence*. The *essence* of a thing is just an *aspect* of *how* the world is, but the view SSA is about the mystical, which is not *how* the world is, but *that* it is.

rate, I think we now have enough elements to describe, in a phenomenologically perspicuous way, and in a way which is consonant with Wittgenstein's remarks, why EoE can be an aesthetic experience.

Ordinarily, we see things «from the midst of them», but sometimes it happens to us to see them «from outside», that is, «with the whole as background». This is to view them SSA. This is a first experiential shift that might occur to us. When this happens, it is no longer important how things are. The emphasis is now on things in the whole. So far there is still no apparent reason to feel wonder. But now that the whole is in view, it is possible for us to undergo a second experiential shift. When the things are seen with the whole as background, since we are no longer paying attention to how things are, we might be struck by the fact that things are. When this experience occurs we are not just seeing things as part of the whole, but we are seeing things as part of a whole whose existence is experienced as an absolute miracle. So the particular object we are experiencing in this EoE is now seen with the absolutely miraculous existence of the world as background. And when this happens we might feel wonder, because wonder is the correct response to the apprehension of an event that is in principle unexplainable. This is the peculiar wonder of aesthetics¹².

To appreciate the explanatory import of this view on the connection between EoE and aesthetics, let me briefly show how it can account for Murdoch's experience of the kestrel (quoted at the beginning of the paper). At the beginning of the experience, Murdoch is seeing objects «from the midst of them». Seeing objects in this way is to see them in the light of our self-centered preoccupations. But then at some point a hovering kestrel captures her attention and everything is altered. As she says, «the brooding self disappears», which is one way of saying that she is no longer seeing things «from the midst of them». At this moment, there is nothing but the kestrel. And now her experience might take two different directions. She might be fascinated by some aspect of the kestrel – this is to see beauty in how the kestrel is. But this is not what happens to her. She is fascinated by the sheer fact that the

¹² Moore 1987, 133 seems to have a similar account in mind when he writes, speaking about the world, that «[i]ts beauty, its mystery, derives from its existing at all – from its susceptibility to being viewed *sub specie aeternitatis*». However, neither Moore, nor (as far as I know) other scholars, explain *why* and *how* the view *sub specie aeternitatis* is conducive to aesthetic wonder.

kestrel is. At this moment the kestrel is her whole world. It is as though the kestrel and the world as a whole were one, or it is as though the whole were seen through the presence of the kestrel. This is one way to see things «from outside», with the whole as background, namely without the veil of our self-centered preoccupations. And when this happens, even if one is not able to articulate the source of her feeling, one is experiencing wonder because one also somehow apprehends the miraculous existence of the world.

This shift – from viewing things «from the midst of them» to seeing things «from outside», with the world as background – is the one that Wittgenstein describes in the next note she writes in NB after having introduced the idea that the work of art is the object seen SSA. Here he draws a difference between seeing a stove as a thing among other things and seeing a stove as if it were the whole world. In the former experience, the stove is as insignificant as every other object – or, to the extent that it is perceived as significant, it is so in some relative sense, the kind of significance which depends on the standards imposed by our everyday brooding self. But as a world, the stove is as significant as any other object. In other words, when the stove (or Murdoch's kestrel) becomes the whole world, then it becomes significant (in the absolute sense) because in that moment the thing is seen in the light of the miraculous and mysterious existence of the world itself¹³. And this can happen with every object, for every object is part of the whole and partakes of its mystery.

6.

In the previous sections I have offered a sketch of the existential view we can find in Wittgenstein's early remarks on aesthetics. Is this view true? One way of arguing for it is by showing how it accounts for specific aesthetic experiences¹⁴. In the previous section I suggested that it can explain Murdoch's experience of the kestrel (and Wittgenstein's experience of the stove). In what follows I shall suggest that the view can explain the aesthetic

¹³ For more on the connection between Murdoch's experience of the kestrel and Wittgenstein's account of EoE see Zanetti forthcoming 1.

¹⁴ The present paper is part of a broader project in which I use Wittgenstein's account on EoE and aesthetics in order to explain a variety of artistic projects. See Zanetti 2022 for an interpretation of Cage's wonder through Wittgenstein's view; see Zanetti 2025b, c, d for an interpretation of Pessoa's wonder and angst with the help of Wittgenstein's early view on EoE and aesthetics.

experience that Wittgenstein describes in Engelmann remark. I shall quote the passage in its full length as it contains several important observations for the purposes of the present discussion.

Engelmann told me that when he rummages around at home in a drawer full of his own manuscripts, they strike him as so splendid that he thinks it would be worth making them available to other people. (He says it's the same when he is reading through letters from his dead relations). But when he imagines publishing a selection of them the whole business loses its charm and value and becomes impossible. I said that was like the following case: Nothing could be more remarkable than seeing a man who thinks he is unobserved performing some quite simple everyday activity. Let us imagine a theatre; the curtain goes up and we see a man alone in a room, walking up and down, lighting a cigarette, sitting down, etc. so that suddenly we are observing a human being from outside in a way that ordinarily we can never observe ourselves; it would be like watching a chapter of biography with our own eyes, – surely this would be uncanny and wonderful at the same time. We should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself. – But then we do see this every day without its making the slightest impression on us! True enough, but we do not see it from that point of view. – Well, when E. looks at what he has written and finds it marvellous (even though he would not care to publish any of the pieces individually), he is seeing his life as a work of art created by God and, as such, it is certainly worth contemplating, as is every life and everything whatever. But only an artist can so represent an individual thing as to make it appear to us like a work of art; it is right that those manuscripts should lose their value when looked at singly and especially when regarded disinterestedly, i.e. by someone who doesn't feel enthusiastic about them in advance. A work of art forces us – as one might say – to see it in the right perspective but, in the absence of art, the object is just a fragment of nature like any other; we may exalt it through our enthusiasm but that does not give anyone else the right to confront us with it (CV 6-7 [4-5]).

In what follows, I shall highlight some observations made in this rich remark and explain how the existential view might account for them¹⁵.

(4.1) Shift of perspectives. At the beginning of the remark, Wittgenstein distinguishes between two points of views: one

¹⁵ For a very different interpretation – which gives no role to the experience of wonder at the existence of the world – see Schulte 2020. See also Zanetti 2025a for an interpretation of this passage in the context of the dialogue between Wittgenstein and Zen Buddhism.

considers things «from the midst of them» and it is the one we inhabit when we perform ordinary activities, such as walking, smoking, sitting-down, etc. The other considers things «from outside», and it is the perspective we have if we look at our life as if it were displayed on the stage of a theater.

Now, in many discussions of aesthetic experience, it is often argued that an object can evoke an aesthetic response only when we relate to it in a disinterested manner. This means that we approach the object without viewing it solely as a means to fulfill our practical desires or ends¹⁶. Interestingly, this feature is also crucial in most accounts of EoE, and this provides another key for appreciating the connection between EoE and aesthetic experience. To illustrate, this observation is central in Sartre's *Nausea*. The novel famously begins with Roquentin who wants to throw a pebble but is stopped by some feeling that he can't quite understand (Sartre 1938, 6). The whole novel is a philosophical inquiry aimed at understanding what happened that day. At some point Roquentin understands.

I was going to throw the pebble, I looked at it and that was when it all began: I felt that it existed. And then, after that, there were other Nauseas; every now and then objects starting existing in your hand (Sartre 1938, 147).

As Sartre notes, ordinarily we simply use objects, but our patterns of use can be suddenly shocked if objects are seen as existing (Sartre 1938, 13). This shift might happen with particular objects, like a pebble or, as in Wittgenstein's remark, with life itself. When we see our life displayed on stage, we see our ordinary interested relation with the world, but we see it from outside, from a point of view which allows us to see the miraculous existence of life itself.

At the beginning of the paper I mentioned Murdoch's experience of the kestrel as an instance of an aesthetic experience accounted by the existential view. Now, Murdoch also offers an account of the conditions that favor or hinder the shift from the ordinary interested mind to the disinterested mind that is able to see existence and beauty. The following passage nicely summarizes the spirit of her approach.

¹⁶ For an overview of the connection between disinterest and aesthetic experience, see Peacocke 2023, 2.5.

The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one. Rilke said of Cézanne that he did not paint 'I like it', he painted 'There it is'. This is not easy, and requires, in art or morals, a discipline. [...] We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need¹⁷ (Murdoch, 1969, 57).

Here Murdoch stresses the many ways in which our «fat relentless ego» (Murdoch, 1969, 51) veils reality with its self-centered preferences. For Murdoch, to learn to transcend this veil is the hallmark of moral change and progress. Love is the name of the energy which liberates from the grasp of the ego so that what is real can be seen. This purified vision is for Murdoch fundamental in morality and art. An echo of this Murdochian diagnosis is perhaps to be found in Wittgenstein's observation that aesthetic experience occurs when the object is seen from outside: in this vision, when the object is seen with the world as background, the ordinary self-centered perspective is relinquished and reality is seen «from above, in flight»¹⁸. It is hard to see ourselves «from above» or «from outside» because we are ordinarily trapped in the business of our grasping ego. But when we succeed in loosening its hold on experience, we might feel wonder at the miraculous existence of life itself. And here lies also an encounter with something worth calling 'beauty'.

(4.2) Feelings of Existence. What do we feel when we see our own life from outside? We know that when Wittgenstein speaks of EoE in TLP and LE he says that in this experience we feel wonder. But in this passage he says that when we see our own life from above, this is at the same time «uncanny and wonderful». So there is wonder, but there is also the uncanny.

¹⁷ See also Elliott 1993 for a reference to Cézanne in order to illustrate Wittgenstein's early aesthetics.

¹⁸ This is also the perspective from which can be read Appelqvist's attribution of *disinterestedness* to the aesthetical and the ethical way of seeing the world in Wittgenstein. See Appelqvist 2013, §3.1. Unfortunately, Appelqvist does not explain disinterestedness by reference to the experience of existence and so in my view fails to understand the real insight that grounds Wittgenstein's early remarks on aesthetics. Elliott's interpretation (Elliot 1992, 155-156) nicely captures both Murdoch's emphasis on self-centeredness and Wittgenstein's observation on the scientific way of looking at events.

Now, this reference to the uncanny¹⁹ is important, for it captures a feature of EoE which is central in all reports of EoE (and which is rarely, if ever, highlighted by interpreters of Wittgenstein's early view on aesthetics). Existence in Sartre's novel is felt with nausea, but he also speaks of many other feelings, such as «absurdity» (Sartre 1938, 154) and «atrocious pleasure» (Sartre 1938, 157). We saw that Coleridge speaks of «sacred horror». The uncanny is central in Heidegger's work, both in *Being and Time* and in *What is Metaphysics*, where existence is notably met through *Angst*²⁰. The same richness and complexity can be found in Hadot's report of his own EoE, which is worth quoting in its entirety, for here we find all the elements of EoE that we have witnessed so far in Wittgenstein's work.

Night had fallen. The stars were shining in the immense sky. At this time one could still see them. Another took place in a room of our house. In both cases I was filled with an anxiety that was both terrifying and delicious, provoked by the sentiment of the presence of the world, or of the Whole, and of me in that world. [...] I experienced a sentiment of strangeness, of astonishment, and of wonder at being there. At the same time I had the sentiment of being immersed in the world, of being a part of it, the world extending from the smallest blade of grass to the stars. This world was present to me, intensely present. Much later I would discover that this awareness of belonging to the Whole was what Romain Rolland called the 'oceanic sentiment'. I believe that I have been a philosopher since that time, if by philosophy one means this awareness of existence, of being-in-the-world. [...] I began to perceive the world in a new way. The sky, the clouds, the stars, the 'evenings of the world', as I would say to myself, fascinated me. With my back on the window ledge, I looked toward the sky at night with the impression of being plunged into the starry immensity. [...] Since then, I have been strongly impressed by the radical opposition between everyday life – which is lived in semiconsciousness and in which we are guided by automatisms and habits without being aware of our existence in the world – and of the privileged states in which we live intensely and are aware of our being in the world (Hadot 2008, 5-6).

¹⁹ See also Wittgenstein's reference to *fear* in CV 7-8 [5-6].

²⁰ But also of wonder: «Of all beings, only the human being, called upon by the voice of being, experiences the wonder of all wonders: that beings are» (Heidegger 1943, 234). Several authors have suggested that the experience described by Heidegger in *What is Metaphysics?* is exactly the same experience we find in Wittgenstein. See Horgby 1959, Murray 1974, Fay 1989, 1991, Philipse 1992, Cooper 1997, Zanetti 2023.

Hadot's report emphasizes, like Wittgenstein's, the shift from our ordinary experience of things – e.g., stars, a blade of grass, oneself – to the experience in which the thing is seen with the whole as background. The shift makes one feel wonder, but also a sentiment of strangeness, astonishment, and an anxiety which is both terrifying and delicious at the same time. When we see existence, we experience a particular «fascination», he says, and this is, I think, the sort of aesthetic wonder which both Murdoch and Wittgenstein are linking to the mystery of existence. When we awake to the miracle of existence, although we keep performing ordinary activities, we are not living them in the 'semiconsciousness' which is oblivious of their existence and which is completely absorbed in practical interests; rather, we are sensitive to the fact that what is ordinary is also extraordinary precisely because it exists without any possible explanation.

It is important to briefly mention the complexity and richness of feelings elicited by EoE because this will show the great explanatory power of the existential view. The feelings lived in a EoE are to be found in a great a variety of aesthetic experiences. If the existential view is true, then perhaps some of these feelings are to be explained by saying that they are evoked by the apprehension of the mystery of existence. If this is true, the existential view shall offer new insights for interpreting a great variety of aesthetic experiences and works of art, and it promises to shed new light on the connection between disinterest and aesthetic experience.

(4.3) The Role of Art and the Artist. The shift from the ordinary perspective to the one sensitive to the miracle of existence can occur in various ways. It can occur spontaneously, as in the cases described by Sartre, Murdoch, Coleridge and Hadot. But at the end of his remark Wittgenstein suggests that the shift may also occur with the help of the artist. The artist can allow us to see an individual thing as a work of art. A work of art can force us to inhabit «the right perspective», without which the individual thing is just «a fragment of nature». If my reading is correct, then, Wittgenstein is suggesting that one important role for the artist is to create the conditions for appreciating the miraculous existence of what exists. Coherently, in this passage Wittgenstein illustrates the experience of life itself with the help of an art form, theatre.

Now, if the artist can help us to see the existence of things, the question is how she can do so. Most works of art bring our attention to how things are (and here is where the traditional notion of form

finds its natural place), but this is not necessarily to see existence. How can a work of art succeed in awakening the spectator's mind to the miracle of existence? Although we find no direct instructions for artists in Wittgenstein's work, I think we can extrapolate from his remarks a sketch of a theory of the conditions that favor or hinder EoE. If the artist knows what these conditions are, then she might use this knowledge in order to create works of art that are conducive to EoE. To conclude this section, I shall briefly discuss two such conditions.

(4.3.1) Seeing things from outside. We know that in order to see existence we should experience the shift from viewing things «from the midst of them» to viewing them «from outside». So, one idea is to move things and events out of their ordinary context, the kind of context in which we are prone to encounter them in the light of our practical needs. This can be done in various ways. Let me just offer two examples.

In Bill Viola's video and sound installation «The Greeting» (1995), we observe women engaging in simple everyday activities (conversation), much like in Engelmann's remark. The actual event captured on film lasted only 45 seconds, but its projection is slowed down to last ten minutes. This artwork can evoke various considerations and emotions. For instance, we might be fascinated by the multitude of details that typically go unnoticed at normal speed. But the piece has also the potential to inspire wonder simply for the fact of life itself. And one can try to explain how this specific work of art can succeed in having this effect if one thinks about the conditions that favor or hinder EoE. First, the events displayed are ordinary, and this is likely to silence our interest in the aspects that concern how they are. If one of the women were to kill the other women, then perhaps our mind would be concerned with violence and death. But this particular way of the way things are is too interesting for us and so we wouldn't easily experience existence. Second, the events are slowed down (and we can't understand what women are saying) and this further relaxes the hold of the everyday mind because our ordinary habits do not find a context in which they can work as they normally do. In other words, if we ordinarily move semiautomatically from one event to the other, slowing down ordinary uninteresting events create spaces in our attentional flow, thereby relaxing its everyday action-oriented habits and thus creating the conditions for shifting our attention from the way things are to the fact that they are. Third, what goes

on in the scene is as ordinary as what each of us does in our everyday life. So we can see that in a way our life is just like the one of the women in the scene. This allows us to see our life on stage, as in the case described by Wittgenstein.

Another example is John Cage's work "0'00" (1962). It consists of sounds produced by the performance of some ordinary activity. The work is accompanied by the following instruction: "In a situation provided with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action". In listening to such mass of sounds it might happen to us that they become the whole world and that we experience that they are. This might happen because we never pay attention to them, so it is somewhat surprising to know that they are and always were there; moreover, and relatedly, they do not have any practical relevance for us, and in this way the hold of our ordinary mind is relaxed; finally, there is nothing special in how these sounds are, and this is why it is easier for us to be struck by the fact that they are.

(4.3.2). Seeing things as inexplicable. We know that a condition that hinders our capacity to feel wonder is the scientific way of looking at things, that is, a way of looking that presupposes that there must be some explanation for each event. As Sartre puts it in *Nausea*, «the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence» (Sartre 1939, 154). If this is so, then one way for an artist to evoke the mystery of existence is to relax the hold of this scientific way of looking at things. How to do so? Perhaps one way could be to place things and events in a context in which we are no longer capable of understanding why they are as they are and why they exist. Again, Cage's work can help us to appreciate how this can happen. By organizing sounds through chancy operations, some of Cage's work presents sounds which we don't recognize and understand: we do not know where they come from, what produced them, and where they go. This experience might elicit all sorts of reactions in the listener. We might perhaps be struck by the fact that what is true of sounds is true of all events. Or we might be struck by the richness of the phenomenology of sounds. But it might also happen to us to be struck by their sheer existence. In this moment, these sounds are the whole world and they appear as the world as coming from nowhere.

Now, I do not wish to argue here²¹ that these are the correct interpretations of Viola and Cage's work. The important point for now is that we appreciate that these accounts make sense. This shows, I think, the explanatory power of the existential view as well as the validity and fruitfulness of the insights that we find in Wittgenstein.

7.

To sum up, in this paper I have argued that in Wittgenstein we find an articulation of what I have called the existential view, that is, the view according to which some aesthetic experiences are grounded in the apprehension of the miraculous existence of what exists. On Wittgenstein's view, when we see things from the point of view of eternity, that is, from outside, with the whole as background, then we might feel wonder because we apprehend the existence of the world as an absolute miracle or mystery. This wonder can be an aesthetic wonder and the role of the artist is to help us see that each individual object is a work of art precisely because it partakes to the miraculous existence of the whole.

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²¹ See Zanetti 2022 for a defence of the claim that Cage's work aimed at creating the conditions for appreciating the miracle of existence.

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