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## Wittgenstein's Critical Physiognomy

### **Abstract**

In saying that meaning is a physiognomy, Wittgenstein invokes a philosophical tradition of critical physiognomy, one that developed in opposition to a scientific physiognomy. The form of a critical physiognomic judgment is one of reasoning that is circular and dynamic, grasping intention, thoughts, and emotions in seeing the expressive movements of bodies in action. In identifying our capacities for meaning with our capacities for physiognomic perception, Wittgenstein develops an understanding of perception and meaning as oriented and structured by our shared practical concerns and needs. For Wittgenstein, critical physiognomy is both fundamental for any meaningful interaction with others and a capacity we cultivate, and so expressive of taste in actions and ways of living. In recognizing how fundamental our capacity for physiognomic perception is to our form of life Wittgenstein inherits and radicalizes a tradition of critical physiognomy that stretches back to Kant and Lessing. Aesthetic experiences such as painting, poetry, and movies can be vital to the cultivation of taste in actions and in ways of living.

### **Introduction**

“Meaning is a physiognomy.” –Ludwig Wittgenstein (*PI*, §568)

In claiming that meaning is a physiognomy, Wittgenstein appears to call on a discredited pseudo-science with a dubious history of justifying racial prejudice and social discrimination in order to

elucidate his understanding of meaning. Physiognomy as a science in the eighteenth and nineteenth century aimed to provide a model of meaning in which outer signs serve as evidence for judgments about inner mental states. This divide between outer signs and the inner signified might seem to be an unfortunate and un-Wittgensteinian point of reference for thinking about how meaning works. This interpretation of Wittgenstein's invocation of physiognomy, however, relies on a particular and limited view of the physiognomic tradition. Wittgenstein's appeal instead identifies him as inheriting and developing a critical physiognomic practice, one that opposes itself to any putative science of physiognomy. This critical approach to physiognomy can be found in Kant and traced through a diverse array of nineteenth and early twentieth-century philosophers and critics prior to Wittgenstein's development of the concept. By articulating a critical, rather than a putatively scientific, understanding of physiognomy, we gain insight into Wittgenstein's understanding of meaning in general and the relation between thought and expression in particular. Equally important, we see that Wittgenstein understands our perception and understanding to be oriented and governed by our shared practical concerns.

Most recent scholarship on Wittgenstein's account of meaning follows Kripke's lead in using the philosophical framework of rule-following. The strategy has been to determine the relation between a rule and its application and in so doing illuminate the broader implications for meaning in language and human life generally. Engaging directly in this debate, David Finkelstein has argued that attempts to bridge the gap between grasping a rule and applying that rule, as Kripke and Wright, for example, each in their different ways try to do, fall into a philosophical problematic structured by the confused search for solutions to nonexistent problems. Kripke offers a skeptical solution to the skeptical paradox that is generated on reflecting on the gap that can arise between a rule and its application (1982: 3-4). Wright, on the other hand, develops a constitutivist account of meaning that answers Kripke's skeptic by grounding the truth of my rule-governed judgment in my judgment that my current usage accords with my past uses (2001: 211). But

both of these interpretations of Wittgenstein take it for granted that, in the ordinary instance, the rule and its application stand in need of connection or justification. Finkelstein argues, correctly, that Wittgenstein does not attempt to bridge a perceived gap between the rule and its application (2003: 88). Instead, Wittgenstein wants us to see that when we are participating in the form of life to which the rule belongs there is no gap between it and its application; grasping the rule is knowing how to apply it appropriately. Only when the rule is isolated from the form of life in which it participates and then analyzed does it come to seem inert and in need of something further to govern its application. Importantly, Finkelstein makes clear that to grasp a rule is to know how to apply it; in turn, we can extend this approach to the apprehension of thought, intention, and emotion in the perception of the expressive capacities of the human body: “We do not, typically, need interpretation in order to understand a person’s facial expressions. Sometimes we do, when there is real doubt about what a facial expression means.... But it is a mistake to think that there is a gulf between every facial expression and its psychological significance” (2003: 91). When we understand Wittgenstein’s approach to questions of meaning, we recognize that, in typical cases, we grasp a person’s intention in watching her act.

In this paper, I develop an account of Wittgenstein’s understanding of the expressive possibilities of the human body in action and, in so doing, articulate Wittgenstein’s concept of physiognomy, placing him in a larger philosophical tradition of critical physiognomy. I explicate Wittgenstein’s insight that meaning is a physiognomy by pursuing an account that develops Finkelstein’s basic claim that clarifying the relation between a rule and its application allows us to better understand how the perception of expression is, at the same time, the apprehension of thought, intention, and emotion. I pursue this account not by examining the questions regarding rule-following directly but, rather, by articulating Wittgenstein’s concept of physiognomy. First, I argue that Wittgenstein’s discussion of the relation between perception and understanding in seeing aspects entails an account

of both perception and understanding as fundamentally governed by our practical needs. Second, I identify a philosophical tradition of critical physiognomy that can already be located in the work of Lessing and Kant. I show that the form of judgment at stake in a critical physiognomy contrasts with the form of judgment in a putatively scientific one, in that a critical physiognomic judgment is the recognition of thought, intention, feeling, and character in the apprehension of the body's expressivity. Third, I locate Wittgenstein's understanding of the relation between thought and expression in this larger critical physiognomic tradition so as to demonstrate the role our shared practical concerns have in orienting our ways of perceiving what is happening. Exercising the capacity for this critical physiognomic judgment cultivates taste in actions and ways of living. In order to clarify how physiognomic sense making is both fundamental and can be cultivated, I consider the example of watching popular movies. Movie watching demonstrates both the form of judgment at work in critical physiognomic thought and its place in our everyday interactions.

### ***I. Wittgenstein and the Practical Nature of Perception***

In section XI of Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein distinguishes between two uses of the verb 'to see'. On the one hand, there is a use of 'to see' in which one succeeds in seeing in the relevant sense if one is able to describe or reproduce the object seen. On the other, there is a use of 'to see' in which one succeeds if one recognizes a resemblance between two objects. The first use of 'to see' Wittgenstein distinguishes occurs when, for example, one person with an object in her visual field reports on that object to another person who does not. We can imagine two police officers on surveillance: one is looking through a pair of binoculars, the other is taking notes on what the first describes. The first officer will report on what she sees to the other who does not have the same view. In this use of 'to see', one sees successfully if one has a functioning capacity for vision, one is oriented correctly, and nothing is obstructing one's view. Success conditions for this use of 'to see' depend essentially on the actualization of one's capacity for sight. Failed instances of seeing in this use

typically involve impeding a person's ability to see, for example, by dimming the lights.

The second use of 'to see' Wittgenstein identifies has a different logic. This use is typified in examples such as when someone says, "I see the resemblance she has to her father." The logic of this use of 'to see' is not governed by an unimpeded exercise of vision. Indeed, on this use of 'to see', it is perfectly comprehensible for the content of a person's visual field to remain unchanged and for her to come to see the resemblance. Seeing in this sense of seeing a resemblance depends for its success on recognition and understanding. That is to say, even the unimpeded actualization of one's capacity for sight does not constitute success in seeing a resemblance. Instead what is required for successfully seeing a resemblance is a transformation in one's understanding.

It is not an accident that these two different uses, with their different logics and success conditions, are united in a single word. Wittgenstein resists the thought that these uses are different meanings and track distinct concepts. Instead, the coexistence of these uses of 'to see' draws attention to the mutual dependence of perception and understanding.

Having distinguished between the two uses, Wittgenstein develops his discussion of the dawning of an aspect, of being able to recognize one thing as another, to see it as something. Here one is able to interpret what one sees in a particular fashion. One recognizes the salient features of what one is looking at and understands how those features fit together. When one is able to look at the picture of the duck-rabbit and see first a duck and then a rabbit, one can recognize one portion of the drawing first as a bill, then as ears. Someone who can see the picture first as a duck and then as rabbit is able to identify and interpret the salient features of her visual field in contrasting ways. What we see depends on what we recognize as salient in perception and how we organize those salient perceptual aspects.

The literature on Wittgenstein and perception has largely focused on his remarks on aspect-seeing and, not surprisingly, attempts to connect his remarks on seeing aspects to a more general account of perception. Stephen Mulhall, for example, has

argued that Wittgenstein demonstrates that our ordinary experiences of perception are instances of *continuous* aspect-seeing: “a study of continuous aspect perception can legitimately be viewed as a philosophical investigation of human relationships with objects or phenomena *in general*” (1990: 137). Justin Good, on the other hand, argues that Mulhall’s interpretation eliminates what is most distinctive in Wittgenstein’s discussion of continuous aspect-seeing: namely, that some other aspect is going unnoticed when one is seeing a certain aspect continuously. Mulhall rightly emphasizes the moments in Wittgenstein’s discussion when he highlights the ways in which our understanding of the world fully penetrates our experience of perception. Good, on the other hand, is rightly struck by Wittgenstein’s insistence that our ordinary experiences of seeing are not instances of seeing-as; if seeing-as were characteristic of perception, this would mean that there would be other aspects of our perceptual field to which we are systematically blind (2006: 35-6).<sup>1</sup> Once we recognize that, for Wittgenstein, our capacities for perception and understanding are oriented and governed by our shared practical concerns, we see Mulhall is right that how things appear is shaped by our shared understanding, while Good is right that normally perception is not an act of interpretation that makes other interpretations unavailable.<sup>2</sup>

It is tempting to think of what happens when we see a resemblance as suggesting a priority relation between seeing and understanding, in which one first has, as a given, a field of visual content and then interprets that content. We can call this way of understanding what seeing involves a *two-stage* understanding. Wittgenstein is at pains to resist this two-stage understanding of perception, according to which perceptual content is first given and then interpreted. Importantly, this means that for Wittgenstein our

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in seeing my baseball glove, I do not see an object as a glove. If I know what characteristically is done with it, then I perceive a glove whenever I stumble across it in the closet.

<sup>2</sup> Further, in not fully recognizing the organizing function of our practical concerns for perception, Good is unable to give a satisfactory account of the unity of the diversity of the phenomenon we call seeing-as. Instead he rightly emphasizes the ragged quality of the various things we call seeing but does not acknowledge the depth of Wittgenstein’s interest in why these different uses belong to the same concept.

ordinary instances of perception are not, as Mulhall would have it, cases of seeing a given content *as* something. Instead our understanding is always at work in perception but not as an act of interpretation or continuous seeing-as. Mulhall takes himself to be avoiding a two-stage account by insisting on each act of perception being an act of seeing-as, so that there is no gap between what is given and the interpretation of what is given.<sup>3</sup> But Wittgenstein resists both the philosophical temptation of a two-stage account of perception and that of an account of ordinary perception as continuous seeing-as. It is philosophically muddled to think that a person, in everyday instances of listening to speakers of one's native language, hears sounds as words. Rather, one hears speech. Similarly, one does not see the metal implement as a fork; one sees a fork.

Wittgenstein's rejection of a philosophical problematic in which perception and understanding are coordinated in a two-stage process entails that perception is organized and oriented by our shared practical concerns. Picturing perception as organized in the first instance in order to arrive at a theoretical specification of how things are makes it difficult to describe a relation between perception and understanding in terms other than as a two-stage process. The characteristic philosophical puzzles that Wittgenstein gives voice to in order to undermine arise because of a presupposition that the primary function of perception is to determine how things are. An account of perception that operates in two stages, in which the world first gives itself to us in order to be comprehended and then that given is brought under the appropriate concepts, continually reappears as a danger in any attempt to develop an account of perception that takes its primary function to be a theoretical or speculative one.

In resisting an understanding of perception as a two-stage process in which one is given a content and then imposes an interpretation, Wittgenstein encourages us to recognize that our

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<sup>3</sup> In avoiding the dangers of a two-stage account, Mulhall succumbs to another danger: taking a local phenomenon that occurs at a moment of relative breakdown to be a general model for all ordinary cases.

perception is organized and oriented in the first instance by practical concerns and only derivatively in terms of a theoretical understanding. Our tendency to picture our capacity for understanding as primarily and fundamentally on the model of an act of theoretical interpretation facilitates and gives rise to the ‘two-stage’ philosophical misunderstanding of how perception functions. A theoretical or speculative perspective is rather an accomplishment that is possible once we suspend our immediate practical concerns, which means this perspective is not the starting place for everyday instances of perception. The act of seeing is governed by a set of practical concerns, of how to go on in a particular way, that is, how to respond to what is perceived. So even though understanding is achieved, this understanding is not the product of grasping some underlying conditions that make this perceptual knowledge possible. Instead it is our practical concerns that govern our ability to make sense of what we perceive, render it coherent. This is why Wittgenstein offers seeing a fork and knife as an example of perception. To see a fork and knife is to recognize them in the context of a set of practical concerns and possible uses. Imagining that one sees a given visual content *as* a fork is to fall prey to the illusion that seeing a fork is primarily an intellectual exercise of correct category subsumption and only thereafter a candidate for practical concern. Wittgenstein says, “One doesn’t ‘take’ what one knows as the cutlery at a meal *for* cutlery; any more than one ordinarily tries to move one’s mouth as one eats, or aims at moving it” (*PI*, IIxi, p. 195).

In cases where one recognizes an aspect shift, one becomes aware of the role understanding plays in perception. The awareness one has in the act of shifting between seeing different aspects contrasts with the form of understanding that occurs in seeing cutlery at a meal. Our conscious awareness of the role interpretation plays in cases of seeing aspects or resemblances occurs precisely because we are not sure of what to do with what we are perceiving, how to respond. No doubt it is in large part because we become conscious of our perception in such moments that the aim of perception can seem to be a theoretical understanding of how things are. In encountering cutlery at a meal,



there is, ordinarily, no question of how to proceed. One sees a knife and a fork inasmuch as one knows what to do them, namely, use them to eat the meal. It is when one is momentarily at a loss about what to do or how to respond that one can become conscious of the roles understanding can play in perception.

Wittgenstein's concern about a picture underlying and distorting our understanding of the relation between the practical and the theoretical shows up quite early in the *Investigations*. He is at pains in the opening sections to insist that, when thinking about language, it is too easy to picture it as centrally and essentially concerned with the proffer of true propositions and only derivatively able to do other things, like negotiating or questioning or praising. Instead, he suggests that we take seriously the analogy between language and a set of tools (*PI*, §11). This analogy is not only supposed to illuminate the diversity of functions language can have, but also to insist that language use is practical, serving as means to a diverse set of ends. Picturing language as essentially concerned with making true statements is of a piece with understanding our perceptual capacities as first representing the world as it is. Instead, what is primary is *use*, the employment of language and perception to move through the world and do things.

Grasping the priority our practical concerns have in the functioning of our perceptual capacities allows us to recognize the Wittgensteinian alternative to the assumptions within the philosophy of action that saddle us with either a merely behavioristic account of action or an account of intention as a discrete internalized mental act that accompanies behavior. Throughout the course of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein returns to this dialectic of philosophical temptation, in which we seem faced with an unpalatable choice. Either internal mental acts accompany our behavior and thus supply meaning, converting mere behavior into action and sounds into meaningful speech, or we give up on the existence of such internal mental acts and content ourselves with the description of sets of external, observable behaviors. Both options in this dialectic assume that we come to see the relation between an action and its intention through an intellectual interpretation that operates upon the perception of a set of

movements. In the case of taking intention to be an internal mental act, we imagine the intention accompanying the perceived movements, just hidden inside, out of sight. In the behavioristic option, we imagine that there is nothing accompanying the movements; instead, we project meanings onto these mere movements. But Wittgenstein does not think that intention is separate from the movements constituting the action. That would be to see the movements *as* an intentional action. In *Zettel*, he says:

We do not see facial contortions and make inferences from them (like a doctor framing a diagnosis) to joy, grief, boredom. We describe a face immediately as sad, radiant, bored, even when we are unable to give any other description to the features. – Grief, one would like to say, is personified in the face. (Z, §225)

In ordinary cases, we see actions and recognize the intention in the action; we see expression and recognize the thought or emotion. Wittgenstein says: “The intention *with which* one acts does not ‘accompany’ the action any more than the thought ‘accompanies’ speech” (*PI*, IIxi, p. 217). In both cases, when a person acts, the intention is seen in acting just as the thought is conveyed in speaking. It is the speech that is thoughtful and the action that is intentional.

## ***II. The Tradition of Critical Physiognomy***

Wittgenstein’s commitment to viewing action as meaningful because already intentional locates him in a philosophical tradition that we might call, following Kant, critical physiognomy. A *critical* physiognomy stands in contrast with the rightly discredited tradition of a scientific physiognomy. A putatively scientific physiognomy is one oriented by the desire for a standpoint on human intention, character, and mood that does not depend in particular on the experience of the person making the judgment but rather could be reduced to a catalog of external features that serve as evidence for dispositions. Already in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant dismisses the desire for a scientific physiognomy as a philosophical confusion. He rejects the notion that there could be a science of the human form because judging

the human form requires maintaining an intuition of the form in question:

[It] is incontestable that there is a physiognomic Characteristic, which however can never become a science, because the peculiarity of a human *form*, which indicates certain inclinations or faculties of the subject being looked at, cannot be understood by description according to concepts but only by illustration and presentation in an intuition or by an imitation of it. (2007: AK 7:296)

Kant's contention is that the physiognomic form of judgment necessarily depends on intuitive contact with the person being perceived. Any attempt to abstract away from the intuition in order to formulate general principles or a description in terms of concepts cannot succeed.

Instead, Kant marks out another possibility, one that Wittgenstein inherits and develops. This tradition of critical physiognomy, in which, as Kant puts it in the *Anthropology*, one judges the internal in the external, is oriented by practical concerns. Kant himself mostly distinguishes between the possibility of a critical physiognomy and the impossibility of a science of physiognomy without doing much further work in developing the implications of this critical approach to physiognomy or in specifying the peculiarity of the human form that requires intuitive contact in order for this form of judgment to occur.<sup>4</sup> For this reason, Kant sometimes talks about physiognomy as judging the internal by means of the external; from the Wittgensteinian point

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<sup>4</sup> The fact that Kant distinguishes between a putatively scientific form of physiognomy and a critical one based on an understanding of morals and customs does not mean that Kant freed himself from the racial prejudices that shaped the development of the scientific physiognomic tradition through the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, Kant's claim that there cannot be a scientific physiognomy demonstrates the extent to which a commitment to a putatively scientific account of racial hierarchy need not commit one to a justification of such a hierarchy by appeal to a putatively scientific form of physiognomic reasoning. Kant renounces the latter without ever clearly separating himself from the former. See Bernasconi (2002) on Kant's commitment to a scientific understanding of a racial hierarchy. On the other hand, Kleingeld (2007) argues that Kant's work in 1790s indicates a revision in his earlier strong commitment to a clear racial hierarchy. Whatever one's view of Kant's account of the races, his views on physiognomy remain conceptually distinct, if closely related.

of view I'm pursuing here, there is good reason to worry that Kant may sometimes operate with a picture of expression that takes the internal and the external to exist independently of each other, such that the external merely serves as a sign of the internal. However, Kant does supply a central insight for this critical approach to the perception of expression, which is that such perceptions locate the recognition of intention, mood, character and the like in the perception of actions. Such perception is made possible through our shared practical concerns regarding how we should go on together. Kant writes:

Thus there is no longer any demand for physiognomy as an art of investigating the human interior through exterior, involuntary signs, and nothing is left of it but the art of cultivating taste, not taste in things, but rather in morals, manners, and customs, in order to add to the knowledge of man through a critique which would enhance human relations and the knowledge of man in general. (2007: AK 7:297)

Kant's insight here is twofold: first, that a critical physiognomy is crucially a matter of taste, that is to say, necessarily a judgment that should be affirmed as true for all humans but that can only be arrived at by means of intuition by the judging subject. Second, what is at stake is taste in human action and ways of living. To recognize the feelings, moods, and character of those around us is possible inasmuch as we commit ourselves to understanding how what has happened makes sense in the context of morals, manners, and customs. It is because we are practically attuned to each other in this way, that we share in the particular activities that constitute a form of life and, crucially, understand *why* one participates in such activities, that we are legible to each other and can see others as acting with particular intentions, from particular moods and characters, etc.

For these reasons, it is helpful to recognize that the critical physiognomic tradition, though importantly present in Kant's particular discussion of physiognomy in the *Anthropology* and inspired by his more general conceptual framework, has an equally important precedent in Lessing's criticism. In his essay on the Laocoön, Lessing distinguishes painting and poetry as different methods for imagining bodies in action. This discussion draws our

attention both to the constitutive role of the imagination in the perception of action and to our sensitivity to the difference that minute variations in expressive detail can play in our understanding of emotion and thought.

We can distinguish between two distinct physiognomic traditions: one that follows the lead of Lavater and his nineteenth century scientific inheritors in attempting to develop a science of physiognomic characterological identification and which devolved into phrenology and justifications for racial discrimination in criminology and other social fields; the other, while not always recognized as distinct, eschews the pretension of a scientific physiognomy in favor of cultivating critical practices that enhance understanding of intention and character in the perception of human bodies in action. This critical tradition of physiognomy claims its inheritance from Kant, Lessing, and Hegel and includes Wittgenstein as perhaps its most radical and insightful proponent. But these competing historical physiognomic traditions can only come into view by first distinguishing between the forms of judgment at stake in each tradition.

In the tradition of a putatively scientific physiognomy, the form of judgment at stake is one that starts from the identification of distinct physical characteristics and, on that basis, generates a judgment regarding the moral character or intellect of the person possessing those characteristics. This putatively scientific form of judgment distinguishes sharply between evidence for a particular judgment – distinct facial characteristics, say – and the judgment arrived at on the basis of that evidence – that the person is cowardly or a natural liar, perhaps. This putatively scientific form of judgment is thus static and linear. It is static inasmuch as it attempts to isolate physical features and identify them as permanently fixed signs of one's mental states. It is linear because it begins with these fixed physical signs and derives on their bases judgments about the inner mental life of the subject under examination. Further, it presents itself as an objective judgment, in the sense that, in principle, it abstracts away from any particular intuitive contact between the one judging and the one being judged

and thus exists independently of and prior to any particular action undertaken by the subject.

This putatively scientific form of judgment stands in contrast with the form of judgment operative in the tradition of critical physiognomy that stretches from Kant and Lessing through Wittgenstein. The critical form of physiognomic judgment is not static and linear but dynamic and circular. Rather than begin with a set of fixed physical features and then derive on that basis a judgment about the inner life of the subject, the practitioner of critical physiognomy engages in a form of judgment in which the perceptions of the expressive physical features and judgments about the intentions and moral character of the agent are mutually implicating and mutually reinforcing. It may be tempting to think of what is at stake in this form of judgment as the recognition of the inner in the outer. But this is already to picture my expressions and my feelings and thoughts as states that are in principle independent from one another. On the critical approach to physiognomy, my mindedness is not independent from my expressive body, which can indicate or reveal my mental states as a sign. Instead, my mindedness is, in the first instance, located in what I do. This critical judgment is a kind of mereological one, in which the understanding of the whole – the characterological judgment – is not only supported by the perception of the parts – the distinct physical features – but, further, the understanding of the overall mental state helps in identifying the subtlest physical features as revelatory of that state.

Not only is the critical physiognomic judgment circular – in that the understanding of the parts and the whole reinforce and refine each other – it is also dynamic. Rather than isolating distinct features prior to any particular action, the critical physiognomist is concerned with the apprehension of bodies in action. The point of such physiognomic practices is not to isolate and identify physical features that express underlying mental states but instead to recognize the intention and meaning of particular expressive movements as they participate in the larger actions the agent performs. Thus, the practitioner of critical physiognomy will recognize the meaningfulness not of isolated physical features but

of gestures, hesitations, and fidgets. This critical form of physiognomic judgment takes the body in action as a somatic field that expresses, and, in expressing, is revelatory of the thoughts governing the action. In Kant's terms, the critical physiognomic judgment requires an intuition of a person in action. What is apprehended in the judgment is the person's expressiveness as her action unfolds before us.

The dynamic character of the critical physiognomic judgment means that the circular form of the judgment need not be vicious. Because our perception of others in action is governed by the extent to which we are able to share practical concerns, the circular form of judgment at stake in a critical physiognomic practice allows for the possibility of refining a mutual understanding in light of possible shared practical concerns. In this sense, the circularity in this judgment can be virtuous inasmuch as we can attune ourselves to each other's practical orientations. Of course, the possibility of this circular form of judgment being vicious is real and internal to the nature of the judgment.<sup>5</sup>

Having distinguished their characteristic forms of judgment, it is easier to mark out the critical physiognomic tradition from the putatively scientific tradition. As noted above, the putatively scientific tradition can be traced from Lavater's work and earlier, through the phrenologists of the nineteenth century, and includes composite photographic work of racial and criminal types done by many in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most

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<sup>5</sup> Of all those in the critical physiognomic tradition, Nietzsche is perhaps the most sensitive to the dangers of vicious circularity in making these sorts of judgments. He outlines the worry in *Beyond Good and Evil*:

In the middle of a lively conversation I will often see the other person's face expressing his thoughts (or the thoughts I attribute to him) with a degree of clarity and detail that far exceeds the power of my visual ability: - such subtlety of muscle movement and ocular expression *must* have come from my own imagination. In all likelihood the person has an entirely different expression or none at all. (2002: §192)

This possibility, of seeing in another's expression only what I project into it, is a genuine problem, one that arises, as Nietzsche implies, from what I want in the situation. Thus the possibility of a vicious circularity in such judgments itself depends on the practical concerns of the one making the judgment.

prominently Francis Galton. In all of these endeavors, an attempt is made to isolate and identify, prior to any particular action taken, a set of physical features that reveal an underlying moral character or intellectual traits. The critical physiognomic tradition develops by contrast with the putatively scientific attempts at physiognomy. Kant rejects Lavater's work explicitly as aspiring to an unwarranted scientific status (2007: AK 7:297). Hegel, in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, rejects any judgment that distinguishes between outer physical signs and inner mental states in order to deduce the latter from the former and describes how such a separation can only devolve into phrenology (1977: §§309-346). In both cases, such a critique is developed in order to make room for a form of judgment in which the inner and the outer are not understood as existing independently from one another so that the mental can be deduced from physical signs. Rather, both Kant and Hegel develop their critiques in order to open the conceptual space for an understanding of physical gestures and features as expressive of thought, such that thought can be seen in the gestures and not deduced from them.

This is not the place to offer a comprehensive account of this post-Kantian tradition of critical physiognomy. In identifying this critical physiognomic tradition, I do not mean to suggest that there are not meaningful differences among the philosophers who inherit this problematic. Any full account of this alternative approach to questions of physiognomic judgment needs to offer a more systematic analysis of the differences between the philosophers in this tradition. In this paper, I aim to emphasize the form of judgment at stake in the tradition and distinguish it from the other, more familiar, putatively scientific form of physiognomic judgment. Still, there are three thinkers whose inheritance and development of the Kantian problematic I've called critical physiognomy is especially pertinent for locating Wittgenstein's response to the problematic: Bergson, Nietzsche, and Benjamin. Bergson shares with Wittgenstein an understanding of perception as essentially practically oriented, such that it is responsive to and shaped by our primary need to understand what is happening, what has happened, and what can happen as possibilities within a particular form of life.



Their shared understanding of perception and language as mutually shaped in the light of our need to grasp what is happening around us and within our form of life allows them both to account for the ways that characteristic philosophical problems arise from the presumption that perception functions in order to serve a theoretical or speculative need, so that only by resisting this presumption will these characteristic philosophical problems lose their grip (1991: 261-3).

Importantly, physiognomic thinking is generally not conscious but can become conscious. In drawing attention to the conscious awareness one can have when seeing different aspects in the duck-rabbit picture for example, Wittgenstein is emphasizing the rarity of this conscious ability to cultivate one's perception. The ordinary situation is one in which the interplay between perception and the understanding is not conscious. Nietzsche and Benjamin both, in their own ways, emphasize the extent to which bringing our ordinary capacity for physiognomic perception and understanding into consciousness requires artificial means. These artificial means allow one to refine one's ordinary form of judgment by calling attention to it, reflecting on it and thus, in critiquing it, refining it; in this sense, the appeal to artificial means such as film encourage the critical refinement Kant and Lessing thought possible for our physiognomic capacity.

Nietzsche invokes a comparison to the perception of a snake's skin and insists that this form of thinking requires increased attentiveness to surfaces. What is unknown to us about each other is not hidden at some great depth but displayed on the surface and so hidden in plain sight:

All qualities of a person of which he is conscious – and especially those he supposes to be visible and plain to others also – are subject to laws of development entirely different from those qualities which are unknown or badly known to him, which conceal themselves by means of their subtlety even from the eye of a rather subtle observer and which know how to hide as if behind nothing at all. This might be compared to the subtle sculptures on the scales of reptiles: it would be a mistake to take them for ornaments or weapons, since one sees them only with a microscope, i.e., with an artificially sharpened eye, which

similar animals for whom they might signify something like ornaments or weapons simply lack. (2001: §8)

This critical physiognomic tradition draws attention to our mutual exposure to each other, to the fact that our forms of thinking are not hidden in the sense that they are too deep to be seen. If our thinking can be hidden from each other it is because we do not see what is on the surface or do not know how to see it.

### ***III. Inheriting the Critical Physiognomic Tradition***

There are two important areas of contention that arise among the philosophers concerned with critical physiognomic judgments. First is the status the capacity for this form of judgment has for us. Kant, for example, introduces it in the *Anthropology* in a way that seems to suggest that this is one capacity among many others that humans are capable of cultivating, while Wittgenstein, in identifying meaning itself as a physiognomy, understands it to be fundamental to our form of life. Second, there is disagreement about whether this form of judgment allows us to connect what is external and visible to our understanding of internal mental states, as Kant describes it, or whether talk about external behavior and internal mental states is itself potentially misleading, as Wittgenstein suggests.

In recognizing Wittgenstein's inheritance of the critical physiognomic tradition, it becomes easier to see the extent to which identifying of an intention, mood, or character in an action is an instance of apprehending meaning in general. Having the physiognomic as a model for apprehending meaning allows one to guard against the confusions at the root of the philosophical temptations explored throughout the *Philosophical Investigations*. The thought, for example, that "an 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria" (*PI*, § 580) generalizes the Kantian claim that critical physiognomy "judges the interior by the exterior" (2007: AK 7:295) and makes clear that our mental states cannot, in principle, develop independently of what we do. Wittgenstein's repeated concern to guard against the fantasy that my mental life is in principle private and only accessible to me grows out of his

insight that understanding one's inner life can only come through an understanding of what one does.

Wittgenstein continually returns to the thought underlying the Kantian project of a critical physiognomy and radicalizes it. In noting that “meaning is a physiognomy”, Wittgenstein encourages us to notice how, in our everyday experiences of meaning, meanings are interwoven into our form of life (*PI*, § 568). In this way, the meaningful is alive to us. Participating in a shared form of life consists in sharing a practical orientation, participating in activities together, and so understanding the point of doing what we do. It is in this context that we recognize the intentions, moods, or character that guide each other's (and our own) particular actions. Equally, it is when this mutual attunement in a shared form of life breaks down, and breaks down around questions of practical orientation, that we become mysterious to each other. In posing the problem of the grammars of hope and love, for example, Wittgenstein asks, “Could someone have a feeling of ardent love or hope for the space of one second – *no matter what* preceded or followed this second?” and responds by appealing to the context of our shared form of life as fixing the grammar of such concepts: “What is happening now has its significance – in these surroundings. Its surroundings give it its importance. And the word ‘hope’ refers to a phenomenon of human life. (A smiling mouth *smiles* only in a human face)” (*PI*, § 583). This physiognomic example, of seeing a person's emotions in their face, encourages us to recognize the importance of the shared forms of life that constitute the practical attunement that structures our experiences of meaning in general.

In inheriting and taking up the problematic at work in a Kantian project of critical physiognomy, Wittgenstein clarifies why we are tempted toward thinking about the perception of meaning as a two-stage process, and how we can disabuse ourselves of such temptation. The temptation is to think we are first given something externally that we then interpret as something that exists internally. Wittgenstein provides the example of being misled by someone's appearance: “We say ‘The expression in his voice was *genuine*’. If it was spurious we think as it were of another behind it. – *This* is the

face he shows the world, inwardly he has another one. – But this does not mean that when his expression is *genuine* he has two the same” (*PI*, § 606). The fact that pretence is a genuine practical possibility does not mean that perception of expression consists in matching two independent entities, the external behavior and the internal mental state. Instead, we see the state of mind expressed in the behavior. The possibility of pretence does not undermine this thought. Rather it encourages us to adopt the right kind of attention in apprehending action, making sense of the particular details in light of the overall context in order to recognize, for example, the differences between pretenses of happiness from genuine instances of it.

Given our practical orientation in our everyday experience, it is not a surprise that we recognize ourselves and those around us acting with specific intentions, in certain moods, and from particular characters. It is typically when we have suspended our immediate practical concerns, whether from a sense of practical confusion or from a commitment to achieving a theoretical or speculative perspective, that we are able to see the actions in question as mere movements. In our more ordinary experiences, we already recognize the meaningfulness of others’ actions.

Wittgenstein’s understanding of the capacity for physiognomic perception as fundamental to a human form of life may seem in tension with Kant’s insistence of the capacity as one that can only be cultivated as taste in actions and ways of living. But these two understandings of physiognomic perception are in conflict only if one hears “taste” as something that one could choose to cultivate, as one might a taste in wine. Instead, physiognomic perception, like language use, is fundamental for our form of life. Like language use, physiognomic perception is a capacity that is constitutive of human life *and* skill in this capacity is acquired by cultivating taste in its exercise.

Kant’s insight that a critical physiognomy can only be developed in terms of taste in actions and ways of life provides the context in which Lessing’s articulation of painting and poetry as methods of imagining bodies in action can be recognized as equally

a contribution in the philosophy of action as in aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> For Lessing, as for Kant, questions of the conditions for recognizing good action are always questions of taste. Lessing's work reminds us that the capacities at work in our apprehension of action in artistic contexts are the same capacities that we use when we apprehend action in our ordinary interactions. In grasping works of art that explore the possibilities of human action, we suspend our immediate practical concerns regarding what to do and only exercise our ability to recognize meaningful action, to bring a number of expressive movements together under a single form of action description. Lessing's specification of painting and poetry as methods for imagining bodies in action provides a framework for identifying the movies as another such method and a method that centrally and continually exercises our capacity for physiognomic perception. When we watch movies, we make sense of what happens by attending to what is done and how people react.

Benjamin thought that the promise of film was that it provides what Nietzsche calls an artificially sharpened eye, and so in watching, we train ourselves to get better at understanding what people are thinking by watching them act and react on screen. In watching movies, we heighten, without being explicitly aware of it, our ability to grasp what Benjamin calls "the optical unconscious" (2003: 265-6). We often watch movies as a means of distraction. But in such a distracted state we grasp the meaningfulness of tics, fidgets, and hesitations as expressive of thinking and feeling. The movies allow us, for example, to study what it looks like when one is trying to avoid acknowledging pain.

One recent philosopher who carries forward Wittgenstein's understanding of meaning as a physiognomy is Stanley Cavell.<sup>7</sup> Cavell's work on film develops the critical approach to physiognomy so as to allow us to recognize the depth to which

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<sup>6</sup> Lessing shares with Diderot the sense that art and aesthetic experience is the site of enormous promise and enormous danger for our cultivation of taste in actions and ways of living. These aesthetic experiences allow audiences to apprehend the logic of practical categories and thus offer occasions for thinking through the nature of types of actions.

<sup>7</sup> Another is Cora Diamond. See, in particular, "The Face of Necessity". Her work on the relation between moral philosophy and literature in "Having a Rough Idea of What Moral Philosophy Is" is also especially pertinent.

popular movies rely on and exercise their audiences' need to understand the meaningfulness of human gesture and expression. Cavell's most developed account of the natural home the movies provide for our capacity for critical physiognomy occurs in his reading of Frank Capra's *Mr. Deeds Comes to Town* in "What Photography Calls Thinking". There, Cavell locates popular movies within a physiognomic tradition that he identifies with Emerson's understanding of expression:

First, that Deeds will show his awareness that the motion picture camera bears an affinity with metaphysical restlessness, that it has its own imperative to keep moving, and second, that this awareness is, in effect, an acceptance of Descartes' perception that the human stands in need of proof in each case, by each case, together with Emerson's perception that we are mostly incapable any longer of taking on our existence by ourselves. And I take it that Deeds' insight is that a reverse field of proof is available by way of the motion picture camera, so that while thinking is no longer secured by the mind's declaration of its presence to itself, it is now to be secured by the presence of the live human body to the camera, in particular by the presence of the body's apparently least intelligent property, its fidgetiness, its metaphysical restlessness. In Descartes the proof of thinking was that it cannot doubt itself; in Emerson the proof of thinking is that it cannot be concealed. (2005: 130)

Our experiences at the movies make clear that the human body is an expressive field, one that cannot help but to continually reveal the thinking that governs it. When we think, we are on display to each other; the movie camera heightens our awareness of our mutual expressiveness and intelligibility.

Watching a popular movie allows one to apprehend the logic of practical categories, in that watching a movie requires one to determine what is happening and why by watching what people do and how they react while suspending one's usual immediate practical concerns surrounding the question of what to do oneself.<sup>8</sup> In Lessing's terms, movies are, like painting and poetry, a method for imagining bodies in action. In watching movies we exercise our

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<sup>8</sup> See Wack (2014) for a further development of the argument that movie watching affords the opportunity to apprehend practical agency and that our capacity for physiognomic perception is central to our grasp of the practical categories at stake.

basic capacity for recognizing thoughts, feelings, intentions, and character in the gestures and expressions of the human body. At the movies, the exercise of the capacity for critical physiognomy is always a question of cultivating taste in manners, morals, and customs.

The movies offer this occasion for heightening our capacity for critical physiognomic apprehension because, in watching movies, our own practical concerns are suspended. Watching a movie entails attending to its coherence – giving ourselves over to making sense of it – at the exclusion of our other ongoing everyday practical concerns. Because we are unable to do anything but watch the action as it unfolds, the movies present us with opportunities to apprehend agency as a form of free play. Watching a movie means being able to understand why the characters are acting as they do, what they intend, how they feel, what they are thinking, by watching what they do. In other words, watching the characters in a movie and understanding what they are doing and why requires the dynamic and circular form of judgment that characterizes our capacity for critical physiognomy. Audiences move back and forth between recognizing the most minute gestures as revelatory of the overall action and refining their understanding of that larger action as it unfolds.<sup>9</sup>

Wittgenstein's appeal to physiognomy as the key to understanding the experience of meaning is not an odd invocation of an obsolete pretense of a science. Rather, in identifying physiognomy with the experience of finding meaning, Wittgenstein places himself in an underappreciated critical tradition that emphasizes the dynamic and circular form of judgment at work in

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<sup>9</sup> This dynamic and circular judgment is characteristic of the experience of the movies in a way that stands in clear contrast with the role of composite photography in the development of putatively scientific physiognomy over the course of the nineteenth century. For Galton and others, still photography was supposed to capture the external signs of moral character and intellectual acumen and so allow for independent observers to deduce the nature of the character and intelligence by means of those external features. The physical features on display in a still photograph are supposed to stand as evidence of character and intelligence prior to any particular action the person in question undertakes. At the movies, on the other hand, we recognize the meaningfulness of gestures as they contribute to an unfolding action.

recognizing the expressive nature of the human body in action. This critical physiognomic tradition that Wittgenstein inherits emphasizes the essentially practical orientation of our capacities for perception and understanding. Because we share a set of practical concerns, we are able to recognize what others are doing and thinking by watching them act. When we cannot so recognize others' thoughts, emotions, and intentions, it is because we have become strange to each other's ends and have blinded ourselves to what is there for all to see.<sup>10</sup>

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