

**TORE NORDENSTAM**

## **ON ART AND ETHICS**

Carla Carmona Escalera defended her doctoral dissertation, *Egon Schiele: Análisis ético-formal de su obra pictórica*, at the University of Seville on June 11, 2010. My contribution as a member of the evaluation committee consisted of a slightly abridged version of the following pages.

### **An invitation**

Carla Carmona Escalera's dissertation is an invitation to look and see in a special way. It is an invitation to see Egon Schiele's oeuvre as an artistic analogy to Ludwig Wittgenstein's way of handling ethics. It is an invitation to reflect upon Schiele's work in the light of Wittgenstein's work, and the other way round. By doing so, she also invites us to reflect upon basic philosophical themes like the nature of understanding and ethics. It is an ambitious project, which has led to a work which is both original, stimulating, dense and demanding.

The dissertation is divided into an introduction, a chapter on Schiele's work with the title *Formas de mostrar*, a second chapter on Schiele's work entitled *Idea pictórica*, and a

conclusion and an epilogue. In the introduction, Carla does two things – she presents her own project, and she presents Wittgenstein’s way of handling ethics. The bulk of the work consists of detailed analyses of Schiele’s pictures. Actually, the introductory presentation continues well into the first chapter. There is a clear break between page 85 and page 86, where the analytical part begins.

## **A lucid presentation**

The analysis of Schiele’s oeuvre can be read in isolation as an important contribution to art criticism. To clarify its philosophical relevance I shall turn to the passage in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* (PU) where he talks about the importance of how things are presented in philosophy. Carla refers to this passage once without putting a special emphasis on it. *Se trata de ver conexiones y de encontrar e inventar casos intermedios*, she writes on p. 68. But this is really the crux of the whole project. Let me elaborate on this for some minutes.

In PU, § 122, LW uses the expression *eine übersichtliche Darstellung*, a lucid presentation, a presentation which gives us a clear survey, *una visión sinóptica* (the dissertation, p. 67).

Here is the whole paragraph in Anscombe’s translation from the 1950s:

122. A main source of our failure to understand is that we do not command a clear view of the use of our words. – Our grammar is lacking in this sort of perspicuity. A perspicuous representation produces just that understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’. Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate cases.

The concept of a perspicuous representation is of fundamental significance for us. It earmarks the form of account we give, the way we look at things. (Is this a ‘Weltanschauung?’)

Here is the original German text:

122. Es ist eine Hauptquelle unseres Unverständnisses, daß wir den Gebrauch unserer Wörter nicht übersehen. – Unserer Grammatik fehlt es an Übersichtlichkeit. – Die übersichtliche Darstellung vermittelt das Verständnis, welches eben darin besteht, daß wir die 'Zusammenhänge sehen'. Daher die Wichtigkeit des Findens und des Erfindens von Zwischengliedern. Der Begriff der übersichtlichen Darstellung ist für uns von grundlegender Bedeutung. Er bezeichnet unsere Darstellungsform, die Art, wie wir die Dinge sehen. (Ist dies eine ‚Weltanschauung‘?)

One important thing that Anscombe misses is that Wittgenstein does not at all talk about representation. He talks of presentation (*Darstellung*).

In this passage, LW makes it clear that he is concerned with understanding and lack of understanding. More precisely, he is concerned with that understanding which consists in seeing connections with the help of intermediate cases. This is precisely what Carla does in her analysis of Schiele's oeuvre. She is concerned with understanding, and the method she uses throughout is making comparisons, making us see connections, similarities and differences. The Schiele study is a beautiful example of what a lucid presentation in Wittgenstein's sense might amount to.

In her careful study of Schiele's pictures, she compares single pictures with each other and contrasts groups of pictures with other groups of pictures. There are also comparisons with pictures by other artists and some excursions to other forms of art. Without making a fuss over it, she has ipso facto made a welcome contribution to a neglected area of philosophy, viz. what it means to understand pictures. Since pictorial understanding plays such a prominent role in our lives, she has also made a welcome contribution to the general philosophy of understanding. Carla's way of handling huge tangles of pictorial details has in fact given us excellent models of how words get new meaning by being used in new contexts or, if you like to put it in that way, models of conceptual development and change.

A good example of how this is done is the section on presentation (pp. 86-97). In the course of those twelve pages, Carla begins the work of building a concept of presentation by comparing 41 different pictures (20 of them on the DVD which is included in the dissertation). The building of the concept of presentation continues in the following sections, where presentation is contrasted with exhibition, allegory and grimaces. Those concepts – *presentación, exhibición, alegoría, muecas* – and all the rest of the special concepts in the dissertation are gradually built up with the help of hundreds of references to hundreds of pictures, surrounded by comments intended to lead the reader's attention in certain directions. Meaning formation is ubiquitous, yet hard to grasp. Here we can follow the process step by step. That is the beauty of Carla's presentation.

The section on presentation begins with a striking first line:

En muchas de las ocasiones en las que el artista retratase a su mujer ésta es presentada.

What that means is explained with the help of a combination of saying and showing. The reader is immediately invited to look at the first picture on the DVD:

Fijémonos en el lienzo de 1915 'Retrato de la mujer del artista, de pie (Edith Schiele con vestido a rayas' [1].

After those two introductory sentences, the analysis begins straight away:

Todo es tratado por igual.<sup>325</sup> Ningún elemento en la composición sobresale entre los demás.

The first comparison with another picture by Schiele comes already in that footnote, which begins with the following sentence:

Esto es más evidente en el dibujo preparatorio para este lienzo ‘Edith Schiele, de pie con los brazos a los lados’ (K D1720), en el que toda la figura es tratada por igual a lápiz.

And so it goes on throughout the section of presentation, paying attention to a number of features of more than 40 pictures. Gradually, the notion of presentation begins to take form through remarks like the following:

Para presentar hay que respetar. (P.88)

El fondo, por tanto, no sólo no es indiferente con respecto a la figura, sino que la cuida .... (P.86)

Creemos que el que la presentación de los niños no sea frontal es una manera de cuidarlos, de no incomodarlos. (P. 89)

Please note the key role that ethically loaded words play in these quotations, words like caring for and respect. The moral dimension is all-pervasive, as one would expect in a work where the expression análisis ético-formal occurs on the front page. I shall come back to that later on.

## **The rules of the house**

Wittgenstein’s style of philosophizing is far removed from traditional academic philosophy. To opt for something on those lines when writing a doctoral dissertation is a courageous thing to do. Looking back on what she has done towards the end of the dissertation, Carla writes about the difficulty of combining what is expected of a doctoral dissertation with the intuitive and dynamic character of her own study: Tampoco ha sido fácil compaginar lo que se espera de una tesis doctoral con el carácter intuitivo y dinámico de nuestra investigación (p. 315). This is not just a stray after-thought. This is actually how the dissertation begins.

The dissertation begins with a quote from Thomas Bernhard's novel *Korrektur* (*Corrección*) (p. 1). The speaker or writer is somebody who lives in the attic of Höller's house. The theme is the necessity of conforming to the rules of the house:

... tomaba la decisión de familiarizarme poco a poco con las reglas de pensamiento aquí reinantes y estudiarlas, para poder pensar con arreglo a esas reglas de pensamiento ... no era fácil ... familiarizarse con esas reglas y someterse a ellas, y avanzar con arreglo a esas reglas de pensamiento.

What are the rules of the house concerning doctoral dissertations in the human sciences? Normally, there are some introductory chapters on aims, theory and method, including a survey of previous research on the chosen subject, followed by some chapters on the research that the doctoral candidate has carried out, and finally some concluding reflections on what has been accomplished and what remains to be done. Normally, there are also some pages right at the beginning where the author thanks her/his family, friends and colleagues for their patience and so forth, and normally, there is also a substantial number of footnotes, bibliographic references and an index or two at the end of the work. In the name of scientific objectivity, the writer of the dissertation is normally expected to stay in the background. If you are a bit old-fashioned, you stay away from the word I. If necessary, you could use the word we once in a while.

The rules are so well-established that we tend to think of them as given once and for all. In fact, the philosophical doctorate was first introduced in an American university in the 1860s. At the same time, a new requirement took effect, viz. that the dissertation must be based on original research carried out by the doctoral candidate himself. The current rules and expectations surrounding doctoral dissertations have a relatively short history, and they are not immune to change.

One of the most interesting developments in Academia in recent years is the scientific essay, often but not always based on the writer's own professional experience. Essay-writing plays a key role in the Centre for Practical Knowledge at Bodø University

College in northern Norway, and it has also played a central role in the Skill and Technology centre at the technical university in Stockholm. One of the first doctoral dissertations presented in Skill and Technology in Stockholm was a remarkably unorthodox essay on the professional skills that meteorologists have. A more recent example from Skill and Technology in Stockholm is a doctoral dissertation a couple of years ago which consisted of an analysis of the professional knowledge of a well-established artist in Sweden, carried out by the artist himself, not an autobiography but including a good many narrative stretches.<sup>1</sup>

The point I want to make is simply that there is room for change. The dissertation we are considering today is a creative and innovative piece of work. The second part of the work, the Schiele analysis, is indeed an outstanding example of what a scientific essay might amount to. Let me mention two sections in particular: the analysis of the oil painting *Mother with Two Children III* from 1917 is a brilliant little essay in its own right on Schiele's treatment of chairs (pp. 191-203); the same is true of the meditations on the veiled and the unveiled in Schiele's art (pp. 78-84), starting with an analysis of the watercolour *Standing Girl in Blue Dress and Green Stockings, Back View* from 1913. The problem, as I see it, is the first part of the dissertation. Let me explain.

### **On saying too much**

It is understandable that Carla has chosen to present her work in the way she does. After all, this is a doctoral dissertation which is intended to lead up to a doctorate. Hence the division of the work into a "theoretical" part (up to p. 85) and an analytical part which makes up the bulk of the dissertation. The first part is much more traditional than the second one. It shows that the writer is familiar with a relevant selection of Wittgenstein texts and in addition to that with a good number of texts written by various scholars. She

<sup>1</sup>Maja-Lisa Perby, *Konsten att bemästra en process. Om att förvalta yrkeskunnande*, Stockholm 1995; Roland Ljungberg, *En resa från det ordlösa. En kartläggning av ett personligt yrkeskunnande*, Stockholm 2008.

goes through this background material with a particular purpose in mind – to prepare for the analysis which makes up the second and main part of the dissertation. The second part is much more direct. It is simply more efficient.

Consider the beginning of the analytical part of the dissertation (p. 86) which I have already quoted:

En muchas ocasiones en las que el artista retratase a su mujer ésta es presentada.

That is an excellent opening sentence. That could in fact be the beginning of the whole work. But doctoral dissertations don't usually begin like that. They don't begin *in medias res*; they begin *ab ovo*.

In some places, Carla accuses Schiele of saying too much, for instance in the self-portraits from the period he spent in prison. The painter transgressed the borderline between showing and saying in an unfortunate way. I feel tempted to retort that sometimes saying too much is just the right thing to do. I think I would have done the same if I had been imprisoned for the reasons that sent Schiele to jail.

Like Schiele, Carla sometimes says too much. In both cases, one might add that under the circumstances saying too much might be the right thing to do. I hope that after the dissertation there will be a book. In that book, there will be less pressure in the direction of saying and more freedom in the direction of showing. After a short preface, the book could begin *in medias res* with the section on presenting. The Schiele study can stand on its own feet. It doesn't need a heavy academic prop.

By doing so, one would also eliminate a source of worry, to which I now turn.

## **Facts and values**

On p. 127 Carla writes about “la clara diferencia que Wittgenstein estableciera entre el mundo de los hechos y el mundo de los valores en el TLP y cómo ésta no entra en conflicto con su filosofía posterior. La esfera de los valores precisa de un lenguaje silencioso.”

I suggest that this is wrong. What Wittgenstein said about ethics in TLP is indeed in conflict with his later philosophy. Let me try to explain how.

Ludwig Wittgenstein spent the last 25 years of his life discussing and criticizing the views he had put forward in TLP. In PU and other texts, he concentrated on his earlier views on the relations between language and the world and developed a method to handle that cluster of problems. The core of the method could be described as dismantling the problems. Instead of seeking for new answers to the question of the relations between “language”, on the one hand, and “the world”, on the other hand, he came to the conclusion that the key words in the formulation of the problem are empty abstractions. What he did was to replace the abstract notion of language and the abstract notion of the world with a huge set of observations of the different ways in which various words and utterances are woven into the situations in which they are used.

Carla is of course aware of this. On p. 85 she talks about la disolución de los problemas, and on p. 70 one finds the statement, Wittgenstein insistió uno y otra vez en la necesidad de reconducir las palabras del empleo metafísico al cotidiano. With a reference to PU, § 116. The examples that Wittgenstein gives there of words which need such treatment are *Wissen, Sein, Gegenstand, Ich, Satz, Name* (knowledge, being, object, I, proposition, name). He could have added many more examples to the list, for instance body, mind, fact and value.

In the course of his investigations, LW paid a good deal of attention to the so-called problem of body and mind. He did not seek for an alternative to say Descartes’ answer to

the question of how the body is related to the mind. Instead, he used the dismantling procedure – “body” and “mind” as conceived by the philosophers are abstractions, concepts which are not anchored in ordinary speech and activities. The philosophers’ notions of body and mind are good examples of what happens when language goes on holiday. Look at everyday situations where we talk about the body and about the mind, and you will find something very different from the philosophers’ talk.

When the abstract notions of language and world are replaced in this way by huge skeins of language-involving activities, one cannot go on saying that ethics is beyond the world. One cannot go on talking innocently about the world of facts and the sphere of values as something that is given once and for all. The distinction between facts and values is like the distinction between body and mind and can be handled in the same way – by dismantling the philosophical abstractions “facts” and “values”. Much philosophical nonsense is produced all the time in the field called moral philosophy, partly produced by the assumption that ethics has to be placed on a theoretical foundation. But if one reflects upon examples of different sorts of language-involving activities which have to do with ethics, one will discover that there is in fact a good deal which can be said about ethics.

Instead of asking the question, What is ethics?, one could begin by asking, Where is ethics? (without looking for a wholesale answer like “It is outside the world of facts”).

Here is an example from Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, with a little introduction by Ben Tilghman:

When Huck had come to the end of his river journey and had been mistaken by Aunt Sally for Tom Sawyer he had to improvise a tale upon the spot to explain his belated arrival, so he told of being a passenger on a steamboat that ‘blowed out’ a cylinder head. Aunt Sally then exclaimed,

‘Good gracious! anybody hurt?’

‘No’m. Killed a nigger.’

‘Well, it’s lucky; because sometimes people do get hurt.’<sup>2</sup>

Ethics is in the language itself. It is woven into the concepts we use, it is inseparable from the linguistic expressions we use.

Having come so far, one can begin to see that morals are literally in the walls. An example: the floor plan in the architect Munira Hamed El Neil Daifalla’s dissertation *Utilization and Differentiation of Space* reproduced in my book *The Power of Example*, p. 217. The clear differentiation between girls’ and boys’ rooms and women’s courtyard and public courtyard reflects the central notions in Sudanese ethics, notions which can be hinted at by words like honour, dignity and decency. In Arabic: *sharaf*, *karama*, *‘ird*. And what those words stand for is definitely not outside the world of facts (in an everyday sense of that word).<sup>3</sup>

In fact, morals are everywhere. That is the reason why we sometimes fail to see them. They are too close.

## **The moral dimension**

The moral dimension plays a prominent role in Carla’s ethico-formal analysis of Schiele’s oeuvre. Ethics is not only present as that of which one cannot speak, it is also there in the very words which Carla uses in her extended analysis of Schiele’s work. Nothing is hidden, but sometimes things are so close that we cannot see them. I have already quoted some sentences to illustrate the point. Here are some more:

<sup>2</sup>B. R. Tilghman, *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics. The View from Eternity*, p. 106. Cf. my book *The Power of Example*, p. 216.

<sup>3</sup>On the notion of facts, cf. Elizabeth Anscombe, *On Brute Facts* (1958). What she discusses is institutional facts, not the pure facts that philosophers have imagined. Cf. my paper *From "Is" to "Ought" – Deduction or Articulation?* (electronic version available at [www.torenordenstam.se](http://www.torenordenstam.se)).

El artista no dudó en presentarnos a su familia. No es de extrañar, si se tiene en cuenta que en la presentación se está cuidando algo. (Pp. 89-90)

Schiele parecía ser consciente de que el ser de las cosas es siempre el mismo, y si respetaba el de su mujer, no tenía sentido no hacerlo con el de los objetos y las plantas que lo rodeaban ... (P. 94)

Es una manera de esperar la presentación, la interacción con el otro, con dignidad. (P. 87)

Es una señal de respeto, especialmente dentro del ambiente militar. (P. 92)

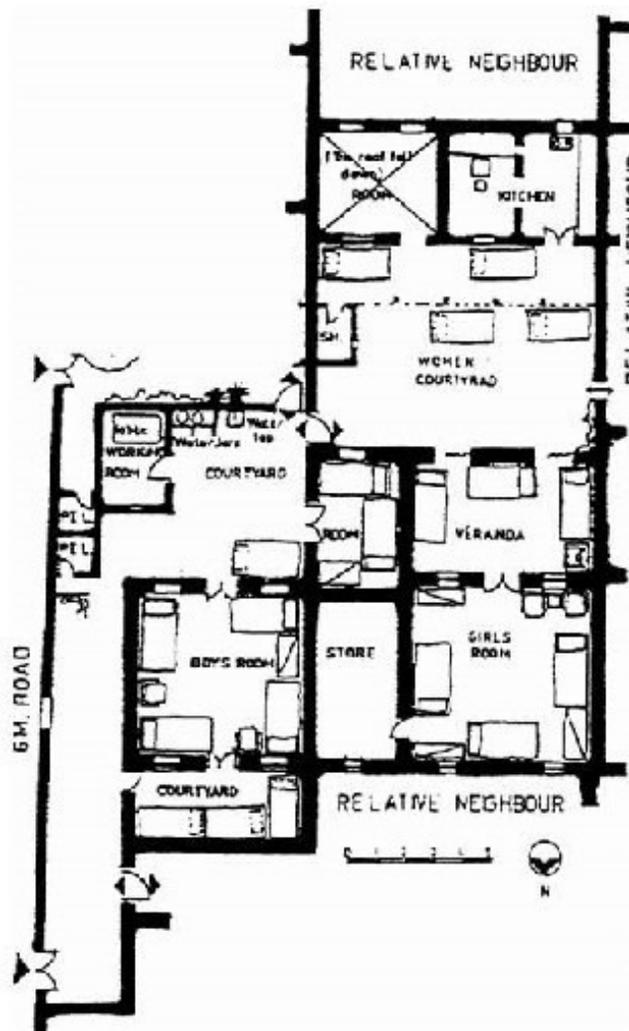
... Schiele fuese más delicado con su hermana que consigo mismo (recordemos aquello que dijimos en la sección anterior del cuidado que prestara a sus seres queridos). (Pp. 111-112)

Respecting and caring for our fellow human beings and surroundings are central notions in any ethics worth the name. If one looks for it, one will find many other expressions which bring the moral dimension to the fore, words like *violencia* (p. 108), *delicadeza* (p. 119), *vulnerabilidad* (p. 113), *naturalidad* (p. 116, 117 et passim), *espontaneidad* (p. 123), *alienación* (p. 168), to give a few examples only.

In conclusion, I should like to come back to the main point of my comments here today: The Schiele part of the dissertation contains all that is needed for the purposes of this ethico-formal analysis of Schiele's oeuvre. It can stand on its own feet without any need for a traditional academic prop. What matters is drawing attention to the moral dimension of Schiele's work, as Carla does again and again in the course of her admirable analyses of the individual pictures, and to hint at the parallel with Wittgenstein's way of handling ethics, con delicadeza, without pressing the analogy too much, all the time trying to find the right balance between saying and showing.

## **Thank you**

Thank you, Carla, for your invitation to look and see! Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for your attention!



A traditional house in Omdurman, Sudan. Floor plan in Munira Hassan El-Nail Daifalla, *Cultivation and Differentiation of Space: A Study of Social Factors Influencing House Design in Tribal Class Areas in Omdurman, Sudan*, The Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm, 1998.