

Wittgenstein, Tagore, and Lalon

**‘ETHICS AND AESTHETICS ARE ONE’ (T6.421):
EARLY WITTGENSTEIN AND RABINDRANATH TAGORE**

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Abstract

In this paper, I would like to offer a non-resolute interpretation of the remark “Ethics and Aesthetics are the same” (T6.421) through the lens of the ideas of Wittgenstein’s favorite poet Rabindranath Tagore. The paper will be divided into three main sections. In the first section, I will analyze Tractatus’ paragraph 6.421 from the perspective of early Wittgenstein, in the second section, I will focus on Tagore’s aesthetics, and in the final section, I will aim to show that Wittgenstein’s view of ‘Ethics and Aesthetics being one and the same thing’ has its counterpart in the philosophy of Tagore.

The fragmentary, dense, and cryptic paragraphs of Ludwig Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* have posed serious problems to the interpreter right from its publication. The discussion of ethics and aesthetics ‘being one and the same’ is confined to a mere bracketed portion of one paragraph.¹ Regarding this, Paul Engelmann, Wittgenstein’s closest confidante, commented rightly: “I guess that the statement of the *Tractatus* ‘Ethics and Aesthetics are one’ is one of the most frequently misunderstood propositions of the book.”²

In this paper, I would like to offer a non-resolute interpretation³ of this remark through the lens of the ideas of Wittgenstein’s favorite poet Rabindranath Tagore. At this point it is

¹Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974 (1921)). Hereafter it will be referred as *Tractatus* and the reference to paragraph number will be preceded by T (T6.421).

² Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir*, translated by L. Furtüller (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1967), p. 143.

³According to resolute interpreters, Wittgenstein did not want to convey ineffable metaphysical truths via the nonsensical utterances of the *Tractatus*. My interpretation of the *Tractatus* in this endeavor is not resolute as I feel resolute interpreters have not given due importance to what the author himself had suggested in his letters to Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Von Ficker. Wittgenstein candidly expressed himself by saying that the main thrust of the book is to distinguish between what can be said and what cannot. (Ray Monk, *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* [New York: The Free Press, 1990], p. 164). Again, at the same time, he passionately believed that

worth mentioning that there was a “Tagore mania”⁴ in Germany during the 1920’s, and that reportedly during the meetings of the Vienna Circle Wittgenstein preferred reading Tagore’s poems to discussing *Tractatus* with the logical positivists. Along with his student Smythies, Wittgenstein even translated a portion of Tagore’s favorite mystical play *The King of the Dark Chamber*. Rudolf Haller offers a list of poets and writers from Germany and elsewhere “who may have contributed to his understanding,” which include Goethe, Schiller, Lessing, Matthius Claudius, Edward Moricke, as well as “Russian writers (especially Dostoevsky and Tolstoy) and the famous Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore.”⁵

The paper attempting to interpret the remark from the perspective of the ideas of Tagore will be divided into three main sections. In the first section, I will analyze *Tractatus*’ paragraph 6.421 from the perspective of early Wittgenstein; in the second section, I will focus on Tagore’s aesthetics; and in the final section, I will aim to show that Wittgenstein’s statement of ‘Ethics and Aesthetics being one’ has its counterpart in the philosophy of Tagore as well.

I

Aesthetics in the *Tractatus*:

Seemingly, ethics and aesthetics are two mutually exclusive discourses on the normative plane. Usually ethics deals with actions being evaluated as good or bad, whereas aesthetics deals with contemplation of an object as being beautiful or pleasant. Aesthetic awareness is rarely forced upon us, whereas we cannot avoid ethical considerations even if we want to. So why did Wittgenstein think that they are the same?

There is one reference where Wittgenstein provides us with a clue of how to interpret this *sameness*. In “A Lecture on Ethics” delivered in 1929, he says:

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.⁶

Here he is explicit that the two subjects are not identical, as the definition of ethics will include only a part of aesthetics – that might be ‘the most essential part’, but still it is not the whole of it. Hence, he is not obliterating the basic distinction between the two subjects but pointing to some fundamental points of their affinities and interdependencies. But again why would Wittgenstein affirm that they are one? What are the connections between them? From his various remarks one can infer that the connections lie: **i**) in their being values, hence being inexpressible, **ii**) in their being related to viewing ‘*sub specie aeterni*’; **iii**) in their being the

“what we cannot talk about is most important.” (Paul Engelmann, *Letters from Ludwig Wittgenstein with a Memoir*, p. 97).

⁴ Martin Kampchen, *Rabindranāth Tagore and Germany* (Calcutta: Max Mueller Bhavan, 1991), p. 12.

⁵ Rudolf Haller, “Wittgenstein: Poetry and Literature,” in Wolfgang Huemer and Marc-Oliver Schuster (Eds.), *Writing the Austrian Traditions: Relations between Philosophy and Literature* (Edmonton, Alberta: Wirth Institute for Austrian and Central European Studies, 2003), pp. 41-42 (italics mine).

⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, “A Lecture on Ethics,” *The Philosophical Review*, Vol. 74 (1), 1965, p. 4.

'right view of the world'; **iv**) in their being linked to happiness and finally; **v**) in their being 'the miracle', 'the wonder that the world exists'.

i) Ethics and Aesthetics being values, hence being inexpressible

First of all, ethics and aesthetics are the same in the sense that both these discourses are inexpressible in sensible language as far as the criteria of expressibility in the *Tractatus* is concerned. According to the theory of language and meaning of the *Tractatus*, a proposition is sensible and expressible in words if and only if it pictures a particular state of affair of the world. As abstract and normative disciplines, the content of these two discourses go beyond the scope of pictorial representations. They lie outside the boundaries of scientific language; hence they are inexpressible in sensible language and they should be passed over in silence.

ii) Ethics and Aesthetics being related to viewing 'sub specie aeterni'

There is another thing that is common to ethics and aesthetics. Wittgenstein says, "The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis* and the good life is the world seen *sub specie aeternitatis*. This is the connection between art and ethics."⁷ Viewing *sub specie aeterni* thus provides the link between these two disciplines. Now what is this 'Viewing *sub specie aeterni*'?. In *Culture and Value*, we find Wittgenstein elucidating:

... it seems to me that there is a way of capturing the world *sub specie aeterni*.... it is as though [thought] flies above the world and leaves it as it is – observing it from above, in flight.⁸

Explaining 'viewing sub specie aeterni' in terms of 'viewing from above in flight' might remind us that Wittgenstein was an aeronautical engineer at the beginning of his career. It provides us also with an insight that such viewing leaves everything in the world 'as it is'. It cannot bring about any change in the facts or events of the world. And when you see from above, everything seems to be on the same level. Looking at the world from the flight, from above, also suggests a sense of detachment. Such viewing with detachment comes as a necessary step for Wittgenstein to lead an ethical life, a happy life.⁹ I'll come back to this point later.

Wittgenstein elucidates that when one views an object from eternity, that object becomes the whole world. Wittgenstein clarifies, "The thing seen *sub- specie aeternitatis* is the thing seen together with the whole logical space."¹⁰ Logical space, for early Wittgenstein refers to the world of possibilities; hence, when he asserts that the object is seen not *in* the logical space but *with* the whole logical space, he means that one sees the object not as a possibility in the world. As "The possibility of its occurring in states of affairs is the form of an object,"¹¹ this object viewed from eternity becomes different from the objects and facts, the totality of which

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914–1916*, edited by G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1961), p. 83.

⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, edited by G.H. von Wright and Heikki Nyman, translated by Peter Winch (The University of Chicago Press, 1984; Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 5.

⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-16*, p. 81.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 2.041.

constitutes the world. Now what exactly did he mean by 'together with the whole logical space'? He explains it with the example of a stove:

As a thing among things, each thing is equally insignificant: as a world, each one equally significant. If I have been contemplating the stove, and then am told: but now all you know is the stove, my result does indeed seem trivial. For this represents the matter as if I had studied the stove as one among the many things in the world. But if I was contemplating the stove, *it* was my world, and everything else colorless by contrast with it.¹²

Here he is explicit that the particular object, (here the stove) if conceived as an object among other objects (that is, that a stove is different from a hot plate, used as an instrument for cooking etc.) is insignificant as it is only a fact among other facts. It is a trivial fact, which is not valuable. It becomes valuable when it is viewed from a different perspective, from the perspective of eternity. Not only that, it also gives rise to "the mystical feeling of the world as a limited whole."¹³ Now, what exactly is this viewing from eternity? This viewing from eternity is not viewing from inside; rather, it is viewing from outside: "The usual way of looking at things sees objects as it were from the midst of them, the view *sub specie aeternitatis* from outside."¹⁴ Viewing from eternity is thus,

a transformation in the way of seeing, therefore there corresponds a transformation of the object seen, a transformation described in terms of addition of sense. This addition seems to come about because the observer, so to speak, absorbs himself in the object, in such a way that the object, though it be ordinary and habitual, ceases to be an insignificant thing among things and becomes his world.¹⁵

Moreover, logical space in *Tractatus* indicates the domain of possibilities, those which are actual, constitute the world. The world is also equivalent to reality, which consists of both positive and negative states of affairs, that is, it comprises the whole logical space. Hence, if the object viewed *sub specie aeterni* is viewed together with the whole logical space then the implication is that it constitutes the whole world.

Interestingly, for Wittgenstein, viewing in this manner also leads one to view the world ethically. Wittgenstein explicitly connects ethics with the meaning of life when he attempts to define ethics by a number of synonymous expressions. In *A lecture on Ethics* he writes, "Ethics is the enquiry into the meaning of life, or into what makes life worth living."¹⁶ Furthermore, for him, the good life is happy life and harmony is the criterion of happy life, which is also the only right life.¹⁷ The question that pops up here is How can we secure such good/happy life? Wittgenstein gives a clue : "How can man be happy at all, since he cannot ward off the misery

¹² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-16*, p. 83.

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.45.

¹⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-16*, p. 83.

¹⁵ Gabriele Tomasi., "Wittgenstein, the Artistic Way of Seeing, and the Sense of the World," *Kulturen: Streit-Analyse-Dialog - Cultures: Conflict-Analysis-Dialogue*, edited by Georg Gasser, Christian Kanzian, Edmund Runggaldier (Kirchberg am Wechsel: ALWS, 2006), p. 353;

<http://wittgensteinrepository.org/ojs/index.php/agora-alws/issue/view/18>

¹⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A lecture on Ethics," p. 4.

¹⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-16*, p. 78.

of this world? Through the life of knowledge....The life of knowledge is the life that is happy in spite of the misery of the world. The only life that is happy is the life that can renounce the amenities of the world.”¹⁸ It is through the attitude of detachment/renunciation, that one can change one’s unhappy world to a happy one. How does one acquire this quality? For Wittgenstein, one can practice the act of renunciation only when one adopts a particular perspective. And this perspective consists in viewing the world *sub specie aeterni*, that is, viewing the world as a limited whole from eternity. We have noted earlier that viewing from above or eternity suggests a sense of detachment. It is through this sense that viewing ‘sub specie aeterni’ connects ethics and aesthetics together.

Moreover, Wittgenstein points out that viewing *sub-specie-aeterni* is actually contemplating:

The contemplation of the world *sub specie aeterni* is its contemplation as a limited whole. The feeling that the world is a limited whole is the mystical feeling.¹⁹

It is only through contemplation that the object (in the example, the stove) becomes ‘the whole world for me’. This happens in the case of aesthetics (‘the work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*’) and also in ethics (in good life, the world is viewed aesthetically – ‘Good life is the world seen *sub specie aeterni*’).²⁰ Thus the distinction between art and good life, between aesthetics and ethics merges here. Both become one. This is common in “traditional accounts of aesthetic contemplation where it is typically one in which the whole of consciousness is inhabited by the object contemplated.”²¹

Wittgenstein elucidates this point (‘the work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*’) clearly in *Culture and Value* by referring to the distinction between someone performing some unremarkable activity in ordinary life, and seeing these same mundane things done on stage in theatre. In this example, Wittgenstein is not imagining a sequence of a play but merely the framing of such activity by the conventions of theatre. He says, “we should be observing something more wonderful than anything a playwright could arrange to be acted or spoken on the stage: life itself. But 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.”²² (“A work of art,” he goes on to say, “forces us to see *in the right perspective but in the absence of art, the object is just a fragment of nature like any other.*”²³

iii) Ethics and Aesthetics as providing ‘the right view of the world’

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 81.

¹⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translated by C. K. Ogden (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 6.45.

²⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-16*, p. 83.

²¹ Nieli Russell, *Wittgenstein: From Mysticism to Ordinary Language – A study of Viennese Positivism and the Thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein* (New York: State University of New York Press. 1987), p.71.

²² Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 4.

²³ Ibid., p. 4 (italics mine).

Now, what is this 'right perspective' or 'right viewing'? Wittgenstein is not very explicit. He queries in an entry in *Notebooks 1914-16*: "Is the essence of the artistic way of looking at things that it looks at the world with a happy eye?"²⁴ What does the phrase 'happy eye' connote here? Does only artistic way of looking at things can bring about relevant changes in one's attitude to the world? We find a clue again in the *Notebooks* where he says: "The world is *given* me, i.e. my will enters into the world completely from outside as into something that is already there."²⁵ So it is my will which penetrating into the world makes it my world, be it good or evil by an exercise of a good or evil willing. Viewing the world *sub specie aeterni* is thus connected with the exercise of good will. Wittgenstein makes connection between this viewing and good life explicit when he says: "Good life is the world viewed *sub specie aeterni*."²⁶

Thus, one's viewing the world from eternity and one's exercise of will provides one with happy eyes and makes 'the world' his happy world. Aesthetic perception thus is a shift away from the everyday relationship with what is perceived, so that the object is seen and known in a way which is at once more vivid and more detached than in the everyday relationship. We are to think of the ethical as also sharing this attitude.²⁷ This, for early Wittgenstein, was 'the right perspective'; he describes the ideal toward which he aims to lead his readers at the end of the *Tractatus*:

My propositions are elucidatory in this way: he who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he *sees the world rightly*.²⁸

For early Wittgenstein, only the artist can present an individual object in such a way that it appears to us as a work of art. We already quoted him saying that "A work of art forces us to see in the right perspective but in the absence of art, the object is just a fragment of nature like any other."²⁹ Wittgenstein claims that a work of art compels us to see things in the right perspective. Art can turn an object that is a mere 'piece of nature' into an object that is worth contemplating. It seems that by using the word 'rightly' as an adverb to 'seeing the world', Wittgenstein did not mean logical or propositional rightness or correctness. Rather, he probably intended to talk about ethical/aesthetical perspective of seeing the world as a limited whole. Here the word 'rightly' is used in an aesthetic sense, as when someone says that a musical note is on its right place when it is in harmony with previous notes. It is in this sense that seeing the world rightly as a harmonious whole is also 'seeing it with a happy eye'.

iv) Ethics and Aesthetics as being linked to happiness

²⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-16*, p. 86.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

²⁷ Diane Collinson, "Ethics and Aesthetics are One," *British Journal of Aesthetics* Vol. 25(3) (1985), pp. 266–72.

²⁸ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.54.

²⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 4 (italics mine).

An important question troubles us at this point: Why art should always be confined to 'happy eye'? What about the artistic expression of the ugly, the terrible, and 'the tragic'? Wittgenstein somehow seems to anticipate this question and in the entries of the *Notebooks 1914-16* he says:

For there is certainly something in the conception that the end of art is the beautiful. And the beautiful is what makes us happy.³⁰

Here Wittgenstein is connecting the idea of art with that of beauty. The question that arises here is How is art connected with the beautiful? The beautiful in art cannot be in what is depicted or presented, for ugly and painful things are often the subject matter of art: it seems that Wittgenstein here is using the word 'beautiful' in the sense that it incorporates both good and evil, beautiful and ugly. This becomes obvious when we see that according to Wittgenstein, "If seen with detachment... an ordinary scene looks at the same time *unheimlich* and *wunderbar*," (that is, uncanny and wonderful).³¹

It is quite possible that Wittgenstein's thought here seems to have a continuity with the idea of beauty as something beyond mere material possession and as something that transcends loss or worldly interests. Wittgenstein's notion of beauty seems to come from the notion of harmony. Work of art constructs a perspective from which many different and even conflicting elements can be brought into some unified and harmonious whole.³² This harmonious view of the world and life comes from viewing the world as a limited whole, as understood in the *Tractatus*. It contributes to a good ethical life, thus to the merging of ethical and aesthetical viewpoints once again.

But for early Wittgenstein, this cannot be expressed in sensible terms to anyone. As he puts it to Waismann:

If I needed a theory in order to explain to another the essence of the ethical (*and also of aesthetical*), the ethical would have no value at all.³³

This means that any attempt to theorize ethics or aesthetics, for Wittgenstein, will be 'to run up against the boundaries of language'. And yet, one can live an ethical life simply by having an ethical/aesthetical attitude towards the world. In Wittgenstein's own life, most indicative in this regard were the years in the 1920s, which he spent as a teacher in lower Austria. Those were also years of an aesthetical commitment which inspired him to design a modernistic house in Vienna for his sister.

v) *Ethics and Aesthetics being connected with 'the wonder that the world exists'*

³⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-16*, p. 86.

³¹ Gabriele Tomasi, "Wittgenstein on Life, Art, and the "Right Perspective," in Josef Rothhaupt und Wilhelm Vossenkuhl (Eds.), *Kulturen und Werte: Wittgensteins "Kringel-Buch" als Initialtext* (Berlin/ Boston: De Gruyter, 2013), p. 363.

³² Carolyn Wilde, "Ethics and Aesthetics Are One," in Peter B. Lewis (Ed.), *Wittgenstein, Aesthetics and Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 174.

³³ Friedrich Waismann, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1979), p. 116-117.

Finally comes the proposition 'the miracle is that the world exists', which serves as paradigmatic example of both ethics and aesthetics. It shows the underlying connection between ethics and aesthetics, whereas the peculiarity of the experience it conveys (I wonder that the world exists!) is that it falls into the domain of the mystical, the ineffable. It is the mystical experience of the world as a whole where the subject feels as merging oneself with that world. For Wittgenstein, this is an experience par excellence and mystical, which cannot be put into words.

The discussion of the above five points reveals that the connecting link between ethical and aesthetical discourses is 'viewing the world *sub specie aeterni*. This is a viewing of the world taken from outside, which is thus connected with the sense of the world. Thus the sense of the world as relevant to ethics also lies "outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the case." For all that happens and is the case is accidental. What makes it non-accidental cannot lie within the world, since if it did it would itself be accidental.³⁴ Thus both ethics and aesthetics are transcendental and work as 'conditions of the world'.³⁵

Such a view of the world differs from what can be seen from any factual or scientific viewpoint, for the facts themselves are within the world. It is also for the same reason that such 'viewing from eternity' can never be expressed in terms of scientific language. In this way, factual representation functions as a cage and ethics, and aesthetics can be taken as attempts to run against the boundaries of the cage. But in their attempts to transcend these boundaries, they show themselves and make themselves understood. What this shows is that factual or propositional representation is limited. There are points of view, which are not factual representations, which are not fragmentary or partial, but which can offer an overview of the world as a whole. It is interesting to note here that Wittgenstein connects this kind of viewing of the world with 'viewing with a happy eye' claiming that 'the beautiful is what makes happy'.³⁶ The experience of value arises from such wholeness, from the perceived harmony between the individual and the world.³⁷ This experience of unity is what being happy means.³⁸ Viewing from the viewpoint of eternity is not a perceiving of the object in terms of causality or an orientation toward a certain end. What Wittgenstein achieves with this differentiation is to show the difference between the question of human value and the scientific questions.³⁹ We will show that Tagore also takes such a stance on the way an object is viewed from the point of view of aesthetics. For him, a rose is beautiful when one feels the unity of a rose coinciding with the unity of the universe, a feeling which takes us beyond temporality. This is a unity that tunes up the inner unity of oneself along with the unity of the universe.

II

³⁴ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 6.41.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.421.

³⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-16*, p. 86.

³⁷ Julian Friedland, "Wittgenstein and the Metaphysics of Ethical Value," *Ethic@ - An International Journal for Moral Philosophy*, Florianópolis, Vol. 5, No. 1 (2006), p. 101.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 92.

³⁹ B. R Tilghman, *Wittgenstein, Ethics and Aesthetics: The View from Eternity* (London: Macmillan, 1991), p. 44.

Rabindranath Tagore and Aesthetics

Tagore's aesthetics and philosophy are intertwined with each other as 'the touch of aesthetic inspiration' pervades not only his poems and songs but also his worldview and his approach to the fundamental issues of life and thought. It is thus fair to say that "aesthetics is the dough with which his metaphysics and other writings are baked and cooked."⁴⁰ Still, it is very difficult to have a logical, succinct, and structured account of his aesthetics and philosophy. He himself has acknowledged that such a goal is bound to elude us:

I am that poet
 who is a dream-like being moving about stealthily,
 and who is unable to make myself understood.⁴¹

This is further complicated by the fact that his approach to art, literature, and paintings in his later years underwent a fundamental change from that of earlier ones, provoking an enigmatic confusion over his tenets on aesthetics among his interpreters. Thus, before identifying his points in common with Wittgenstein, I will briefly discuss Tagore's early and later aesthetics.

Aesthetics in Tagore's Early Works

For Tagore, the uniqueness of the human being in this world consists in the fact that they can be an artist. Because of their aesthetic faculty and expression, a human is distinguished from other things and beings in the universe. Almost all of Tagore's deliberations on the relationship between the human being and the world reflect his aesthetic discernment. This becomes evident when he conveys:

When we experience anything aesthetically, we do not experience only that object. A good poem confers dignity on land, sea and sky, on the whole of the existence.⁴²

For him, all works of creation such as music, dance, painting, and literature reveal rhythmic forms and that is what is common between human and God. This is what binds God and human together in creating this universe 'as a work of Art'. Tagore's approach to Art seems to be unique because he believes that the world of reality belongs to Art. In order to grasp what he means by reality, truth, and the truth of Art, one will have to analyze how Tagore views the human being in relation to nature.

According to Tagore, a human has three aspects of being. First is their physical being, who tills the soil, gathers food, does everything for their material being, and roams around unquestioningly in the domain of facts. Second is their intellectual being, who wants to find out reason and law behind the facts. Apart from these aspects, there is yet another one, a personal human: "This personal man is found in the region where we are free from all necessity – above the needs, both of the body and mind – above the expedient and useful. It is the highest in man

⁴⁰ V. S. Naravane, "Tagorene Aesthetics Concepts of Harmony and Personality," in *Rabindranāth Tagore in Perspective: A Bunch of Essays* (Calcutta: Visva Bhārati, 1989), p. 2.

⁴¹ Narasingha P. Sil, "Rabindranath Tagore's Aesthetics Revisited," in *Rabindra Miscellany*, 2015, p. 36, available at: <https://www.parabaas.com/rabindranath/articles/Rabindra%20Miscellany.pdf> (accessed on 7 April 2020).

⁴² Abu Sayeed Ayyub, *Poetry and Truth* (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1973), p. 119.

– this personal man.”⁴³ In this world of the personal human being, Art takes place. Tagore elucidates that where there is beauty in flowers, sweetness in fruits, where there is compassion for other living beings, where there is a feeling of surrendering oneself to the Great (*bhūmā*), we feel ourselves as being in an eternal personal relation with the universe. We call it ‘real’, as in reality truth is personal.

Tagore treated the ultimate truth as “the Truth of relationship, the Truth of harmony in the Universe, the fundamental principle of creation.”⁴⁴ By means of creativity, this personality of the human being transcends the abstraction of the factual domain and triumphs over the limitations of logical reasoning. The reality of the world thus does not belong to the physical human or the intellectual human with logical reasoning. Rather, the world becomes real in the domain of the personal where one feels one’s infinity, where one is divine. One can be conscious of personality in its narrower sense, which begins with the feeling of separateness from the world. Tagore elucidates this with the delight of a miser who in their aspirations to make more money strikes upon the unity or oneness of the world. A rich person distinguishes themselves as a wealthy being from the rest of the world; but the unity of a rose, of a piece of art, a poem is consistent with the unity of the world. The latter are the messengers of the One, the Infinite, and the Eternal. Art for its part expresses the delight of this unity of the finite and the infinite in the human being.

The artist creates their reality, which is more important than the factual reality of scientists. About this creation of reality, Tagore is of the opinion that one can modulate the nature-human-divine interrelationships through one’s creative faculty and can make truth one’s own. Truth can be *real*, only when it is personal. This truth is beautiful. Beauty for Tagore is “born of man’s desire to fraternize with the outer world of life and nature.”⁴⁵ Such a conception of beauty is different from the ordinary conception of beauty; it is based on the philosophy of discipline and restraint. Tagore argues, “When man has the power to see things detached from self-interest and insistent claims of the lust of the senses, then he sees that what is unpleasant to us is not necessarily unbeautiful, but has its beauty in truth.”⁴⁶ Tagore says, “The day when I first realized this truth, I remembered Keats’s words, ‘truth is beauty, beauty truth.’”⁴⁷ Now, Tagore assimilated this ‘beauty truth’ with goodness – “Which is really good is both useful and beautiful.”⁴⁸ For Tagore, “Beauty cannot be the aim of art and literature unless it is good. In

⁴³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality: Lectures Delivered in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1917), p. 12.

⁴⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man Being the Hibbert Lectures for 1930* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931), p. 100.

⁴⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Writings on Literature and Language: Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by Sisir Kumār Das and Sukanta Chaudhuri (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 51.

⁴⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, “Sense of Beauty,” *Angel of Surplus: Some Essays and Addresses on Aesthetics*, edited by Sisir Kumār Ghose (Calcutta: Viśva Bhāratī, 1978), p. 53.

⁴⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, p. 37.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

goodness also we discover that wealth, that surplus⁴⁹ which is commensurate with the whole world."⁵⁰

Moreover, for Tagore, when we are intensely aware of the equation of truth, beauty, and goodness, we are aware of ourselves and the harmony of our souls with the outside universe. It gives us joy as aesthetic experience (*Ānanda*). To elucidate this, one can take the example of a rose. One feels happy (pure aesthetic joy) when one sees a rose; one sees the beauty of harmony in its color, smell, and contour, that is, in the form of a flower. "The final meaning of delight which one finds in a rose can never be in the roundness of its petals, just as the final meaning of joy of music cannot be in a phonograph record."⁵¹ In Tagore's opinion, the essence of the creative person is their capacity to feel and also to make others feel joy as aesthetic experience (*Ānanda*). On the one hand, we have the artist who expresses their inner *bhāva* (sentiment) in the art object. On the other, the creative process finds fulfillment only when *sahṛdaya rasika* (a sensitive spectator who can connect with the performance with emotion) appreciates it, feels the inner *rasa* (emotion of aesthetic pleasure that develops from *bhāva*) within, and experiences *Ānanda*. In this sense, Tagore believes that human feelings are the most important emotional forces, which transmute things into our living structures. The human being looks at the world and absorbs it with emotions of love, hatred, wonder, fear, pleasure, pain, and so on. In Tagore's own words,

Our emotions are the gastric juices which transform this world of appearance into the more intimate world of sentiments. On the other hand this outer world has its own juices, having their various qualities which excite our emotional activities. This is called in our Sanskrit rhetoric *rasa* which signifies outer juices having their response in the inner juices of our emotions.⁵²

Hence, the things that arouse our emotions arouse our feelings for our own selves. Then, we feel the longing to express ourselves for the sake of expression. Art originates from such longing and belongs to the domain of 'surplus'.⁵³

⁴⁹ The notion of surplus is the central notion in the philosophy of Tagore. He elucidates it in the following way: "Like animals, human beings also have hunger, thirst, and bodily cravings, but what makes man different from animals is that apart from these bodily cravings, human beings crave for completely different things. Animals are necessarily bounded by their needs and necessities, they cannot go beyond them. Animals possess knowledge but that knowledge is employed for useful purposes, such as how to build nests, how to jump on prey, how to avoid danger, and so on. But human beings also have knowledge, which they often employ to fulfill their needs in life, but they can go far beyond and declare that I am acquiring knowledge just for the sake of knowledge and not for anything else. Here they differ fundamentally from animals.

Animals possess certain altruistic tendencies such as parenting and taking interest in herd and hive. Humans also know that they have to be good because their goodness is necessary for their race, yet they go far beyond that. They can afford to say that goodness is for the sake of goodness. Animals also have emotions, which they use for self-preservation." (Priyambada Sarkar, *Language, Limits and beyond: Early Wittgenstein and Rabindranath Tagore* (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 38-39). "Man has a fund of excess emotional energy that does not get satisfied with simple preservation. It seeks an outlet in creation of art, literature, music and dance. For man's civilization is built upon their surplus." (Tagore, *Personality: Lectures Delivered in America*, p. 11).

⁵⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Writings on Literature and Language*, p. 172.

⁵¹ Amiya Chakravarty, *A Tagore Reader* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 88.

⁵² Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality: Lectures Delivered in America*, pp. 14-15.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Aesthetics in Tagore's Later Works

Quite in contrast with his aesthetics in his early works, the later poems and paintings of Tagore often seem to betray the sense of conflict, discord, and dissonance at the heart of existence. In a letter from March 1930,⁵⁴ Tagore explained candidly that in earlier years his inspiration for creation, constituting the centre of his life and the world, came from the outside world. But later in life, when " ... he entered this passionate desire to paint and to draw. ... The movement was no more inwards from outside but outwards from inside"⁵⁵ One gets an inkling of such changes much earlier in the poems of *Balākā*,⁵⁶ where the poet celebrates humanist ethos and also salutes youthful love, beauty, and restlessness. Next, we detect *Palātakā*,⁵⁷ which expresses the "poet's concern with the multiple mundane trials and tribulations, and the weal and woes of human life, that is a part of universal life."⁵⁸ During the last 15 years of his life, he came into contact with younger modern poets of Bengal, who were pioneering a modernist movement that unhesitatingly depicted the weight of sin and sorrow, sexuality, evil, and the complexity of intellectual experiences. He often critiqued this modernism by identifying the modern with the crude and the trivial. Yet, one does not fail to notice the distinctive features of modernism in his own writings of this period. He writes about the trivial in *Nabajātak* (1940);⁵⁹ and poems composed in these years (from *Punasca* [*Postscript*, 1932]⁶⁰ to *Śeṣlekhā* [*Last Writings*, 1941]⁶¹) seem to reveal his encounter with the real world:

I'm familiar with the road to the real world.
No fancy reality could be found there.
There the terrific and the terrible walk hand in hand.⁶²

In *Śeṣlekhā*, we find expressions of his own personal tussle, uncertainties, and lack of knowledge of being and self. At the end of the day, he confessed that he has no answer for the questions that bothered him throughout his life, and of which he thought he had answers in his early life. Much agony in his personal life, and much 'hurts and pain' out of the chaos and crisis in the outside world had made him realize that 'Truth is hard'. Truth is not only hard but also 'terrible', which seems to be in dissonance with 'the aesthetics of harmony' in his early works. Sisir Kumār Ghosh, a noted Tagore critic writes, "Full of dramatic discords, through alternate rhythms of intensity and exhaustion, the poems unfold a history of a conflict, long and carefully concealed at the heart of Rabindranath's imagination."⁶³ This is evident also in his paintings drawn during the last phase of his life. It is no wonder that critics describe his "gnawed battered twisted

⁵⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 12 (Calcutta: Viśva Bhāratī, 1961), pp. 93-94.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

⁵⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, *Balākā* (in Bengali) (Calcutta: Indian Publishing House, 1916).

⁵⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Fugitive* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1921).

⁵⁸ Sil, "Rabindranath Tagore's Aesthetics Revisited," p. 42.

⁵⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nabajatak* (Bengali book of poems) (Kolkata: Viśva Bhāratī Granthalay, 1940).

⁶⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *Punasca* (Kolkata: Viśva Bhāratī Granthalay, 1932).

⁶¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Sesh Lekha* (Bengali book of poems) (Kolkata: Viśva Bhāratī Granthalay, 1941).

⁶² Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Poems of Rabindranath Tagore*, edited by William Radice (Delhi: Penguin, 1990), p. 68.

⁶³ Sisir Kumar Ghose, *The Later Poems of Tagore* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Private Ltd., 1989), p. viii.

and phantasmagorical images born out of deletions as expressions of his suppressed unconscious.”⁶⁴ Dyson and Adhikari traced the peculiarities of Tagore’s (around 2,500) paintings to his deficiency of color vision. However, the last writings and paintings thus force us to look at our ‘sage–poet’ (*rṣi kavi*) in a different manner. Here, one notices that “this Tagore does not console us like the poet but places us in a land of uncertainty.”⁶⁵

However, I think that if one looks closely at his poems, novels, dramas, and paintings during the 1930s, one would not fail to notice that although his creative works look at the ordinary, at the crude, harsh reality, still he is not oblivious to the glory of the beautiful. It is true that his last days are full of symptoms of resentments and perturbations. But that is not final. He never deviates from his central aesthetics and philosophy as he writes only a few months before his death:

I have seen the light of the eternal
Behind the illusion of calamity.
Truth’s joyous form is imaged in this dust.⁶⁶

This is indicative that he was able to see ‘the light of the eternal’ and the harmony of truth and joy as aesthetic experience even in his very last months. Not only that, he was even hopeful that the Supreme Human Being will appear in this world. In this phase, one can notice his inner tensions between his central aesthetic philosophy and the new ideas of modernism. Sometimes new ideas occupy for him the central place; but as he is firmly rooted in a harmonious picture of the whole, it never goes fully out of sight. Because of this, he can visualize the *leelā* (a spontaneous purposeless self-manifestation) of divine dance, where his individual self merges in the flow of the life of truth, where he sees the peace of the ever-constant and ‘joyous form of truth’. His uncertainty regarding the contingency and crudeness of the mundane is contradicted by his image of merging himself into the festival of the infinite, the eternal.⁶⁷ He thus realizes that truth can be cruel but it can be also loved, and it can make free those who love it. There is the beautiful even in the terrible, throughout history and the world. In his later work, Tagore has described the terrible and the beautiful walking hand in hand. It is true that Tagore portrays his feelings of distress at the sight of the harshness and crudeness of reality in some poems of his later years; but he claims at the same time an absolute certainty in ‘the bright eternity behind the mist of danger’. He does not intend to offer ‘a radically new ontology’, as he still finds strength from his inner light:

He carries to his treasure-house
His final reward.
He who could put up with your deceit receives from you the right
To everlasting peace.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Sovon Som, *Tagore’s Paintings: Versification in Line* (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2011), p. 25.

⁶⁵ Pabitra Sarkar, “Foreword,” in Sovon Som, *Tagore’s Paintings: Versification in Line*, p. 3.

⁶⁶ Amiya Chakravarty, *A Tagore Reader* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), p. 72.

⁶⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *Prantik* (Kolkata: Visva Bhārati Granthalay, 1937), pp. 23-24.

⁶⁸ Amiya Chakravarty, *A Tagore Reader*, pp. 373-374.

III

Tagore and Wittgenstein: Convergence of Ideas on Aesthetics

Based on the elucidation of ideas on aesthetics of the two thinkers discussed above, one can portray the obvious divergences in the approaches of the poet and the philosopher. The poet will be reluctant to view aesthetics as nonsensical, as aesthetics helps him to approach the 'real' in his life; whereas the philosopher will be happy to delineate it as an attempt to express the inexpressible. Yet, in spite of their natural divergences, there are few important points of convergence where their views concur, not least because Wittgenstein's remark 'Ethics and Aesthetics being one' has its counterpart in the philosophy of Tagore.

For Tagore, beauty exceeds what is necessary. That is why we recognize it as wealth. He believed that beauty cannot be the aim of art and literature unless it is good. Goodness has made beauty more than something to be seen with the eye.⁶⁹ As Tagore says:

Whatever is beneficent is in deepest union with the whole world, in secret harmony with the mind of all humanity. When we see this beautiful accord of the true and the beneficent, the beauty of truth no longer eludes our perception. Compassion is beautiful; so are forgiveness and love. ... *The image of beauty is the fullest manifestation of the good and the image of the good the consummate self of beauty.*⁷⁰

This harmony of the Good and the Beautiful, ethics and aesthetics, cannot be represented by factual scientific language. For, they are the inexpressible. Tagore says it in his lectures delivered in America in 1917,

Facts are like wine cups that carry it [the truth], they are hidden by it, it [the Truth that Good is beautiful] overflows them. It is infinite in its suggestions; it is extravagant in its words. It is personal, therefore beyond science.⁷¹

According to Tagore, science is concerned with facts which are stateable in scientific language, whereas this merging of the good and the beautiful is beyond scientific language. Wittgenstein uses similar analogy in his lecture on ethics, delivered in 1929, where he says,

Our words will only express facts; as a teacup will only hold a teacup full of water, even if I were to pour out a gallon over it.⁷²

Thus, both Tagore and Wittgenstein agree that words in our everyday language are incapable of expressing the higher truth; that is, that higher truth cannot be put into words.

There is also another important point of convergence. For both of them, viewing from eternity is what connects ethics and aesthetics. In line with Wittgenstein, Tagore says "When we look at a rose and find it beautiful, it becomes the whole world. Its unity of form, color,

⁶⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Writings on Literature and Language: Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 173.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 172 (italics mine).

⁷¹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Personality: Lectures Delivered in America*, p. 34.

⁷² Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A lecture on Ethics," p. 6.

texture, and smell coincides with the unity of the universe, and thus it takes us beyond temporality. This unity aligns itself with the inner unity of oneself along with the unity of the universe."⁷³

Beauty for Tagore is a fundamental concept akin to that of being, surplus, and harmony, and this concept is most important in his idea of aesthetics. For Tagore, the poet is not a devotee of truth for the sake of truth, or of goodness for the sake of goodness. Rather, he is a devotee of truth and goodness as they are in themselves beautiful. And because of their beauty, the poet got attracted to them. Tagore elucidates this with the example of a blade of grass. A lay person who is indifferent to nature gets no pleasure from the blade of grass. It is a trifle matter to them. He is not interested. But a botanist finds pleasure even from a blade of grass as they know the importance of grass in the domain of plants. Similarly, an aesthete knows how to view a blade of grass even from the point of view of spirituality, can feel themselves and the world in that particular blade of grass and finds ecstasies in it.⁷⁴

From Tagore's account, it follows that from the point of view of the scientist the truth of a blade of grass is important, but only as representative of a class. But to the aesthete, a blade of grass is important not because it belongs to a class having such and such properties, not because it has some utility, but because it becomes the whole world. It comes to the fore and everything else goes to the background. When we look at a blade of grass aesthetically, the cover of its 'everydayness', that is, its being in particular spatio-temporal framework, gets removed. The aesthete discovers a deep harmony in the beautiful object and feels happy from the core of their heart.⁷⁵ This harmony transcends all discords, all conflicts. For Tagore, truth, beauty, and harmony are interchangeable terms. The artist through creative synthesis extends themselves over the whole world and feels the union with the world in them. Tagore elucidates: I exist and everything else exists. There is this union of the two in my existence.⁷⁶ This harmony, this being with the whole world, transcend the boundaries of ordinary discourse and somehow make themselves understood by means of the suggestiveness of language in poems, music, and other art forms.

Tagore elucidates the typically mystical experience of the union of oneself with the world, which he had in his early years. Regarding this experience, he says in his Hibbert lectures:

When I was 18, a sudden spring breeze of religious experience for the first time came to my life and passed away leaving in my memory a direct message of my spiritual reality. One day while I stood watching at early dawn the sun sending out its ray from behind the trees, I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight, and the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy. The invisible screen of the common place was removed from all things and all men and their ultimate significance was intensified in my mind.⁷⁷

⁷³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 14 (Kolkata: Paschimbanga Sarkar, 1986), p. 388.

⁷⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 12, p. 6.

⁷⁵ Sachindranath Ganguly, *Rabindra Darshan* (Śāntiniketan: Viśva Bhāratī, 1968), p. 86.

⁷⁶ Rabindranath Tagore, *Rabindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 12, p. 352.

⁷⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, *The Religion of Man* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1953), pp. 93-94.

One notices similar insight in a poem where he speaks of the wonderful experience of the whole world embracing his heart: "I don't know how my heart unfolded and embraced the whole world today."⁷⁸ Tagore believes that "poets reveal the benign to the world in its ineffably beautiful form. The truly benign serves our need and it is beautiful: that is, it has an unaccountable attraction that surpasses its use."⁷⁹ "Only the true artist can comprehend the secret of the visible world and the joy of revealing it."⁸⁰

Thus, for both Wittgenstein and Tagore, words are incapable of expressing values that incorporate truth, beauty, and goodness. But this gives rise to the typical Tractarian paradoxical situation: If words are incapable of expressing values such as truth, beauty, and goodness, then what purpose does this discourse on ethical and aesthetical values serve? Although from the point of view of the *Tractatus*, it might appear nonsensical, yet one can get over this paradoxicality by referring to the Tractarian notion of 'logical clarification of thoughts'.⁸¹ Hence, this discourse has a point: it points to a harmonized, value-laden, poetic universe of a poet and a philosopher. It thus clarifies human attempts to run against the boundaries of language, which, though fruitless, still deserve our deep respect and admiration.

⁷⁸ Rabindranath Tagore, "Prabhāt Utsav, Prabhāt Sangīt," in *Rabindra Rachanāvali*, Vol. 1. (Kolkata: Paschimbanga Sarkar, 1980), p. 71 (trans. mine).

⁷⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Selected Writings on Literature and Language: Rabindranath Tagore*, p. 172.

⁸⁰ Rabindranath Tagore, *On Art and Aesthetics: A Selection of Lectures, Essays & Letters*, edited by Prithwish Neogy (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1961), p. 108.

⁸¹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, 4.112.