

The Use of Examples

One of the most important problems for a study of symbolic practices (pictorial, verbal or other) is the choice of a language of description that is general enough to allow for comparisons between different symbolic practices and specific enough to allow for meaningful descriptions of actual practices. I will argue that Goodman's theory of symbols provides some of the categories needed for such an analysis.

I will try to indicate this by looking at Goodman's analysis of a symbolic practice that – though widely used in many different kinds of discourse – has generally not received much attention: the giving of examples. Goodman's extensional description of exemplification allows us to differentiate between various types of examples and to determine what we mean when we say that examples 'show' something. In this way, conflicting approaches to the question of examples (namely Kant and Wittgenstein) can be seen as complementary. A theory of symbols can operate these clarifications by virtue of its strict extensionalism.

I. An Extensional Approach to the Description of Symbolic Practices

One of the most important problems for a study of symbolic practices (pictorial, verbal or other) is the choice of a language of description that is general enough to allow for comparisons between different symbolic practices and specific enough to allow for meaningful descriptions of actual practices. I will argue that Goodman's theory of symbols provides some of the categories needed for such an analysis.

My argument will touch upon – but not consider in detail – a certain number of general questions: What is it that a general theory of symbols contributes to the study of symbolic practices? What is its relation to the categories used by the respective specialists in fields as different as cultural studies, literary theory, sociology or visual studies? What kind of questions will such a general theory of symbols be able to raise and what kind of answers can it provide? What kind of objects does it describe?

The defining characteristic of Goodman's theory of symbols is its extensionalism: all relations are to be expressed in terms of reference. The syntactic and semantic differences Goodman introduces in order to distinguish between symbol systems are differences in the mode and direction of reference, in the way referential chains are organized etc. These distinctions have sometimes been read as characteristics of static ('Saussurean') systems (see e.g. Mitchell 1994: 347ff.). The following analyses imply that this is not the case: a theory of symbols does not describe the inherent qualities of objects, but the different ways we use them as symbols (see Stetter 2005). This essentially pragmatic reading of Goodman also entails that a general theory of symbols cannot and should not replace specialist discourses, on the contrary: a theory of symbols can determine the formal characteristics of a variation, but it takes a

musician or a musicologist to say what counts as a “candidate” for a variation (see Goodman/Elgin 1988: 67).

An extensional approach does impose serious restrictions on the description of symbolic practices, but in doing so it also opens new perspectives. The most promising of these perspectives is the comparison of practices across different media, such as the analysis of variations, quotations or examples. I will try to show this by looking at Goodman’s analysis of a symbolic practice that – though widely used in many different kinds of discourse – has generally not received much attention: the giving of examples.

II. Examples

An example is an instance of a general concept or statement. On the one hand, examples guarantee the reality or the applicability of this concept. We might demand clarification or even proof by demanding an example for what has been said. On the other hand, we might – for the very same reason – dismiss something as superfluous or insufficient by calling it ‘merely’ an example (as opposed to a general rule).

Moreover, we think that examples show what cannot be said, that they somehow exceed the general concept they exemplify, that there is somehow ‘more’ to them and that they render things evident in a way descriptions cannot. And for that very reason they may also be misleading: we might even suspect them of conveying too much information, irrelevant or contraband information that might encroach on the concept that is exemplified.

An analysis of examples should address these conflicting impressions and help us to decide whether examples are indispensable or not and whether there is ‘more’ to examples or not. I shall argue that they are indispensable, that there are different kinds of examples, that, indeed, there can be ‘more’ to them, and that an analysis in terms of Goodman’s theory of symbols will allow us to see why this is so. In short: Goodman’s theory of symbols allows us to disentangle the two different strands of questions that make up traditional approaches to the analysis of examples – the question, what distinguishes ‘showing’ from ‘telling’, from the question, what makes an example epistemologically productive. And it can operate these clarifications by virtue of its strict extensionalism.

III. Examples in Kant and Wittgenstein

Traditionally examples have not been more than a minor object of study in rhetoric and epistemology. John Lyons (1989: 4), in his study of examples in Renaissance texts, has called the example “metaphor’s forgotten sibling”. And even in the last decades the status of examples has not undergone the same revision as that of metaphors. Due to the work of Black, Goodman and others metaphors have been recognized to function not only as ornaments but also as models, as instruments of cognition. Examples have not received the same amount of attention. Roland Barthes wrote that rhetoric as a discipline had often been regarded as “ce qui vient après” (Barthes 1994 [1970]: 917) – that is the presentation, the dressing-up that comes after the facts have been established. And examples still seem to be regarded in this way, as an addition to what has already been said and proven independently. This said, examples *have* made their appearance in philosophical investigations concerning the relation between the general and the particular; roughly speaking this has been the case wherever in a text the epistemological and the rhetoric dimension overlap. This is, for example, the case in a very discreet and almost invisible way in transcendental philosophy, it is also the case – and reputedly so – in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy where examples have become the centre-piece of philosophical analysis.¹

With Kant and the profound re-conception of epistemology he operates, examples are, *in a way*, rehabilitated by comparison with his predecessors.² For Kant, of course, concepts without intuitions are “void” (“leer”)³; by consequence a central problem of transcendental philosophy is how concepts obtain the requisite intuitions, i.e. the problem of “presentation” (“Darstellung”).⁴ Kant establishes the possibility of “presentation” in this sense for four different types of concepts: schemata furnish the intuitions for pure concepts of the understanding. The schema allows the “application of the category to phenomena”.⁵ Mathematical concepts are, likewise, applied a priori – by construction within the pure forms of intuition.⁶ To rational concepts or ideas “no sensible intuition can be adequate”.⁷ They can only be presented in a symbolical manner, by analogy. In this way “the Beautiful is the

¹ I have chosen Kant and Wittgenstein and excluded others (namely Aristotle) for argument’s sake; my aim here is not to give a historical account of examples in philosophy, but to make certain systematic points on the use of examples.

² On examples in Wolff see Buck 1971.

³ Kant 1968 [1781]: A 51/B75, p. 45 of the translation.

⁴ Kant 1968 [1790]: § 59. The following reading of Kant is based on Beaufret 1973 and Gabriel 1998.

⁵ “die Anwendung der Kategorie auf Erscheinungen“ (Kant 1968 [1781]: A 139/B 178, p. 101 of the translation).

⁶ Kant 1968 [1804]: A 183.

⁷ “[Vernunftbegriffen kann] keine sinnliche Anschauung angemessen sein” (Kant 1968 [1790]: § 59, A 251/B 255, p. 148 of the translation).

symbol of the morally Good”⁸. Examples, finally, furnish intuitive reality to empirical concepts.⁹

Of these four terms – schemata, constructions, analogies and examples – two are well-established within Kant’s terminology: schemata and analogies are the subject of much read paragraphs in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Judgement*, respectively; the other two, constructions and examples, are rather marginal in Kant’s work. Following the interpretations of Jean Beaufret (1973) and Gottfried Gabriel (1998), I think, nevertheless, that these four terms form a kind of conceptual grid which is Kant’s answer to the problem of ‘presentation’ (‘Darstellung’).

If this is correct, the status of examples in Kant is as follows: examples are indispensable to the acquisition of knowledge and they appertain to the domain of intuition. They cannot exceed the concepts they comply with – except for the fact that they are real and guarantee that these concepts are not void. And within the framework of transcendental philosophy they are a minor problem. But – and here again, one could speak of the rehabilitation of examples by Kant – the *Critique of Pure Reason* also advocates a didactic use of examples: examples are the “go-cart of the judgement”¹⁰, they can demonstrate how concepts should be applied.

In Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* the status of the question of examples is very different from the hesitant rehabilitation in transcendental philosophy. In two respects examples play a decisive role in Wittgenstein’s later philosophy: philosophy itself proceeds by example not by theoretical construction; and, secondly, examples are crucial for the application and formation of concepts.

Wittgenstein advocates the use of examples in philosophy as an antidote to metaphysical aberrations: the description of a real (or at least realistic) language-game will sweep away the illusions created by a metaphysical use of language, the description of a fictitious language game might demonstrate the absurd consequences of a given theory. By giving examples philosophy works as a therapy that will cure us of the perverse desire to ask metaphysical questions.¹¹

⁸ In the original: “das Schöne ist das Symbol des Sittlichguten” (Kant 1968 [1790]: § 59, A 254/ B 258, p. 149 of the translation).

⁹ See Kant 1968 [1790]: § 59, A 251/B 254, p. 148 of the translation.

¹⁰ Original expression: “Gängelwagen der Urteilskraft” (Kant 1968 [1781]: A 134/B 174, p. 99 of the translation).

¹¹ See e.g. *Philosophical Investigations* [quoted as PI] §§ 2sq., Wittgenstein’s most famous fictitious language-game that demonstrates the shortcomings of the Augustinian picture of language, or § 411 for a ‘therapeutic’ reading of realistic language-games. For the different functions of language-games see e.g. Glock 1996: 193sq. This said, whatever his remarks about his own writings suggest, Wittgenstein’s texts are not enumerations of examples, and to assert that Wittgenstein’s method consists in proceeding “by example” (see e.g. Kroß 1999:

And, moreover, examples play a decisive role in concept formation:

Suppose I shew someone various multicoloured pictures, and say: “The colour you see in all these is called ‘yellow ochre’”. – This is a definition, and the other will get to understand it by looking for and seeing what is common to the pictures.” (PI § 72)

By choosing one feature of the example over the others, we establish an open series of analogies. This process of selection and abstraction enables us to continue the series, “to go on the same way” (PI § 185).

Wittgenstein thus recognizes the importance of examples in two very different contexts: examples are indispensable to philosophical investigation and examples are indispensable to ensuring our conceptual hold on the world – the domestic life of a concept is a series of examples. I will not, in the present context, discuss the massive implications of this reversal for the question of rules in the *Philosophical Investigations*. For the question of *examples* the consequences are as follows: to choose description over explanation (see PI § 109), therapy over theory (see PI § 133) implies that examples are productive, that they are an integral part of our knowledge of the world, that there is – at the very least – an interdependence of showing and telling.

Kant’s treatment of examples is part of the more general question of ‘presentation’ (‘Darstellung’), i.e. the question how concepts relate to intuitions. Examples in Wittgenstein are part of an enquiry concerning the nature of philosophical investigation, i.e. the relation between rhetoric and logic; and they are part of an enquiry concerning the nature of rules and concepts, which means they lead up to a problem of induction.

IV. Goodman’s Analysis of Exemplification

Goodman takes up the question of exemplification in an entirely different context. In the first two chapters of *Languages of Art* Goodman tackles the question what makes a (pictorial) representation a representation of something and the question how a picture expresses an emotion. The result of these first two chapters is the distinction between four modes of reference: literal or metaphorical denotation and literal or metaphorical exemplification. Denotation is the reference of a label (a picture, a predicate etc.) to its instances, exemplification is, conversely, “the reference of a sample to a feature of the sample” (Goodman 1984: 56), of what is denoted by a certain label to this label.

182 and Gabriel 1998: 243 in an allusion to *Philosophical Investigations* § 133) is an oversimplification. But examples *do* play a decisive part in Wittgenstein’s critique of philosophical tradition.

To define examples in the language of extensionalism changes the face of the problem: firstly, in this perspective the giving of examples is in itself a symbolic practice (see also Elgin1983: 72) and not what underlies such a practice or anchors it to reality. Secondly, exemplification is a kind of reference. This is what distinguishes exemplification from instantiation, the mere possession of a property from the showing forth of a property – the definition given in *Languages of Art* is: “exemplification is possession plus reference.” (Goodman 1997 [1968]: 53) By consequence, exemplification is “selective” (Goodman 1984: 59) – i.e. it involves choosing one of the many labels that apply to a given sample. Goodman’s example is the tailor’s swatch where a small piece of cloth exemplifies the colour and texture of the cloth we are going to buy, but not, say, its size (see Goodman 1997 [1968]: 53).

In a Kantian perspective the problem would be to find an example to match the label, in a Wittgensteinian perspective the problem would be to see how we manage to go on from one example to the next. In an extensional perspective, these different approaches would simply correspond to different uses of examples.

V. Sketching some of the Consequences

For a quick sketch of an extensional approach I would like to begin with the question of intuition. What do we mean, when we say that an example ‘shows’ something? Are examples (as opposed to ‘concepts’) in some way iconic? How does a theory of symbols define ‘showing’ as opposed to ‘telling’? If exemplification is defined by the direction of reference, it is obvious that being an example (as opposed to a denotation) and being an image (as opposed to, say, a verbal description) involve distinctions in different dimensions of description: iconicity does not depend on the direction of reference, but rather on how this reference operates. Goodman does not define iconicity, but establishes ‘density’ and ‘repleteness’ of representation as typical features of the pictorial (Goodman/Elgin:1988: 130sq.). ‘Density’ refers to the fact that there is no way of deciding which of two labels refers to an object (Goodman 1997 [1968]: 136, 153), because characters “merge into one another, and so also for what is denoted” (Goodman 1984: 57). ‘Repleteness’ refers to the fact that in understanding the symbol in question we have to take into account a wealth of aspects and that we do not know beforehand which of them are relevant (see Goodman 1997 [1968]: 229sq.). Both properties would be typically present in a painting and typically absent in a (musical) score. But neither has to do with the direction of reference. If this is correct, then

some examples, but not all of them, will be dense, some dense *and* replete, and some of those, but not all of them, will be pictorial. Furthermore, those that are dense (but not necessarily replete) could be said to ‘show’ something. There is no terminological distinction in Goodman between ‘telling’ and ‘showing’, but in *Languages of Art* there is a passing remark to the effect that ‘showing’ as opposed to ‘telling’ implies both exemplification and density (see Goodman 1997 [1968]: 253). Some examples, then, show something, others do not.

To say that exemplification is a mode of reference and that the question, what distinguishes ‘showing’ from ‘telling’, is not the same as the question, what distinguishes an example from an image, has, I think, three consequences that indicate what aspects to look out for in an analysis of examples.

Firstly, exemplificational systems can be digital or analog or anything in between. That is (if you pardon the oversimplification), examples can be used in a ‘Kantian’ way (as proofs of existence, as proofs that a given empirical concept is not void) and in a ‘Wittgensteinian’ way. ‘Saying’ would be what denotational systems like languages or notations do, ‘showing’ would refer to semantically dense exemplificational systems – with the two other positions in the grid taken by analog denotational systems and ‘Kantian’ examples. Examples, then, have different functions; to say that something is an example is not to name its function in discourse but its mode of reference.

An extensional analysis thus links the description of examples to a description of their context: the distinction between digital and analog symbol systems is not one of inherent properties, it is a consequence of our habitual ways of using these symbols (see Goodman 1997 [1968]: 158).

If exemplification is defined by direction of reference, the second consequence is, that we will have to determine the referential chains involved, when we want to describe what kind of cognitive challenge the use of a given example poses. We might start out with a label and look for an example-as-proof-of-existence, or we may start out with examples and search for a symbol system and labels to fit them. But before we determine which step is the critical one, we will have to retrace the referential chains. These might be more complex than suspected. Take the simple case of ostensive definition: you teach someone the German word for ‘apple’ by pointing to the drawing of an apple. The picture obviously denotes the apple, but: does the picture exemplify the verbal label or does the apple exemplify both the picture and the verbal label? Neither is a very good description: technically speaking the picture could exemplify the verbal label metaphorically, but it is more plausible to say that both the picture and the verbal label are instances of a third label, the label ‘apple-representations’

which is exemplified by the picture and in turn denotes the verbal label – in other words: “a term is applied not to what it denotes, but to what it mentions” (Elgin 1983: 47), the term ‘apple’ “applies mention-selectively” (Elgin 1983: 47) to the apple-picture. In this way a very simple given practice is based on a two step referential chain (picture to the label ‘apple representations’ to verbal label). The critical point in the ostensive definition is obviously the first step in the chain, from the picture to the label ‘apple-representations’. Our understanding of the definition depends on our choice of the appropriate label for the picture. And as readers of Wittgenstein we already know, that, here again, the context plays a crucial role (see PI § 28-32). In this way, the identification of the referential chain(s) and of the critical points (i.e. the distinction of what is given and what has to be added in our understanding of the example) is an important part of the description of a given symbolic practice.

The third consequence, that can be drawn from Goodman’s distinction between showing and telling, concerns the question whether there is ‘more’ to examples than ‘instantiation plus reference’; and if so, whether this applies exclusively to examples that are semantically dense; and whether this explains how it is possible that examples that are logically equivalent (that is both instantiations of the label in question), are not rhetorically equivalent, are not equally good examples.

What difference does it make when the exemplificational system in place is dense? Density and repleteness of exemplificational systems account for the difference between showing and telling, for everything that is ‘more’ in giving an example. That an exemplificational system is semantically dense means that – by definition – we cannot decide with certainty which symbol exemplifies a label (see Goodman 1997 [1968]: 239 and Elgin 1983: 122). In the case of the ostensive definition by picture that means not only that there could be borderline cases, that might or might not exemplify the label in question. It also means that we might not know which traits of the exemplifying representation are relevant for the reference to be successful. Even if we have been told what the label is, we are still in a (‘Wittgensteinian’) situation where we have to continue the series – and in order to do that we will try to figure out what other labels are relevant and can be used to determine what counts as an example for the label in question. But, as Goodman points out, not all examples are good examples. A good example requires ‘projectibility’, i.e. it must be representative (Goodman 1978: 133sq.).

This brings us to the question of prototypes and the risk of what I have called ‘contraband’ information. In situations where we have to decide whether a sample is projectible, or which of its traits are projectible, we decide on a set of labels, not a single

label. And this selection of additional labels as exemplified and as projectible depends largely on the wider framework of accepted practices.

In a semantically dense system examples might thus serve as useful prototypes or – because we are looking for potential prototypes and a wider framework of accepted practices – trigger ‘mythological’ (see Barthes 1993 [1957]) connotations, clichés.¹² It will therefore be essential for an analysis of examples to name the cue(s), such as representational conventions, their transgression, the situational context etc. that determine the choice of projectible labels.

An extensional approach – that determines referential chains, distinguishes digital and analog exemplificational systems, and notes where cues are needed to identify the labels exemplified – such an approach places the practice of giving examples into contexts and connects it to functional hypotheses. I think this is a useful point of departure for the analysis of examples and other symbolic practices.

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¹² This is not true for digital systems: in a digital system instantiation warrants projectibility.

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