

Beauty, Value, and the Aesthetics of Life in Kant and Aristotle

James I. Porter

University of California, Berkeley

MY TOPIC IS WHAT I CALL “the aesthetics of life.” The phrase may occasion some puzzlement. After all, aesthetics is a field of inquiry that we normally associate, since Kant, with art and literature. We speak about aesthetic *perceptions*, *reflection*, *judgment*, and *value*. When we do so, we seem to be trying to delimit a sphere of experience or a set of properties (sometimes an attitude) that can be treated as a realm apart, distinct from our other activities in the world. What could an aesthetics of *life* possibly mean? When we “do” aesthetics in the classical sense, we are supposed to be doing a particular thing or a set of particular things: looking at a painting, listening to music, enjoying a landscape (optimally, as though it were a work of art rather than as a geological site or a place on which to build a house or a city), or, more generally, interpreting an artifact, but in a particular way, say, by attending to its form, its formal or sensuous properties, or its emotional impact. In doing aesthetics we are taking up a particular stance on the world, giving it a special kind of attention, if not adopting an “aesthetic attitude” (a much controverted notion): we are engaging in the world by disengaging the world from itself and by isolating objects of a particular kind of value. Art encourages these moves. A museum removes us from day-to-day reality; reading is like daydreaming, not thinking, and certainly not like solving an equation; nature, taken in aesthetically, gives rise to reveries, not to scientific speculations; art relieves us of the banalities of the ordinary and introduces us to the extraordinary.

I think we are all vulnerable to this kind of understanding to a greater or lesser degree. But it is one that we ought to resist. From it follow a number of assumptions, most of them attributed to

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the eighteenth century, all of them questionable: the view that art and the aesthetic capture experiences that are autonomous from other regions of human activity, severed from all instrumental, moral, political, or practical thinking; that art and aesthetics are opposed to cognition; that aesthetics and utility are distinct, while the latter is subordinated to the requirements of life—in a word, that the aesthetic and the nonaesthetic are distinct realms separated by a conceptual and practical chasm. I want to suggest that assumptions like these not only constrain the boundaries of aesthetics but also constrain and impoverish the language of aesthetic description itself.

Why must the aesthetic and the non- (or extra-) aesthetic compete? The view that they must and do strikes me as highly problematic as well as historically false. Kant does not support this view, and neither do a great many other theorists of aesthetics before and after him. I've made this point in a different context, concerning the alleged modernity of art and aesthetics, and it is one that I want to develop differently here.¹ If I am right, a radical reorientation toward our current understanding of aesthetics will be required.² In order to see why we will need to turn first to Kant and then to Aristotle. But before doing so, I want to make a few further prefatory comments.

WHY AESTHETICS HAS NEVER BEEN MODERN

The symposium organizers' statement is an open invitation to reassess the value of beauty and form in modern thought after the eighteenth century. Specifically, Viv Soni and Thomas Pfau note that "while beauty and form [have] come to be allied with a staid premodern or neoclassical love of order and hierarchy, or else with a bourgeois aesthetic of commercialization and kitsch," it behooves us to ask whether these same concepts can be "recuperated for humanistic inquiry after the devastating critiques of the past two centuries." In my own essay, I've taken the liberty to expand their remit in a slightly different way than they probably envisaged. Instead of looking forward, I look back, first to Kant and then to Aristotle. Instead of tying beauty and form more tightly to aesthetics, I've tried to loosen those very ties. Instead of mounting a defense of beauty and form, I've suggested that we need to expand our category of the aesthetic so that it activates its radical meanings of sensation, perception, and receptivity to experience and makes this its central business—a democratization of beauty, if you like. You could say that I've taken a "we have never been modern" line on the problem (I am after all the token classicist among the participants in this symposium), because I believe that aesthetic problems are fundamentally comparable at most times in history, even if the ways in which those problems get posed and answered take different expressive turns.

My essay suggests that aesthetics, in its most recurrent form, spells out the primary conditions of sentience and of meaning making in relation to the world and to life as it is lived, and that this is true whether we look back to classical antiquity or forward to today or tomorrow. One thing I want to try to do below will be to suggest that aesthetic considerations can never be *contained* by purely aesthetic considerations; that art and aesthetics are such powerful forces

¹ James I. Porter, "Is Art Modern? Kristeller's 'Modern System of the Arts' Reconsidered," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49, no. 1 (2009): 1–24; James I. Porter, "Reply to Shiner," *British Journal of Aesthetics* 49, no. 2 (2009): 171–78; and James I. Porter, *The Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece: Matter, Sensation, and Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

² Current, not earlier. Dewey's *Art as Experience* (1934) is completely relevant to a broader understanding of aesthetics. See John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, Harriet Furst Simon, and Abraham Kaplan (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), arguing for the need to explore "the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living" (16).

that they oblige us to broaden our views of their roles even when we least want to do so or when we least suspect that this is what we've done. Aesthetics is a seductive entrée to the realm of the *extra-aesthetic*. If this is right, we should be concerned to ask why this broadening process is so seductive and why it is so ineluctable. But first let's clear away some of the prejudices that clutter our view of aesthetics and then move on to more positive claims.

A prejudice of modernity is its unjustified belief that it has invented the category of the aesthetic and its view that art is modern. I've tried to dismantle one of the sources of this belief in a few places, above all in two recent books on the origins of aesthetic thought in classical antiquity. (I locate these origins in the experience of matter and sensation in a broad range of discourses and inquiries, from philosophy to nature to science to language, rather than in the experience of beauty, form, sublimity, or even art.)³ A point of departure in the first study was Kristeller's essay from 1951 called "The Modern System of the Arts," an essay that has been overly influential in shaping attitudes since then about the rise of aesthetic inquiry in modernity.⁴ One aspect of the problem that Kristeller raises is purely historical, a matter of assigning dates to inaugural moments. Another aspect is more significant, as it is a matter of describing patterns of thought. Put the two aspects together and you get the question—for me it's a skeptical question—whether anything new, any new way of conceiving or imagining the world, really gets inaugurated starting with Baumgarten and then Kant in the mid- to late eighteenth century. Were art and the aesthetic really invented as distinct spheres of activity—that is, were they accorded a special status that set them off from other domains, for example, morality, politics, religion, matters of practical utility, thoughts about craftsmanship, the sciences, even metaphysics, at that time? According to Kristeller and others (including Rancière), the answer is yes. Art, the story goes, becomes a domain of pure, formal contemplation (and optimally the contemplation of form, aka beauty). It becomes "fine" as in fine art. It becomes an autonomous domain within but apart from life and the world at large. It becomes a subtopic of philosophy. Its theory is now called aesthetics.

Only the last of these claims is true. But that is a matter of nomenclature and is neither here nor there. The rest is highly debatable, I'd say even disprovable. But it's easy to see why this Whiggish line on the rise of aesthetics might appeal to the prevalent conviction that the world drastically changed sometime during the modern era (whenever that gets dated), that modernity marks a rupture with the past, and that the ghosts of the dark past have been definitively laid to rest never again to disturb us as we go about our enlightened, disenchanting business today. I don't believe that even today the kinds of purifying separations (let's call them autonomizations) that this view of the emergence of an idea or practice entails can be sustained—and it entails cordoning off not only individual fine arts understood *as* art but also each art from the others as if they lived in different compartments without access to their neighbors. Against this view of art's autoimmunity to all forms of contagion, I believe that art and the aesthetic since (and including) Kant are every bit as much complicit in politics, morals, pragmatics, economic systems, religion or theology, and science as they have always ever been. The myth that they are not is the modern myth of mythlessness. But it's only in modernity or, rather, in a certain ideology of modernity

³ Porter, *Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece*; and James I. Porter, *The Sublime in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁴ Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts," in *Renaissance Thought and the Arts: Collected Essays*, exp. ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 163–227, discussed in Porter, "Is Art Modern? Kristeller's 'Modern System of the Arts' Reconsidered"; Porter, "Reply to Shiner"; and more generally in Porter, *Origins of Aesthetic Thought in Ancient Greece*.

that the quarantining of these various aesthetic functions becomes mythical. Elsewhere, these various domains go on performing their marvelously internetworked functions quite peacefully and happily, blissfully innocent of the classifications of the aestheticians. And they frequently do so by ransacking the past in an unfashionably anachronistic way that challenges all linear models of history, all progressivist theories of style, and all theories of modernity's constitutive rupture with the past.⁵ The deconstitution of the primacy of beauty and of the category of the aesthetic that I hope to experiment with here—the result might be called a theory of the “anaesthetic”—is very much in line with this transgressive model of art's anachronic temporality.

Kant, the presumed patron saint of modern aesthetics, is in fact a case in point (which is why I focus on him in the essay). Aristotle is another—less an interesting counterpoint than an interesting counterpart. My essay seeks to create a resonance between these two distant figures. It also seeks to displace (or to dethrone) aesthetics from its domain of propriety, and in the process it seeks to dilute the potency of the signifier “beauty” by suggesting that beauty is just that: a signifier of a certain kind of intensity (or value) that has to cohabit with other forms of intensity and values along a register that runs a gamut from low to high across any number of domains of experience. Where we place “beauty” on this scale depends on historical accidents but nothing more. So, for example, Plato locates beauty at the peak moments of metaphysical yearning for an ideal that lies beyond human reach but not beyond human aspiration. Striving for beauty drives one to ecstatic extremes. In such cases beauty becomes sublime—and any other number of things (exquisitely desirable, unthinkable, and divine). (Plotinus will call this *to hyperkallon*, or “a beauty beyond beauty.”) Aristotle locates beauty and sublimity in the miracles of the natural world (but not in tragedy), and he is hardly alone. In his *Encyclopedia* article on (*le*) *beau*, Diderot calls “beauty” “whatever has the means to awaken in my understanding the idea of relations.” Kant uses beauty as a cipher for the harmonious relationship of the mind's fit with the world. Sublimity is for him the name of this same relationship when it is threatened. But the relationship can't be finally threatened, and so sublimity comes to resolve itself in beauty again.

But why limit ourselves to a pair of terms, beauty and the sublime? We can and should go further, and I think we can while holding true to the spirit of Kant's project (but also to Plato and Aristotle and hundreds of other thinkers I haven't yet named), by recognizing that the nomenclature we use to describe experiences that we also describe as “aesthetic” (beauty, sublimity, harmony, symmetry, and so on) is an impoverished and schematic stand-in for a far richer set of perceptions. Perhaps we should jettison this language in favor of a more neutral, less inhibiting, and more expressive range of indices. In its place, notions like awareness, engagement, difficulty, embarrassment, perplexity, astonishment, fear, and bliss, or the epiphanic, intensity, exuberance, and vitality, would come to the fore, not singly but organized by “a system of concepts through

⁵ This last consideration about the recursive and inwardly collapsing temporality of art is expressed by a number of historians of art and culture, from Jacob Burckhardt and Aby Warburg to Georges Didi-Huberman and Alex Nagel (with Christopher Wood). See Aby Warburg, *Die Erneuerung der heidnischen Antike: Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Geschichte der europäischen Renaissance*, ed. Gertrud Bing and Fritz Rougemont (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1932); Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante: Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg* (Paris: Minuit, 2002); and Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010). For a general discussion of the connections that run from Burckhardt to Warburg, see Werner Hofmann, review of *L'image survivante*, by Georges Didi-Huberman, *Kunstchronik: Monatsschrift für Kunstwissenschaft, Museumswesen und Denkmalpflege* 55, no. 12 (2002): 590–96. For an attempt to broaden the range of aesthetic vocabulary in a different, lower register, see Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, (2012).

which attention might be focused.⁶ On the side of the object, not the subject, we could insist on another range of terms, such as “value,” “expressive form,” “significant form,” “design,” “shape,” and so on—provided we don’t unduly underscore formal properties or substitute them for material qualities, such as texture, layering, traces of the hand or tool, material curvature (for materials curve and bend and thereby elude the distinction of their own form—do they even have one?), rustlings, cadences, and so on. One term conspicuously absent from this list is “aesthetics” itself. The world had to wait for Baumgarten to coin this specific term in this specific usage. But in doing so he merely contributed one more impoverished label to the heap of impoverished labels—and he thereby ushered in a strictly modern anxiety. How do we corral experience into the narrow bounds of what we call the language of aesthetic experience? Why do we even try?

Behind these worries looms a larger, more interesting question, which ought to concern anyone who wants to talk about beauty and form as aesthetic considerations: namely, why do we even feel the *need* to assign aesthetic labels to things or our experience of them? I don’t think this is a question that most writing in the area does a good job getting at. The usual tendency is to start with the premise that beauty is a known or knowable entity, as is form; that aesthetics is merely a way of accounting for the presence of these entities wherever they appear; and that the act of finding or assigning them is a natural one to do. But if we probe the problem a little more deeply and stand back from it like skeptical anthropologists doing fieldwork on that strange species we call humans, we might wonder if there’s anything self-evident about either beauty or form. Kant claims to have an answer, and this will be discussed below. But his answer has nothing to do with art, aesthetics, or beauty in their conventional senses.

Looking at the earlier end of the tradition, we find that Aristotle makes similar claims. For both thinkers and the traditions they reflect, art is nothing other than a subset of a greater value that comes directly from the apprehension of living. Less squeamish than modern aestheticians, Aristotle and his ancient kin were happy to develop a large, seemingly indiscriminate, linguistic palette for describing this value, which could be located in any domain whatsoever, likewise indiscriminately, from the parts of animals to the image of God. It includes wonder, the marvelous, the paradoxical, the useful, the astonishing, the vibrant, the colorful, the brilliant, the grand, the sublime, and sometimes even the beautiful. But that language was developed in the first instance to describe the world as it is experienced or as we imagine it to be experienced (Plato’s myths, not least his myths of the gods and of Forms, are full of such imagined experiences). Art fits in here not because it is a separate sphere but because it belongs to the same world as these experiences. Art is in fact just one more occasion for the experience we have of the world—not a more intense form, or a more distilled form, but simply another. Seen in this light, beauty and other aesthetic values are derivative from pleasures we take in the world, not in art objects per se (though we can derive pleasures here too). Aesthetic values describe, or reference, “forms of life” and not just forms of fiction or art. When we read a poem, we enter into the world of the poem. If we exit the poem, we enter into the world that is figured or just featured in the poem. I see no qualitative leap to make here, and neither do poets. The question to ask about poets and painters is whether they are describing an aesthetic experience or a feeling of life. In places, the language of aesthetics is inseparable from the language of philosophy or theology even in our contemporary world—which is not to say that the one reduces to the other but only to say that

⁶ Michael Baxandall, *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 49; cf. 117.

the legitimacy of the modern age, as Hans Blumenberg warned, is far less certain than it would like to be, and which is also to suggest that we are not and have never been truly modern, nor is it clear why we should wish to be.

But enough of the preliminaries. It is time to turn to Kant.

KANT AND THE “FEELING OF LIFE”

Kant’s theory of aesthetic value in *The Critique of Judgment* is probably so familiar that an unsuspecting reader will pass right over one of his most important ideas. What readers invariably *do* focus on is Kant’s claim that aesthetic judgment is subjective and reflective, by which he means that it involves intuition (not concepts), that it is formal (not content oriented), that it is bound up with feelings of pleasure and pain, that it is disinterested (not bound up with any interest in the existence of the object), and that it is free of all extrinsic utility.⁷ But this is to miss an essential feature of Kant’s theory—the particular role that is allotted to feeling. In aesthetic perception, the subject is not taking in the world and organizing it under categories or concepts; she is taking her own pulse as she stands before the world as it impinges on her. In German, the subject *sich selbst fühlt*: she feels or experiences herself. This self-monitoring is registered as pain and pleasure but is not finally reducible to either sensation. Thus, whenever one experiences a feeling of pleasure or pain in the course of representing the world to oneself without regard for the object, the fact of pleasure and pain, Kant says, “denotes nothing in the object,” because it denotes “a feeling that the subject has of itself and of the manner in which it is affected [*afficiert*] by the representation” (§1, 5:204). Kant then adds this clarification: in such cases, “the representation is referred wholly to the subject, and what is more to its feeling of life [*das Lebensgefühl*]—under the name of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure.”

The “feeling of life” is not how Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment is generally remembered.⁸ Nevertheless, the occurrence of this phrase on page 1 of the third *Critique* is not a slip. Quite the contrary, it gives Kant’s theory its deepest significance. Life, the promotion of life (*die Beförderung des Lebens*), vital powers (*Lebenskräfte*), lively states and movements of mind (*Lebendigkeit*),⁹ and the principle of life (*Lebensprinzip*) are its synonyms, and these run through the whole of the third *Critique*. Kant introduces this language whenever he wants to tell us, not about the formal conditions of judgment alone, but about its *motivating* conditions. And when it comes to matters like these, Kant’s theory is anything but disinterested. The much-vaunted

⁷ CJ §2, 5:204. Translations of *The Critique of Judgment* (hereafter *CJ*) are from Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952). Section numbers are followed by volume and page numbers of the Academy edition of Kant’s works: Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 29 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902). Occasionally I make use of the translation by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews: Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), above all for the First Introduction (hereafter FI).

⁸ The main treatments known to me include Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the “Critique of Judgment”* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), text chap. 5; Rachel Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty and Biology: An Interpretation of the “Critique of Judgment”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. chap. 6; and Béatrice Longuenesse, “Kant’s Leading Thread in the Analytic of the Beautiful,” in *Aesthetics and Cognition in Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, ed. Rebecca Kukla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 194–219. Christoph Menke, *Force: A Fundamental Concept of Aesthetic Anthropology*, trans. Gerrit Jackson (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), touches on many of the issues but is oddly silent about the “feeling of life.” I have not yet been able to consult Jan Völker, *Ästhetik der Lebendigkeit: Kants dritte Kritik* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2011).

⁹ More precisely, *lebendig* or *belebend*.

exclusion of interest and its partner utility pertains only to “the existence of the *object*” (Kant’s words) and *its* utility.¹⁰ It does not pertain to the *subject*, for whom the feeling of life is of paramount interest *and* utility. If we pursue this thread far enough, not only will Kant’s aesthetics come out as a theory about what matters most to us all of the time, but it will also transform our customary ideas about aesthetics (with a capital A) in favor of something else altogether. What Kant offers us instead is an aesthetics that takes as its object life itself. Let us call this revised aesthetics (with a small *a*) an “aesthetics of life” as opposed to the aesthetics of beauty and other things as this is generally thought of today.

So understood, aesthetics in Kant’s sense no longer applies, in the first instance, to art or to nature. It applies, rather, to the mind and its states. By mind (*Gemüth*) Kant understands something between soul and mind. *Gemüth* is a capacity of sentience that is directly wired into the biology of life and the natural constitution of the human: in Kant’s words, “the mind is life”; it is “the life principle itself.”¹¹ Now, the states of pleasure and pain arise whenever a subject experiences itself *as* alive and as alert to its surroundings. But these states are themselves in a sense misnomers, since the feeling of life is what goes “*under the name of* the feeling of pleasure or displeasure.” What Kant means is that when you experience pleasure or displeasure (pain) in the aesthetic apprehension of an object that you go on to label “beautiful” or its opposite, what you are in fact experiencing, whether you recognize it or not, is a more primitive “feeling of life.”¹² Here, he is virtually taking on board the view of the materialist philosopher Epicurus—a little begrudgingly, to be sure, because Kant presents the thought as a concession:

We must even admit that, as Epicurus maintained, *gratification* and *pain*, though proceeding from the imagination or even from representations of the understanding, are always in the last resort corporeal, since apart from any feeling of the bodily organ life would be merely a consciousness of one’s existence, and could not include any feeling of well-being or the reverse, i.e., of the furtherance or hindrance of the vital forces. For, of itself alone, the mind is all life (the life-principle itself), and hindrance or furtherance has to be sought outside it, and yet in the man himself, consequently in the connexion with his body. (§29, 5:277–78)

The concession to Epicurus is reiterated later on in connection with the idea of the feeling of life, now described as “a feeling of the furtherance of *the entire life of an individual* and, hence, also of his bodily well-being, i.e., his health” (§54, 5:331; trans. adapted; emphasis added). Kant’s vitalism, his physiologism, and his biologism here converge miraculously, and astonishingly, for a brief moment of solidarity with a figure whom he otherwise views with the utmost of ambivalence.¹³

¹⁰ E.g., *CJ* §12, 5:227, where Kant banishes only the utility (outer or inner) of the *object*.

¹¹ “[D]as Gemüth für sich allein ganz Leben (das Lebensprincip selbst) ist” (*CJ*, “General Remark,” 5:278).

¹² Béatrice Longuenesse, “Kant’s Theory of Judgment, and Judgments of Taste: On Henry Allison’s *Kant’s Theory of Taste*,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 46, no. 2 (2003): 143–64, makes a parallel observation in a different context: “I am not claiming that Kant wants to convince us that this is what we actually think [namely, that “all judging persons ought to experience a pleasure similar to mine”] when we say, ‘this is beautiful’” (151). Rather, the insight into the feeling of life is what we can come to recognize upon an analysis of our own states.

¹³ See James I. Porter, “Lucretius and the Sublime,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Lucretius*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Philip Hardie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 167–84, on Kant and Epicurus. Kant’s aesthetics is, among other things, a model of mental health. It tracks the operations of the “healthy” human understanding (*der gesunde Verstand*) in its normal and “natural” operations (*CJ* Preface, 5:169; §§39–40, 5:293; §40, 5:293–95).

“Aesthetics” is the name of the theory that Kant uses to capture this experience of the feeling of life, which designates a subject’s pleasurable or painful self-reflection whenever she pays full attention to or is otherwise made aware of her own vital powers. But there’s more, for Kant also knows that it’s not enough to enjoy these sensations for a moment and then go on to other things (although most of the time this is what we do). He recognizes that aesthetic perception is one that we find to be not only valuable but incomparably so. It is deeply satisfying (hence, terms like “pleasure” and “unpleasure” barely capture its quality), and it is addictive: we want it to go on, so that we can luxuriate in it, draw it out, explore it experientially (not cognitively, but intuitively). In such cases, Kant says, “we dwell on the contemplation of the beautiful because this contemplation *strengthens and reproduces* itself” and so too “we linger in the company of the representation of an object which keeps arresting the attention.” This lingering—in German *weilen* and *Verweilung*, concepts that will be reproduced in Goethe’s later theory of beauty (*Verweile doch! du bist so schön!*)—is an “active engagement,” not a passive one (§12); it has an *intrinsic* causality (a purposiveness without ulterior aim), namely, the continuance of its own state; and it is valuable because it represents the “enlivening” of the mind and its cognitive faculties (in the absence of a determinate cognition): we are, at that moment, engaged at the height of our mental capacities—but we are not, or do not need to be, thinking a single thought (§12).¹⁴ The pleasure one receives from such a state issues from an affirmation—an affirmation of one’s most vital capacities.

Our instinct to strengthen and reproduce this state—and I think this tendency can only be called an instinct here, albeit one of which we can at moments become vividly conscious—is an instinct to life. Thus, Kant writes, “spirit [*Geist*], understood in its aesthetic significance, is the animating [or enlivening, *belebende*] principle in the mind [*Gemüth*]. That, however, by which this principle animates the soul [*Seele*], the material which it uses for this purpose, is that which purposively sets the mental powers into motion, i.e., into a play that is *self-maintaining* and even *strengthens* the powers to that end” (§49, 5:313; trans. Guyer and Matthews, adapted; emphasis added). The enlivening response to the world is more than simply a quickening of our mental faculties: it is an affirmation of every element that is involved in this process and, finally, of the process itself—and of life. The affirmation is built into the very repetition—the lingering, dwelling in and upon, self-strengthening and self-reproducing—that drives the process onward. This is as one might only expect: if the feeling that is had were to hold good at one moment and not the next, it would threaten to be utterly contingent. Its continuity and repeatability are the sign not only of its subjective validity but also of its necessity in the face of a manifold of sensations that are themselves forever in motion and changing.¹⁵ Spinoza’s *conatus* might be a useful comparandum.¹⁶ Conversely, pain reminds us of these same capacities when they are being obstructed,

¹⁴ The distinctive feature of the experience is not the absence of (determinate) thought but only its irrelevance. (See below.)

¹⁵ Cf. *CJ* §53, 5:329: “It is only the indispensable condition [*conditio sine qua non*] of that [viz., of any aesthetic] proportion of the combining as well as changing impression [*derjenige Proportion der Eindrücke in ihrer Verbindung sowohl als ihrem Wechsel*] which makes it possible to grasp them all in one and prevent them from destroying one another, and to let them, rather, conspire towards the production of a continuous movement and quickening of the mind by affections that are in unison with it, and thus towards a serene [literally, “comfortable” and “comforting,” *behaglichen*] self-enjoyment” (trans. adapted). “Proportion” suggests a formula (a form of relation) that can remain stable regardless of the contents that it governs.

¹⁶ Spinoza’s definition brings out the relevant conjoining of pleasure, life, and the mind: “When the mind considers itself and its power of acting, it rejoices, and does so the more, the more distinctly it imagines itself and its power of acting” (IIP53); “the mind’s striving [*conatus*], or power, is its very essence” (IIP54D); trans.

as in the case of the sublime, which involves us not only in a desire to perpetuate an experience but also in an expansion (an *Erweiterung*) of what counts as the very idea of experience itself.¹⁷ In point of fact, expansion of the faculties applies as much to beauty as to sublimity.¹⁸ But in one way no aesthetic experience is truly expansive but is rather conservative and self-congratulatory: experiences merely affirm the given nature of the mind.¹⁹

Finally, lest we worry that Kant is running us off a solipsistic cliff with his insistence that self-regarding reflection like this has an ultimate value, we should recall his insistence that such reflection involves a powerful component of sociability: it is staked on the expectation that my feeling is not an aberration, not merely a private sensation, and that others should and will share it (it is universal and proper to human nature, hence “communicable”)—which gives us, incidentally, another source of aesthetic “interest” and not of disinterest, a point that Kant is perfectly explicit about.²⁰ Aesthetics here is an aesthetics of sentience and of life, virtually a species characteristic and a vital mark of the human.²¹ It is not an aesthetics of the beautiful or the sublime, let alone an aesthetics of art or nature, though it continues to map onto these other areas in a derivative fashion. Aesthetic judgment is in the first instance an analysis of our most vital affections, whether these take the form of pleasure or pain, and indeed of a subject’s *capacity for affection*—its capacity to undergo both modification and determination²²—and its *incapacity for indifference*. Aesthetic experience is the registration of this capacity, this receptivity and sensibility to experience *tout court*. All Kant’s aesthetic terms, going right down the line (beauty, sublimity, form, formlessness, grandeur, ugliness, fearfulness, wonder, and so on), can be rewritten in terms of this expanded view of what aesthetics means and does.²³

Take beauty. Beauty corresponds to the harmonious free play of the faculties of the mind whenever it is confronted with an object that it perceives in its “formal finality.” Forget about beauty for a moment and consider the free play of the faculties alone: this is what the mind experiences in its traffic with objects whenever it registers them as a familiar and virtually cognate world, and whenever it experiences *itself* as a (likewise) familiar and coherent activity.

from Edwin Curley, ed., *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994). As Béatrice Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge: Sensibility and Discursivity in the Transcendental Analytic of the “Critique of Pure Reason”* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 7, notes, Kant evokes the Spinozan *conatus* in his *Lectures on Metaphysics*. In Longuenesse’s paraphrase, “a *conatus* is associated with every *Vermögen* (mental faculty). This *conatus* is a tendency or effort to actualize itself”—and, one might add, a tendency to promote life. See *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, AA 4:422; Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 322. The all-pervasiveness of this quality of mental life in the face of the sensible world in Kant is one of the principal themes of Longuenesse’s study, and one that I wholeheartedly endorse. See also Menke, *Force*, 72 (asterisked note).

¹⁷ Cf. Spinoza again: “When the mind imagines its own lack of power, it is saddened by it”; that is, it experiences pain (IIIP55).

¹⁸ See *CJ* §53, 5:326 (said of poetry), 5:329 (said of music), and 5:330 (said of painting).

¹⁹ See Longuenesse, “Kant’s Leading Thread in the Analytic of the Beautiful,” 211: the purpose of the mind is “that the mind [should] be precisely in the state it is in.”

²⁰ E.g., *CJ* §§40–41.

²¹ Cf. *CJ* §5, 5:210: “Beauty has purport and significance only for human beings, i.e., for beings at once animal [*thierische*] and rational, but not merely for them as rational beings (e.g., as intelligent minds [*Geister*]), but as at once animal and rational” (trans. adapted; emphasis added).

²² *Modifikation, Bestimmbarkeit*; see n. 47 below.

²³ He grumbles that his use of the term “aesthetics” is both potentially confusing and used *faute de mieux*, “for the lack of another expression” (*CJ* FI VIII, 20:222).

In such cases, we experience a feeling that we label a response to beauty and that is “directly attended with [viz., accompanied by] a feeling of the promotion of life [*eine Berförderung des Lebens*]” (§23, 5:244; trans. adapted). The harmonious fit of mind and world is reassuring. It is useful for life. That is why Kant says of this experience that it has a “*subjective purposiveness*,”²⁴ one that carries all the hallmarks of an interest “for us.” The play of the subject’s cognitive powers—the most basic workings of the mind—is formally purposive: it expresses the underlying and essential fit or congruence not only between the faculties of the mind (imagination and understanding) but more importantly between the mind and its objects.²⁵ It is in virtue of this fit that the mind can construe the world at all and in that sense can be said to “live”—can be vitally active, can confidently go about its business—in the world, and in the absence of which the mind could not function at all.²⁶

The sublime is the gripping experience of the *same* indeterminacy of aesthetic judgment that beauty displays in a more harmonious way: it is free play that has become a vertiginous free fall—at least momentarily. But even so, the sublime is every bit as bound up with the feeling of life as the beautiful is. Sublimity for Kant comes about not only whenever the mind is painfully checked in a fundamental way but also when this check poses a threat that is felt to be existential: it is “brought about by the feeling of a momentary check [*Hemmung*] to the vital forces [*Lebenskräfte*]” (§23, 5:245; trans. adapted). This would appear to make a contrast with the beautiful, which is said to promote and not hinder the vital forces. But in the continuation we learn that the experience of the sublime is not limited to the experience of the life forces being checked. It, too, in the last analysis, is an experience of their being powerfully affirmed, and with an even greater intensity than in the case of the beautiful. The impedance that we feel is “followed at once by *an even more powerful discharge* [*Ergießung*] of these *same* forces” (ibid.; trans. adapted; emphasis added).

The differences between beauty and sublimity are well known and need little rehearsal. Equally significant are the features they share (§23, 244). Like beauty, the sublime is a species of reflective aesthetic judgment and as such shares all the principal features that beauty possesses, among these the prevalence of pleasure (*Lust, Wohlgefallen*)—Kant devotes an entire chapter to this (§27)—and the fact that the faculties are promoted, not hindered, through their mutual interplay, which is to say through the harmony of the faculties. For, all appearances to the contrary, the sublime is not an example of a disruptive paroxysm of the faculties when they are overtaxed with their cognitive assignments and thrown into mutual antagonism. Quite the contrary. In the face of the horrifying displays of nature in turmoil and in chaos, seemingly at odds with itself, excessive, unfathomable, and without purpose, the mind remains resolute and at one with itself, summoning up all its powers from within.²⁷ As in the case of the beautiful, the experience of the sublime produces a fundamental harmony of the mind’s faculties and realizes a “higher [i.e., subjective] purposiveness” (§23, 5:246)—a harmony that, moreover, is every bit as pleasurable and as reassuring as that which judgments of beauty supply.

²⁴ The phrase is introduced in *CJ* §11, 5:221.

²⁵ Cf. Longuenesse, “Kant’s Leading Thread in the Analytic of the Beautiful,” 211: “Moreover, the purposiveness of the object—the fact that it satisfies an immanent purpose of the human mind, that of enhancing its own pleasurable life—is also a purposiveness *of the mind itself*.”

²⁶ It is in virtue of this fit that the subject “feels itself quite at home” or “at ease” (*behaglich*) in its activities (*CJ* §15, 5:227; §53, 5:329).

²⁷ The experience acts like a tonic, galvanizing the mind: it “calls forth our own powers” (*unsere Kräfte auffordert*) and “energetically sets [us] to work” (*rüstig zu Werke [zu gehen]*) (*CJ* §28, 5:264, 262; my trans.).

I want to insist on this last point. Both the beautiful and the sublime perform an identical function, namely, achieving a subjective agreement of the mental faculties among themselves and with their objects (a *Gemüthsstimmung*; §26, 5:256) through “the subjective play of the powers of the mind,” which in the case of the beautiful is a seemingly spontaneous and strictly pleasurable event, but in the case of the sublime is a more reluctant but finally pleasurable event: the powers of the mind are here shown to be “harmonious even in their contrast” (§27, 5:258; trans. Guyer and Matthews). This accord, I should add, is *total*. For although the roles of the various faculties may seem differently allotted in the cases of the beautiful (imagination and understanding) and the sublime (imagination and reason), in point of fact in each case the experience that is had is “estimated as final [i.e., purposive] for the whole province of the mind [für die ganze Bestimmung des Gemüths]” (§27, 5:259; emphasis in original), which is in complete inner harmony across all three domains: imagination, reason, and understanding. Kant is emphatic on this point. All three faculties are active in producing aesthetic judgments in every aesthetic judgment, ensuring that the various components of the mind will achieve their sought-for harmonization no matter what obstacles might lie in their path.²⁸ The fact of this kind of accord points to the supersensible ground not only of aesthetic judgment but also of all intuition *tout court*. This ultimate point of reference is the pure and transcendental concept of reason: in other words, “the supersensible substrate of humanity” (§57, 5:340).²⁹ And as beauty and the sublime both demonstrate each in their own way, Kant is confident that such harmonies will obtain in the mind, because they must.

This last point cannot be emphasized enough. Kant’s theory of aesthetics reflects an attitude to the human place in the world: his fundamental optimism (it is really a supreme confidence) that the mind and the world can mesh congruently, that the world is wonderfully fitted to our minds and vice versa, and that to be mentally engaged with our surroundings is to experience a basic pleasure—it is the pleasure of life itself.³⁰ The robust harmonization of the mind with its objects gives us something like the proper pleasure of the human animal (to adopt an Aristotelian terminology).³¹

²⁸ Understanding is fundamentally involved in all acts of judgment (*CJ* FI VIII, 20:222). Not only does the understanding play a crucial role in bringing about the desired result in the case of the sublime (*CJ* §26, 5:253), but it is also the case that reason is quietly directive in judgments concerning the beautiful, discreetly working behind the scenes (in the service of “a still higher principle of reason”; *CJ* §22, 5:240—this secures universal communicability) and ensuring that the feeling of purposiveness that we have is, well, rational—which purposiveness in any case is simply by definition.

²⁹ The topic in this passage is judgments of taste (of beauty), but as Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Taste: A Reading of the “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 250, notes, “the introduction of the supersensible is perfectly appropriate.”

³⁰ Hence the “hope” expressed in the Introduction (VI, 5:188) that “the more intimately we come to know the secrets of nature . . . the more simple shall we find it in its principles, and the further our experience advances the more harmonious shall we find it in the apparent heterogeneity of its empirical laws.” Inquiry into nature depends on this optimism, which is in fact the premise of all such inquiry.

³¹ The lectures on anthropology (1781/82) tackle the same problem with different results. Briefly, pleasure and pain are both “feelings of life”: “Pleasure is the feeling of the promotion of life, and pain is the feeling that [the promotion of life] is being hindered” (Immanuel Kant, *Vorlesungen über Anthropologie*, ed. Reinhard Brandt and Werner Stark [Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1997], 1068). So far, so similar. But at this time, Kant seems to follow Burke (and the Stoics, whom he mentions, as a counter to Epicurus: 1079) in viewing pain—above all, pain succeeded by pleasure and then by pain, in an ongoing series—as a stronger index of the feeling of life than pleasure alone (*Anthropologie*, 1079 and *passim*). But in other places Kant anticipates the third *Critique*, e.g., AA 15:247, no. 567 (“Reflections on Anthropology” [ca. 1784]): “Everything that promotes or enlarges the feeling of life [*das Gefühl des Lebens*] is pleasing,” which is to say, whatever “favors

Pleasure is so basic to our interchange with the world that even “the most common experience [*die gemeinste Erfahrung*] would not be possible without it.”³² Kant’s view of the mind is a profoundly optimistic one. It presumes a few basic things: that the world appears to the mind in a harmonious condition, ordered, fitted together (coherent), and seamlessly fitted to, and so agreeing with, our mental faculties; and that in apprehending the world, so formed, our minds respond spontaneously (and, Kant suggests, for the most part unconsciously)³³ with a feeling of pleasure. This essential congruence of the mind and its objects could not obtain without the mediating services of the faculty of aesthetic judgment, which provides the framework within which the harmonies on both the subjective and objective sides of the equation are allowed to mesh. Indeed, another name for this congruence, viewed in and of itself, is “beauty.”

In other words, Kant’s position is that *our fundamental posture toward the world and the world’s posture toward us are aesthetic*. That this is so guarantees that we, as it were, grope our way meaningfully through the world before we come to know and understand it, and that we can never fully grasp (know or understand) the grounds by which we do so. This is not to say that the world must always appear beautiful in the ordinary meaning of the term (as some commentators worry). The world simply has to be aesthetic, which is to say experienceable: it must afford us with a feeling, a feeling of life. And to the extent that it does, we must say, with Kant’s stipulative lexicon, that the world just is beautiful in all its appearances,³⁴ be these actual or merely possible.³⁵ But to say that is merely to acknowledge that the world meshes with the mind whenever we can construe the world, and that this is the a priori condition of all possible experience.³⁶ Not even the experience of the sublime contradicts this conclusion, which suggests either that beauty inhabits the sublime or that the sublime inhabits all possible experiences. I believe that both of

the exercise and use of the faculties [*Kräfte*]” (of any kind, including mental, above all the free will, which, when actualized, “has the greatest [amount / degree of] life” [*hat das größte Leben*]) and, above all, whatever contributes to “harmonization” or “coherence” (*zusammenstimmung* [*sic*]) of, presumably, inner and outer factors (15:253, no. 587). Cf. 15:247, no. 570: “All enlivening by the mind is inner and enlarges it [“the feeling of life”] entirely; all enlivening by the body enlivens only a part. Enlivened is not the person who has a healthy stomach and good arms and legs, but rather the person who is made vividly aware of his lively condition [*seiner Lebendigkeit*]... The causality of representations in view of their own... [word(s) missing] is pleasure [*Lust*]. The immediate feeling [of life] displays greater [i.e., “augmented”] life [*zeigt doch vermehrt Leben*]. All pleasurable feelings appear to favor [or “enhance”] the free movement of the neural sap [*des nervensafts* (*sic*)],” which is to say, of the mind’s lively state.

³² *CJ* Introduction VI, 5:187.

³³ “We no longer notice any decided pleasure...” (Zwar spüren wir... keine merkliche Lust mehr...; *ibid.*).

³⁴ Pace Paul Guyer, *Values of Beauty: Historical Essays in Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 88–99. When Kant claims that “in the course of nature everything is beautiful” (*Anthropologie*, M 25:1378), he means nothing other than this. Hence, “if we notice regularity [*Regelmäßigkeit*], then even the ugly is regular”—that is, purposive for the mind, and hence, too, it is beautiful (*Anthropologie*, M 25:1378; trans. Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Taste*, 186). See Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Taste*, 184–87, for discussion of and objections to the unwanted implication that “everything is beautiful.”

³⁵ See *CJ* §30, 5:279, where Kant holds that nature’s beauty is extravagantly spread out “everywhere [*allerwärts*], even at the bottom of the ocean, where it is only seldom that the human eye... penetrates.” This is a fantasy, not an experience. But then again, Kant is not describing an object or a property, or even an aesthetic experience. He is describing a possible experience and, more to the point, a *requirement* of the mind. Nature (the world we inhabit) *must* prove purposive (schematizable, a synthesizable manifold), even when we can’t “see” it, if we are to construe appearances. Otherwise, intolerable chaos would ensue (*CJ* §82, 5:427–28).

³⁶ This is not to deny that Kant often regresses to ordinary nomenclature, as when he notes how certain mineral crystallizations or snowflakes “often have shapes of extreme beauty” (*CJ* 5:349). Kant snaps out of this brief reverie on the next page when he returns to “beauty in general” and the stringent criteria of aesthetic judgment.

these claims are likely to be true for Kant, as they are in other thinkers as well, both ancient and contemporary.³⁷

The fit or apparent lack of fit with the mind is a condition that *any* object can meet, be it a table or a tragedy. After all, even a lowly building—an otherwise-nondescript *Gebäude*—can earn the label “beautiful,” not for its pleasing qualities but simply because it stimulates a viewer’s feeling of life (§1, 5:204). The pleasure or pain we get from apprehending an object is the pleasure or pain of mental activity itself, though in the final analysis, pleasure will trump pain: the object world will always be shown to conform with the mind.³⁸ In its aesthetic response to the world, the mind (or soul) experiences itself as alive and alert to its surroundings. Aesthetics has been completely routed around the problem of the feeling of life. Beauty and sublimity are just our way of labeling this feeling. I say “labeling,” but as Kant repeatedly reminds us, it is also a way of *mislabeling* the feeling: the semantics of beauty and sublimity are inherently misleading. Both terms involve a “subreption,” or a confusion of subject and object properties.³⁹

³⁷ A different way of making this admittedly bold claim about Kant more palatable would be to show how sublimity embodies the violence that *any* imposition of form and coherence (viz., a priori purposiveness) on the sensory manifold necessitates (CJ §27, 5:259: “dieselbe Gewalt”; cf. §25, 5:247, where this is described in terms of a kinetic movement [*Bewegung*] in or of the mind, which can be pleasurable or painful when felt depending upon the perspective one takes), while beauty blissfully “forgets” (or forgives) this violence and revels in the resulting purposiveness alone—as it were, a posteriori. (See briefly below.) The feeling caused by this movement is the source of Kant’s *Lebensgefühl*. For the more general point, see R. G. Collingwood, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (London: Oxford University Press, Humphrey Milford, 1925): “Sublimity is beauty which forces itself upon our mind, beauty which strikes us as it were against our will. . . . Some such feeling. . . is never altogether absent from *any* aesthetic experience, and therefore all beauty has some tinge of sublimity; . . . hence all beauty is sustained by a spring of sublimity at its heart” (35, emphasis added). A further agreement is Collingwood’s claim that “any object may be found sublime if approached from the right point of view” (34). (To argue this last point would require an excursus of its own.) Contemporary theorists reach similar conclusions, at least in places, e.g., Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2009), 98: “there is . . . no rupture between an aesthetics of the beautiful and an aesthetics of the sublime.” Jean-François Lyotard presses the domain of the aesthetic, which is based on vital affections for him as well, to a point beyond any distinction between beauty and sublimity. See “Music, Mute” and “Anima Minima” in Jean-François Lyotard, *Postmodern Fables*, trans. Georges Van Den Abeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), e.g., 233. In support of Collingwood’s two claims, see Porter, *The Sublime in Antiquity*, with a discussion on p. 472 of Kant’s chapter on the “Anticipations of Perception” and intensive magnitudes in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (B207–18, AA 4:115–24), which, I believe, offers a further gateway to the sublime in Kant. See also n. 65 below and the ambidextrous nature of beauty and sublimity.

³⁸ Whatever nature really is like, we can perceive it only “as a system” (CJ FI IV, 20:208–9). Nature *cannot* be allowed to be “unbounded” (*grenzenlos*), “infinitely great” (*unendlich groß*), a “raw chaotic aggregate” (CJ FI IV, 20:209; cf. CJ §23, 5:246: “chaos,” “wildest and most unruly disorder and devastation,” “magnitude and might”), or “abyss” (CJ §27, 5:258; §29, 5:265; §87, 5:452: “abyss of the purposeless chaos of matter”)—except by way of a momentary heuristic ascription that our mental faculties eventually override, through *another* heuristic ascription (as in CJ §23). The process of achieving this unification of appearances, by way of a postulated supersensible causality (CJ FI VI, 20:218), is itself sublime. The actual system is not in nature; it is found in experience and is the system of experience itself: thus, the title of section IV of FI, “On *experience as a system* for the power of judgment.” Note further that it is the faculty of judgment (*Urtheilskraft*) that produces experience as a system for itself. Therein lies its actual *power* (*Kraft*). For the same reason, sublime objects are emphatically *not* formless (nothing in nature is); they are merely considered (imagined) “*without any regard to their form*” (CJ §26, 5:256). To be sure, form in nature is just as much of a heurism (an importation by the mind). On the “technique of nature” (the a priori principle of subjective purposiveness and of rule-bound systematicity) that we heuristically smuggle into our view of nature to permit it to be experienced and construed at all, see CJ FI I, 20:200; FI II, 20:205; FI VII, 20:220; and CJ §23, 5:246.

³⁹ CJ FI VIII, 20:222 (*vitium subreptionis*); CJ §27, 5:257 (*Subreption*).

Aesthetic labels are fragile things in Kant, and they are in no way glued to their objects.⁴⁰ The aesthetic labels that we use to paint the world are misrepresentations if we take them in the conventional sense. But they are significant to the extent that they reflect back to a subject her sense of her own vitality. “Beauty is for itself, apart from any reference to the feeling of the subject, nothing” (§9, 5:218). Kant’s remark has a more ominous implication for anyone who wishes to preserve the conventional understanding of aesthetics. There are no beautiful things in the world any more than there are sublime things. The language of aesthetic description is our way of painting the world in familiar colors and hues. Once we detach the labels from objects, we are free to examine the way in which these ascriptions come about—which is exactly what Kant does. Finally, the substantive difference between beauty and sublime is less significant than it at first appears. Beauty is Kant’s way of labeling a successful synthesis of the manifold. Sublimity registers the violence that imposing such a synthesis involves (one we tend to ignore). But ultimately, both beauty and sublimity reaffirm the coherence of the world they register, and of the mind’s own vibrant destiny.

Kant’s demolition of aesthetics as we understand this is nearly complete.⁴¹ There is nothing autonomous about aesthetic value, because there is nothing in our experience that does not fall under its domain as long as we are alive, capable of sentience (*aisthēsis*),⁴² of attending to objects and to our own selves, and so on. This is why the default reading of Kant gets a hold of things from the wrong end. It is not the case that our “ordinary sensual and perceptual interests are *suspended* in aesthetic contemplation.”⁴³ On the contrary, they are never more actualized than here. But then we have to accept the corollary, that our ordinary sensual and perceptual interests are aimed at such actualization *all the time*. For the same reason, interpretations of Kant that presume that cognition is the norm and that aesthetic perception and judgment mark either the defection of this norm or its excess are equally doubtful.⁴⁴ It cannot be the case that “when the

⁴⁰ One might argue that they attach to subjective appearances rather than to objects (which is partly why any object can be singly or simultaneously beautiful or sublime or neither of these for Kant), but feelings and not appearances are their ultimate referent.

⁴¹ See below on the language of aesthetic ascription.

⁴² See *CJFI* VIII, 20:222.

⁴³ Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, 104; emphasis added.

⁴⁴ “[A]esthetic judgment *starts* where the search for concepts *collapses*” (Longuenesse, “Kant’s Theory of Judgment, and Judgments of Taste,” 146). “A beautiful object can always be recognized as an object of some determinate kind, but our experience of it always has *even more unity and coherence* than is required for it to be a member of that kind. . . . We experience [an object we call beautiful] as beautiful precisely because we experience it as inducing a degree or type of harmony between imagination and understanding. . . . that *goes beyond* whatever is necessary for ordinary cognition” (Guyer, “The Harmony of the Faculties Revisited,” in *Values of Beauty*, 99, emphasis added). Identically, Zuckert “imaginative [i.e., reflective] synthesis . . . of the manifold [is] *richer and more unified* than is possible under discursive conceptual description” (Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty and Biology*, 284–85, emphasis added). As Guyer admits (99), there is no evidence in Kant that “unequivocally impl[ies]” this “metacognitive” approach, and with good reason: Kant would never assent to such an approach. In the same vein, see Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, 92: “The play of the imagination in the judgment of beauty serves to intensify the activity of our mental life in general.” Finally, according to Menke, *Force*, 74, “the aesthetic is an ‘enlivening’ of the forces that *exceeds* any practical faculty” (emphasis added). My point is that the apprehension of beauty is *no more intense* than any other mental act, such as cognition or moral thinking. Here, I would agree with Fred Rush, “The Harmony of the Faculties,” *Kant-Studien* 92 (2001): 38–61, who makes two excellent points: first, that reflective synthesis is “logically prior to any explicit conceptual synthesis” (hence, it does not add to or go beyond cognition; it is, on the contrary, built directly *into* cognition); and then, or consequently, “a sheer desire and pleasure in figuring the world without ulterior purpose is prior to and continuous with the requirement that we classify that

cognitive powers are in a certain ‘optimal’ relationship, we have cognition. And when they are in a relationship with a different proportion of activity, this produces a judgement of taste.⁴⁵ On the contrary, the two mental acts ought to be completely congruent with each other. And for that to occur, they must, I take it, share the same optimal relationship, which is none other than what Kant calls the “harmony” of the faculties,⁴⁶ one that is “suitable for a representation (by which an object is given to us) *from which cognition is to result*” (§21, 5:238). This is also the upshot of §39, 5:292–93: “This pleasure [of reflective judgment] must of necessity depend for everyone upon the same conditions, seeing that they are the subjective conditions of the possibility of a cognition in general, and the proportion of these cognitive faculties which is requisite for taste is requisite also for ordinary sound understanding, the presence of which we are entitled to presuppose in everyone” (emphasis added). Aesthetic judgment must meet the general condition of mental activity *tout court*.⁴⁷ At stake in any act of aesthetic judgment is a representation (*Vorstellung*) that “accords with the conditions of the universality that is the general concern of understanding” and “that brings the cognitive faculties into the proportionate accord *which we require for all cognition* and which we therefore deem valid for everyone who is so constituted as to judge by means of understanding and sense conjointly (i.e. for every man)” (§9, 5:219; emphasis added).⁴⁸ What Kant is describing is nothing less than “the subjective condition of all our possible experience.”⁴⁹ Finally, the plea-

world in order to have experience with epistemic import” (59, 60). This desire is had whenever our mind makes contact with its objects, and it is available to be had even when those objects present obstacles, or are inaccessible, to the imaginative synthesis.

⁴⁵ Melissa Zinkin, “Intensive Magnitudes and the Normativity of Taste,” in *Aesthetics and Cognition in Kant’s Critical Philosophy*, ed. Rebecca Kukla (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 138–61, here 158.

⁴⁶ See CJ §21, 5:238: “However, there must be one [disposition or, rather, species of harmonization (*Stimmung*)] in which this internal ratio suitable for quickening (one faculty by the other) [*zur Belebung (einer durch die andere)*] is best adapted for both mental powers in respect of cognition (of given objects) generally; and this disposition can only be determined through feeling (and not by concepts).”

⁴⁷ The mutual *Spiel* of the faculties is a function of their interaction in proportionate balance and harmony. The faculties are always activated by being cast into play (*ins Spiel gesetzt*; CJ §9, 5:217; cf. *Critique of Pure Reason* B90, AA 4:91). In judgment they enjoy a “free play”; in cognition they enjoy a more determinate and tethered play or interplay. But in both cases they “enjoy” this interplay, and the pleasure (*Lust*) they produce is always a reflex, or affirmation, of the mind’s own activity, its actuality, and its destiny or purpose (*viz.*, purposiveness). Thus, moral “delight in action” is a “pleasure . . . of self-asserting activity [*Selbstthätigkeit*] and of its adequacy [*Gemäßheit*] to the idea of its vocation [*Bestimmung*]” (CJ §39, 5:292; trans. adapted). What is more, sublimity is explicitly enlisted in this project: “the determinability [*Bestimmbarkeit*] of the subject,” which is to say its capacity for feeling and self-modification (*Modifikation seines Zustandes*) and its incapacity for indifference, when it is understood “as moral feeling,” “is nevertheless related to the aesthetic power of judgement and its formal conditions to the extent that it can serve to make the lawfulness of action out of duty representable at the same time as aesthetic, i.e., as sublime, or also as beautiful, without sacrificing any of its purity” (CJ “General Remark,” 5:267; trans. Guyer and Matthews). Plainly, there is a certain aesthetic dimension even to moral thinking, while aesthetics is congruent with Kant’s largest moral project. But to say this may be no more than to say that the moral dimension makes itself known to a subject *in and as feeling* (*viz.*, aesthetically). See CJ “General Remark,” 5:271, where Kant says just this: “da diese Macht sich eigentlich nur . . . ästhetisch-kenntlich macht.”

⁴⁸ Cf. CJ §9, 5:218 (“as is requisite for cognition in general”; emphasis in original); §9, 5:219 (“belongs to cognition generally”); and §38, 5:290 (“for a possible experience generally,” etc.).

⁴⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science, with Selections from the “Critique of Pure Reason,”* trans. Gary C. Hatfield, rev. ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 87 (*Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, AA 4:335). Life here has a totalizing character: it encompasses the whole of what we experience (or, rather, what we can experience). But it also has an affirmative character: Kant’s theory of mind is a theory of mental possibility; it affirms what the powers of the mind, understood in a very real sense as “powers” (*Kräfte, Vermögen*), have a capacity to do. Their enlivening is not the sign of any exceeding of their logic or their praxis, nor is Kant hitting upon anything like a “split”

asures that are had from cognition are not in any way distinct from those that are had in reflective judgment.⁵⁰ The pleasure I take in the mere apprehension of the object qua apprehension is the *same* pleasure that I take in the apprehension of the object qua object.⁵¹ *Both* mental states produce a harmony—and indeed the same harmony—of my faculties.⁵² Both attest to my status as a thinking and feeling subject. And both leave me with a sense—not enhanced so much as affirmed—of the vital “life forces” that make me the receptive and responsive subject that I am.⁵³

Let’s return to the passage from which this essay set out, placed now in a larger context:

To apprehend a regular and appropriate building [*regelmäßiges, zweckmäßiges Gebäude*] with one’s cognitive faculties, be the mode of representation clear or confused, is quite a different thing from being conscious of this representation with an accompanying sensation of delight. Here the representation is referred wholly to the subject, and what is more to its feeling of life—under the name of the feeling of pleasure or displeasure—and this forms the basis of a quite separate faculty of discriminating and estimating, that contributes nothing to knowledge. All it does is to compare the given representation in the subject with the entire faculty of representations of which the mind is conscious in the feeling of its state. (§1, 5:204)

The first example of beauty in the *Critique of Judgment*—a provocatively unattractive one at that—is of a building’s representation to the mind. Kant gives us two ways of processing the

between the aesthetic and the practical or between “faculty and force,” as though the idea of the faculty were divided “against itself” (Menke, *Force*, 74, 80). Faculties *just are* forces, and they wield great power. This thread runs through the whole of Kant’s critical enterprise, which is nothing less than an inquiry into the range of these powers and their vital capacity. See above and Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, 7n12, 196, 206, etc., on the *conatus*-like quality of Kant’s faculties.

⁵⁰ Cf. *CJ* FI VIII, 20:231; trans. Guyer and Matthews “Pleasure is a state of the mind in which a representation is in agreement with itself, as a ground, either merely for preserving this state itself (for the state of the powers of the mind reciprocally promoting each other in a representation preserves itself) or for producing its object.” And see Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 106: “pleasures of contemplation or desire have the same content as a conscious state of the mind,” though perhaps it would be more in keeping with Kant to say that the pleasures of contemplation and those of cognition have the same form (are formally identical) but are directed at, or generate, different kinds of mental objects.

⁵¹ Cf. *CJ* §39, 5:292; and *Critique of Pure Reason*, §5, 5:3, below.

⁵² “The proportion of these cognitive faculties which is requisite for taste is requisite also for ordinary sound understanding” (*CJ* §39, 5:292–93).

⁵³ See *Critique of Pure Reason*, §5, 5:23, trans. Mary J. Gregor in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999): “However dissimilar representations of objects may be—they may be representations of the understanding or even of reason, in contrast to those representations of sense—the *feeling of pleasure* by which alone they properly constitute the determining ground of the will. . . . *is nevertheless one and the same in kind* not only insofar as it can always be cognized only empirically but also insofar as it *affects* [*afficiert*] *one and the same vital force* [*Lebenskraft*] that is manifested in the faculty of desire, and in this respect can differ only in degree from any other determining ground.” Cf. *CJ* FI III, 20:206–7: pleasure links the various faculties (e.g., those of cognition and desire), for there is also a “pleasure contained in the determination of the will.” The same example appears in the *Jäsche Logic* (Introduction §V, AA 9:33), only there the subject in question is a wild savage who has no concept of a house as we do but who nonetheless has an intuition that we would have to say is identical to our own. Aesthetic apprehension is indeed primitive. And as the example suggests, it is the foundation on which cognition rests. (This ought to be true even if the savage were to build up a repertoire of concepts that are incomparable to our own, given the universal character of thought that Kant typically presupposes—despite *CJ* §17, 5:233–34, a passage that in any case concerns a special category of the aesthetic [“normal ideas”] and not its most general account.)

building's representation to the mind, as exhibiting either a formal purposiveness or a concept. It is the same representation, but one that gives rise to two distinct "readings." There is nothing in the object that determines this outcome. What does? I am not sure that anything does apart from the somewhat artificial distinction that Kant is asking us to accept.⁵⁴ In the moment of apprehension, both readings are available concurrently. Abstracting the pleasure we take in the receptivity to the "form" of the object gives us what Kant calls both a feeling and, as is frequently the case, our consciousness of it. But the pleasurable feeling is *likewise* present in the conceptualization that the object before me is a house. The shape in front of me must be a coherently synthesized manifold of appearances—it must have a purposiveness—if it is to be susceptible to being subsumed under a determinate concept. But to say that I, as it were, overlook the conceptual element of the intuition is not to say that the concept is not present in the intuition. It is, if I have one (and in this case I do). Its relevance is simply being suppressed in Kant's account.⁵⁵ Kant is, in other words, giving us not two different mental acts but two different ways of expressing or describing a single mental act. In the conceptualization of the appearance I see purposiveness and add a concept (a purpose, a *Zweck*) to my apprehension. In the bare registration of the appearance as purposive alone, I am not mindful of any further purpose. "One might say that in intuition, the object is *represented* even if it is not *recognized*."⁵⁶ (In Kantese, it is felt but not known.) My awareness stops, as it were, at the level of purposiveness and lingers there, luxuriating in the purposiveness of the representation alone.⁵⁷

To sum up, I hope it is clear that if aesthetics, when it is attached to the vital functions of life, is in no way opposed to utility, nor is it reducible to some quarantined domain called "art" or "aesthetic" contemplation. The distinctions are not so much false as they are unnecessary. *Every* intuition of nature is *eo ipso* conceptual, because the very idea (the concept) of nature is involved in the intuition, whether we are conscious of this or not.⁵⁸ For the same reason, concepts are present in all aesthetic judgments even when they are not named as such, and by the same reasoning, *all cognitions have an aesthetic element*, unbeknownst to themselves.⁵⁹ When we look at a statue and when we look at a person, the *structure* of our perception is the same, however many further considerations may and in fact always do go into each perception (these factors can be conventional,

⁵⁴ Being *regelmäßig* and *zweckmäßig* are not aesthetic criteria for Kant (see also *CJ* "General Remark," 5:241).

Does the building display any aesthetic features at all? Probably not. More to the point, I think, is what Kant is doing to minimize the ordinary sense of "beautiful."

⁵⁵ Cf. *CJ* §26, 5:256: "Just as the aesthetic judgement in its judgement of the beautiful refers the imagination in its free play to the *understanding*, to bring out its agreement with the *concepts* of the latter in general (apart from their determination) . . ."; and *CJ* §57, 5:339–40: judgements of taste "must of necessity be founded upon some concept or other," even if only an indeterminate one.

⁵⁶ Longuenesse, *Kant and the Capacity to Judge*, 220.

⁵⁷ We could say that we luxuriate in the *indeterminacy* of the representation, but this would be somewhat inaccurate. The representation is formally determinate insofar as it achieves a sufficient degree of purposiveness; it merely lacks the final determination that would give this intuition a final, determinate purpose. So what we have instead in aesthetic reflection is a determinacy without determinateness.

⁵⁸ Kant calls nature, so understood, the *Inbegriff*, or quintessence, "of all objects of experience" (*CJ* FI IV, 20:208).

⁵⁹ Here I agree and disagree with Fiona Hughes, *Kant's Aesthetic Epistemology: Form and World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 277: "aesthetic judgment is exemplary of cognitive synthesis without counting as a species of the latter." We might better say that aesthetic judgment gives the *form* of cognitive synthesis, and that this form is present in all cognition. But I agree with Hughes and with the recent trend that seeks to integrate aesthetic experience into Kant's largest understanding of the mind, on which see Samantha Matherne, "Kant and the Art of Schematism," *Kantian Review* 19, no. 2 (2014): 181–205, esp. 200, 204n40.

economic, ideological, moral, and so on). And to the extent that we draw pleasure from our perceptions, we are experiencing a feeling of life—that is, we are experiencing life aesthetically.

Finally, lest you fear that Kant is producing an eccentric theory of the aesthetic, or that I am producing an eccentric reading of Kant, you should consider Elaine Scarry's observation that "beauty . . . quickens. It adrenalizes. . . . It makes life more vivid, animated, living, worth living. . . . [It] confers the gift of life. [It is] the structure of a perception."⁶⁰ Or consider John Cage's surprising answer to the question "What is the purpose of writing music?"

One is, of course, not dealing with purposes but dealing with sounds. Or the answer must take the form of a paradox: a purposeful purposelessness or a purposeless play. This play, however, is an affirmation of life—not an attempt to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply a way of waking up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and let it act of its own accord.⁶¹

Or consider finally R. G. Collingwood's proposition from 1925: "Art is the primary and fundamental activity of the mind. . . . Hence, the aesthetic consciousness is the absolutely primary and fundamental [indeed, he adds, the most "primitive"] form of all consciousness."⁶² Hence, Collingwood says, a painter "paints in order to see."⁶³ He does not see—does not look around the world—in order to paint.⁶⁴ Kant was saying nothing other than all these things. To take up one last example from the third *Critique* (it will resonate with what follows), poetry is valuable, Kant says, not because of the way it rhymes, but because "it invigorates the mind [*stärkt das Gemuth*] by letting it feel [*fühlen*] its capacity—free, spontaneous [*selbstthätig*], and independent of determination by nature—of regarding and judging nature as phenomenon [*die Natur als Erscheinung*]" (§53, 5:326). That's quite an assignment for poetry! But then, Kant isn't interested

⁶⁰ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 24–25.

⁶¹ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 12.

⁶² Collingwood, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art*, 67.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁶⁴ Cf. Paul Klee as paraphrased by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his essay from 1964, "Eye and Mind": "Henceforth, as Klee said, the line no longer imitates the visible; it 'renders visible'" (Galen A. Johnson, ed., *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, trans. Michael B. Smith [Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1993], 143). Alva Noë, *Strange Tools: Art and Human Nature* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2015), might agree with Klee, but probably not with Collingwood. But Noë's theory is more about art than it is about aesthetics (he in fact is rather unclear about their exact relationship). In any case, he takes both to be second-order activities that comment or reflect on first-order perceptual experiences, whereas the view I have been proposing here makes aesthetics a first-order activity and takes art to be derivative of this. Noë's view comes close to mine to the extent that he holds to the idea that "all experience, insofar as it *is* experience, happens in an aesthetic space. For to be integral, to be integrated, to be organized, is to *be* aesthetic" (Noë, *Strange Tools*, 205, appealing to Dewey, *Art as Experience*). Noë, however, misses an essential aspect of Dewey's notion of aesthetic experience, which I believe is fundamental: experience is aesthetic, not to the degree that it is organized and integral, but to the degree that it is "immediately felt" (Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 45; cf. 123: "what is not immediate is not esthetic"). Moreover, art experiences are for Dewey derivative of the value of *everyday* experience, which is intrinsically aesthetic and at times—and inevitably (given the rhythms of life as it passes "from disturbance into harmony" and back again)—a product of "intensest life" and "heightened vitality" (Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 16–17, 22, 25), the latter being Dewey's definitional criterion of experience *tout court*: "Experience in the degree in which it *is* experience is heightened vitality" (25). By contrast, aesthetics for Noë is not found in the immediacy of life, wherein "all [animal] senses are equally [and immediately] on the *qui vive*" (Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 24), but only in the secondary elaborations of the perceptual processes when these attain a metacritical distance from their data (see, e.g., Noë, *Strange Tools*, 51–52, on "aesthetic" ["detached," "contemplative," reflective] vs. "wild" [viz., ordinary] seeing, thinking, and feeling).

in poetry as poetry or in its being beautiful or sublime, but only in the aesthetic experience of the mind whenever it is vitally engaged.⁶⁵ Nor were many ancients, among them Aristotle, to whom we can now turn.

ARISTOTLE AND THE VALUE OF LIFE

Aristotle likewise believes in the coherence of perception with the feeling of life, sentience, and the most primitive forms of pain and pleasure. He states this clearly in his analysis of pleasure in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. “Life [to zēn] is defined . . . by the power [dunamei] of perception or thought [aisthēseōs]; . . . life seems to be essentially the act of perceiving or thinking. And life is among the things that are good and pleasant in themselves.”⁶⁶ *Eo ipso*, aesthetic pleasure (in the narrow sense familiar today: aesthetics with a capital A) will be part of this larger picture. What is more, attending to this vital pleasure intensifies the pleasure, heightens its value, helps to maximize the sensation (its own capacity to discriminate ever-finer differences)⁶⁷—in a word, it perpetuates life: “to perceive [aisthanesthai] that we perceive or think is to perceive *that we exist*” and “that one lives” (*hoti zēi*), as life and existence are “defined as perceiving or thinking”; “and such perception is pleasant [and desirable] *in itself*.”⁶⁸ Ross’s paraphrase is tempting: “consciousness of life is pleasant.”⁶⁹ But this radically understates Aristotle’s point, which is that consciousness of life is immediately realized *in* feelings of pleasure, while pain can also be a factor in this awareness, however paradoxical that may seem: pain impedes the activity to which pain, too, is “proper” (*viz.*, the activity’s most natural impedance).⁷⁰ Aristotle’s point is that we affirm life just by virtue of aiming at what we naturally do, which is not to say that we cannot become more conscious of this activity and pursue it with greater intensity than we already do; theoretically speaking, there is *no limit* to this possibility, even if in reality limits do matter: our nature is perishable, it is changeable, it is complex; no pleasure is forever, and pain is an ineluctable part of life for us inasmuch

⁶⁵ The sequel runs: “. . . in the light of aspects which nature of itself does not afford us in experience, either for sense or the understanding, and of employing it accordingly in behalf of, and as a sort of schema for, the supersensible.” A case could be made for labeling poetry here a source of *either* beauty or sublimity, an equivocalness or, rather, double-barreled judgment that we find elsewhere in *CJ*. See “General Remark,” 5:267, on the human figure and 5:270 on the lawfulness of moral action, both of which can be simultaneously beautiful and sublime, in the same way that a given “movement” in the mind can be interpreted as an index of either beauty or sublimity (§25, 5:247; see n. 37 above).

⁶⁶ *Nicomachean Ethics* (hereafter *EN*) 9.9.1170a16–20; trans. W. D. Ross, rev. Jonathan Barnes, in Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, 2 vols. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁶⁷ “Now since activities are made precise and more enduring and better by their proper pleasure . . .” (*EN* 10.5.1175b13–15). The echoes with Kant need little discussion. Aristotle continues his thought (and the echo): “and [the same activities] are injured by alien pleasures” and by pains that are “proper” to the activity (as its natural impedance). Differentiation is a vital capacity of the soul; see next note.

⁶⁸ *EN* 9.9.1170a31–b2. Cf. 1170a19 and 1175a10–31 for the same points. See Ronald M. Polansky, *Aristotle’s “De anima”: A Critical Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 378, for discussion of the same capacity in *On the Soul*. Aristotle’s theory of soul is a theory of life, that is, of life’s diversification, self-differentiation, and self-maintenance, but this would need separate discussion. Cf. *On the Soul* 2.2.413a29–31 on growth and self-nutrition, all in the name of maintaining and expanding life “in all directions”: for nutrition *maintains* (*preserves, sōzei*; 416b17) *life*; it feeds, as it were, the soul qua being, qua *ousia* (*sōzei tēn ousian*; 416b14), and not only the body, which is a material entity and which needs to be ensouled in order to be alive.

⁶⁹ This is found in the notes to the reprint of the 1925 translation: Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 243.

⁷⁰ *EN* 10.5.1175b17 (*oikeiai lupai*).

as we are composed of a double nature, part animal, part divine.⁷¹ Nevertheless, every activity is “intensified by its proper pleasure”; and “every creature has its *own proper* pleasure.”⁷² “Life is an activity; what intensifies life is the pleasure that is proper to it,” and we’ve just heard what that is. Life, moreover, is self-preserving, not in the sense that it shuns death, but in the sense that it is possessed of an innate drive to affirm itself.⁷³ Sarah Broadie is right to state that for Aristotle enjoyment and pursuing an activity are forms of “practical affirmation”: Enjoyment . . . *declares* the value per se of *doing* [something], by one’s very doing of it.⁷⁴ It is a performative value statement—a value that is expressed in action and not just in theory. As Aristotle puts it, activity simply appears to be the pleasure: so cognate (*suggeneis*) are these, it is disputable whether they can even be separated.⁷⁵ Kant’s view is identical, as when he says that “the mental state present in the determination of the will by any means [by which he means whatever exhibits the freedom of a subject in its transactions with the world] is *at once in itself a feeling of pleasure and identical with it* [*mit ihm identisch*], and so does not issue from it as an effect.”⁷⁶ The pleasure is constitutive of the mental activity; and both represent a fundamental affirmation, which is to say a primordial judgment as to existence (*Wirklichkeitsgeltung*), which admits of *no* negation: to think a thing is *eo ipso* to confer existence and value on it and on the act of thinking itself.⁷⁷ There is an ultimate and nonnegotiable *utility* to this kind of value—a noninstrumental utility, comparable to saying, as Aristotle does, that we “use knowledge” when we are *aware* of what we know. For the word “know” is used in two senses, Aristotle writes: “both the man who has knowledge but is not using it and he who is using it are said to know.”⁷⁸ This value is, for Aristotle, wired into the organic processes of life, and it is expressed in the mere act of living. As Broadie says, “pleasure is a dimension of life as lived by the particular being that lives it.” But even more significantly, “what is distinctive about Aristotle’s view is the underlying metaphysics which ensures that the living being is its life’s own source, and *as such* is the subject of pleasure.” In other words, pleasure is “a dimension of vital activity as such.”⁷⁹ Vital affirmation in this form defines what the *praxis* of a living human being is. Might aesthetics with a small *a* be one of the ways in which human life is enhanced, made more vital, and is completed—useful, even? I believe that for Aristotle it both ought to be and it is.

One hint that this is the case is found in the same set of passages from the *Ethics*. As it happens, the *praxis* of sensation, of which life is the realization and culmination, is defined by Aristotle in relation to beauty—not to beauty in the ordinary meaning of the word (the beauty

⁷¹ EN 7.14.1154b20–31.

⁷² EN 10.5.1174a30–32, 1176a3–4 (trans. adapted).

⁷³ We choose life for the sake of pleasure, choose pleasure for the sake of life (both at once) (EN 10.5). There is something *conatus*-like about this feeling: “one’s own being is desirable for each person” (EN 9.9.1170b7).

⁷⁴ Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 333.

⁷⁵ “The pleasures involved in activities are more proper to them than the desires; for the latter are separated both in time and in nature, while the former are close to [*suggeneis*, “cognate with”] the activities, and so hard to distinguish from them that it admits of dispute whether the activity is not the same as the pleasure” (EN 10.5.1175b30–33). “For they seem to be bound up together and not to admit of separation, since without activity pleasure does not arise, and pleasure completes and perfects every activity,” above all the activity of “life” (EN 10.4.1175a19–21, a15–16; trans. adapted).

⁷⁶ CJ §12, 5:222.

⁷⁷ *Wirklichkeitsgeltung* is a term coined by Anneliese Maier, “Kants Qualitätskategorien,” in *Zwei Untersuchungen zur nachscholastischen Philosophie: Die Mechanisierung des Weltbilds im 17. Jahrhundert; Kants Qualitätskategorien* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 1968), 71–147, esp. 74–75.

⁷⁸ EN 7.3.1146b31–33.

⁷⁹ Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, 353.

narrowly associated with art and aesthetics) but to beauty as a broadly evaluative term, indeed one that represents the highest embodiment of value. For just as “every sense [*aisthēsis*] which is in good condition acts perfectly [most completely] in relation to the most beautiful [*to kalliston*] of its [sensible] objects [*to aisthēton*], . . . it follows that in the case of each sense the best activity is that of the best conditioned organ in relation to the finest [“best,” *kratiston*] of its objects. And this activity will be the most complete and pleasant.”⁸⁰ Beauty intrudes here in a purely functional way: whatever actualizes a sense most completely and unimpededly is beautiful just by dint of this fact. Now, life is plainly the most complete and pleasant of all activities. If so, then its “finest,” “worthiest,” and “most beautiful” object will be nothing but life itself—its own apprehension. Life short-circuits the activity of sensation (*aisthēsis*). Whereas in ordinary sensation the distance between action and object is constitutive of the activity, in matters of life, the object is completely immanent to the act. Living is sensation, thought, and pleasure all in one. This is the core of Aristotle’s aesthetics of life.

We can put this reading to the test by running it through Aristotle’s theory of poetry and by asking why we take pleasure in tragedy. How does the aesthetics of tragedy operate alongside the aesthetics of life? If we are on the right track, the answer ought to be that the proper pleasure of tragedy is “a dimension of vital activity as such” and not, as is commonly imagined, a dimension of aesthetic value in a narrow sense. The two kinds of consideration can overlap without needing to do so. I am claiming that they are fundamentally sutured together.⁸¹ Let’s trace the moves that are needed to bring us from one kind of consideration to another. If I am right, we won’t need to move at all.

When a spectator is watching a tragedy, she is vitally engaged: her attention is absorbed by an activity that affirms her own most vital qualities. Tragedy is to this extent “life preserving” and “life enhancing.” Identification is one element at work here: it reminds us that the feeling of life can be empathetic and not just self-directed. Another factor is the peculiar pleasure that comes from processing the *praxis* (the action) of a play in such a way as to result in a combination of pity, fear, and—somehow—the catharsis of both.⁸² Tragedy’s proper pleasure should not be *different* from the pleasures that govern life as an activity; it ought to fall *under* them. That is, tragic pleasure ought to be a *version* of our most vital affections and coordinated with them. If we can’t make the two ends of Aristotle’s theory meet and cohere with each other, then we haven’t grasped either one.

If this is right, then to appreciate Aristotle’s view of tragic pleasure we need to ask how tragedy engages our consciousness of ourselves *as* living. And by “consciousness” we should understand vivid awareness, which is had, first and foremost, in the shape of a vivid feeling. But that should be fairly easy to answer too. Tragedy puts on display human life at the limits of life’s possibilities and allows us to experience what Plato in the *Philebus* calls the pleasurable pains and lamentations of “life’s tragedies and comedies.”⁸³ In its concentration on life-threatening *pathē* (the “most tragic” being “deaths on stage and physical agonies and woundings and so on”), above

⁸⁰ EN 10.4.1174b14–20.

⁸¹ What this ought to mean (and here I am speculating openly) is that the various proper pleasures that a single living creature experiences in its various activities must in theory be coordinated: all of them must be accommodated to that creature’s life without running afoul of one another.

⁸² *Poetics* chap. 6 and 14.1453b10–13; trans. M. E. Hubbard in D. A. Russell and M. Winterbottom, eds., *Ancient Literary Criticism: The Principal Texts in New Translations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

⁸³ *Philebus* 50b.

all those that are visited on closely knit biological relations (“where brother kills [or “means to kill”] brother, son father, mother son, or son mother”), tragedy cannot help but train the mind and its emotions on our most vital concerns, in a kind of *sympatheia* that is at once immediate, collectively shared, and vicarious.⁸⁴ There is a sophisticated perversity to tragedy when it is viewed in this light: it knows how to stab us in the heart. It attacks our feeling of life before we can ever protect ourselves from this feeling with a concept. To view a tragedy is to confront life in its image: “tragedy is an imitation of actions and of life [*to biou*].”⁸⁵ It is to look into the soul of life, in its most vital *praxis*, indeed its essence. This why Aristotle calls the *muthos* (the action, or the *praxis*) the “soul” of tragedy.⁸⁶ But as stirring as this may be, it is *no* different from looking into the parts of an animal on a slab in a lab. (Aristotle compares tragedy to a *zōion* that is animated by a *psuchē*—its *praxis*—for this very reason.)⁸⁷ What you see when you stare into this gruesome mess of organs, Aristotle tells us in *On the Parts of Animals*, is one of the most beautiful and marvelous sights there is: you see the *praxis* of this creature, its whole and complex “action.” You see why it ticks (its *hou heneka*), its final purpose, and its ultimate utility.⁸⁸ The whole of *On the Parts of Animals* 1.5 is a hymn to the beauties and marvels of nature, not from any disinterested and distanced perspective, but precisely from the perspective of someone who “lives in their midst” as their cohabitant, participant, and fellow creature. And here Aristotle never sounded more like Kant, or Kant more like Aristotle: “Every realm of nature is marvelous” (ἐνεστί τι θαυμαστόν) and the source of “amazing pleasure” (ἀμηχάνους ἡδονὰς παρέχει) for those who contemplate it.⁸⁹

[Just] as Heraclitus, when the strangers who came to visit him found him warming himself at the furnace in the kitchen and hesitated to go in, is reported to have bidden them not to be afraid to enter, as even in [his] kitchen the divinities were present, so we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful. Absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in nature’s works in the highest degree, and the end for which those works are put together and produced is a form of the beautiful [ἄντος τινὸς φυσικοῦ καὶ καλοῦ]. (*Parts of Animals* 1.5.645a17–23)

When you view the whole of nature and any of its innermost elements in this way, what you see in them is “what is most useful [*chrēsīmotatōi*] to life [*pros ton bion*].”⁹⁰ You see their marvelous “beauty.” You are doing aesthetics. A

⁸⁴ *Poetics* 12.1452b11–13, 14.1453b20–21.

⁸⁵ *Poetics* 6.1450a16–17.

⁸⁶ *Poetics* 6.1450a38–39.

⁸⁷ See *Poetics* chap. 23, where Aristotle states that tragedy, when it provides pleasure, does so as a whole (with a beginning, middle, and end), and it does so “like a single whole living creature” (ὡσπερ ζῶον ἐν ὅλον ποιῆ τὴν οἰκείαν ἡδονήν). See André Laks, “Plato’s ‘Truest Tragedy’: *Laws* Book 7, 817a–d,” in *Plato’s Laws: A Critical Guide*, ed. Christopher Bobonich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 217–31, correctly noting “that there is a clear and demonstrable relation between the concept of an ‘action,’ *praxis*, and that of a ‘life,’ *bios* (our life, after all, will be the sum of our actions)” (223). Too few commentators on the *Poetics* take note of this kind of connection, which has its most immediate roots in Plato’s *Phaedrus* but which is in fact more deeply rooted in ancient thinking generally.

⁸⁸ *Parts of Animals* 1.5.645b15–20; trans. W. Ogle in Barnes, *Complete Works of Aristotle*: “As every instrument and every bodily member is for the sake of something, viz. some action [τὸ δ’ οὐ ἔνεκα πᾶξις τις], so the whole body must evidently be for the sake of some complex action [πᾶξιώς τινοῦς ἔνεκα πολυμεροῦς].”

⁸⁹ *Parts of Animals* 1.5.645a17–18, a9; trans. adapted.

⁹⁰ *EN* 10.1.1172b5.