

Beauty, Disinterested Pleasure, and Pure Contemplation: Schopenhauer's Response to Kant

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The true purpose of art was not to create beautiful objects, he discovered. It was a method of understanding, a way of penetrating the world and finding one's place in it, and whatever aesthetic qualities an individual canvas might have were almost an incidental by-product of the effort to engage oneself in this struggle, to enter into the thick of things.

Paul Auster, *Moon Palace*, 71

In *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Friedrich Nietzsche deplores that “Schopenhauer made use of the Kantian version of the aesthetic problem”, and “could not break free of the spell of Kant’s definition” of beauty as disinterested pleasure.¹ However, even though Nietzsche rightly emphasises that Schopenhauer will incorporate Kant’s notion of disinterestedness into his own aesthetic theory, Schopenhauer also fundamentally transforms Kant’s Analytic of the Beautiful into a highly original aesthetic attitude theory² and focuses on the cognitive and ethical values of aesthetic *perception* instead of on the logic of aesthetic *judgment*. Schopenhauer holds that the purely disinterested, objective stance is inextricably connected with knowledge of, what he calls, Platonic Ideas and is hence cognitively valuable. This heightened state of awareness is pleasurable not only because it frees us from the thralldom of the will, but also because it yields genuine cognition of “the purely objective inner nature of things, namely the *Ideas* appearing in them” (WWR I, 369).³

1 Nietzsche, Friedrich: *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge 2000, 78–79.

2 Schopenhauer may well have been the first to hold that disinterestedness is a defining quality of the aesthetic attitude. Although Kant has often been interpreted to defend such a view, he nowhere claims that disinterestedness is essential to the aesthetic attitude but (as we shall see) that it is a requirement of the pleasure on which a pure aesthetic judgment is based. Neither do British philosophers such as Lord Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Alison defend a disinterested attitude view of beauty and taste. Their work does not contain any reference to “disinterested attention”, “disinterested contemplation or “disinterested perception”. (See Rind, Miles: The Concept of Disinterestedness in Eighteenth-Century British Aesthetics. In: *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 40 (2002), 67–87.) To hold that disinterestedness is a defining element of aesthetic perception, as Schopenhauer does, was (as far as I know) entirely new in the history of philosophy.

3 Schopenhauer also claims that our aesthetic relation to the world also has genuine moral value, for it allows us to exist (at least temporarily) as pure will-less subjects which is, on Schopenhauer's

In the first part of the paper, I briefly discuss Kant's theory of disinterestedness. I pay particular attention to rectifying a common misconception of this notion, and discuss some significant problems with Kant's usage of the criterion of disinterestedness to distinguish between the beautiful and the agreeable.

In part two, then, I argue that (i) Schopenhauer transforms Kant's logical analysis of aesthetic judgment into a novel psychological account of aesthetic contemplation, (ii) gives up Kant's concern with the transcendental conditions of the reflecting judgment, and (iii) focuses on a peculiar, "will-less" mode of attention to objects. It will be argued that Schopenhauer nonetheless retains two extremely crucial aspects of Kant's analysis of beauty: first, the idea that the pleasure of beauty cannot be based on the satisfaction of some personal desire or inclination and, secondly, that aesthetic experience is ultimately based on the stimulation of our cognitive powers, i.e. what Schopenhauer calls the "intellect". For Kant, too, suggests that, although our application of the predicate "beautiful" be independent of the subsumption of the object under any determinate concept – a requirement, moreover, with which Schopenhauer concurs – it still leaves room for the imagination and the understanding to play "beyond" what is regulated by determinate concepts. On Schopenhauer's account, aesthetic pleasure is equally the result of the cognitive freedom and expansion that the will-less attitude affords. Schopenhauer thus transforms the Kantian transcendental analysis of beauty in terms of "non-conceptual *reflection*" into a psychological theory of beauty in terms of "non-conceptual *cognition*". And whereas, for Kant, disinterested pleasure is grounded in the "free harmonious play" of our cognitive powers but is not itself a form of cognition; on Schopenhauer's view, beauty does somehow offer us (non-conceptual) insight and understanding, which adds to the pleasure of the aesthetic experience.

Thus, according to both Kant and Schopenhauer, or so I argue, a beautiful object conveys a primordial sense of non-conceptual unity and coherence and yields a degree of harmony that cannot be reduced to the rigid unity offered by conceptual knowledge. And, although Schopenhauer's "idealistic" version of aesthetic perception fails to accommodate for several valuable ways in which artworks can convey ideas, thoughts and emotions, his account of aesthetic contemplation in terms of will-lessness and objectivity is still rich in psychological insight. Questioning his perhaps rather extravagant Platonic metaphysics does not invalidate his aesthetic theory altogether, which discloses fundamental truths about the aesthetic mode of considering objects, enabling us to become alive to the world's most significant features.

er's views, remarkably similar to the moral state of "complete resignation", in which "one is then left only as purely knowing being, as the undimmed mirror of the world" (WWR I, 390). Although Kant, of course, never denies that beauty may have cognitive or moral value, the cognitive and moral values Schopenhauer attaches to the contemplation of beauty are obviously very un-Kantian.

Disinterested Pleasure: Kant

Kant contends that our pleasure in the agreeable depends upon the real existence of the object which occasions it (that is to say, the “appearance” of agreeableness is not sufficient to afford us pleasure). In the case of pure judgments of taste, however, “it is readily seen that to say that the object is *beautiful* and to prove that I have taste what matters is what I make of this representation in myself, not how I depend on the existence of the object” (*CJ*, § 2, 5:205). Thus any particular interest in what kind of object it is, whether or not it is relevant to our aims, wants or desires, even whether it is real or not, are not required for our *aesthetic* judging and enjoying the object. And because pure aesthetic judging is solely grounded in the object’s singular appearance and not in any further personal interests, the pleasure it affords can be characterized as genuinely *disinterested*.

Two things must be specially noted here: first, disinterestedness is an aspect of the *pleasure* on which a pure judgment of taste is based, and secondly, the disinterested quality of the pleasure is a *logical* (and not merely a psychological) requirement of pure judgments of taste, which arguably enables us to distinguish them from judgments of the agreeable and the good.⁴ It may, of course, be that some intellectual, sensual and moral considerations supervene upon our aesthetic judging and liking. But this psychological fact is not an argument against Kant’s analysis. On the contrary, those considerations may well be psychologically involved in our aesthetic judging, but Kant’s point is the logical one that such elements are not necessary preconditions of aesthetic “liking” (*Wohlgefallen*) and judgment. And while disinterestedness may sometimes take on a psychological character, since (as Kant suggests) “a judgment of taste is merely contemplative” (*CJ*, § 5, 5:209), it can still be validly claimed that the above mentioned psychological factors are not necessary requirements of pure judgments of taste.

For Kant, an interest entails taking pleasure in the actual existence of the object. At first sight, this might seem to obscure the difference between pleasure in the beautiful and the agreeable. It seems as if Kant claims that the agreeable produces an interest in (or desire for) further experiences of the same sort, whereas the beautiful does not, and this (to say the least) seems highly implausible. Yet, while Kant does hold that any pleasure will tend towards maintaining itself, the tendency to prolong itself is *not* an interest in Kant’s sense. By emphasising that the agreeable *is* connected with an interest in objects of the same kind, whereas the beautiful is not, Kant intimates that the former provokes *not* a desire for more similar experiences, but for more *objects* of the same kind, i.e. objects that will offer such (agreeable) experiences, whereas the pleasure in the beautiful is wholly disinterested, since it may (and usually will) urge us to maintain in the

⁴ For more on this, see Vandenameele, Bart: Beauty, Disinterested Pleasure, and Universal Communicability: Kant’s Response to Burke. In: *Kant-Studien* 103 (2012), 207–233.

specific state of aesthetic pleasure we find ourselves in, but does not necessarily stimulate a desire for the actual existence of the object, since our pleasure in a beautiful object stems from the contemplation of the object's form alone and is grounded in the free but harmonious "play" of imagination and understanding (cf. *infra*).

That our judgment is a genuine judgment of beauty can only be found out if we are able to retrieve the epistemic basis of the feeling of pleasure we experience and upon which we base our judgment. Only if the pleasure is not merely a personal physiological response to external stimuli but can be attributed correctly to the purposeful play of our cognitive capacities can it be inferred that our judgment is a pure judgment of taste. That Kant remains extremely vague about the method and outcome of such an introspective investigation is unfortunate, but is not our primary concern here.⁵ Far more crucial is that the disinterested character of the pleasure on which our aesthetic judgment is based ultimately depends upon the object's potential to stimulate our cognitive faculties, thereby enabling us to recognise the object's form as *purposive* in relation to "cognition generally". That is to say, while beauty can only be consciously recognised through the pleasure we feel in it, this pleasure itself is ultimately grounded in heightened purposeful cognitive activity, involving the mutual quickening of understanding and imagination.

Now, instead of developing the idea that judging beauty requires a detachment from the object or one's own desires, Kant claims that appreciating beauty involves reflecting *activity* of our cognitive faculties on (the form of) the judged object and on the ground of our pleasure. Contrary to mere sensory judgments of the agreeable, a judgment of beauty clearly necessarily involves cognitive activity, whereby our imagination and understanding produce pleasure or displeasure. Judgments of beauty are *reflective* judgments, which means that – although they are non-cognitive because they are based on the feeling of pleasure or displeasure and not on any determinate concepts – they presuppose cognitive activity, more specifically the purposeful "play" of our imagination and understanding; and the pleasure we take in the beautiful is rightfully characterised as disinterested only because it is ultimately *grounded in* the "free harmonious play" of imagination and understanding, which reciprocally enliven each other and purposefully accord. Thus the disinterested quality of our pleasure does not merely refer to but actually *arises from* a harmonious relation between our cognitive faculties, which is purposive with regard to cognition in general (see *CJ*, § 9, 5:217 and § 12, 5:222).

We thus arrive at what, on Kant's views, is the distinctive (albeit somewhat paradoxical) source of pure aesthetic pleasure. By exploring various shapes, con-

5 I have discussed this elsewhere. See Vandenabeele, Bart: The Subjective Universality of Aesthetic Judgements Revisited. In: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 48 (2008), 410–425.

tours, and randomly trying out several configurations, they stimulate and enliven each other, without their activity being determined by the application of concepts to the phenomenal unity: “we *linger* over the consideration of the beautiful” (*CJ*, § 12, 5:222). For Kant, aesthetic reflection somehow attempts to realise the ultimate goals of cognition in the absence of the subsumption of sensory intuitions under determinate concepts. “Imagination”, he says, “must in the judgment of taste be considered in its freedom [...] not taken as reproductive, as subjected to the laws of association, but as productive and self-active (as originator of arbitrary forms of possible intuitions)” (*CJ*, § 22, General Remark, 5:240). To make sense of this, we must recall that in ordinary cognition the imagination operates in the service of the understanding’s determining activity: it is not free but produces schemata that enable conceptual determination and identification of objects. The specific reflective nature of aesthetic appreciation precludes, however, the mutual accord of imagination and understanding from resulting in a conceptual determination of the object. In aesthetic reflection the imagination gains a freedom that surpasses the subservient role it plays in ordinary cognition (cf. *CJ*, § 22, General Remark, 5:241).

Furthermore, whilst Kant grounds the disinterested pleasure of beauty in the “free harmonious play” of the cognitive powers, Schopenhauer too associates beauty with the quickening of our cognitive capacities, and (again like Kant) contends that pure aesthetic perception cannot be based on a subsumption of intuitions under determinate concepts. He transforms the Kantian transcendental analysis of beauty, however, into a psychological theory of will-free consciousness and deep absorption, which (i) necessarily involves detachment from individual desires, urges, and affects, and (ii) affords a superior kind of cognition of the aesthetic object’s universal essence. Thus, whereas Kant finds his distinction between the agreeable and the beautiful on the presence or absence of any specific prudential, personal or moral interest in the actual existence of the object, yet nevertheless claims that the pleasure in the beautiful is transcendently grounded in the “free harmonious play” of our cognitive powers, which is free from regulation by determinate concepts, Schopenhauer finds the distinction between the “alluring” (or “charming”, i. e. *das Reizende*) and the beautiful on the criterion whether our perception of the object is or is not in the service of our individual interests, needs, and wants, i.e. our will. As we shall see, he ultimately identifies the “experience” of beauty with a depersonalised, will-less state of inner peace and tranquillity, which affords not merely relief from pain and suffering but also genuine cognition of the timeless (and, as Schopenhauer insists, Platonic) ideas.

Having provided a brief exposition of Kant’s theory of disinterested beauty, I am now in a position to clarify how Schopenhauer, while retaining Kant’s insight that beauty stimulates our cognitive capacities in an unusually lively way, radi-

cally transforms the Kantian idea that beauty is based upon free reflection on an object without ulterior cognitive aim into the idea that beauty is based upon the will-free contemplation of an object's universal essence. It is to Schopenhauer's contrast between interested cognition in the service of the will and painless will-free contemplation, which arguably characterises aesthetic cognition that I now turn.

Pure Contemplation: Schopenhauer

Following Hume, Schopenhauer holds that the subject's intellectual imposition of space, time, and causality on experience is driven by human needs, interests, and affects. The intellect is governed by the will: it is merely the will's tool.⁶ Again following Hume, Schopenhauer thus contends that one's intellect can be and often is disturbed by the will, i. e. by affects, urges, needs, inclinations and passions: "Thus is our intellect daily befooled and corrupted by the deceptions of inclination and liking" (WWR II, 217–218). The will clouds our judgments and the intellect ordinarily functions in the service of the will. Everything that takes place without the intellect – an organism's procreation, development and preservation, the healing of wounds, the critical stage that brings about salvation during an illness, the instinctive skills of animals, etc. – turns out infinitely better than what happens with the help of the intellect.⁷ Thus Schopenhauer distances himself completely from the "ancient and universal error" of the Western tradition, which reveres intellect and reason as the most perfect hallmark of humanity.⁸ For Schopenhauer, however, the intellect is "at bottom tertiary, since it presupposes the organism, and the organism presupposes the will" (WWR II, 278).

However, while the whole world, including human life, is nothing but an uncanny puppet show of one and the same blind and ruthless will, we do not have to give up considering things altogether to be able to attain a state of pure, will-

6 For the intellect as the instrument or tool (*Werkzeug*) of the will, see: WWR I, 292; II, 205, 214, 215, 220, 225, 229, 398, and 641.

7 See WWR II, 269: "If the intellect were not of a secondary nature, [...] then everything that takes place without it, in other words, without the intervention of the representations, such, for example, as generation, procreation, the development and preservation of the organism, the healing of wounds, the restoration or vicarious repair of mutilated parts, the salutary crisis in diseases, the works of animal mechanical skill, and the activity of instinct in general, would not turn out infinitely better and more perfect than what takes place with the aid of the intellect, namely all the conscious and intended achievements and works of men. Such works and achievements, when compared with those others, are mere botching and bungling."

8 See WWR II, 199: "The remarkable phenomenon that in this fundamental and essential point all philosophers have erred, in fact have completely reversed the truth, might be partly explained, especially in the case of the philosophers of the Christian era, from the fact that all of them aimed at presenting man as differing as widely as possible from the animal. Yet, they felt vaguely that the difference between the two was to be found in the intellect and not in the will."

less, and painless perception or intuition (*Anschauung*). For, during a few scarce moments in our lives, all of a sudden

[...] we enter the state of pure contemplation, we are raised for the moment above all willing, above all desires and cares; we are, so to speak, rid of ourselves. We are no longer the individual that knows in the interest of its constant willing; the correlative of the particular thing to which objects become motives, but the eternal subject of knowing purified of the will, the correlative of the Idea. And we know that these moments, when, delivered from the fierce pressure of the will, we emerge, as it were, from the heavy atmosphere of the earth, are the most blissful that we experience. (WWR I, 390)

Schopenhauer here characterises a peculiar state of consciousness, in which we are still live subjects and yet become aware of ourselves as pure, *will-less* subjects of knowledge, who have overcome the ordinary state of willing individuals in which we ordinarily find ourselves. In this state of pure contemplation, we are raised “above all willing, above all desires and cares”, and are able to experience what it is to be overwhelmed by the perception of an object. This state of pure contemplation (in which we become *one* with the object we perceive) is, Schopenhauer argues, *aesthetic*. In aesthetic experience we cease to view objects in relation to our will: our ordinary *empirical* consciousness of the object, which is determined by the subjective forms of space, time and causality, has been suspended and replaced by a pure will-free way of perceiving. We are fully absorbed in the object and lose ourselves in the contemplation of it:

Thus it considers things without interest, without subjectivity, purely objectively; it is entirely given up to them in so far as they are merely representations, and not motives. Then all at once the peace, always sought but always escaping us on that first path of willing, comes to us of its own accord, and all is well with us (*uns ist völlig wohl*). (WWR I, 196)

Certain experiences, Schopenhauer argues, are so intense that they are able to lift us above ourselves and enable us to get rid of all the excessive lumber of individual emotions, desires and even thoughts. Our individuality has vanished and all that is left is a state of de-individualised, “pure” subjectivity which is no longer determined by the urges of individual willing. Thus, for Schopenhauer, beauty rests on the disinterested objectivity of perception. He even claims that “everything is beautiful only so long as it does not concern us” (WWR II, 374). The drastic nature of this definition cannot be sufficiently stressed. All typically human, individual ways of considering an object are suspended and what remains is a subject without *ego*, which perceives the aesthetic object emotionless, thoughtless – we come to see the world “from outside” (WWR I, 372). An experience of beauty is thus, on Schopenhauer’s terms, abnormal: a purely disinterested, will-less and detached state of consciousness, in which we have transcended our indi-

vidual interests, and have ultimately become the object's "pure mirror" (WWR II, 367). In aesthetic contemplation we have become somehow disengaged and even estranged from the world, for we have adopted a stance in which "the entire consciousness is filled and occupied by a single image of perception" (WWR I, 179), and which enables us to become alive to usually unnoticed significant features of objects. Thus, aesthetic objects are no longer perceived according to their relations to other objects but as what they are in themselves, and we remain will-less, painless, and detached spectators, for we no longer consider the object in its relation to our will, that is, our desires, needs, urges, interests, and wants.

This "abnormal" aesthetic state of mind, which offers an "escape" from the ordinary way of estimating an object, cannot, however, proceed from a conscious act of will (*Akt der Willkür*): we cannot *decide* to enter into the blessed state of the better consciousness but have to be stimulated by an object through which we can enter into a peaceful, timeless and tranquil state of mind:

The change in the subject required for this, just because it consists in the elimination of all willing, cannot proceed from the will, and hence cannot be an arbitrary act of will, [...]. Thus pure will-less knowledge is reached by the consciousness of other things being raised to so high a potential that the consciousness of our own selves vanishes. For we apprehend the world purely objectively, only when we no longer know that we belong to it; and all things appear the more beautiful, the more we are conscious merely of them, and the less we are conscious of ourselves. (WWR II, 367–368)

This passage already partly reveals to what extent Schopenhauer's theory of painless perception and will-less contemplation really departs from Kant's aesthetic theory. Although Schopenhauerian will-lessness clearly echoes Kant's concept of disinterestedness, Schopenhauer radically breaks with the idea that aesthetic pleasure is based on the reflection and feeling, let alone the *Lebensgefühl*, of a judging subject. First, Schopenhauer's aesthetic subject is a "pure" subject in which the capacity to judge – not only of determining but also of reflecting judgment – has vanished altogether. Schopenhauer's pure aesthetic subject does not judge, it is not detached in the sense that it takes some distance to be able to judge the object; it is, on the contrary, totally absorbed by the object. Despite his using terms such as rapture, exaltation and enjoyment, the type of awareness he describes is *not* a matter of our emotions, affects or feelings, but of inner peace, serenity, complete objectivity and *painless contemplation*; our will and emotions are expelled from consciousness and we perceive the object as universal.

Moreover, for Schopenhauer, an experience of beauty is not, as Kant insisted, based upon our "feeling of life" (*CJ*, § 1, 5:204; see also *Anthropology*, § 60, 7:231), but is rather an intimation of *death*: the world has become "something foreign" to us (WWR II, 387), and we lose ourselves and "become the pure mirror of the

objective inner nature of things” (WWR II, 367); “we have stepped into another world [...] where everything that moves our will [...] no longer exists” (WWR I, 197), and are aware only of the deprivation of everything that is typical of individual human being (see WWR I, 178; I, 195–196). We have become will-less, timeless, and totally disengaged subjects – subjects without *ego*; so hardly subjects at all, since we remain “wholly foreign to, and detached from, the scene to be contemplated”, and adopt “the view from nowhere” (WWR II, 373). We have become so overwhelmed by the perception of the object, that we are no longer conscious of our individual selves anymore, and have temporarily become disposed of our own living nature, our own will to life (ibid.).

Thirdly, whereas Kant claims that an aesthetic judgment’s determining ground *cannot be other than subjective*” (CJ, § 1, 5:203), Schopenhauer will argue, as we shall see, that aesthetic experience is concerned not with subjective feeling but with *objective cognition*. Instead of reflecting upon our individual feelings of pleasure or displeasure, Schopenhauer urges that in aesthetic perception (or intuition) “the consciousness of our own selves vanishes. For we apprehend the world *purely objectively* [...] and all things appear the more beautiful, the more we are conscious merely of them, and the less we are conscious of ourselves” (WWR I, 368; italics added). Aesthetic consciousness is thus not merely an escape from the torments of our existence as willing subjects, but somehow offers us objective understanding and knowledge of the world. A peculiar type of knowledge, however: not based on (determinate) concepts, as is the case in the “subjective” kind of knowledge that is scientific knowledge, for instance, but knowledge of, what Schopenhauer calls, (Platonic) *Ideas*. Schopenhauer was always fascinated by the possibility of a “better consciousness”, not only as a kind of awareness that enables us to escape from the sufferings that are inherent in our nature as willing individuals, but also as a path to a superior kind of knowledge and understanding which transcends the ordinary way of perceiving and coping with the world around us and our position in it (WWR I, 372; WWR II, 386).

Although Schopenhauer continually identifies the Ideas as Platonic – as timeless, universal essences – this crucial observation intimates that his characterisation of artworks in terms of vehicles of knowledge and understanding that transcend our determinate conceptual knowledge of objects is remarkably close to Kant’s suggestion that works of art communicate *aesthetic ideas*. Aesthetic ideas, Kant says, are the products of the artist’s imagination, which strives “toward something that lies beyond the bounds of experience” – or more precisely, “inner intuitions (*innern Anschauungen*) to which no concept can be completely adequate” (CJ, § 49, 5:314). This is exactly the thought that we find in Schopenhauer, but it should not blind us to the important differences between their respective views: as we have seen, for Kant, aesthetic imagination is “productive”, for it invents intuitions and produces new configurations, whereas for Schopen-

hauer the Ideas are timeless universals which the artist *discovers* by adopting an objectifying, disinterested and de-personalised stance towards the world. Nonetheless, the suggestion that artworks communicate Ideas that offer a kind of understanding or knowledge that cannot be reduced to the knowledge we gain through concepts is important, for it gives the lie to those that consider aesthetic cognition to be inferior to the (scientific and philosophical) sort of knowledge that is conceptual in nature.

Yet what kind of knowledge Schopenhauer has in mind when he characterises will-less aesthetic knowledge in terms of knowledge of timeless Ideas still remains puzzling. One commentator offers the following:

The Ideas might just be ordinary perceptual objects [...] their universality having to do [...] with the selectiveness of attention paid to them by the observer [...]. Perceiving an Idea [...] is a matter of perceiving an ordinary object but with one's attention focussed on its essential, and away from its inessential aspects.⁹

What is significant in an object, though, does not necessarily coincide with the "universal" it is supposed to be an instance of.¹⁰ In artworks minute details of brushwork, colour hues, voice timbre, etc. are often more artistically relevant and significant than the ideas conveyed. Moreover, the universal ideas that are expressed in some masterpiece painting may often be rather trivial. If the way in which the artist renders the subject-matter does not really engage us in stimulating and moving ways and enrich our imaginative capacities, the art work will not be of much value (and will definitely not lead to the blissful state of the "better consciousness" which Schopenhauer identifies as the aesthetic attitude). Good art not only occasions interesting ideas but develops our capacities for discrimination and appreciation. The value of a work of art mainly depends on the way it penetrates and shapes our grasp of the ideas and attitudes conveyed. Art's cognitive value cannot be reduced to the ideas – Platonic or not – that they express and communicate. The way in which they stimulate our imaginative perception and shape our discriminatory capacities is at least as important a value of good art as conveying crucial thoughts or ideas might be.

Schopenhauer's Platonic idealism fails to accommodate for the particularly valuable way in which art can *express* ideas, thoughts, emotions and attitudes. This is a fundamental value of good art, though. Take any work by such masters as Roger van der Weyden, Lorenzo Lotto, René Magritte and Alberto Giacometti, for example. The ideas they convey and the themes they treat may at times be trivial, but the value of their work does not solely (nor perhaps primarily) depend on the content of the ideas they communicate. It is the sophisticated,

⁹ Young, Julian: The Standpoint of Eternity: Schopenhauer on Art. In: *Kant-Studien* 78 (1987), 434.

¹⁰ See Janaway, Christopher: Knowledge and Tranquility: Schopenhauer on the Value of Art. In: *Schopenhauer, Philosophy, and the Arts*. Ed. by Dale Jacquette. Cambridge 1996, 53.

complex and often radical way those artists challenge, shape and transform our visual attention and imagination, using multiple revolutionary techniques and contrasting distinct detailing which renders some of their works eminent masterpieces. Even though Schopenhauer does pay some attention to the exquisite way in which Dutch still-life painters manage to direct “such purely objective perception to the most insignificant objects, and set up a lasting monument of their objectivity and spiritual peace in paintings of *still life*”, and “in the same spirit landscape painters, especially Ruysdael, have often painted extremely insignificant landscape objects, and have thus produced the same effect even more delightfully” (WWR I, 197), he still seems too preoccupied with defending art against Plato’s estimation of it.

Now, for Plato, art is worthless and even harmful, since it only offers the illusion of knowledge and leads us away from a genuine understanding of the world. Contra Plato, Schopenhauer argues that art can afford true knowledge and understanding. Now he is so eager to repudiate Plato’s scathingly negative estimation of art by offering a Platonic answer himself, that he does not pay sufficient attention to the way in which art can be cognitively significant *not* because it necessarily conveys universal, timeless Ideas, but (more importantly) due to the way it shapes, expands and deepens our cognitive and imaginative capacities and enriches our mental life. The way in which such artists as Bach, Shakespeare, Keats, Wilde, Magritte, etc. have been successful in modifying the forms, styles and media through which they transmit their ideas explains the significance and timeless value of their work. Not (primarily) because they communicated universal or revolutionary ideas, but because they expressed their ideas in an absorbing, touching and enriching way, and shaped how we look at what their art expresses. Thus what matters is not primarily the nature or content of the ideas themselves, but whether the media and styles of representing or expressing them deepen our responses to them and shape and modify our grasp of the ideas conveyed – and not necessarily, as Schopenhauer would have it, how they enable us to adopt an objectifying, “disengaged” stance towards the miseries of the world, in which we feel no longer concerned by them.

Still, Schopenhauer’s insistence that aesthetic experience affords knowledge and has clear cognitive value is a theoretical gain over Kant. Schopenhauer argues that perceiving (and, hence, enjoying) something aesthetically presupposes that our ordinary categories of perception are suspended, which implies that objects are no longer apprehended in relation to other objects, and secondly, that we do not consider objects in relation to our will. Kant, however, does not believe that objects of aesthetic experience are seen in a fundamentally different manner (let alone, as Schopenhauer insists, *sub aeternitatis specie*, i. e. from the standpoint of eternity) nor that our ordinary categories of perception are suspended, nor that

the aesthetic subject's consciousness is fundamentally transformed into a pure objective consciousness.

Thus Schopenhauer's conception of "pure objective consciousness" is closer to the Platonic ideal of "pure knowledge of the soul" than to Kant's conception of aesthetic experience: as Schopenhauer puts it, in aesthetic contemplation "we no longer consider the where, the when, the why, and the whither in things, but simply and solely the *what*." (WWR I, 178) Aesthetic will-less perception, which Schopenhauer identifies with Spinoza's notion of knowledge "sub aeternitatis specie" offers insight into the timeless kernel of things, i. e., the universal essences of the perceived objects, beyond mere appearance. Schopenhauer calls these eternal essences the (Platonic) Ideas, the "eternal forms" behind the mere appearances of common empirical cognition. Schopenhauer here, again, clearly moves beyond Kant's analysis of aesthetic disinterestedness, and appropriates a more Platonic vision of knowledge of eternal Ideas.

Yet, two considerations seem to stand in the way of identifying Schopenhauer's Ideas with their Platonic counterparts. First, whereas Plato held that knowledge of the eternal forms of things involves conceptual thought and ratiocination, Schopenhauer maintains that reason is an instrument of the will that helps us survive as living organisms in the natural world. For Schopenhauer, the timeless Ideas are not known through abstract reasoning, but *in* and *through* intuition of natural objects or works of art, combined with an idealising act of our imagination. Whereas "the common, ordinary man [...] can direct his attention to things only in so far as they have some relation to his will", and "always demands only knowledge of the relations, the abstract concept of the thing is sufficient"; in aesthetic cognition, however, one "strives to grasp the Idea of each thing, not its relation to other things." (WWR I, 187–188) Thus the Ideas – i. e. the alleged objects of aesthetic cognition – are known by a peculiar type of *imaginative perception*, which does not involve any concepts at all. This statement clearly echoes Kant's thought that a pure aesthetic judgment cannot be based on (determinate) concepts, but also radically departs from Kant, for Schopenhauer claims that an aesthetic experience is first and foremost a kind of *objective insight*, whereas Kant argues that it is based on a reflecting judgement, which is grounded in a disinterested feeling of pleasure or displeasure, and does not contribute to cognition at all.¹¹ Although the gap between Kant's and Schopenhauer's aesthetics may not be as big as some commentators suggest¹², Schopen-

11 See Kant, Immanuel: *Critique of Judgment*, § 3, 5:206: "[...] the presentation is referred solely to the subject and is not used for cognition at all, not even for that by which the subject cognizes himself."

12 See, for example, Janaway, Christopher: *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy*, Oxford 2007, 194: "The vision behind Schopenhauer's theory of aesthetic experience is Platonic, not Kantian."

hauer's discussion of the will-less, timeless state of consciousness – which is purportedly the essence of the aesthetic attitude – is definitely more Platonic than Kantian. Still, as noted above, Schopenhauer's so-called "(Platonic) Ideas" appear less Platonic than Schopenhauer is prepared to admit.

Furthermore, Schopenhauer argues that, since the categories of space and time, and the understanding or intellect (operating according to the principle of sufficient reason), ground and even "construct" the world as representation, this world is divided into numerous distinct objects, and is therefore characterised by plurality. Those categories do not apply to the thing in itself, which belongs to the noumenal world, hence (Schopenhauer argues) the thing-in-itself cannot be characterised by plurality. Schopenhauer reasons as follows:

- (1) the categories of space, time and the categories of the understanding – the principle of sufficient reason – create the objective world (the world as representation);
- (2) the world as representation therefore consists of multiple representations or different objects;
- (3) the principle of sufficient reason is limited to the world as representation;
- (4) the principle of sufficient reason does not apply to the thing-in-itself (the *noumenon*);
- (5) the thing-in-itself beyond all phenomena cannot be characterised by multiplicity;
- (6) the Ideas are characterised by multiplicity;
- (7) the Ideas cannot be the noumenal thing-in-itself.

These claims face a number of problems, not least because they are further enmeshed in Schopenhauer's basic metaphysical view that the thing-in-itself is the will, which automatically implies that the will ought to remain unknowable, and Schopenhauer does not (always) recognise this.¹³ Moreover, his analysis of empirical perception is combined with and, I would add, unnecessarily clouded by his semi-Platonic account of the Ideas, which he argues to be the adequate "objectivations" of the metaphysical will. Schopenhauer seems rather confused when he contends that the Platonic Ideas reveal the antagonistic nature of the metaphysical will, which they would express by struggling to conquer their spot in the universe and by fighting the other Ideas to be able to manifest themselves as clearly as possible in the empirical world.

13 An exception can be found in WWR II, 198, where he concedes that "being known of itself contradicts being-in-itself."

For the purposes of his aesthetics, however, it is quite unnecessary to think that the Platonic Ideas are the adequate “objectifications” of the thing-in-itself, i.e., the will. Instead, what might ground aesthetic cognition is the idea that, though we are confronted with empirical objects, it is possible to view those empirical objects in a way that transcends their merely empirical characteristics. The thought would then be that aesthetic cognition requires an impersonal “universal standpoint” through which not only the perceived object but also the self or “I” is viewed, as it were, from nowhere. The individual object does not vanish, but is “perceived in light of its universal significance.”¹⁴ How this universal point of view is to be attained by creatures whose nature is essentially *willing*, which inclines them to perceive, think, and judge from their own egocentric (and even egoistic) viewpoint, remains nonetheless puzzling.

That Schopenhauer’s radical transformation of Kant’s theory of disinterested pleasure ultimately results in an account of aesthetic experience which is perhaps unnecessarily clouded by Platonic metaphysical idiom, does not automatically render the account as such invalid. There are at least three plausible elements in Schopenhauer’s description of the experience of beauty, and each of these are a theoretical gain over Kant. First, Schopenhauer’s particularly strong requirement that, in aesthetic contemplation, we temporarily lose ourselves completely in the aesthetic object may be overstated, but is far from implausible as a characterisation of (at least some genuine instances of) aesthetic experience. For, in aesthetic contemplation, we are surely taken in by the object and are temporarily immune to our environment, that is to say, to the mechanistic causal network of things, and – as Schopenhauer plausibly holds – at the same time our relation to the world is deepened and enriched. Secondly, his insistence that our desires, urges, needs, and wants temporarily abate in aesthetic experience equally holds for experiences we typically tend to identify as aesthetic. Considering an object from an aesthetic point of view does – at least in some cases – require, as Schopenhauer insists, that we set aside our personal needs, desires and wants. Aesthetic perception is not merely a question of our pleasure being unrelated to the real existence of the object, as Kant maintains, for (as we have seen) this criterion does not offer any independent ground for *all* cases of the beautiful. However, aesthetic experience does involve, as Daniel Came contends, “an attitude of reflective disengagement from all considerations of utility, which considers only what the object is ‘in itself,’”¹⁵ which is precisely what Schopenhauer argues. Thirdly, Schopenhauer’s defence of the cognitive value of aesthetic experience in terms of “pure objectivity” may be metaphysically overcharged, but is definitely rich in phenomenological insight, and gives the lie to those who, like Nietzsche, identify Schopenhauerian disinterestedness and objectivity with the “blessed peace

14 Wicks, Robert: *Schopenhauer*. Malden 2008, 98.

15 Came, Daniel: Disinterestedness and Objectivity. In: *European Journal of Philosophy* 17 (2009), 5.

of nothingness”, which is supposedly “hostile to life”. That Schopenhauer connects his (plausible) characterisation of disinterested aesthetic experience with a soteriological metaphysics of life-denial and asceticism does not entail that aesthetic disinterestedness *in itself* is, as Nietzsche holds, necessarily a “homage to ascetic ideals”.¹⁶ As I have argued elsewhere¹⁷, Schopenhauer’s characterisation of aesthetic experience in terms of will-less and painless objectivity may indeed be closer to an intimation of the eternal tranquillity of death than to Kant’s ideal of *Lebensgefühl*. Yet, *contra* Nietzsche, Schopenhauer’s claim that the aesthetic subject’s exceptionally “pure” state of consciousness allows it to discover the deeper objective essences of the world is hardly implausible: at least *some* (intense) aesthetic experiences, in which our self-consciousness dissolves and we become immune to ulterior aims and desires, enable us to unravel universal truths about mankind and its place in the world.

Conclusion

Schopenhauer’s characterisation of aesthetic experience in terms of will-free objective cognition may perhaps not hold for *all* kinds of aesthetic experience but is a plausible and perceptive characterisation of at least some basic aspects of genuine instances of it. For, at least one of the reasons why we value artworks such as Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, and Goya’s *The Third of May 1808* is because they convey profound universal truths about the world and our place in “the thick of things”, and because (as Schopenhauer insists) they offer us both a release and a renewal, since they return us to something fundamental. And even if we cannot put what this something is adequately into words, the experience “revives”, “cheers”, and “comforts” us (WWR I, 197).

Thus, Schopenhauer’s radical transformation of Kant’s analysis of disinterested pleasure results in too idealistic a theory of aesthetic will-lessness to be able to account for each and every genuine aesthetic experience. To completely dismiss it, however, risks dispensing with an invaluable philosophical contribution which surpasses Kant’s analysis of free beauty and enables us to think through the essential features of the fabric of our consciousness and the primordial significance of aesthetic experience to human life.

16 Nietzsche, Friedrich: *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Trans. Carol Diethe, Cambridge 2000, 80.

17 See Vandenabeele, Bart: Schopenhauer and the Objectivity of Art. In: *A Companion to Schopenhauer*. Ed. by Bart Vandenabeele, Chichester 2012, 219–233.