

COGNITIVE INTERPRETATION OF KANT'S THEORY OF AESTHETIC IDEAS

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The aim of my paper is to argue that Kant's aesthetic ideas can help us to overcome cognitive limitations that we often experience in our attempts to articulate the meaning of abstract concepts. I claim that aesthetic ideas, as expressed in works of art, have a cognitive dimension in that they reveal the introspective, emotional, and affective aspects that appear to be central to the content of abstract phenomena.

I

Most of us share the intuitive feeling that abstract concepts are harder to understand than concrete, empirical concepts.¹ This is evident, for example, from the feelings of insecurity and struggle that we experience each time we try to explain the meaning of concepts such as truth, love, hopelessness, or vulnerability.² Ralph Ellis nicely describes this experience: 'When we begin to say what we mean by "in love", most of us find ourselves struggling, questioning and revising what we think we mean by it [...] There was an unsureness, a hesitance, a fear of saying what we did not mean, or not being able to say what we did mean.'³ Yet we do not experience any difficulty in grasping the meaning of

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- ¹ One should bear in mind the distinction between abstractness and abstraction. Even though all concepts are abstracted from experience, not all of them are abstract concepts. Category members of abstract concepts are non-material, non-concrete, and non-sensory-perceivable objects in contrast to superordinate concepts (like the concepts of animal, furniture, artefact, and so forth), whose members are all concrete and sensory-perceivable objects. See Anna Borghi and Ferdinand Binkofski, *Words as Social Tools: An Embodied View on Abstract Concepts* (New York: Springer, 2014), 3–4.
- ² Even though concepts of emotions such as 'love' or 'hopelessness' are usually included in the category of abstract concepts, since they both refer to non-concrete and non-physical objects, contemporary cognitive science and psycholinguistics tend to keep them apart. This is because emotion concepts (such as happiness, hopefulness, love, sadness, anxiety, jealousy, and loneliness) refer directly to internal affective states and have a direct bodily counterpart, while abstract concepts lack these two characteristics. Rather, they refer to mental states, cognitive processes, personality traits, situations, and events (for example, concepts such as time, thought, death, truth, infinity, chaos, patriotism) which might have an indirect emotional or affective association (for example, the concept of death might be associated with negative emotional experiences such as fear). See *ibid.*, 2–11. In this paper I refer to both kinds of concept as abstract.
- ³ Ralph D. Ellis, *Questioning Consciousness: The Interplay of Imagery, Cognition, and Emotion in the Human Brain* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1995), 73.

concrete, empirical concepts. The meaning of a concept, say, the concept of a flower, is quickly available to us in terms of a specific set of physical properties that can be perceived by one or more of the senses. Ellis writes that our attempts in explaining the meaning of empirical concepts are accompanied by the feeling of confidence 'that we *could* call up certain images, but normally without actually calling them up in order to prove to ourselves that we can do it'.⁴ Our understanding of concepts is ultimately dependent on our ability to explain their meanings in imaginable terms. In comparison with empirical concepts, however, abstract concepts do not have a physical, perceptual and thus imaginable referent. To the extent that such concepts lack a direct perceptual and imaginable counterpart, they are more difficult to comprehend and understand.

Such a view is supported by contemporary studies in cognitive science. Numerous research studies show that abstract concepts are much more difficult to understand than concrete or determinate concepts.⁵ This difference is known as the *concreteness effect* and is commonly explained by two main theories – Dual Coding Theory (DCT) and Context Availability Theory (CAT). In short, DCT claims that comprehension of concepts depends on two interconnected systems: a verbal system, responsible for processing verbal information, and an imaginal system, responsible for processing nonverbal information and for generating mental images.⁶ According to this theory, abstract concepts are harder to understand because they lack an additional perceptual source of information that concrete concepts have. CAT, on the other hand, claims that conceptual processing depends on contextual and situational information.⁷ For example, understanding the meaning of the concept 'chair' depends not merely on knowing its physical properties, but also on relevant situations in which the object occurs or is used. Abstract concepts are more difficult to understand because they have a weaker connection to contextual information.

In sum, both theories show that perceptual information plays an important role in conceptual processing; in order for us to comprehend and fully understand abstract thoughts and ideas, they must in some sense be connected with concrete and imaginable representations. One way to evoke imagery for abstract concepts is by means of their associations with empirical concepts. For instance,

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For a survey of these studies, see Katja Wiemer-Hastings and Xu Xu, 'Content Differences for Abstract and Concrete Concepts', *Cognitive Science* 29 (2005): 719–36.

⁶ The main advocate of DCT is Allan Paivio. See his *Mental Representations: A Dual Coding Approach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

⁷ Paula J. Schwanenflugel, 'Why Are Abstract Concepts Hard to Understand?', in *The Psychology of Word Meanings*, ed. Paula J. Schwanenflugel (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1991), 223–50.

the abstract concept 'religion' can evoke imagery indirectly by means of its association with the empirical concept 'church'. Or the concept 'justice' can evoke imagery through its association with a particular situation, such as a court trial. Availability of such referential imagery presumably eliminates the concreteness effect and produces better processing and understanding of abstract phenomena.

It is difficult, however, to see how such referential imagery could convey the meaning of abstract concepts since it is determined by our own subjective experiences. Numerous studies in cognitive science have argued that the content of abstract concepts involves not merely features that can be explicitly articulated in words and propositions, but also experience-related properties, that is to say, 'properties expressing subjective experiences' that are more difficult to express in ordinary language.⁸ Consider, for example, the concept of hopelessness. One can explicitly articulate the meaning of hopelessness as being an emotion with a negative view of the future. However, this conceptual meaning cannot give a full account of the idea of hopelessness as we experience it from the inside, as determined by our own beliefs, thoughts, memories, desires, feelings, interests, goals, and so forth. When we try to explain the meaning of the idea of hopelessness, we feel that there is always much more that is implicitly present in our awareness of the meaning than we are able to explicitly articulate, and that this implicit meaning we internally experience is far more specific, precise, and complex than we can capture in words. This is because, as Gendlin points out, our ordinary words and concepts refer to our experiences indirectly by means of general characteristics that are abstracted from our experiences, and as such they are logically incapable of grasping and communicating introspective, affective, and emotional aspects associated with concepts such as hopelessness.⁹ But how we experience hopelessness does appear to have an effect on our understanding of the idea of hopelessness itself. Mark Johnson, who argues for the qualitative dimension of meaning as part of our understanding of abstract phenomena, captures this idea accordingly: 'the meaning is in what you think and feel and do, and it lies in recurring qualities, patterns, and structures of experience that are, for the most part, unconsciously and automatically shaping how you understand,

⁸ Wiemer-Hastings and Xu, 'Content Differences', 719. See also Lawrence W. Barsalou and Katja Wiemer-Hastings, 'Situating Abstract Concepts', in *Grounding Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking*, ed. Diane Pecher and Rolf A. Zwaan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 129–63; Schwanenflugel, 'Why Are Abstract Concepts Hard'; Stavroula-Thaleia Kousta et al., 'The Representation of Abstract Words: Why Emotion Matters', *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 140 (2011): 14–34.

⁹ Eugene T. Gendlin, 'The Experiential Response', in *Use of Interpretation in Treatment*, ed. Emanuel Hammer (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1968), 217.

how you choose, and how you express yourself.¹⁰ Something similar is pointed out by Eugene T. Gendlin, an advocate of the theory of experienced or felt meanings: 'Every individual lives in his subjective experiencing and looks out at the world from it and through it.'¹¹ Both authors argue in favour of the idea that there is an additional meaning to our abstract concepts that goes beyond their logical meanings. While logical meanings of abstract concepts represent merely some general patterns of our experiences (say, that 'hopelessness' is an emotion with a negative view of the future), they cannot grasp all the details of our experience of hopelessness. That is to say, they cannot capture all the phenomenological and qualitative aspects associated with our abstract concepts. Accordingly, if it is true that the content of our abstract concepts also entails experience-related properties, then it would seem to follow we cannot fully determine the meaning of abstract concepts until we include some of our subjective experiences as well. These experiences provide an additional source of information that is required for a more complete understanding of abstract phenomena.

In what follows, I hope to demonstrate that Kant's aesthetic ideas, as expressed in works of art, can help us to overcome cognitive limitations that we often experience in our attempts to articulate the meaning of abstract concepts. The gist of my argument is that aesthetic ideas make experience-related properties of abstract concepts salient and thereby available for our acknowledgement and further analysis. That is to say, aesthetic ideas make abstract concepts more cognitively accessible to us, by creating image schemas that allow us to think about these concepts in a way linked to sensory experience. To develop my argument, I begin the first part of the paper with a discussion of Kant's doctrine of aesthetic ideas and explain how aesthetic ideas can serve as a sensuous counterpart of abstract concepts. In the second part of the paper I bring together the resources introduced and developed in the first part and propose an account of the role of aesthetic ideas in promoting the meaning of abstract concepts as it is determined by our own subjective experiences.

II

In § 49 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant puts forward his view of artistic beauty as being an expression of aesthetic ideas. According to him, an aesthetic idea is a 'representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking, though

¹⁰ Mark Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 61.

¹¹ Eugene T. Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 228.

without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., *concept*, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible.¹² He adds, in § 57, that an aesthetic idea is 'an *intuition* (of the imagination) for which a concept can never be found adequate' (*CJ*, p. 218; AA 5:342).

It is suggested accordingly that aesthetic ideas are concrete sensible representations of imagination, that is, images of some sort, and that these rich images give rise to much thinking that cannot be fully described by any determinate concepts.¹³ Aesthetic ideas are thus similar to ordinary images (for example, of a flower), but they are dissimilar to ordinary images in that no determinate concepts correspond to them (as an image of a flower corresponds to the concept of a flower). Since aesthetic ideas lack determinate concepts, they evade the possibility of cognition. That is to say, they cannot be cognized in an ordinary sense by connecting intuitions with determinate concepts.

In Kant's view, aesthetic ideas strive to exhibit concepts that go beyond the limits of our ordinary experience. He has two kinds of concepts in mind. On the one hand, there are concepts of reason (rational ideas), such as 'invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc.' They are 'concept[s] to which no intuition (representation of imagination) can be adequate' (*CJ*, p. 192; AA 5:314). What is distinctive about them is that they can be thought, but not empirically encountered. For example, we can think of the idea of hell, but have no empirical intuition of it. For Kant, concepts that lack an adequate sensible correlate are called indeterminate concepts (in contrast to determinate concepts for which empirical intuition can be given) (*CJ*, p. 215; AA 5:339).

On the other hand, Kant writes that aesthetic ideas can also exhibit concepts 'of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., [...] with a completeness that goes beyond anything

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 192 (AA 5:314). Hereafter: *CJ*.

¹³ For a related reading of aesthetic ideas, see also Anthony Savile, *Aesthetic Reconstructions: The Seminal Writings of Lessing, Kant, and Schiller* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). For example, he describes aesthetic ideas as 'concrete presentations of particular themes that are offered us by individual works of art' (p. 180). Wicks explains aesthetic ideas similarly, as 'meaning-rich images'; see Robert Wicks, 'The Divine Inspiration for Kant's Formalist Theory of Beauty', *Kant Studies Online* (2015): 26. Among others holding a similar interpretation are Henry E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 283–84; Brigitte Sassen, 'Artistic Genius and the Question of Creativity', in *Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment: Critical Essays*, ed. Paul Guyer (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 173, and Donald W. Crawford, 'Kant's Theory of Creative Imagination', in *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, ed. Ted Cohen and Paul Guyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 156.

of which there is an example in nature' (*CJ*, p. 192; AA 5:314).¹⁴ These kinds of concept (typically classified as abstract) are dissimilar to rational ideas in that their concrete instances can be experienced. For example, the concept of (romantic) love is directly grounded in one's emotional and bodily experience (through behavioural signs like smiling, accelerated heartbeat, loss of appetite, and so forth). On the other hand, they are also dissimilar to our ordinary (concrete) empirical concepts (such as dog, table, chair) in that they refer to non-material and non-concrete objects. For example, concepts such as love, envy and fame have no particular shape, size or colour, and one cannot see, touch or hear them. There is no single and concretely perceivable object that would correspond to such concepts. Their referents are mental and emotional states, situations and events.

However, even though we can find examples of abstract concepts in ordinary experiences, their full meaning extends beyond such experience. This is because, as we have seen, the content of abstract concepts largely involves experiential features, emotional aspects, and other introspective properties, such as beliefs, memories, intentions, goals. For example, the content of the concept of alienation contains detailed features of the felt experience (what alienation feels like subjectively, how one acts when in this state of mind, and so forth). But the felt experience or the *quality* of such a mental state cannot be directly exhibited in ordinary experience.¹⁵ This is at least how I interpret Kant's decision to include abstract concepts in the category of concepts that aesthetic ideas strive to exhibit, in spite of his claim that aesthetic ideas strive to exhibit concepts that go beyond sensory experience. Thus, the implication seems to be that there is an additional, indeterminate material to these concepts for which no sensible intuition can be given and it is this material that aesthetic ideas strive to exhibit.

According to Kant, aesthetic ideas are generated by means of aesthetic attributes. He describes aesthetic attributes primarily in terms of what they do – namely, they 'express only the implications connected with it [a concept] and its affinity with others' (*CJ*, p. 193; AA 5:315). The function of aesthetic attributes is

¹⁴ Matherne uses the term 'experience-oriented' aesthetic ideas. She argues similarly that aesthetic ideas can represent not only moral and rational ideas, but also everyday kinds of ideas, concepts, and feelings. Samantha Matherne, 'The Inclusive Interpretation of Kant's Aesthetic Ideas', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 53 (2013): 21–39. Among others holding a similar view are Rudolf Lütke, 'Kants Lehre von den ästhetischen Ideen', *Kant-Studien* 75 (1984): 65–74; Kenneth F. Rogerson, *Kant's Aesthetics: The Roles of Form and Expression* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986), 99; and Emine Hande Tuna, 'A Kantian Hybrid Theory of Art Criticism: A Particularist Appeal to the Generalists', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 74 (2016): 397–411.

¹⁵ Rogerson has, I believe, something similar in mind when he writes: 'while we may have some experience of such things their full import is yet beyond ordinary experience, for example our psychological attitudes to such things' (*Kant's Aesthetics*, 99).

to bring to mind various connections or mental associations between different concepts and objects that, when taken together, give rise to a general idea (that is, rational ideas or abstract concepts). Kant gives an example of the image of an eagle with a lightning bolt in its talons, which functions as an aesthetic attribute of the rational idea of the king of heaven in the sense that it expresses certain associations and implications connected with this idea (in terms of representing power, strength, freedom, being above the material world) (*CJ*, p. 193; AA 5:315).

Kant says very little, however, about what exactly aesthetic attributes are and how they come to occasion mental connections and associations. Fortunately, he offers a few remarks that can help us to formulate a plausible explanation. First, he writes that aesthetic attributes are 'supplementary representations of imagination' that 'go alongside the logical ones', which means that imagination produces them in addition to logical attributes. Considering that logical attributes 'constitute the presentation of a given concept itself' (*CJ*, p.193; AA 5:315), that is, a schema of a determinate concept, and thus they refer to general representations that different objects of the same kind have in common and in virtue of which the determinate concept is applied, this means that aesthetic attributes must refer to features of the object that go beyond these general features. Second, aesthetic attributes are 'attribute[s] of a representation of sense' (*CJ*, p. 194; AA 5:316), meaning that they must refer to features of an object with which we are directly perceptually acquainted. Third, they are product of 'the imagination, in its freedom from all guidance by rules' (*CJ*, p. 195; AA 5:317), which means that imagination produces them without being determined by the concept of the object.

Taking all these points together, the suggestion seems to be that aesthetic attributes refer to the distinctive aspects of a particular object, in contrast to those aspects of the object which are shared by all members of a class and in virtue of which the concept applies. Since these distinctive features of a particular object are not determined by the concepts of an object, they are a product of imagination in its free play. Let me explain this proposal in what follows.

According to Kant's epistemological theory, in order to have a perceptual image, conceptual harmony between imagination and understanding is necessary. We must perceive a certain combination of the sensible manifold under some empirical concepts. However, even though recognition of objects proceeds by the means of a schema, an abstract form shared by all members of a certain kind, each particular image also differs from others of its kind. That is, they differ in the additional features which are not determined (entailed) by the concept. For instance, I recognize the flower by the application of the flower rule (schema) to the sensible manifold. The flower rule is a basic figurative mental representation

of an object with petals, leaves, and stems in a specific relation. Yet a particular image of a flower may have a distinct shape of petals in a particular combination of colours (that is, a distinctive combination of the general features). But these distinctive features of this particular flower are not entailed by the concept of a flower.¹⁶ This is because, as Kant writes, a concept 'refers to the object indirectly, by means of a characteristic that may be common to several things'.¹⁷ That is to say, concepts can serve as rules only for the features of the object common to members of a certain kind, but cannot be rules for the individual features and their combinations which are distinct and unique to the particular object itself. As Sarah Gibbons in her analysis of Kant's imagination puts it: 'Concepts can only provide a discursive unity of diverse representations possessing some common feature; they do not represent those diverse representations as parts of a single encompassing whole.'¹⁸ Thus, the presence of these additional features which are not entailed by the concept shows that the activity of imagination is not fully determined by the concept, and therefore can potentially be in free play.

My suggestion is that aesthetic attributes refer to those specific and distinctive features of an object that have been left undetermined by the concept of the object.¹⁹ Such an interpretation appears to be suggested by Kant in his discussion of aesthetic ideas where he writes:

in the use of the imagination for cognition, the imagination is under the constraint of the understanding and is subject to the limitation of being adequate to its concept; in an aesthetic respect, however, the imagination is free to provide, beyond that concord with the concept, unsought extensive undeveloped material for the understanding, of which the latter took no regard in its concept, but which it applies, not so much objectively, for cognition, as subjectively, for the animation of the cognitive powers. (CJ, p. 194; AA 5:317)

¹⁶ The flower example pertains to the relation of concepts and particulars in general, whereas my investigation is deliberately restricted to the reception of artworks.

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996), 366 (AA A320/B377).

¹⁸ Sarah L. Gibbons, *Kant's Theory of Imagination: Bridging Gaps in Judgement and Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 44. Among others making this point are Keren Gorodeisky, 'Schematizing without a Concept? Imagine That!', *Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics 2* (2010): 182, and Mojca Kuplen, *Beauty, Ugliness and the Free Play of Imagination: An Approach to Kant's Aesthetics* (New York: Springer, 2015), 65–72.

¹⁹ My interpretation accordingly differs from the view that aesthetic attributes supervene on logical attributes, that is, general features of the object. For this view, see Andrew Chignell, 'Kant on the Normativity of Taste: The Role of Aesthetic Ideas', *Australian Journal of Philosophy* 85 (2007): 415–33, and Steven Ravett Brown, 'On the Mechanism of the Generation of Aesthetic Ideas in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 12 (2004): 487–99.

As I read this passage, the 'unsought extensive undeveloped material' that sets imagination and understanding into a free play refers to aesthetic attributes that furnish an aesthetic idea. Kant explains this undeveloped material as something that has been left out by the ordinary synthesis according to a determinate concept. That is, the object has been recognized as the particular kind of thing it is, say, an eagle, yet the sensible manifold in this object contains an additional material that is not determined by the concept of the object. It is this additional material of the object that aesthetic attributes take into account. To illustrate my proposal, I will consider Picasso's *Weeping Woman* (1937).

The painting depicts a grief-stricken face of a woman, weeping into a handkerchief. One can immediately recognize that this is a painting of a human face. One perceives the head, eyes, nose, and lips (that is, logical attributes), as presented by the schema of a human face. But one also perceives a specific and distinctive configuration of these features. The face is painted in different geometrical shapes, split into fragments; the shapes of the mouth, teeth, tears, and the handkerchief used to dry the tears are almost fused into each other; the sides of the face are juxtaposed in such a way that they offer simultaneously a frontal and a profile perspective of the face. But these distinctive features are not specified by the schema of a human face. Hence, they are products of imagination in its free play.

Yet one can also notice that it is precisely these distinctive features of a face, combined together in this specific way, that bring to mind the thoughts, feelings, moods, sensations, and other mental representations associated with the idea we generally have of grief and loss. For instance, the feeling of disorientation and anxiety as occasioned by the simultaneous presence of the frontal and profile perspectives of the face, the idea of emotional brokenness conveyed by the fractured shapes of the face, brought together in an unnerving way or the idea of a paralyzing emptiness as beautifully expressed through the image of woman's chattering teeth, convulsively nibbling the handkerchief. It is the imaginative synthesis of these distinctive features of a woman's face which bring to mind different associational thoughts connected with the idea we have of grief or loss. Even though these ideas do not have a determinate empirical counterpart, they can nevertheless be depicted through the synthesis of aesthetic attributes (a collection of associations). In this way we are able to think about these ideas in terms of a concrete perceptual experience.

Kant writes that in contrast to an empirical intuition, which is an external representation of imagination, an aesthetic idea is an 'inner intuition' of imagination (*CJ*, p. 192; *AA* 5:314). Although he does not explain what he means by such inner intuitions, taking into account his remark that an aesthetic idea is

a 'coherent whole of an unutterable fullness of thought' (*CJ*, p. 206; AA 5:329), it is reasonable to assume that an aesthetic idea is a kind of a holistic mental representation (or a pattern) of various semantic or intellectual elements combined and unified.²⁰ In other words, an aesthetic idea refers to a certain kind of inner picturing of thoughts and associations that occur in our mind as we reflect on a particular object or an artwork.²¹

It is important to point out that according to Kant the ability to express aesthetic ideas is a special talent (or spirit) possessed by a genius. Thus, only intentionally spirit-filled artworks can actually express aesthetic ideas. Even though this idea appears to be inconsistent with Kant's remark that all beauty, thus also natural beauty, can express aesthetic ideas (*CJ*, p. 197; AA 5:320), this inconsistency can be resolved by taking into account Kant's claim in § 45 that nature is beautiful if it looks like art (*CJ*, p. 185; AA 5:306). Accordingly, nature might seem to be an expression of aesthetic ideas (since it looks like art), but in fact it does not actually express aesthetic ideas (since it is not art). Only intentionally created objects can express aesthetic ideas. But the fact that nature cannot express aesthetic ideas does not mean that it cannot evoke certain kinds of ideas. For instance, Kant writes that the white colour of the lily evokes the idea of innocence and the bird's song evokes the idea of joyfulness (*CJ*, p. 181; AA 5:302). These examples are not representative of a genuine expression of aesthetic ideas, since they refer to sensations alone. Kant writes that even though sensations can suggest certain kinds of ideas, he adds that these ideas are not the result of free play, but rather an automatic by-product of associations produced by the feeling that we connect with a certain colour or tone (*CJ*, p. 205; AA 5:328). That is, ideas suggested by colours and tones are very vague, general ideas that we naturally connect with certain sensations (such as sadness, happiness, and so on) and do not leave much behind for reflection.

How exactly imagination produces aesthetic ideas is difficult to say since Kant does not provide any explanation of such an imaginative operation. Presumably, the imagination is able to generate aesthetic ideas without being governed by any determinate concepts, while, however, being in accordance with the general need of the understanding to bring order and unity to the sensible manifold. Kant describes the ability to produce aesthetic ideas as 'the inborn predisposition of the mind (*ingenium*)' (*CJ*, p. 186; AA 5:307) and as a 'particular spirit given to

²⁰ Similarly, Chignell interprets an aesthetic idea as involving 'a plurality of representations or thoughts linked together' ('Kant on the Normativity of Taste', 424).

²¹ For a similar reading, see Kenneth Berry, 'Kandinsky, Kant, and a Modern Mandala', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 42 (2008): 105–10. He refers to an aesthetic idea as a 'mental image' or a 'mind picture'.

a person at birth, which protects and guides him, and from whose inspiration those original ideas stem' (*CJ*, p. 187; AA 5:308). The artist himself cannot explain how he comes to produce aesthetic ideas, nor can he describe these ideas to others through the use of a determinate language. Kant writes that

the author of a product that he owes to his genius does not know himself how the ideas for it come to him, and also does not have it in his power to think up such things at will or according to plan, and to communicate to others precepts that would put them in a position to produce similar products (*CJ*, p. 187; AA 5:308).

An aesthetic idea is conceptually indeterminate; it cannot be specified in the set of criteria that others could follow (for otherwise the product could not be an object of aesthetic appraisal). Kant claims: 'the rule must be abstracted from the deed, i.e. from the product' (*CJ*, p. 188; AA 5:309). That is to say, an aesthetic idea can be grasped and communicated to others only through direct observation and reflection on the particular work itself; merely hearing or reading someone else's description of the work cannot reveal the aesthetic idea.

This is compatible with my interpretation of an aesthetic idea as generated by the unique and distinct features of an object (aesthetic attributes), in contrast to those general features that the object shares with others of its kind and can be explicitly articulated (logical attributes). We can, for example, explicitly articulate criteria for why we would classify something as a face, or as a flower, without having to be directly acquainted with the object itself. Yet we cannot state such criteria that uniquely identify particular objects in all their detail. For instance, it is impossible to give a description that would apply completely accurately and uniquely to *Weeping Woman*, and yet this particular work of art expresses an aesthetic idea. Now, if an aesthetic idea is produced by the synthesis of particular and distinct features of an object, but these particular features cannot be explicitly articulated, that is, one cannot completely describe all the features of the particular object (they can only be distinguished by observation), then it also follows that an aesthetic idea itself cannot be grasped in a determinate concept. As we have seen, concepts can only be based on commonalities between distinct particular objects but cannot represent the individual features of the object. The only way an aesthetic idea can be revealed and communicated to others is through a non-discursive, affective mode of expression. The communication of an aesthetic idea is subjective (as the term 'aesthetic' suggests) in the sense that it can be communicated only through a direct feeling of the mental state of free harmony between imagination and understanding. In other words, an aesthetic idea can be grasped only through an aesthetic experience of the work, that is, experiencing a sense of freedom and harmony in the playful interaction between

different associational thoughts that the imagination conjures up without being governed by any determinate concepts, but which is nevertheless in agreement with the understanding – namely, the sensible manifold is organized in a way that exhibits indeterminate conceptual content. Thus, even though Kant writes that an aesthetic idea is ineffable (cannot be expressed in a determinate language), it is nonetheless communicable, that is, it can be revealed and communicated to others through the aesthetic feeling of pleasure.²²

III

I have so far argued that an aesthetic idea is a product of the synthesis of imagination, whereby the components that comprise this synthesis are aesthetic attributes, that is, thoughts, associations, and other mental representations evoked by the distinctive features of an object or an artwork. If my account is correct, then it is fair to say that aesthetic ideas can capture the introspective, emotional, and affective properties associated with our abstract concepts.

As we have seen, our ordinary conceptual vocabulary is inadequate to fully determine all the implicit meanings of concepts such as love, hopelessness or freedom. The only way to express what is ineffable in our abstract concepts is by means of their associations with aesthetic attributes, that is, supplementary representations of imagination that express implications and kinships between different concepts and objects (say, kinship between the image of the fractured shape of a face and the idea of emotional brokenness). In other words, aesthetic ideas are concrete representations holding together various introspective, emotional, and affective aspects involved in our experience of abstract concepts. The availability of such imaginary representations can profoundly expand the meaning of these concepts and further our understanding of them.

I believe this is the idea Kant has in mind when he writes that an aesthetic idea ‘aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way’ (*CJ*, p. 193; AA 5:315), thereby implying that expansion of a concept is not logical expansion that proceeds by adding actual properties or logical attributes to the concept.²³ Rather, the expansion of a concept proceeds aesthetically, that is, by means of aesthetic attributes that bring to mind a multitude of thoughts, feelings, moods,

²² This is also pointed out by Charles DeBort, ‘*Geist* and Communication in Kant’s Theory of Aesthetic Ideas’, *Kantian Review* 17 (2012): 177–90.

²³ For the view that the kind of knowledge that aesthetic ideas give rise to cannot be captured in terms of logical or determinate knowledge, see also Michel Chaouli, ‘A Surfeit in Thinking: Kant’s Aesthetic Ideas’, *Yearbook of Comparative Literature* 57 (2011): 55–77; Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 120–22; and Matherne, ‘Inclusive Interpretation’, 36–37.

and sensations connected with the given concept. One may, for example, notice that *Weeping Woman* does not broaden our definition of grief as an emotional state experienced due to significant loss, but rather it stimulates our reflection on a whole range of reactions, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, other mental aspects, and effects involved in our experience of grief and loss. Thus, the kind of knowledge that aesthetic ideas add to our concepts refers to knowledge of the various introspective, emotional, and affective aspects connected with our abstract concepts, but cannot be explicitly articulated in words and propositions.

This is at least how I interpret Kant's claims that an aesthetic idea 'occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it' (*CJ*, p. 192; AA 5:314); or 'gives more to think about than can be grasped and made distinct in it (although it does, to be sure, belong to the concept of the object)' (*CJ*, p. 193; AA 5:315); and 'no expression designating a determinate concept can be found for it, which therefore allows the addition to a concept of much that is unnameable' (*CJ*, p. 194; AA 5:316).

In these passages Kant uses words such as 'much thinking' or 'more to think' which seem to suggest that non-discursivity is caused by the great quantity of thoughts, which in principle could be articulated in a determinate language, but their excess makes it difficult to do so. This, I believe, is not what Kant has in mind. Thoughts provided by aesthetic ideas are not merely difficult; rather, they are impossible to conceptualize since they themselves are, as Kant puts it, 'unnameable'. The kind of thoughts that aesthetic ideas add to our concepts are such that they cannot be explicitly articulated in words and propositions, but, as Kant states, 'belong to the concept'. Yet the kind of thoughts that appear to meet these two characteristics – namely, non-discursivity and pertaining to the concept – are the kind of thoughts that refer to the introspective, affective, and emotional aspects associated with our concepts.

Consider again the concept of grief. Even though we can explicitly articulate the meaning of grief as being an emotion, experienced due to the loss of someone or something important to us, this conceptual meaning cannot give a full account of the idea of grief as we experience it from the inside. As I have pointed out, our ordinary language is not rich enough or precise enough to grasp and explicate all the subtle aspects of our experience. What we ordinarily explicate by saying that we feel grief is merely some rough aspect of our experience, while a great deal of meaning is left unelaborated. It is this unelaborated meaning of our abstract concepts that aesthetic ideas carry forward. Aesthetic ideas make experience-related features of abstract concepts salient by connecting them with particular imaginable representations, thereby making them more cognitively accessible to us. They thus provide us with an

additional source of information that is required for a more complete understanding of abstract phenomena.

Such a view is implied in Kant's claim that concepts without intuitions are empty.²⁴ He refers to empirical concepts which need to be connected to empirical intuitions in order to make sense of experience. Without empirical intuitions, empirical concepts are mere words, lacking any substantive meaning. But the same can be said of abstract thoughts and ideas, such as the concepts of truth, love, grief, hopelessness, and vulnerability. Only by connecting these kinds of concepts with sensible intuitions (by means of aesthetic attributes) can we truly say that we understand what they mean. Aesthetic ideas thus fill in the emptiness that abstract concepts on their own would leave without empirical intuitions.

The idea that aesthetic ideas can enrich and broaden the experiential dimension of our concepts has also recently been pointed out by Samantha Matherne in her claim that aesthetic ideas expand our subjective connections to concepts in that they reveal 'the richness of experience we too often overlook in the exigencies of everyday life'²⁵ and thereby provide us with ways of 'entertaining new possibilities or looking at the concept in different ways'.²⁶ She gives an example of Proust's description of a madeleine cake and writes: 'The aesthetic idea and aesthetic attributes involved in that passage augment my concept of a madeleine with subjective characteristics, like memory, childhood, and nostalgia.'²⁷ Although I am certainly in agreement with Matherne's view on the aesthetic idea as enlivening our abstract notions, I also find her account unsatisfying, for it does not explain how exactly aesthetic ideas come to expand our subjective connections to concepts.

My proposal is that the aesthetic idea expands our subjective connections to concepts and broadens our interpretation of experiences by expressing different meanings that abstract concepts can have for us. If aesthetic ideas are products of the imaginative synthesis of various thoughts and associations (that is, aesthetic attributes), this implies that they are able to capture and bring together various introspective, emotional, and affective aspects connected with our concepts and can thereby express the experience-related meaning of concepts. Aesthetic ideas furnish the meaning of an experience by selecting, specifying, and bringing together different introspective, emotional, and affective aspects. Since there can be many different ways of selecting and combining aspects, there can be many different meanings of an experience prompted by an aesthetic idea.

²⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 107 (AA A51/B75).

²⁵ Matherne, 'Inclusive Interpretation', 30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 37

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Each expression of an aesthetic idea brings a different meaning of an experience and thereby a different perspective on abstract concepts. Herein lies the originality of aesthetic ideas. To see exactly how aesthetic ideas can express different meanings of our abstract concepts, let us consider Michael Haneke's film *The Seventh Continent* (1989).

The movie is an agonizing story of a well-situated Austrian family and their attempt to escape the feeling of emotional and social isolation in the modern world by choosing to commit a suicide. The mental state of emptiness and depersonalization that accompanies the everyday life of this family is represented through images of objects, rather than subjects. We do not see characters' faces, but merely fragmented and isolated shots of their hands turning off the alarm clock, opening curtains, putting toothpaste on a toothbrush, tying shoelaces, making coffee. Using a cinematic technique that emphasizes the state of imprisonment by our daily routines, Haneke manages here to give a perceptible form to the feeling of the emptiness of one's existence, and thereby provides us with a rare opportunity to *recognize* certain mental states, emotions, and ideas that cannot be directly represented. Through the depiction of emotionless and depersonalized performances of our daily routines, the film represents the idea of emotional emptiness, that is, how these emotional states themselves look. We often experience such mental states, yet have difficulty in understanding it clearly. Through the objectification of the idea of emotional isolation, we have an extraordinary opportunity to perceive this emotion in a more formulated and comprehensive way.

In particular, the film offers one of many possible ways to understand the experience of emotional emptiness and alienation. The meaning of an experience is brought out by carefully selecting and specifying certain aspects of experience. For example, the feeling of being trapped in a life of routine as expressed by the depiction of mechanically performed daily tasks, the idea of depersonalization and loss of communication as conveyed by the narration accentuating the monotony of the characters' day-to-day lives and their impersonal verbal exchanges, and how these feelings ultimately lead to the experience of despair and anger at the world, as vividly expressed by the images of the characters demolishing their house and all their possessions and finally their decision to escape the feeling of imprisonment by choosing to commit suicide.

Haneke's film offers one particular form that the idea of emotional emptiness and alienation can take, but there are many other possible ways of expressing this idea. To give an example, Edvard Munch's painting *Evening on Karl Johan Street* (1892) conveys the idea of emotional isolation and alienation by depicting

a crowd of people, detached and isolated from one another, with indistinct faces. Thus, by emphasizing the experience of anonymity, isolation, and loss of self-awareness, the painting adds to yet another meaning that the idea of alienation can have for us. Both, Haneke and Munch have instantiated the same concept of alienation and emotional isolation, yet they express a different meaning of an experience of alienation. That is to say, they express two different aesthetic ideas and communicate in two different ways the meaning of our abstract concepts since it is determined by our own subjective experiences.

Aesthetic ideas, as expressed in works of art, are equipped with a rich and sophisticated vocabulary, a collection of associative images (aesthetic attributes) that can, furthermore, carry finely determined, more specific aspects of our experience, which are more difficult to grasp and articulate by ordinary language. They can make us explicitly aware of what we formerly had only an implicit sense. Aesthetic ideas afford us with an opportunity to imagine the introspective, emotional, and affective aspects connected with our concepts, thereby imbuing them with a more substantive meaning and understanding.

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