Rather surprisingly, we find Hume suggesting that if we really want to know whether or not a thing can appropriately be called beautiful, we should consult the experience of others. Durable admiration is a good indication of the aesthetic quality of an artwork, whereas our personal judgments of a work might well be distorted by our condition of mind or our prejudices. Hume rests his claim to the validity of particular aesthetic judgments, then, on the collective experience of generations, not on the particular experience of an individual on a particular occasion. He does not therefore, believe that everyone has equally valid tastes. *

Hume does, however, believe that the criterion for calling something beautiful is ultimately a subjective one. A thing is appropriately called beautiful if and only if it provokes aesthetic sentiment in appropriately disposed competent judges. What matters, then, is not so much the character of the object as the state of mind occasioned in the observer. Of course, the characteristics of the aesthetic object are relevant to whether or not it occasions aesthetic sentiment in the observer. Hume even indicates some of the objective characteristics commonly observed in artworks that have inspired durable admiration. But the test of an object's beauty is the experience it provokes in an observer. In this respect, as we are about to see, Hume resembles Kant. In general, modern Western aesthetics have turned their attention from the characteristics of the object to consideration of the state of mind that beauty and art occasion.

D. KANT: DISPUTES ABOUT TASTE RESOLVED

In his aesthetic work, Kant's primary concern is essentially the same as Hume's. He is interested in how our subjective aesthetic judgments are valid and in how we can claim that some such judgments are better than others. In the Critique of Judgment, Kant's explicit task is to establish aesthetic judgment on an intersubjective basis. However, although the problems that concern Kant resemble those that interest Hume, here as elsewhere Kant takes Hume as his target. Specifically, Kant sets out to refute Hume's idea that our disputes over taste can only be resolved empirically, and that such resolution is only a matter of consulting the empirical judgments of many aesthetic observers over time.

Kant wonders how it is that the judgment of the beautiful carries with it an expectation that others besides the subject will agree with the judgment. This is perplexing because a judgment that a thing is beautiful means that it provokes aesthetic pleasure within us. We cannot legitimately convince others of the correctness of our aesthetic judgment by providing them with conceptual arguments; argument is beside the point of whether we experience such pleasure or not.

But where does this universality of aesthetic experience come from if not from compelling argument? It comes from our capacity to contemplate suitable objects with our mental faculties in the extraordinary but intrinsically satisfying mode of operation that Kant describes as free play. The faculties that are involved in free play
are the very faculties that Kant takes to be essential to the possibility of human cognition: imagination and understanding.

In his Critique of Pure Reason, Kant characterizes the respective roles of imagination and understanding for ordinary knowledge. Imagination gathers together the stuff of our experience into definite images or representations. On the basis of these representations, understanding forms definite concepts.

Consider a concrete example. In approaching a flower from the standpoint of cognition, the representation of the flower that the imagination presents to the understanding is “understood” by means of a definite concept (e.g., a petunia). Once the understanding has determined the appropriate concept with which to designate the represented object, the process of cognition is complete.

In aesthetic experience, the same two faculties (imagination and understanding) again operate together. However, the end result is not a determinate concept. Instead, the two faculties interact in free play. In this case, again, the imagination forms a representation of the object. But unlike the case of cognition, the representation generated by imagination is not enshrined cognitively by a definite concept. Indeed, in aesthetic experience, we feel that no definite concept could define adequately what we observe. Thus, the two faculties do not neatly finish their work in aesthetic experience. Instead, they “play” by mutually enlivening one another.

When we view the petunia aesthetically, our minds are not statically contemplative, but actively so. We leap from focusing on one aspect of the flower’s form to focusing on another. In the midst of all this we find our understanding sufficiently engaged that often we do seek words to communicate the features of what we notice: “Isn’t the way that petal curves interesting? It almost seems flirtatious.” Such comments do not explain our enjoyment—in this case, of the flower’s form. Yet they do reveal that our understanding in its own peculiar way is at work while our imagination is reworking its presentation.

The understanding’s shifting emphasis, too, seems to encourage imagination to further reformulation of the image that it impresses on the mind. Imagination may present us with a differently focused representation of the petunia in light of the understanding’s sensuous description “flirtatious.” Because no conceptual classification confines the imagination, it can attend to more and more features of the object. It thus enhances our experience of the object’s particularity as opposed to its generically classifiable features.

Against Hume, Kant argues that the convergence of our judgments about beauty are not merely empirical accidents but the necessary consequence of the very mental faculties we possess. Kant’s defense of this claim depends again on the fact that the faculties employed in aesthetic experience are the very ones employed in cognition. Insofar as we can communicate with others—something that we assume in the case of all human beings and something that depends on our common ability to form concepts—we assume their reliance on the same processes of cognition as those we employ. In making this assumption, we assess that their cognitive faculties do function harmoniously.

But to the extent that we have presupposed this, we have presupposed in every human being the active capacity for aesthetic experience. For aesthetic experience
depends only on the active, harmonious free play of the cognitive faculties. As Kant says later in the Critique of Judgment, the pleasure accompanying aesthetic experience is a satisfaction taken simply in the "harmonious (subjectively purposive) activity of the two cognitive powers in their freedom." Kant feels justified therefore in calling taste a kind of "common sense," for this "sense" is a responsive, harmonious condition of the cognitive faculties that can be activated in any aware human being.

Kant describes a judgment that a thing is beautiful as a necessary judgment. He does not mean that everyone empirically agrees that a thing is beautiful. Kant means that when we claim an object is beautiful, we mean it is an example of the sort of thing that can be contemplated aesthetically by any mentally healthy human being. If someone disagrees with our particular judgment that a thing is beautiful, we might discuss the disagreement as a consequence of his or her being preoccupied with practical concerns or by a private mood. But if someone never agreed with anyone that anything were beautiful, we would be right to believe that the person lacked something basic to a human being.

Kant makes two other important points about the nature of the beautiful: aesthetic experience of a beautiful object, he tells us, involves a stance of disinterestedness. The basic idea is that our enjoyment of the beautiful does not provoke any personal interest on our part. However, our enjoyment of the sensuously pleasing provokes an interest in sensuously appropriating the object. Our enjoyment of a T-bone steak, for example, essentially involves our experience of desire to eat it. Appreciation of the beautiful, by contrast, inspires no desire with respect to the object. Instead, we are content simply to contemplate the object.

Kant's other point is that an aesthetic judgment of a beautiful object involves contemplation of mere form. Kant has been described as a formalist because he believes aesthetic contemplation considers form alone. Even in the case of art, Kant contends that consideration of the content is irrelevant and even distracting from aesthetic contemplation. The sensuous satisfaction we might take in the materials of art are also, in Kant's view, irrelevant to aesthetic satisfaction. Kant goes so far in defending this claim that he insists that in painting it is the delineation only, not the colors (which might please or displease us on a purely sensuous level) that we consider when we are judging the work aesthetically. Kant also argues against the view that our emotional response to art has anything to do with the aesthetic satisfaction we take in it.

When we contemplate a beautiful object aesthetically, Kant tells us, we observe what he calls purposiveness without a purpose. The object, in other words, forms an organic unity that coheres as if toward a definite telos, or purpose. Kant accepts the Aristotelian model of the beautiful object as akin to a living organism. But although the elements of the beautiful object seem to function together toward a unifying purpose, we do not, in contemplating, discover what it is. If we did discover a definite purpose, it would provide the key to a conceptual account of the arrangement of elements in a beautiful object. A botanical account of the parts of a flower would be a conceptual explanation of the function of each element with respect to a definite end (the continued life of the flower). But no such definite, objectively identifiable end accounts for the aesthetic form of an object. We recognize only that the parts cohere without being able to explain why.
Although primarily we associate the concept of aesthetic beauty with art, the history of the subject often looks elsewhere. Plato took as his example of beauty the beautiful person; Kant's analysis of the beautiful focused primarily on nature rather than art. Kant, however, does consider art at some length. He considers art essentially to be representational, and therefore he believes that concepts mediate our appreciation of art. In other words, our impression of the kind of thing being represented is crucial to our judgment of whether or not it is well portrayed.

Nevertheless, while Kant believes that both artist and observer are constrained by their conceptions of the things being represented by art, he does not believe that concepts dictate recipes for art. Great art is a product of genius, not conceptual construction. Artistic genius is a natural faculty for producing "aesthetic ideas." These ideas are not conceptual and well defined in nature; instead they are generative, occasioning imaginative thought, but no particular thought. They are intuitive, and they guide the activity of the artist. Great artistic talent, on Kant's model, is thus a bit like poetic inspiration on Plato's. The artist can neither explain the origin of his or her ideas nor give a knowledgeable account of why his or her masterpiece takes the precise form that it does.

In tying artistic creation to genius, to some extent Kant sides with the empiricists. But Kant does not believe that unbridled genius is itself artistically desirable. If the ideas of the genius are not subjected to controlled forms, there is danger that the artistic product will be unintelligible to the artist's audience. Thus, Kant insists that taste must govern genius if works of art are to remain purposive. (Taste is the faculty of judging that a thing is beautiful.) Thus, in order for a genius to create artworks of value, the genius must examine and shape his productions from a critical posture.

Kant concludes his account of the beautiful with the suggestion that to us beauty symbolizes morality. By stimulating the free play of our faculties of imagination and understanding, beauty naturally reminds us of another situation in which we are free: our legislation of the moral law as free and rational agents. In the case of the moral law, another mental faculty, that of reason freely determines the morally ideal. And insofar as we behave in accordance with this moral ideal, we are free from determination by inclination. We are not constrained by the moral law; we are constrained by inclinations that naturally overtake us. When we resist natural inclinations and guide our lives only by our own rational faculties, we are truly free. Our sense of freedom in aesthetic experience naturally reminds us of our moral freedom; and in Kant's own view, this is beauty's highest accomplishment.

E. AFTER KANT: ART, SOCIETY, AND SELF-AWARENESS

Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), who was influenced strongly by Kantian aesthetics, further developed the idea that beauty symbolizes morality. Schiller, in his Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man, argued against the view of some of his
contemporaries that concern for beauty is a distraction from the more serious, political concerns of life. To the contrary, Schiller contends, beauty first makes us capable of becoming good citizens.

In early life, Schiller argues, we conceive of the external world as an adversary that we must force to give us what we want. But when we begin to experience beauty, we learn that our interests and the external world can coincide harmoniously. This experience provides our first step toward personal and political maturity. For only when we have come to believe that the external world sometimes will cooperate with us are we willing to cooperate with the external world.

Beauty intimates to us the possibility of social harmony, for it allows us to conceive of peaceful coexistence with others that does not involve constraint on anyone’s part. Schiller believes that this intuition of a world of cooperation and mutual freedom among ourselves and others is indispensable for any lasting political solution to the tensions among human beings. Thus, Schiller believes that it is our political responsibility to make beauty central in the education of our young.

Much later in the nineteenth century, Count Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy (1828–1910) similarly argued that the value of art lay in its social/political function. But the function that Tolstoy had in mind was quite different from that of Schiller. Art serves its purpose, in Tolstoy’s view, when art sincerely communicates emotion and thereby promotes feelings of community among people. Tolstoy, however, believed that most of the art of his culture did not serve its proper function. The art of the socially elite aimed only to give pleasure to its audience. By contrast, the art of the common people had the appropriate aim of sincere communication of feeling. Thus, Tolstoy’s theory of art’s purpose was not simply idealistic, but also quite critical of contemporary artistic practice.

I. G. W. F. Hegel

Nineteenth-century aesthetics did not, however, focus exclusively on the social/political function that art might serve. Rather, the most powerful theories of beauty emphasized the capacity of art to make human beings understand themselves. Foremost among such theorists was G. W. F. Hegel. Although Hegel did not believe that self-consciousness is a purely personal matter, he did believe that art is a vehicle that human beings have employed to become conscious of a shared spirit. Art, as Hegel understood it, is born of an attempt by human beings to humanize the materials that they find around them. In give creative form to such materials, they make them less alien from themselves. Moreover, because the forms that human beings use to give shape to these materials stem from the human mind, artworks embody the ideas of the mind in an external form. In this way art makes the ideas of the mind present to those who make it. Observing art, human beings can come to know themselves.

Artworks are under obligation to a sensuous medium. Yet ultimately they are addressed, not to the senses, but to the mind. So art’s primary function is a spiritual one. However, because art involves a sensuous medium, tensions can exist between the medium and the spiritual idea that shapes it. For Hegel, the human spirit is always historically located, and its expressions reveal their historical context. Art, as
an expression of the human spirit, has a history. Some of the developments of that history can be understood in terms of gradual human progress in learning to shape the materials of the world in accordance with the mind. Hegel describes three basic stages in art's development, which he distinguishes on the basis of their artworks' physical form to adequately embody the ideal spiritual content behind it.

FROM THE PHILOSOPHY OF FINE ART
BY G. W. F. HEGEL

We have here to consider three relations of the Idea to its external process of configuration.

(a) First, the origin of artistic creation proceeds from the Idea when, being itself still involved in defective definition and obscurity, or in vicious and untrue determinacy, it becomes embodied in the shapes of art. As indeterminate, it does not as yet possess in itself that individuality which the Ideal demands. Its abstract character and onesidedness leaves its objective presentment still defective and contingent. Consequently this first type of art is rather a mere search after plastic configuration than a power of genuine representation.

(b) In the second type of art, which we propose to call "Classical," the twofold defect of symbolic art is annulled. Now the symbolic configuration is imperfect, because, first, the Idea here only enters into consciousness in abstract determinacy or indeterminateness; and, secondly, by reason of the fact that the coalescence of import with embodiment can only throughout remain defective, and in its turn also wholly abstract. The classical art-type solves both these difficulties. It is, in fact, the free and adequate embodiment of the Idea in the shape which, according to its notional concept, is uniquely appropriate to the Idea itself. Such a configuration, which the Idea essentially possesses as spiritual, and indeed as individually determinate spiritually, when it must perforce appear as a temporal phenomenon, is the human form. Personification and anthropomorphism have frequently been abused as a degradation of the spiritual. But art, in so far as its function is to bring to vision the spiritual in sensuous guise, must advance to such anthropomorphism, inasmuch as Spirit is only adequately presented to perception in its bodily presence.

(c) The romantic type of art annuls the completed union of the Idea and its reality, and occurs, if on a higher plane, to the difference and opposition of both sides, which remained unovercome in symbolic art. The classical type of art no doubt attained the highest excellence of which the sensuous embodiment of art is capable. The defect, such as it is, is due to the defect which obtains in art itself throughout, the limitations of its entire province, that is to say. The limitation consists in this, that art in general and, agreeably to its fundamental idea, accepts for its object Spirit, the notion of which is infinite concrete universality, under the guise of sensuously concrete form. In the classical type it sets up the perfected coalescence of spiritual and sensuous existence as adequate conformation of both. As a matter of fact, however, in this fusion mind itself is not represented agreeably to its true notional concept.
To escape from such a condition the romantic type of art once more cancels that inseparable unity of the classical type, by securing a content which passes beyond the classical stage and its mode of expression. . . . In this third stage the object of art consists in the free and concrete presence of spiritual activity, whose vocation it is to appear as such a presence or activity for the inner world of conscious intelligence. In consonance with such an object art cannot merely work for sensuous perception. It must deliver itself to the inward life, which coalesces with its object simply as though this were none other than itself, in other words, to the intimacy of soul, to the heart, the emotional life, which as the medium of Spirit itself essentially strives after freedom, and seeks and possesses its reconciliation only in the inner chamber of spirit. It is this inward or ideal world which constitutes the content of the romantic sphere.

This we may take to be in general terms the character of the symbolic, classical, and romantic types of art, which in fact constitute the three relations of the Idea to its embodiment in the realm of human art. They consist in the aspiration after the attainment and transcendency of the Ideal, viewed as the true concrete notion of beauty.7

In the Romantic stage of art’s development, Hegel concludes, the ideal content is too completely spiritualized to be fully embodied by any physical form whatsoever. Thus, the significant spiritual concerns of the Romantic age eventually turn away from art as a primary vehicle of expression. Hegel concludes,

[I]t certainly is the case that Art is no longer able to discover the satisfaction of spiritual wants, which previous epochs and nations have sought for in it and exclusively found in it, a satisfaction which, at least on the religious side, was associated with art in the most intimate way. The fair days of Greek art, as also the golden time of the later middle ages, are over. . . . Art is and remains for us, on the side of its highest possibilities, a thing of the past.8

Reflective thought, in Hegel’s view, has replaced art as the vehicle for humanity’s most significant spiritual contents and as the means by which humanity comes to

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know itself. Although art remains a source of enjoyment to modern human beings, it is no longer central to the pursuit of their central spiritual concerns.

2. Arthur Schopenhauer

Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) does not share Hegel’s sense of “the end of art.” Schopenhauer, like Hegel, sees art as a medium through which human beings can gain insight into themselves. But Schopenhauer considers this self-awareness to be a private experience that any individual, at any historical period, might have, and of no less value now than for the ancients.

Schopenhauer’s theory of art is bound intimately to his metaphysical theory. Accepting Kant’s distinction between the noumenal and the phenomenal world, Schopenhauer is unwilling to accept Kant’s view that we cannot come to know the noumenal reality behind phenomena. On the contrary, Schopenhauer argues, we know the noumenal world directly. The fundamental, noumenal reality is a turbulent, chaotic Will; and we directly experience this Will in our individual wills.

This fate may seem happier than that proposed by Kant when he denies us any knowledge of the thing-in-itself. But for Schopenhauer, this is not a happy fate at all. The Will, the ultimate reality, is a turbulent cauldron of struggle within itself. The phenomenal world, which is the Will’s manifestation, is accordingly a vale of struggle and turbulence. The various phenomena struggle among themselves, and even a single being’s individual will struggles within itself. Desire, which each of us experiences as the basic manifestation of our nature, is our immediate experience of the dissatisfaction and the internal tension of the will.

From the standpoint of our ordinary outlook on things, we are unaware of our true situation as regards our desires. We believe that we will be content once we gain what we want, although all of our experience shows us differently. And we do not consider those who obstruct us as being in the same position that we are, motivated by blind desire and incapable of doing otherwise. However, occasionally ethical insight indicates the fallacy of this usual way of thinking. When ethical insight overtakes us, we recognize that we are all in the same situation and that we cannot violate another being’s will without violating ourselves. Schopenhauer interprets this kind of insight as a recognition that we are all one thing, namely, the Will. However, most of us do not change our lives as a result of such insight, but instead continue blindly through our lives, swinging like a pendulum between desire and (when we occasionally are satisfied) boredom.

The only way out of such misery is to renounce desire. Schopenhauer, one of the first Germans to become interested in Buddhism, adopted the Buddhist beliefs that desire causes suffering and that suffering ceases only with cessation of desire. Schopenhauer realized that the ascetic life that he proposed as the means to this end would not attract many of his readers. Indeed, if one considers his biography, it seems not to have greatly attracted Schopenhauer himself.

What did attract Schopenhauer was beauty. He believed that for himself and for most others, beauty alone provides a respite from what he calls “the penal servitude of willing.” In the aesthetic experience we comport ourselves without motive or
desire toward the object that we contemplate. We cease to be our ordinary willing selves and become instead “pure will-less subjects of knowledge.” What we come to know in experience of the beautiful is the universal essence of the thing that we behold. Schopenhauer believes that we contemplate the Platonic Form of the beautiful thing, although he interprets the Forms as various hierarchical levels through which the Will manifests itself. When we contemplate aesthetically, both the beholder and the object become universal. The beholder ceases to be his or her private self with personal, willful motives, and the object beheld becomes its universal essence. In aesthetic experience we leave willing behind.

In the case of art, as in the case of beautiful nature, the observer contemplates the eternal Forms behind phenomena. The aim of art is to communicate knowledge of the Forms. Artistic talent, or genius, is an unusually developed ability to contemplate the universal in phenomena. Because the talented artist has this ability, he or she is able to present objects of the world in a manner that makes the universal present to the audience. (The exception to this rule is music. Music does not represent phenomenal things in a universal light. Instead it portrays the movements of the Will directly. Music, alone among the arts, bypasses the Platonic Forms and portrays the deeper reality that Schopenhauer believes is behind them.)

In the case both of beautiful art and beautiful nature, we expand our awareness of our own nature. Schopenhauer believes that the Platonic Forms are more real than the phenomenal things of our world; he thinks that our ordinary sense of ourselves as private, separate individualities is illusory. The Platonic Forms are themselves aspects of the Will. Thus, to the extent that aesthetic experience illuminates them, it illuminates our fundamental nature, which is the Will itself. Schopenhauer suggests that aesthetic experience is akin to ethical insight, and that frequent aesthetic experience is potentially good for our ethical orientation. Unfortunately, however, any insight we might gain from aesthetic experience is, for most of us, transient. As soon as aesthetic contemplation is over, most of us are immediately back in the willful fray.

3. Friedrich Nietzsche

Nietzsche believed that aesthetic experience not only gives us insight into our true nature but also that it justifies life. Nietzsche postulates two aesthetic principles, the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Each of these principles guides a particular kind of aesthetic experience. Dionysian principle fashions art that is frenzied and chaotic; Dionysian experience communicates to the beholder a sense of our fundamental union with the dynamic reality of life. Apollonian principle depicts phenomena through beautiful, idealizing images; Apollonian experience communicates to the beholder a sense that the things of the world are clearly delineated and orderly. The paradigmatic Dionysian art is music; the paradigmatic Apollonian art is sculpture.

Thus, the Dionysian and the Apollonian principles each reveal something important about one’s nature as a human being. The Dionysian principle reminds the individual of his participation in the dynamic flux of life. The Apollonian principle
reinforces the individual’s usual sense that he or she, like everything else, is separate and self-contained. Although Nietzsche concurs with Schopenhauer that this perspective is ultimately an illusion, he believes that it is a necessary illusion. We must, Nietzsche believes, behave as independent agents and believe that the world is relatively stable in order to accomplish the practical tasks essential to our sustained existence. Thus, both Apollonian and Dionysian perspectives remind us of something important about ourselves in relation to the world.

The Apollonian and Dionysian principles also remind us that life is worth living despite the suffering that it involves. Discussing the religion of the ancient Greeks, Nietzsche observes that the pantheon of gods and goddesses was invented by the Greeks under the sway of the Apollonian principle, for the gods and goddesses amounted to beautiful, idealizing images for aspects of human life. The gods, Nietzsche contends, justified human life by living it.

The Dionysian principle, too, had a role in the theodicy of the ancient Greeks. Nietzsche believes that the ancient Greeks used tragedy to reconcile the Apollonian and Dionysian modes of self-understanding. The subject matter of tragedy was explicitly the suffering of an individual, the tragic hero. In identifying with the tragic hero, the audience adopted the Apollonian perspective, which takes seriously the individual character of existence. Prior to the tragic catastrophe that befalls him, the tragic hero is preoccupied with individual pursuits.

The tragic catastrophe reveals the inherent fragility of individual existence and individual pursuits. From the Apollonian standpoint, the tragic hero has lost virtually everything. The audience is reminded of an important aspect of individual life—that it is inherently vulnerable.

At this point, however, the Dionysian principle reminds the audience that a human being’s individual character is not the only aspect of his being. For even when he has suffered terribly as an individual, the tragic hero comes to recognize that he is still a part of the larger flux of being. This was what happened when the tragic hero made peace with the larger world order. The larger, Dionysian flux is so powerful and enthralling that this recognition is deeply joyous and sustaining.

Thus, when the Apollonian illusion that life is orderly and safe for the individual is destroyed, the tragic hero experiences the Dionysian insight that life is wonderful and joyous anyway. The ultimate purpose of tragedy was a spiritual one. It recalled its audience to an understanding of both Apollonian and Dionysian aspects of their lives, and it revealed the Dionysian truth that suffering is no argument against life’s meaning.

By positing two aesthetic principles, Nietzsche challenged the traditional assumption that art had a single aim. Nietzsche’s Apollonian principle embodied many traditional values, such as the aspiration for beautiful form and the desirability of closure. But his Dionysian principle made values of dynamism and chaos. Although the values of the Apollonian principle were compatible with disinterested contemplation, the Dionysian principle promoted interested participation. Nietzsche suggests with his duality that aesthetic experience can take more than one form, and that the various forms it can take might all be valuable to its audience’s understanding of itself and its world.