

A SOLELY HUMAN ASPECT OF EXISTENCE: THE EXPERIENCE OF BEAUTY

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In the history of thought there is probably no philosophy that has posited the question about man with the intensity, extensiveness and centrality equal to those present in Kant's philosophy. It is well-known that in his last work, *Logik*, which appeared as edited by his student Jaesche, but reviewed by Kant himself, he sums up the three fundamental questions which guided him throughout the elaboration of his own thought ('What can I know?', 'What ought I do?', 'What can I hope for?'), in the one, fundamental question, into which every other question flows: 'What is man?'. In each of his works there come to light aspects of the humanity in man which circumscribe to man, in an ever more precise and essential way, a proper and irreducible character. In this way of approximation to the being of man, the experience of beauty comes to have a singular place.

If we, in fact, look at what Kant states in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the contemplation and the production of beauty depend exclusively upon characteristics that only man possesses and that thus allow him to be ontologically distinguished from all other beings which differ from him. According to Kant, we judge beauty beginning from the feeling of what is agreeable and disagreeable. If we consider the ways in which our representations refer to that feeling, we see three different experiences that spring forth: that of 'pleasant', which can also be true for the simple animals; that of 'good' which is true for rational beings in general (and thus true for those not affected by the limitations imposed by sensitivity) and finally that of 'beautiful'. 'Beauty' affirms Kant '[is valid] only for human beings, i.e., animal but also rational beings, but not merely as the latter (e.g., spirits), rather as beings who are at the same time

animal'.¹ What therefore surprisingly happens is that the peculiar intertwining of animality and rationality, which in other fields of actuation of the human faculties imposes severe limitations upon thought and action, in the experience of beauty is redeemed from those limits and transfigured into an experience which, as I hope to be able to show, originates from freedom.

If we concentrate our attention not so much on the Kantian treatment of the beautiful in general, but rather upon the beauty of a work of art, this shows itself to have, both in its internal organization and in the means of its production, characteristics which do not permit going back to a mechanistic model of comprehension. It is well-known that the third Kantian *Critique* has as its theme, in the two parts of its division, the experience of beauty in the 'Critique of the Power of Aesthetic Judgment' and the characteristics of natural organisms in the 'Critique of the Power of Teleological Judgment'. It deals with two apparently heterogenous classes of beings, brought together in reality by the same characteristic of not being able to be fully comprehended according to the mechanism of efficient causes.

What in the work of art contrasts to its mechanistic reduction is constituted by many characteristics which place it in an intermediary position between the human techno-practical production, on the one hand, and the way in which nature produces the organized beings, on the other. 'In a product of art' affirms Kant 'one must be aware that it is art, and not nature; yet the purposiveness in its form must still seem (*aussehen*) to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature'.² In the production of beautiful art there is the discipline of rules, there is the concept of the object to be produced, there is the directed intention towards the actuation of an objective, there is the material which waits to be formed, and yet everything must be composed and flow with that sovereign, unintentional 'naturalness' which does not betray with the slightest trace 'that the rule has hovered before the eyes of the artist and fettered his

¹ I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, Ak. Ausg. V, § 5, p. 210 (*Critique of the Power of Judgment*, edited by P. Guyer, translated by P. Guyer and E. Matthews, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2003, p. 95). Cited hereinafter with *KU*. As far as the modern studies are concerned, according to which the possibility to attribute a sensitiveness to beauty even to the animals is effective, I don't think it would be too difficult to find the source of this sensitiveness in what Kant calls 'pleasant', the experience of which doesn't attain that strong concept of beauty that finds its expression in the 'judgment of taste'.

² *Ivi*, § 45, p. 306 (p. 185).

mental powers'.³ Now this can happen because the rule that organizes the work of art as a completed whole (not the rules which can be learned technically, but the rule which confers beauty to the work) has a wholly peculiar character. Before the act of production it does not exist, no one knows about it, not even the artist: it is all done in the deed, it is made in its making and for this reason it can be recognized as 'original'. It has never appeared before and is not repeatable afterwards. 'The rule' says Kant 'must be abstracted from the deed'⁴ and this means that it has life and value uniquely in that deed. It can only organize that determined product and it is not possible to lay a finger upon its generating principle in order to imitate it or to mechanistically reproduce it.

The inventions or ideations which are the basis for the originality and the beauty of the work of art, those which Kant calls 'aesthetic ideas', are not in control, as to their origins, of the artist who brings them into being. They would not exist without him, yet they are not even intentionally willed by him. Certainly they spring forth from the creative force of his imagination, disciplined by the energies of rationale, but the artist knows not from where they come nor how they come upon him, entirely dominating him. If they derive from an 'intention of beauty' completely determinable through concepts, then there would be no one better than their author to explain in an exhaustive and definitive way their contents that he wished to express as well as the rule of their organization. Not only does he not succeed in doing this, neither is anyone else capable if not by asymptotic process, which can never come close to comparing to the inexhaustible irradiant power of the work.

If we ask ourselves then, what the source might be upon which these prerogatives of the work of art depend, Kant's answer may seem disarming in its simplicity: at the origin of the creation of beauty there is a particular proportion in which the power of the imagination and the discipline of the intellect play freely with each other. As you can see, Kant uses the same elements as the basis of 'common sense'. In man there is an original accord between three heterogenous faculties: imagination, as the faculty of intuitions, intellect, as the faculty of rules, and reason, as the faculty of ideas. Belonging to a world of 'common' sense would not be possible if in each of us were not present and reciprocally finalized, the capacity to intuit indi-

³ *Ivi*, § 45, p. 307 (p. 186).

⁴ *Ivi*, § 47, p. 309 (p. 188).

vidually, addressed to sensitivity, and the capacity to conceive of the universal. This is the primary inheritance, shared by the common man and the genius, which makes it possible to express oneself, to communicate and comprehend each other. But in the creator of the work of art this common inheritance is present as a singular, inimitable proportion, from which is derived the originality, the exemplarity, the unintentionalness of the workings of the genius. Such are the gifts of this 'favorite of nature', whose capacity 'is apportioned immediately from the hand of nature' and which 'thus dies with him, until nature one day similarly endows another, who needs nothing more than an example in order to let the talent of which he is aware operate in a similar way'.⁵ This proportion of the capacities of the mind is the 'rare phenomenon',⁶ through which nature is capable of giving the 'rule to art',⁷ a talent which may be improved, formed, developed, yet never learned nor, through some artifice, taught or imitated.

Another aspect which takes the work of art away from a physico-deterministic consideration is constituted by that complex of characteristics which makes it related to the beings organized by nature. In speaking of the work of art as something which is 'living' it is not only a generous metaphor. It signifies that the work, considered in its objective existence, exhibits properties which are extremely similar to those of organisms. And in the work, considered as whole, every part is bound to every other part in such a way as to be mutually each to the other the cause and effect of their form; furthermore, every part of the work exists only *through* all of the others and its existence makes sense inasmuch as it is in view of the others and of the whole. This is similar as to how in a melody, taken as a unitary whole in its temporal articulation, each note exists in view of each of the others and at the same time, as it is embedded in the melodic development, it exists only through all of the others. And so it is the finality inside of the principle that permits comprehension of the peculiar organization of the work of art. Kant does not linger on these possible analogies of structure between the work of art and the organism. Nevertheless I believe that they help us to insert also the work of art in that peculiar dialectic between mechanism and finalism that Kant develops in the 'Critique of the Power of Teleological Judgment', and that may help to clarify in what sense the experience of beauty evades a mechanistic interpretation and has its roots in freedom.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ivi*, § 49, p. 318 (p. 196).

⁷ *Ivi*, § 46, p. 307 (p. 186).

It is well-known that for Kant 'it is quite certain that we can never adequately come to know the organized beings and their internal possibility in accordance with merely mechanistic principles of nature'.⁸ This insufficiency of a mechanistic explanation nevertheless does not authorize us to pose the finalistic perspective as the only plausible one. The distinction, worked out by Kant, is methodologically and epistemologically of great subtlety. Affirming that *all* generation of material things is possible only according to mechanistic laws or that *some* generations are not possible according to that law is a completely different thing from affirming that, in evaluating the events of material nature, I must use the principle of mechanism insofar as it is possible, while I can bring into play the principle of finality as soon as phenomena which I cannot understand without it present themselves. In the first case I formulate determinant judgments which are contradictory to each other precisely because they claim to say in themselves how natural things are constituted; in the second case I formulate reflective judgments compossible to each other, because through them I take on 'maxims' of evaluation that are 'regulative' to my way of knowing objects and not 'constitutive' of their way of being.

From this point of view the work of art is exposed, as with every other naturally organized being, to the same dialectic which arises from a mechanistic interpretation, on the one hand (today we might speak of naturalistic reduction), which attempts to conquer as much ground as possible, and on the other hand a finalistic perspective, which attempts to protect its own indispensability.⁹ In the age of Kant a naturalization in the mechanistic sense of the work of art would have probably appeared nonsensical, whereas today this is a real project. It aims for an even more ductile and exhaustive actuation of the naturalization, because it knows how to render functional to itself even those theoretical perspectives which have placed the mechanistic paradigm itself in crisis. Just think of the impetuous development that has happened in recent years with that branch of aesthetics which tries to apply the results of the most recent neurological research to the area of production and enjoyment of the work of art. This is not the place to go into the present debate about neuroaesthetics, which has all of

⁸ *Ivi*, § 75, p. 337 (p. 663).

⁹ If we were to rewrite today the antinomy of the teleological judgement, in the 'thesis' we would not express the mechanistic perspective more uniquely, but we would speak more expansively of 'naturalization' in all of its forms, of which mechanism is only a particular case.

the semblances of attempting an integral naturalization to the experience of beauty. But it is worth remembering that the first part of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* itself was placed at the center of attention as an exemplary reference text for this work of naturalization.

I think of the example of an essay by Kawabata and Zeki, which appeared in 2004 in the *Journal of Neurophysiology*, with the significant title 'Neural Correlates of Beauty'.¹⁰ Here the authors, after alluding to the platonic dialogues in which the theme of beauty is discussed (*Hippias Major*, *Phaedrus*, *The Banquet*), come to a halt with the 'Critique of the Power of Aesthetic Judgment', asking exactly the same questions as Kant as to the presuppositions which confer validity to our aesthetic judgment and about the conditions of possibility of the phenomenon of beauty. But, while Kant looks for the answers traveling, so to speak, the path upwards, towards the a priori structures of subjectivity, Kawabata and Zeki propose answering by experimentally traveling the path downwards, looking for the existence of specific neural connections, subject to the experimentation of the phenomenon of beauty, and asking themselves whether one or more cerebral structures in their workings, condition the formulation of the judgement of taste. The research, conducted upon a significant number of subjects using fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) demonstrated that every pronouncement of an aesthetic judgment corresponded to the activation of a set of specific cerebral areas (the medial orbito-frontal cortex, the anterior cingulate, the parietal cortex and the motor cortex), operating interconnectedly, even though their quotients of activity were differentiated according to the type of experience.

The relevance of this research certainly cannot be denied: especially as regards the visual arts, and they have already attained highly significant results,¹¹ demonstrating how important or, better, necessary it is to recognize the neural structures active in the aesthetic experience in order to understand how much the characteristics of the perceptive processes might influence and condition both the creation and enjoyment of beauty. Nevertheless it is legitimate to ask: is this side of research, in addition to being recognized as necessary, sufficient enough to explain the artistic phenomenon? Is the process of naturalization or, in Kantian terms, the way of

¹⁰ H. Kawabata and S. Zeki, Neural Correlates of Beauty, *Journal of Neurophysiology*, 91 (2004), pp. 1699-1705.

¹¹ See, for example, S. Zeki, *Inner Vision. An Exploration of Art and the Brain*, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York 1999.

mechanistic understanding capable of exhausting the entire realm of the experience of the beautiful? It is precisely here that the Kantian teaching on the dialectic of teleological judgment continues to manifest its efficacy.

The quoted authors are particularly careful and critically attentive, but it is right to remember that – in general – in those concerned with the mind-brain relationship, it is possible to notice a continual, significant lexical oscillation: those which are initially presented as neurally ‘correlated’, as substratums or ‘involved’ neural processes, ‘subtended’ or ‘associated’ with the experience of beauty, are transformed insensitively or with brusque passages (with no forewarning as with those of the authors) into neural processes that ‘generate’ aesthetic judgment, ‘determine the creation’ of the work of art, ‘originate’ the fundamental properties of the conscious experience of the beautiful.

It would seem to be a useless redundancy (though evidently it is not) to remember that being associated or correlated with something is very different from the generation or creation of that with which it is correlated and that taking for granted the equivalency of significant terms does not bring about a true and proper *metabasis eis allo ghenos*. In reality, in the passage from one linguistic level to another, we lay a finger upon that which Kant would call the transformation of a reflective judgment (regulative) into a determinant principle (constitutive) of the aesthetic experience. The maxim, on the basis of that which we ‘evaluate’ the involvement of the activation or the deactivation of the determinant cerebral areas when experiencing the beautiful, is in principle transformed into an exhaustive ‘explanation’ of the same. In this way though, we finish by taking for granted exactly what we are trying to explain and that is to say as it happens that the movements induced by electrochemical reactions, through which our nervous system codifies environmental interactions (listening to music, looking at a painting etc.), are then decodified, interpreted and expressed in a judgment of taste.

The reflective judgment, which evaluates a neural configuration in its concomitance with an aesthetic experience, knows very well that what it has before its eyes is a spacial distribution of nervous activity and that this is still separated by an abyss from the processes of interpretation or decodification with which a significant aesthetic is conferred to the neural sequences. If we turn the reflective judgment into determinant judgment either we don’t perceive the problem or we take for granted that the interpreter coincides with the interpreted, identifying himself with it. Knowledge of the way in which the information contained in our sensorial

receptors is codified in nervous impulses and how these are distributed at a cortical level is certainly necessary for the global comprehension of the aesthetic phenomenon. Nevertheless, in order that these processes of codification and distribution alone also be sufficient for the explanation of the phenomenon, it means surreptitiously bringing them to coincide with the activity of decodification and interpretation. And this is not at all taken for granted, rather is it one of the points in which our ignorance becomes denser. It is in fact not infrequent to find among the more attentive experts of this delicate passage the frank acknowledgement that the way in which 'the distribution of nervous impulses at the cortex level and in the successive phases of elaboration is decodified *is unknown*'.¹²

So, we can say, continuing to follow the Kantian suggestions, that even the work of art finds itself collocated inside a characteristically dialectical situation, in which two mutually irreducible perspectives nonetheless perform a positive function for its comprehension: one tends toward the naturalistic reduction of the aesthetic experience, the other tends to take away the finalized level to the interpretation and to the discovery of the sense. But, from the moment that both of the perspectives refer to the same object and find in the object itself sufficient reasons for existing one alongside the other it is legitimate to ask oneself if the unit, with which the work of art is presented, does not accede to a deeper principle, from which the two perspectives, given their irreducibility, spring forth as from a single root. In other words, we place the problem as to whether in that which remains unknown to us in the passage from one perspective to the other there is not hidden a foundation of their unity, inside of the nature of the work of art.

As we are reminded above, according to Kant the work of art comes from an original accord of the faculties common to all men and which renders possible the expression, the communication and the understanding of each other. But in the experience of the beautiful the original accord is configured like a game which has freedom as its constitutive character. That for Kant the production and the enjoyment of beautiful art have their first and last source in an experience of freedom is demonstrated by the rich mass of expressions with which he characterizes not only the enjoyment of the beautiful in general, but also, specifically, in the work of the genius. The agreement between the imagination and the higher rational faculties,

¹² L. Maffei and M. Fiorentini, *Arte e cervello*, Zanichelli, Bologna 1995, pp. 24-25 (my italics).

which is at the root of the aesthetic experience in its globality, does not only have the character of a game disinterested and released from cognitive or practical purposes, but in the game *free* from presupposed rules, a game that invents the rules as it is played: neither the enjoyment nor the creation of the finality of the form of beautiful art could exist without this original experience of being free from the restrictions of prefixed rules which are the basis for the judgment of taste. When we then pass from a simple 'evaluation' of the work of beauty to its 'production', then something more is necessary: the intervention must take place of the 'natural endowment of a subject for the *free* use of his cognitive faculties' which belongs only to the genius and to his capacity to create 'a new rule by which the talent shows itself exemplary'.¹³

In conclusion, a free use of the cognitive faculties is the specific experience of freedom which is the basis of the work of art and that, opening the access to the beautiful, allows for the actuation of a way of being that only man can experience.

¹³ *KU*, § 49, pp. 318 (p. 455).