SUBJECTIVITY IN HEGEL’S AESTHETICS

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This dissertation focuses on the relation between art and notions of individual and collective identity, or *subjectivity*, in the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel (1770 – 1831). Specifically, it addresses the disputed significance of the subject in relation to the purpose, value, and meaning of artworks central to Hegel’s philosophy of art. Numerous critics have readily dismissed Hegel’s aesthetic theory as a crude attempt to understand art by way of an arcane metaphysics that undervalues individual agency. Meanwhile, modern Hegelians, such as Theodor Adorno and Arthur Danto, view the so-called “end of art” thesis in Hegel as a welcome shift in emphasis toward the content or meaning of artworks, but have done little to quell the concern that Hegel’s aesthetics marginalizes the role of the subject. By contrast, this dissertation re-examines Hegel’s philosophy of art through an in-depth analysis of what we might call “aesthetic subjectivity”—the status of the individual subject in the context of aesthetic theory—that is overlooked by opponents and proponents of Hegel alike.

Focusing primarily on Hegel’s oft-neglected *Lectures on Aesthetics*, this dissertation identifies three distinct aspects of aesthetic subjectivity: aesthetic
experience, aesthetic freedom, and aesthetic imagination (both creative and interpretive). A closer look at the development of these categories in the Aesthetics challenges the standard profile of Hegel’s philosophy in three ways. First, it reveals a more constitutive role of subjectivity within the broader canon of Hegel’s thought, and does so with a level of clarity and concreteness absent in many of the earlier, better-known works. Second, it blurs the standard dichotomy between “subjectivist” and “objectivist” aesthetic theories: Hegel’s philosophy of art begins as an internal, dialectical development of core aesthetic doctrines in Kant, such as purposiveness, disinterestedness, imagination, and artistic genius. This continuity thesis in turn provides a more nuanced historical analysis of Hegel’s relation to 19th century German romanticism, including Goethe, Schiller, and Friedrich Schlegel. Finally, a new theory of aesthetic subjectivity in Hegel offers a timely and much-needed alternative to the postmodern emphasis on the “negativity” of art, focusing instead on art’s potential to offer a positive form of social and political dialogue.
For Candace, of course.
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CHAPTER 1:
INTRODUCTION: SUBJECTIVITY IN HEGEL’S AESTHETICS

“We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands motionless, waiting for us.”

1.1 Hegel’s Lectures on Aesthetics: a Gap in the System

Despite a general revitalization of scholarship in Hegel’s philosophy in recent decades, comparatively little attention has been paid to Hegel’s philosophy of art, particularly within the English-language tradition. While art plays a central role in a wide range of Hegelian texts, the full-throated version of his aesthetic theory is


contained in a series of lectures compiled and published by his student, Heinrich Hotho, as *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*. These lectures, which span over a decade of Hegel’s mature intellectual career,⁴ are considered to be among his most successful and well-attended lectures,⁵ and exhibit not only a rich understanding of art’s historical development, but also a clear vision of its philosophical significance.

For contemporary scholars, the *Lectures on Aesthetics* serve a twofold function. First, they serve as a canonical text in art scholarship, giving shape, either directly or indirectly, to three subsequent generations of aesthetic theory in Europe.⁶ Second, the *Lectures* provide a unique vantage point from which to view the broader oeuvre of Hegel’s thought with a level of clarity and concreteness absent in many of his better-known works. According to at least one prominent scholar, Hegel’s lectures on aesthetics are “a treasure trove of perspicuous insights into his

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⁴ From 1818, while Hegel was at Heidelberg, to 1829, during his final years at the University of Berlin.


⁶ In the nineteenth century, these include, in chronological order: Karl Schnaase, Alois Reigl, and Erwin Panofsky. See Lionel Gossman’s *Basel in the Age of Burckhardt: a Study in Unseasonable Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 347-405. Gossman presents a convincing case that even the self-proclaimed Kantian art historian, Jacob Burckhardt, was profoundly influenced by Hegel’s thought. Later influences in the philosophy of art include, most notably, (and with some qualification): Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, György Lukács, Benedetto Croce, and Arthur Danto.
central philosophical views.” Surprisingly, however, even amidst the tide of recent literature on Hegel’s theoretical and political writings, there appears but an occasional monograph devoted to Hegel’s philosophy of art. One modest aim of this dissertation, then, is to make some headway in addressing this lacuna that unfortunately still exists in our knowledge of Hegel.

1.2 The Problem of Aesthetic Subjectivity

The more ambitious goal of the present undertaking, however, is to reintegrate Hegel into the context of contemporary discussions in the philosophy of art. Making Hegel’s aesthetics a part of that conversation, rather than its point of departure, is an ambitious task in the sense that it involves challenging some basic assumptions about that theory as well as its role in the development of modern aesthetics. In broad terms, then, the aim here is to modernize Hegel’s aesthetic theory. While many of the central tenets of German idealist metaphysics rest with the nineteenth century, the fundamental commitments to freedom, intersubjectivity, and social rationality that underwrite Hegel’s philosophy of art can provide a useful resource for addressing present-day hopes and doubts about the continued relevance of art.

At issue in this dissertation is how Hegel’s theory of art can do justice to what we might call “aesthetic subjectivity,” which refers generally to the status of the individual subject in the context of aesthetic theory. This appears to be a problem

for Hegel, given his characterization of artistic beauty as the “sensuous expression of the Idea [das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee].”

This formulation of beauty suggests that the primary task of art is to express a particular content, and indeed, a content that is bound to a complex set of historical, ontological, and metaphysical presuppositions. It is in this sense that Hegel speaks of art as a form of truth or knowledge, an expression of meaning above and beyond whatever pleasure or enjoyment the work of art might afford us. From a modern standpoint, this conception of beauty as truth, as a venue for disclosing the “deepest interests” of the human spirit, or Geist (LFA, 7), might seem somewhat indifferent to, or even dismissive of, the kinds of significance or satisfaction that individuals commonly attach to works of art. Given this picture, we might ask: What role does the subject—the artist or the spectator—play in the appreciation, estimation, or interpretation of art in Hegel’s aesthetics? According to the standing verdict—very little, if any at all.

So, if Hegel’s philosophy of art is to have any viability today, it must come to terms with the problem of aesthetic subjectivity. The thesis I advance in this dissertation is that a full-fledged account of aesthetic subjectivity is not only compatible with Hegel’s philosophy of art, but is an essential component of it. That

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9 Cf. LFA, 7-9; 55; 152; 155.
is, in contrast to the picture just given, I think a closer analysis of Hegel’s conception of artistic truth reveals that the objective content of art is dialectically bound, rather than opposed, to a conception of the subjective context of aesthetic experience. Before stating the problem of aesthetic subjectivity and the proposed solution more precisely, however, it is worth taking a moment to consider how the traditional view of Hegel’s philosophy of art is limited by a conception of modern aesthetics, shared by critics and proponents of Hegel alike, as fundamentally divided between Hegelian-inspired theories of the art object on the one hand and Kantian-inspired theories of art’s effect on the perceiving subject on the other.

1.3 “Reception” vs. “Artwork” Aesthetics

As Hegel makes clear in the opening paragraphs of the Lectures on Aesthetics, the primary objective of a philosophy of art is to elucidate the “Concept” of art, and to explain art’s development in terms of this Concept. While Hegel’s emphasis on a philosophically articulated Concept of art gained significant traction in nineteenth century European aesthetics, it has come under intense scrutiny in recent times for its apparent neglect of important subjective considerations about art. This critique consists of various strands, and echoes a much broader allegation against German idealism concerning the subordination of subjectivity to a grand “system” of philosophy. But much of the problem of aesthetic subjectivity that I am concerned

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10 Hegel notes straightaway the inadequacy of the term “aesthetics” on account of its literal reference to a science of sensation, or feeling, from which he seeks to distance a philosophy of art, properly so called (LFA, 1).
with here appears to originate within the influential movement of “reception aesthetics” [Rezeptionsästhetik] that began to emerge in Germany in the late 1960’s. Motivated, on the one hand, by the compelling call for a return to the experience of art in John Dewey’s *Art and Experience*, and on the other, by a spirit of leftist reform sweeping the political and intellectual culture Europe at the time, a number of philosophers in Germany sought to reclaim the priority of the aesthetic subject from the grip of so-called “artwork” aesthetics.\(^1^1\) This involved prioritizing aesthetic *experience* over the concept of art, *form* over content, *imagination* over truth, and *indeterminacy* over fixed conceptual analysis. The pro-Kantian, anti-Hegelian tendencies of Rezeptionsästhetik are evident, for example, in the remarks of Rüdiger Bubner, a leading proponent of this movement who asserts that, “If one wants to do justice to the actual phenomena, one has to abstain from a priori idealizations through concepts,” suggesting instead that “the approach which remains available is through the original aesthetic experience.”\(^1^2\) Accordingly, Bubner reaches the verdict


that “it is Kant, and not Hegel, who is the author to be more fruitfully explored in the context of modern art.”

While these thinkers rightly drew attention to the implicit socio-political significance of aesthetic experience, imaginative freedom, and polysemical interpretive practices, they wrongly, I believe, came to define that movement in purely oppositional terms, as a counter to the perceived threat of cultural hegemony brought on by the existing order of idealist aesthetics. This opposition is clear, for example, when Hans Robert Jauß, who developed a reception theory of literary criticism, announces that a new literary hermeneutics expressly rejects the idea of “a perfect taxonomy, a closed system of signs and formalistic model of description,” and seeks instead “to conceive the work of art in terms of its effect and reception, and its history as a process of communication between the author and the public, between the past and the present”

In response to the perceived over-rationalization of art in the idealist tradition, aesthetic theory of the past several decades has made a decisive shift away from Hegelian aesthetics to the so-called “subjectivist” aesthetics of Kant. Even among the most recent critics, Kant’s Critique of Judgment is regarded as the much-needed roadmap back to an aesthetic theory of the subject. Jean-Marie Schaeffer,

13 Ibid.

14 Hans R. Jauß, Ästhetische Erfahrung und literarische Hermeneutik (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2007), p. 20; my translation.

for example, argues that the attribution of a metaphysical status to art—what Scheaffer calls the “sacralization” of art in the post-Kantian tradition of aesthetics—effectively disenfranchised the significance of imaginative play and open-ended interpretation that Kant emphasized.\footnote{Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age: philosophy of art from Kant to Heidegger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). An important part of my thesis is to distinguish Hegel’s view from the rather generalized account of “speculative aesthetics” that Schaeffer offers. In this respect, my argument parallels a similar critique made by Karl Ameriks, who supports Schaeffer’s thesis that the rationalist tradition of aesthetics leads to a general devaluation of aesthetic experience, but challenges the conception of German romanticism as a cohesive, monolithic movement that his argument presupposes. Cf. Ch. 9 of *Kant and The Historical Turn: Philosophy as Critical Interpretation* (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press Oxford; Oxford University Press, 2006). Similarly, I want to offer a more nuanced account of Hegel’s role in the “speculative” tradition of aesthetic theory that emphasizes, contrary to Schaeffer’s claim, its continuity with Kantian aesthetics.\footnote{Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 7.}

In other words, the contemporary critique of Hegel’s philosophy of art is presented as a mutually exclusive \textit{choice} between a politically regressive metaphysics of the Concept of art on the one hand, and on the other, an aesthetics that pays adequate tribute to the pleasure and richness of subjective aesthetic experience.

Still others regard this distinction as an asset of Hegel’s theory rather than a liability. Adorno, for his part, regards Hegel’s conception of artistic truth as an important advance upon Kantian formalism. As much as his own view may be regarded as “Hegelian” in this respect, however, by reducing Hegel’s view to that of a “content-aesthetics” [\textit{Inhaltsästhetik}], in the end Adorno adds his voice to the common accusation that that Hegel “helps transform art into an ideology of domination.”\footnote{Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 7.} By contrast, I wish to suggest that we can retain the Hegelian orientation toward artistic truth without conflating that view with a mere account of...
artistic content. Nor, for that matter, does the integration of aesthetic experience and artistic truth require that we renounce the affirmative character of modern art. Instead, it can be argued that the purely negative imperative that Adorno imposes on art—to perpetually remind us of the misery, brutality and vulnerability of a modern world besieged by instrumental rationality—has itself been overturned by the sheer diversity of objectives reflected in contemporary art; I see the relevance of Hegel’s view as consisting precisely in its theoretical versatility towards this diversity.

By equal measure, Arthur Danto, who has arguably done more to advance a Hegelian view in modern art than any contemporary thinker, reaffirms this dichotomy, stating that “nothing more sharply distinguishes the philosophy of art in Kant and in Hegel than the fact that taste is a central concept for Kant whereas it is not even discussed in Hegel.” While I agree that Hegel’s emphasis on content marks a significant improvement on Kant’s emphasis on taste, I regard that view as an extension of, not an alternative to, the set of concerns raised by the Kantian aesthetic tradition. One only gets so far by invoking Hegel’s name in connection with the anti-aestheticism of modern art. Once art succeeds in detaching itself from what Duchamp called “retinal” pleasure, it will, by its own logic, eventually renounce its own renunciation of beauty. And indeed, at present there are telling indications of a “new aesthetic” that espouses, if not an open embrace of beauty, at least a sincere

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welcome back from its former banishment from the avant garde.\textsuperscript{19} There is, therefore, a certain timeliness to emphasizing the reconciliatory potential of Hegel’s view over its factional allegiance.

Whether it is to condone or condemn, the characterization of Hegel as the flag-bearer of an objectivist, content-oriented theory of art overlooks the important continuity between artwork and reception aesthetics. Hegel himself certainly sees this continuity in describing Kant’s \textit{Critique of Judgment} as the “starting point for the true comprehension of the beauty of art” (LFA, 60). Even if he sees the endpoint of this task in his \textit{Lectures on Aesthetics}, it essential to bear in mind that the various doctrines set forth are dialectically generated from \textit{within} the Kantian paradigm. But the prevailing forces in the philosophy of art have lost sight of this continuity and instead have clung to traditional dichotomy described above. The view I develop in this dissertation, then, responds not only to a particular misconception about Hegel’s view of art, but a general misconception regarding the incompatibility of artwork and reception aesthetics. Today’s artworld no longer reflects such a divided landscape of aesthetic theory. And I believe a fresh look at what Hegel actually says about art reveals the extent to which he aims to \textit{reconcile} his views about the content or meaning of art with the prevailing views about aesthetic form or

\begin{itemize}
\item Artists such as Cai Guo Qiang, Anish Kapoor, and Richard Wright are producing works that pay sincere homage to beautiful form; and they do so without being “merely” beautiful, that is, without sacrificing complexity of content. That Richard Wright’s consciously “aesthetic” painting was the 2009 winner of the Tate Museum’s esteemed Turner Prize is a telling indication of beauty’s return to art. \textit{The Guardian}, 2009. Richard Wright: 2009 Turner Prize Winner, December 7. On the return of beauty in contemporary art, cf. Wendy Steiner, \textit{Venus in Exile: the Rejection of Beauty in Twentieth-Century Art} (New York: Free Press, 2001); Jeremy Gilbert Rolfe, \textit{Beauty and the Contemporary Sublime} (New York: Allworth Press, 1999).
\end{itemize}
aesthetic experience. In what follows, I offer a more schematic outline of how the argument I’ve presented so far will be developed in this dissertation. But first, I want to say something about the general strategy that Hegel deploys in the Aesthetics, as it is central to the particular arguments I develop.

1.4 The “End of Art” Thesis

One stumbling block for any positive account of Hegel’s aesthetics will be the so-called “end of art” thesis. Although Hegel actually never uses the phrase “end of art” in the Aesthetics, he does maintain that art is “a thing of the past for us” (LFA, 11), by which he means that it exhausts its highest expressive potential in Greek figurative sculpture, and thus occasions the rise of “higher” forms of thought in religion and philosophy. This claim obviously needs a good deal of qualification. One thing that is clear, however, is that the successive forms of art—symbolic, classical, and romantic—relate respectively to the rise, peak, and decline of art for Hegel. We cannot speak of “art” in any univocal sense in Hegel’s aesthetic theory, and this makes it difficult to make any general claims about Hegel’s philosophy of art. Thus, whatever we have to say about art’s capacity to express truth or knowledge will turn largely on how we interpret Hegel’s notorious statements concerning the fate of art.

For a long time, the caricature of Hegel as the bogeyman of post-Classical art was the status quo in Hegelian scholarship. Benedetto Croce helped inaugurate this view with the blunt assertion that Hegel “passes in review the successive forms of
art, shows the progressive steps of internal consumption and lays the whole in its grave." This view subsequently became the default position for a number of other commentators. Roughly, the argument is this. Art, along with religion and philosophy, has the vocation of drawing human consciousness nearer to a full disclosure of reality—what Hegel calls “Absolute Knowing.” But this disclosure occurs specifically in sensuous, non-discursive mode of knowledge. Since for Hegel the ultimate structure of reality is conceptually constituted, the sensuous form is inherently limited in its capacity to convey truth. Consciousness, in its quest for Absolute Knowing will seek out more discursive form of thought, the culmination of which Hegel finds in philosophy. It follows—so the argument goes—that art is ultimately a dispensable phase of spirit’s journey to self-knowledge. Advocates of the “end of art” thesis seize on this transition as evidence that Hegel effectively declares the death sentence for art in the Aesthetics. This implies two distinct but related claims. The first is that, since art is limited in ways that the “higher” forms of thinking (i.e., religion and philosophy) are not, Hegel maintains that art is inherently an inferior mode of knowledge. The second is that, insofar as religion and philosophy are called upon to fulfill the absolute task of spirit where art comes up


22 See Section III of the Philosophy of Mind (292ff.). In the Phenomenology (424ff) art is presented as an aspect of religion, which Hegel refers to as “Art-Religion.”
short, art is altogether relinquished of this task in Hegel's view, and consigned to its
demise in romantic art. Together, these two claims give the distinct impression
that Hegel's philosophy of art is a philosophy against art, that his aesthetic theory is
in the end anti-aesthetic.

More recently, however, there has been a push among commentators to
rethink Hegel's allegedly flat-footed dismissal of art in favor of philosophy. There
are a number of reasons for this turn of thought. For one thing, this image of Hegel
as the enemy of modern art does not jive well with his obviously deep reverence for
Shakespeare, Goethe, Dutch painting, and other romantic works of art presumed to
be “dead” on this view. Something was very much alive in romantic art for Hegel that
warranted his devoting such an extensive analysis in the Aesthetics of their
contribution to meaningful human experience. Accordingly, it is primarily this
something in modern art that concerns me in Hegel's account. Even if we pronounce
the end of art, it is an altogether different, and I think more fruitful, question
whether this is a boon or a bane to the continued existence of art. It may be that an
end of art (at least in Hegel's sense) is a good thing, as far as art and artistic practices
are concerned.

Second, and more importantly, the so-called “end of art” thesis overlooks the
inherently synthetic and affirmative character of negation for Hegel, and thus does

23 The highly anachronistic use of the term “romantic” in Hegel designates the whole of Post-
Classical art. This includes, but is not identical to, the familiar aesthetic genre of romanticism.

24 E.g., J.N. Findlay, Curtis Carter, Stephen Houlgate, Karsten Harries, Fred Rush, Robert
Pippin, William Desmond, et al.
not take into account the potentially positive, reconciliatory value of art’s coming to
terms with its own limits. So, as these commentators correctly point out, we have
at least some reason to regard the death of art thesis itself with a certain degree of
skepticism, and to suspect that a strict hierarchy may be an overly simplistic way of
explaining the relation of art to philosophy. At any rate, my position in this
dissertation is that, while Hegel’s claim that art is “a thing of the past” for us
constitutes a formidable obstacle for developing a positive account of artistic truth,
it is important to situate such claims in the broader context of his metaphysical and
epistemological commitments. By doing so, I will argue that the connection of
Hegel’s aesthetics with speculative philosophy does not compromise the
significance of art in the way that many commentators have suggested.

1.5 An Alternative View: The Continuity Thesis

I have identified the central problem addressed in this dissertation as the problem
of aesthetic subjectivity. Stated more precisely, the problem consists in three parts,

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25 Here my own analysis differs from that of Adorno’s. While Adorno certainly believes that
art has this function of showing us our deepest interests, he patently denies that art should aim to
reconcile us to the grim reality of modern culture—it shows us what cannot be realized in late
capitalist society. My take on the significance of art is slightly more optimistic: I see the critical
potential of art (in keeping with Hegel) as ultimately something affirmative in the sense that it points
beyond that which it criticizes, namely, to human freedom.

26 Jean-Marie Schaeffer, for example, presents a problematic relation of Hegel’s aesthetic
time to the system of Absolute Idealism. The problem, he argues, is that the kind of “absolutized”
philosophical system characteristic of German Idealism presents a reductive approach to art: instead
of starting from an aesthetic ‘given’, as Kant does, art is derived from an all-inclusive system that is
already in tact. Art of the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger. (Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 2000). For a more nuanced and historically grounded take on this claim, see Karl
Ameriks’ “Hegel’s Aesthetics: New Perspectives on its Response to Kant and Romanticism” in Kant
each having to do with an essential aspect of aesthetic subjectivity claimed to be absent in Hegel’s philosophy of art, namely: aesthetic experience, imagination, and interpretation. Accordingly, the dissertation is divided into three parts: The first deals with the possibility of erecting an account of aesthetic theory in Hegel’s system; the second concerning the role of the imagination in that experience; and the last has to do with the kind of interpretive analysis entailed by such an account. In each section, I argue that Hegel preserves that aspect of aesthetic subjectivity deemed essential to a reception theory of art while dialectically incorporating it into broader considerations about the content, creation, interpretation, and social significance of art.

The initial task, then, is to provide a basic sketch of the kind of aesthetic experience implicit in Hegel’s philosophy of art. This I take up in the next chapter, in which I argue that, although Hegel’s primary concern is to explicate the “Concept” or essence of art, the conceptual analysis he develops is grounded in a phenomenological claim about how we actually experience works of art. What separates the work of art from ordinary sensuous objects in Hegel’s ontology is that it calls forth a special awareness that it is the product of conscious human thought. This insight draws on Kant’s distinction between natural and artistic beauty, according to which the work of art necessarily appears as a product of human intent. But in place of the unresolved tensions left by Kant’s attempt to assimilate the two, Hegel argues that the experience of art is superior to that of nature precisely because we experience the work of art as a bearer of meaning, as having what I call “meaningful form.” Thus, on the interpretation I propose, the ontological
account of the work of art as the “sensuous appearance of the Idea” is inextricably bound to a phenomenological account of how the work of art appears to us in aesthetic experience. To put this claim somewhat differently, for Hegel, aesthetic content necessarily presupposes an aesthetic context, and any attempt to construe one without the other will be fundamentally incomplete.

This view explains the significance of Hegel’s discussion and reformulation of the traditional concept of “Schein,” or aesthetic appearance. For Hegel, art’s truth consists not in the artistic presentation of metaphysical content, but in the transformative effect that the context of art has on a virtually limitless range of content, from the divine to the banal. The beauty of art, in other words, consists not in the content itself, as is commonly thought to be Hegel’s view, but in its amplification or enhancement of content already given in the course of everyday life. And we can begin to articulate an account of aesthetic experience in terms of the way in which content “appears” in the context of art.

On the other hand, of course, the majority of objects produced by conscious human intention are not works of art, do not have this transformative effect on us, and do not typically merit any kind of special perceptual analysis. So, a further condition is required if we are to distinguish the aesthetic experience in any philosophically salient way, not only from the experience of nature, but also from the kind of interaction we have with ordinary products of intelligent design. That condition is expressed in the “common idea” that the artwork is regarded as an “end in itself” (LFA, 25). Ordinary things like cars and watches and telephones can certainly qualify as aesthetically beautiful objects, but unlike the car or the watch or
the telephone, the work of art is not associated with any determinate end or purpose. This conception of the work of art as independent from the aims and interests of human desire occupies a central, though commonly overlooked, place in Hegel’s ontology of art. So, in the third chapter, I examine in greater depth what this conception of “aesthetic freedom” consists in, and what bearing it might have on the subject of aesthetic experience.

Again, however, Hegel’s view of a non-utilitarian conception of art is deeply indebted to Kant, and particularly his notion of “disinterested” pleasure as the basis of aesthetic judgment. The contemplation of beauty, Hegel writes, “leaves objects alone a being inherently free” (LFA, 114). This means that, in considering a work of art, we do not regard the work in terms of its moral, pedagogical, or commercial value; we treat it as an end in itself. But here Hegel has an opportunity to deploy one of the fundamental precept of his practical philosophy in aesthetic theory that, in contrast to the stricter interpretations of Kantian disinterestedness, aesthetic freedom in no way requires us to abstract the work of art from cultural, historical, and political conditions in order to gain a true estimation of its beauty. Like Schiller, Hegel’s aim is to give an account of the social implications of disinterested aesthetic pleasure. Yet unlike Kant or Schiller, Hegel mobilizes a conception of practical freedom as socially normative in order to describe the aesthetic experience as potentially emancipatory without, however, reducing the work of art to a mere instrument of social and moral betterment. By treating the work of art as an end in itself, we in effect free ourselves from a consumptive relation to the world in order to better orient ourselves within it.
Understood as such, Hegel’s account of aesthetic freedom guards against two historically untenable views of art that have since re-emerged in the context of contemporary aesthetic theory: The first is the tendency to enlist art as a means of advancing explicitly ideological ends (e.g. as propaganda); The second is to treat art or artistic beauty as an eternal, timeless concept, detached from the tissue of historical and cultural conditions in which works of art are produced. The aim of the second chapter, then, is to situate Hegel’s basic notion of the work of art is an “end in itself” within this complex historical context and to show how a robust account of aesthetic freedom unfolds dialectically in response to these competing elements in Kant and Schiller. In doing so, I argue that Hegel presents a relevant phenomenological account of the way that art allows us to relate to our physical environment in a non-consumptive way without abandoning the sense in which it inevitably responds to, reflects, and embodies our social environment.

Having sketched the basic contours of an account of aesthetic experience in Hegel, Chapter Four examines the role of the artist who creates the work of art. In particular, Hegel’s account of artistic imagination, or Phantasie, extends this account of socially constituted freedom to the creative activity of the artist. He construes Phantasie in similarly paradoxical terms, as an activity that is free in virtue of its normative commitments. Beginning with the presupposition that art is “essentially made for man’s apprehension,” Hegel argues that artistic production is a fundamentally social enterprise, and as such, an account of imagination must tend not only to the relation between artist and artwork, but also—and in some ways, more importantly—to the relation between artist and audience.
Hegel’s emphasis on this latter point in his account of *Phantasie* explains some of his reservations about the concept of the artistic “genius” brought to prominence among his romantic contemporaries. It is often overlooked that Hegel sides with Kant in rejecting simple imitation theories of creation. He does not reject the Kantian doctrine of genius, but rather is wary of the implications of conceiving genius solely as the capacity to “give the rule to art” (CJ, 307), as if inventing norms were the artist’s gambit. Unlike Kant, Hegel articulates the lawfulness of creativity, not in terms of taste, but rather in terms of the inherent sociality of imagination. It is this line of thought (coupled, of course, with a measure of personal animosity) that instigates Hegel’s notoriously fierce critique of romantic irony as a principle of artistic production. And while his argument tends to give way to an admittedly overstated polemic against Friedrich Schlegel, I think he makes a valid point that, in creating a work of art, imagination does not create a private world within the artist, but rather engages in the substance of a shared reality and presents this in distinctly artistic form. Allowing, then, that Hegel is working with an oversimplified conception of the romantic project, I argue that his notion of artistic “sincerity”—the idea that artistic creativity is a deeply normative practice, bound to public consciousness and shared social experience—poses a genuine challenge to the irony of genius, and also gives us reason to question whether the notion of genius that we’ve come to inherit from 18th and 19th century aesthetic theory is a suitable category for understanding artistic subjectivity today.

In the fifth and final chapter, I turn to the imagination of the spectator and examine the difficult question of aesthetic interpretation. It is a difficult question for
Hegel particularly because it involves the claim that the work of art functions as a form of knowledge or truth, which appears to trade interpretive pluralism and open-endedness for complete discursive clarity. But the evolution of Hegel’s notion of artistic truth is a complex maneuver beginning with his early critique of Kant’s account of productive imagination and evolving in the Aesthetics into a conception of art as a highly reflexive and irreducibly aesthetic form of interpersonal dialogue. His initial attraction to the idea (per impossible for Kant) of a purely sensuous form of knowledge, or “intellectual intuition,” later yields the claim that the content of artistic truth is accessible only by way of imaginative experience, and that this experience is profoundly shaped by the particular historical and cultural context of the individual subject. This means, on the one hand, that I can acknowledge certain objective restraints about what the artwork is about while at the same time acknowledging that the kind of imaginative interplay between the guiding theme of a work and its particular details will be largely dependent on the context of that relation.

Thus, in contrast to current appeals to conceptual indeterminacy and instability of meaning suggested by Kant’s account of imagination, I argue that a much richer form of aesthetic experience is available through the reflexive interaction between the spectator and the work of art. Hegel famously describes the work of art as “a thousand-eyed Argus” (LFA, 111), an object not only to be looked at, but an object that, in some sense, looks back at us. For Hegel, art makes a claim upon us, and calls upon us to engage with it as “a dialogue with everyone who confronts it” (LFA, 264). This dialogue is not possible, however if imagination is
simply give free reign to make of the artwork what it will. The artwork is ineluctably "about" something, however broadly or narrowly construed, and a reflexively communicative experience with the artwork is possible only by recognizing how the limits of imagination are inscribed by the particular socio-historical grounding of the imagining subject. The *Odyssey* is, broadly speaking, about the homeward journey of the title character following the Trojan War. But the *meaning* of this, and its relation to the intricate details and sub-narratives woven into the plot, is as much a product of my being a young, white, educated American male in the 21st century as it is a product of Homer's poetic intentions. And it is this concept of art as reflexive experience, I argue, that allows Hegel's aesthetic theory to reconcile the subjective, experiential aspect of art with its objective, content-oriented, expressive aspect.

This brings us back to the "end of art" thesis. I mentioned that Hegel's controversial claim that art is "a thing of the past" (LFA, 11) has been variously interpreted as a death warrant for art or a much-needed liberation from its quasi-religious obligation. I tend to side with the latter view, although I qualify this by offering an account of art's continued potential to elicit a form of imaginative dialogue, even among a deeply fractured and disparate social consciousness of the present. Underlying the transition from Greek art—the pinnacle of artistic beauty—to the art of the romantic era, after all, is the recognition of the historical transition from social unity to increasingly *individualized* forms of subjective identity. For the

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27 In the extant literature addressing Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, attention on the end of art thesis is vastly disproportionate in relation to other central doctrines of that theory, which are in fact essential to Hegel's claim about an end of art.
Hegelian account of aesthetic imagination which has relevance for the post-romantic period of art, it will be crucial not only to reinterpret the lines of this subjective orientation toward art along national and cultural lines, but also to consider whether this account might be further expanded to accommodate radically individualized modes of identity. If so, then such a historicist account of art might provide a model of aesthetic experience that acknowledges and gives full expression to the diversity and complexity of a distinctly modern form of subjectivity.
“The best baker in the city bakes artful, delicious torts. Insofar as he does this in the bakery, he is only a very good baker. If he does this in a museum, with a purpose, that goes beyond baking torts, he is an artist.”

- Marina Abramovic.28

Considered in abstraction, the deepest fracture dividing modern aesthetic theory seems to run along methodological lines. On the one side of this divide is Kant and an impressive legacy of “reception” theories of art29 concerned chiefly with the various responses to beauty in the subject, such as aesthetic experience, aesthetic pleasure, aesthetic judgment, emotions, feelings of the sublime, and so on. On the other side of this divide is Hegel, along with Hegelian-inspired “artwork” theories,30 which focus


29 In philosophical aesthetics, this tradition extends from the early German romantics (esp. August Wilhelm and Friedrich Schlegel, Novalis, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Ludwig Tieck) to the linguistic aesthetics of Hamann and Herder. It also has had a prominent place in both contemporary art criticism (esp. Clement Greenberg) as well as contemporary philosophy of art (the Rezeptionsästhetik movement in Germany, French deconstructionism, and analytic philosophy of art in the United States).

30 Hegel’s influence was primarily limited to the relatively short-lived heyday of idealist art criticism, represented by (in chronological order): Karl Schnaase, Alois Reigl, and Erwin Panofsky.
instead on questions of definition, aesthetic content, expression, and the ontological status of the beautiful object. Indeed, standard accounts of this philosophical narrative typically yield the following kind of comparison:

Whilst Kant's name has principally been associated with the development of a formalist aesthetics, Hegel is seen to represent an alternative, content-based approach which takes into account the social and historical context in which works of art are made and appreciated.\(^{31}\)

And, from a certain historical and conceptual distance, the characteristic division holds true. Kant's inquiry proceeds regressively, seeking to give an account of how subjective responses to aesthetic phenomena (including both nature and art) can possibly yield universally valid judgments of taste. Hegel, meanwhile, begins with the Concept of beauty itself (pertaining strictly to art) from which he seeks to derive both the particular forms of art (symbolic, classic, romantic) as well as the individual arts themselves (architecture, sculpture, painting, music, poetry).

Given this contrastive image of modern philosophical aesthetics, it is understandable that contemporary aesthetic theory has recently found its way back to Kant as the champion of aesthetic subjectivity *par excellence*, with unrivaled emphasis on concepts of aesthetic autonomy, imaginative free play, and interpretive indeterminacy. Accordingly, Hegel is criticized for his alleged espousal of precisely


the opposite. As Annamarie Gethmann-Siefert points out in her diagnosis of the present antagonism toward Hegel’s aesthetics:

> Often it is not just the individual views of philosophical aesthetics that fall into ill repute, but the very supposition of such a methodically oriented analysis of art, and thus of a philosophical grasp of art in general. Every conceptual analysis of art, every systematic representation, so the objection goes, marginalizes the phenomenon and neglects the lively experience of art.  

What Gethmann-Siefert rightly emphasizes is that what is at issue here is not so much the substance of Hegel’s view as it is its methodology. For if anything resembling an account of aesthetic subjectivity can be found in the *Aesthetics*, the first task is to show that Hegel’s attempt to derive a conception of art systematically from a set of speculative philosophical principles does not in principle denigrate the work of art and the integrity of aesthetic experience.

This can be done, I argue, by examining the philosophical intricacies of these respective methodological approaches. In doing so, I think we will find a complex association of ideas and objectives that easily traverse the presumed fault line of modern aesthetic theory. Certainly much has been done on the side of recent Kantian scholarship to show that his supposedly formalist or “subjectivist” aesthetics—with its attendant concepts of aesthetic autonomy, imaginative free play, and interpretive indeterminacy—can accommodate a robust theory of

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content. But there remains an unwillingness on the part of both proponents and opponents of Hegel alike to give equal consideration to the possibility that his supposedly “objectivist” philosophy of art might nonetheless yield a rich account of aesthetic experience. As contemporary philosophy of art ushers in a return to the subject-centered aesthetics of Kant in response to the perceived over-rationalization of art in the speculative philosophy, Danto and other Hegelian theories of art have done little to dispel the view that Hegel has much interesting to say about art beyond the question of its ontology.

In marked contrast to both proponents and opponents of Hegel alike, then, I argue here for what I call the “continuity thesis” of Hegel’s aesthetics—that Hegel’s aesthetic theory represents an internal, dialectical development of Kant’s general theory of taste rather than a radical break from it. Despite apparently irreconcilable methodological differences, the Lectures on Aesthetics are—as Hegel himself clearly indicates—an extension of, rather than alternative to, the account of aesthetic experience outlined in the Critique of Judgment.

The advantage of this approach is twofold. First, it allows us to address the claim of methodological insensitivity on Hegel’s part. In the first part of the present chapter, I will parse out the various strands of this objection, and show that it is the speculative orientation which in fact leads him to proceed from a basic set of assumptions, or “common ideas,” about the nature and purpose of art. In the next

section, I focus specifically on the first of these common ideas, namely, that the work of art is a distinctly human product, fundamentally distinguishable from nature. I argue that Hegel’s philosophy of art preserves the subjective character of aesthetic experience in Kant while offering a more robust account of the notion, tentatively suggested in §§43-54 of the third Critique, that the experience of fine art is essentially conditioned by the appearance, or “Schein,” of content or meaning. The continuity thesis therefore has the further advantage of allowing us to split the difference with the prevailing Kantian view. On the one hand, we can advance the evaluative claim that the Aesthetics constitutes a significant advance upon Kant’s initial insights on the more complex interrelations of form and content inherent in the aesthetic experience of art, as opposed to nature. On the other hand, we will see that conceding a fundamental phenomenological distinction between artistic and natural beauty in no way compromises the consistency of Kant’s doctrine of reflecting judgment. As with any theory, its greatness is measured by its capacity to open up new avenues of inquiry.

2.1 The Reductivist Claim

In the Aesthetics, Hegel defines the beauty of art as “the sensible appearance of the Idea.”\(^{34}\) We need not drag out all the metaphysical machinery required to unpack this claim in order to see that its admittedly arcane formulation easily lends itself to

\(^{34}\) Knox translates this phrase as “das sinnliche Scheinen der Idee” (Werke 13: 151) as “the pure appearance of the Idea to sense,” whereas I preserve the literal translation, “the sensible appearance of the Idea,” because it reinforces the sensible character of the appearance in question.
the charge that Hegel reduces the significance of art to a purely metaphysical function. The mere suggestion that the primary function of art is to render explicit the universal content of human rationality, or *Geist*, seems outdated at best, and at worst, antithetical to the independent significance of art and individual aesthetic experience. At any rate, the notion of art as the locus of expression for “the Idea” no longer holds much sway for the artworld of today.

However, the charge of methodological insensitivity is nothing new to Hegelian criticism; it is symptomatic of what Gadamer calls the “dogmatic schematism” of Hegel’s philosophy. In its various forms, the suspicion that the concept of individual agency gets swallowed up in the all-consuming system of metaphysics has plagued the reception of Hegel’s philosophy from Kierkegaard to Lyotard, and appears unlikely to wane any time soon. But in many ways, the notion that Hegel systematically derives a theory of art from a fixed conceptual structure has elicited a particularly spirited reaction from Hegel’s art-savvy critics. In contrast to Kantian aesthetic judgments, which proceed from particular intuitions to a universal concept, Hegel seems intent to determine the nature of art from the top down, as it were, by imposing a concept of art on individual phenomena. In this respect, Hegel’s strategy can seem not only outdated, but indeed, openly hostile to

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art and aesthetic experience, as one French scholar suggests in describing the *Aesthetics* as “a gigantic war-machine directed against aesthetics in general.”

Interestingly, one of the few attempts to take seriously the question of aesthetic subjectivity in Hegel comes from within the *Rezeptionsästhetik* tradition in Germany, one of the more virulent strands of anti-Hegelianism to emerge in recent philosophical history. As part of a more comprehensive comparative analysis of Kantian and Hegelian aesthetic theory, Rüdiger Bubner poses the question in his essay title: “Is There an Account of Aesthetic Experience in Hegel?” In order to address this question adequately, Bubner stipulates the following set of conditions.

First, we will have to separate the Kantian approach from its predominantly epistemological context and develop it more along the lines of a content-based conception of art. Conversely, we will have to revise Hegel’s clear determination of art’s ontological status as the ‘sensible appearance of the Idea’ in order to find a trace of something resembling aesthetic experience within his scientifically expounded Concept of art.

While Bubner entertains a few tentative suggestions pertaining to Hegel’s analysis in the *Aesthetics* of symbolic, or “pre-art [Vorkunst],” as possibly accommodating a theory of aesthetic experience, in the final analysis, he argues against this possibility on the grounds that aesthetic subjectivity must be unequivocally central

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38 Bubner, Bubner, Rüdiger. “Gibt es Ästhetische Erfahrung bei Hegel?” In *Hegel und die ‚Kritik der Urteilskraft’*. Edited by Hans Friedrich Fulda and Rolf-Peter Horstmann (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1990), p. 69.

39 Cf. (LFA, 76-77; 303ff./W13, 39). NB: Knox translates “Vorkunst” as the “threshold of art” rather than “pre-art”.

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to an account of aesthetic experience. “The role of subjectivity,” Bubner argues, “must be seen as constitutive,” whereas for Hegel, aesthetic subjectivity is merely “acknowledged as an inevitable, but ultimately unwelcome departure from the path of ontological orthodoxy.” If one values aesthetic experience, in other words, one will choose Kant over Hegel.

Whereas reception aesthetics in Germany (particularly its manifestation in literary theory) came to adopt its anti-Hegelian stance largely in reaction to Hegel’s apparent subordination of post-classical art to philosophy, other critics have focused more on Hegel’s problematic ascription of a quasi-religious function to the “ideal” art of the Greeks. That is to say, while many critics think Hegel did too little for art, others think he did too much. But again, it is a question of how philosophy approaches art. Quite recently, for example, Jean-Marie Schaeffer has suggested that the failure of “speculative” theories of art rests on what he calls the “sacralization of the arts,” the tendency of idealist aesthetics to place art on the high pedestal of theological ontology. It was the philosophical glorification of art as an object of alien reverence, he argues, that ultimately brought about its demise. And according to Schaeffer, the sacralization of art, symptomatic of German idealist aesthetics as a whole, forms part of a deeply flawed methodology preoccupied with deriving an

40 Bubner (1990), p. 80; my translation.

understanding of art from an all-inclusive system, rather than beginning, as he contends Kant does, from aesthetic *givens*.\(^{42}\)

The argument here is one that has been reiterated with surprising consistency. It has beleaguered the reception of Hegel’s philosophy of art from the outset, and it constitutes an even greater obstacle for demonstrating its continued relevance for contemporary aesthetic theory, which rightfully places a renewed emphasis on the significance of aesthetic subjectivity. From the sampling of international critics I’ve discussed so far, however, it should be sufficiently clear that the standing verdict against Hegel’s aesthetics is grounded in the presumed incompatibility of a philosophical approach to the concept of art as such and an adequate account of aesthetic experience. The strategy of this position is to present us with a non-negotiable choice between an aesthetic theory that seeks to articulate the experience of art from the ground up, i.e., from a set of aesthetic “givens,” and one that determines the nature of art from the top down, i.e., from a speculatively conceived Concept. And insofar as the latter dictates the significance of art through a systematic and reductive account of aesthetic content while the former facilitates pleasurable free play and infinitely tolerant and democratic interpretive potential, it would appear that there is really no choice to be made after all.

\(^{42}\) It is a peculiar feature of Schaeffer’s account that he unproblematically situates Hegel alongside his romantic contemporaries, Novalis and Schlegel, in launching a blanket condemnation of speculative aesthetics, which he contrasts with the aesthetic theory of Kant. For a similar, but more historically nuanced take on this claim, see Karl Ameriks’ “Hegel’s Aesthetics: New Perspectives on its Response to Kant and Romanticism” In *Kant and the Historical Turn*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), pp. 209-30.
What I want to suggest, of course, is that we need not accept this methodological dichotomy as absolute. Kant, no less than Hegel, develops a systematic account of artistic beauty from within (and in response to) an elaborate theoretical framework comprised of distinct metaphysical, epistemological, and moral commitments. And Hegel, for his part, only arrives at a Concept of art through a careful assessment of Kantian-endorsed assumptions about artistic beauty that are further underwritten by an extensive acquaintance with individual works of art and a vastly superior knowledge of art history. At the same time, I do not want to gloss over the relevant differences that emerge in the respective epistemological approaches to an aesthetic theory. To be more precise, we can outline the contrasting features of Kant’s and Hegel’s respective philosophical approaches to aesthetics in the following way. The aesthetic theory set forth in third Critique is motivated largely in response to Kant’s recognition of a distinct category of judgment, namely, aesthetic reflecting judgment, which:

a). proceeds from particular intuitions to a universal concept;

b). accounts equally for judgments of both natural and artistic beauty; and

c). is non-cognitive (i.e., are independent from determinate theoretical cognition).

Hegel’s speculative orientation to the question of beauty, by contrast, yields a philosophical account of art that:

1). proceeds from universals to particulars (from the Concept of art to its particular determinations);

2). excludes in principle the philosophical treatment of natural beauty; and
3). constitutes an essential form of truth.

It should be clear from the outset, however, that none of the above characterizations can be attributed to either position without significant qualification. And, as we begin to examine the conceptually nuanced mechanisms in which such claims are situated, it will become clear that the ostensibly irreconcilable differences outlined above are much more a matter of degree than of principle. Specifically, when further consideration is given to the dialectical grounding of Hegel’s metaphysics, we will see that the defining categories of his philosophy of art—the concept of beauty, the ontological separation of art and nature, and the cognitive significance of artworks—all emerge from fundamentally Kantian premises. In what follows, I will consider each of these points in turn.

2.2 The Concept of Art in Hegel

Hegel boasts at the outset of his lectures that he will proceed with his inquiry “scientifically”; that is to say, from a Concept of the matter at hand, where the term “Concept” bears a distinct metaphysical significance that we will examine shortly. Speaking generally of the speculative method, Hegel explains, “Only when we have established this Concept, can we lay down the division, and therefore the plan, of the whole of this science” (LFA, 23). Accordingly, a philosophical, or scientific, analysis of the beautiful will have to proceed from the Concept of beauty itself, which gives way to Hegel’s notorious definition of art as the “sensuous appearance of the Idea” (LFA, 111).
The formulation of beauty as the expression of the “Idea” easily creates the impression that Hegel’s agenda in the *Aesthetics* is to determine the nature of art purely from the standpoint of metaphysics, by imposing the weighty notion of the Concept on individual phenomena. In turn, this approach appears to reduce the significance of beauty to its capacity to render explicit some singularly fixed metaphysical content in external form. This indeed cuts a sorry figure against Kantian aesthetic judgments, which proceed from the basis of the subjective experience of pleasure and conceptual “free play.” Of course, what Hegel understands by the “Concept” bears only scant resemblance to the term “concept” as it is used today in either common or philosophical parlance. And while here is by no means the place to try to tackle the complex mereology of Hegel’s metaphysics, a brief overview of the dialectical structure of the Concept in Hegel will lend clarity to his attempt to reconcile a one-sidedly empirical and a one-sidedly conceptual approach to art in the *Aesthetics*. Indeed, in contrast to the dogmatically essentialist view often attributed to him, this brief foray into the concept of the Concept will show that it is precisely the dialectical grounding of Hegel’s philosophy which guarantees the mutual dependence between universal conceptions of beauty and its concretely particular phenomena. In other words, a quick glance at Hegel’s metaphysics shows the fundamental interdependency of the Concept of art and individually particular works of art.

43 Hegel’s term, “Begriff” is often translated in the English as “Notion,” in order to avoid precisely this confusion. In keeping with his more literal translation, Knox uses the term “Concept,” which I preserve here for the sake of simplicity.
The logical template for the Concept of art developed in the *Aesthetics* is laid out in the *Logic*, the first part of the *Encyclopedia of the Sciences*.\(^\text{44}\) Hegel’s general aim in the *Logic* is to provide an account of the essential conceptual relations of Spirit’s consciousness, the third and final moment of which concerns the Concept and its various *developmental* relations.\(^\text{45}\) The crux of this discussion is the notion that concepts are not static mental categories, but rather *teleological* entities that develop according to an inner logic and purpose. So, when Hegel speaks of the “Concept” of the state, or the “Concept” of nature, for example, he is specifically rejecting both the strictly empiricist and the strictly idealist formulation of universals. As a middle ground between these extremes, he advances instead a quasi-Aristotelian account of the Concept as an organically structured totality.\(^\text{46}\) Locke’s account of concept formation, while thoroughly grounded in the empirical particulars of sense experience, lacks an underlying principle to give unity to the loose assortment of discrete particulars comprising *abstract ideas*. At the opposite


\(^{45}\) The text itself divided according to the various conceptual relations of Spirit’s thinking: the logic of Being, concerning relations of *transition*; the logic of Essence, concerning of *reflection*; and the logic of Concept, concerning relations of *development*.

\(^{46}\) For an insightful discussion of how Hegel’s organic conception of logic offers a surprisingly relevant basis for thinking about the inherent instability of contemporary concepts (including aesthetic concepts), see Songsuk Susan Hahn, *Contradiction in Motion: Hegel’s Organic Conception of Life and Value* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007). Hegel’s *Logic*, as she puts it, presents a “radical new way of thinking about conflict, contradiction, and conceptual incommensurability, which will explode many of our assumptions about what should count as knowledge” (p. 198).
extreme is the Platonic Form, which, without concrete particulars to instantiate the universal, remains a mere abstraction. Hegel’s Concept aims to mediate between these two “one-sided” extremes, and it is absolutely essential for Hegel that the Concept be realized in concretely existing particulars. This implies a strict interdependency of universals and particulars: the Concept requires a concrete content to achieve actuality while, conversely, the instantiated particular has objective reality only in relation to a concept of what the thing is in essence. We might think of the reciprocal structure of the Concept as a more radical, ontological version of Kant’s epistemic dictum that “thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (CPR, B 75). For Hegel, the true Concept exists as a concrete universal—an organic unity of universality, particularity, and specificity. It is not so much that one is inadequate without the other, but that one simply cannot exist without the other; the logical and the ontological are inseparable in the Concept.

It is within this logical-ontological framework that Hegel undertakes to articulate the Concept of the beautiful as the “sensuous appearance of the Idea.” Shortly we will see why Hegel delimits the philosophical Concept of beauty specifically to works of art; for now, it is important to see that he reiterates, with renewed emphasis, the argument in the Aesthetics that the Concept is neither a collection of empirical particulars nor an empty abstraction—and does so, in fact, in the much more lucid and concrete language of art. Given the metaphysical account of the Concept laid out in the Logic, it follows by extension that the Concept of beauty must be also be realized as a concrete universal, that is, as a unity of the Idea
(the universal) and its sensuously present manifestations (concrete particulars). As Hegel reasons:

> Since a content, in order to be true at all, must be of this concrete kind, art too demands similar concreteness, because the purely abstract universal has not in itself the determinate character of advancing to particularization and phenomenal manifestation and to unity within itself in these. (LFA, 71)

In short, one only gets so far in talking about art either in abstraction or as a contingent assortment of particular, sensuous objects. And if this is Hegel’s idea of what it means to elucidate the Concept of beauty, it is far from clear that Hegel is simply perpetuating the “mystical aesthetic” of his predecessors.\(^47\)

In fact, Hegel presents the Concept of artistic beauty in the *Aesthetics* as the dialectical remedy to what he perceives as the methodologically one-sided extremes exhibited in the prevailing “scientific” ways of treating art—the *practical* and the *theoretical*, a division corresponding roughly to the distinction between purely *empirical* and purely *speculative* approaches to aesthetic theory.\(^48\) As we might expect, Hegel decries a purely practical approach to art for its failure to provide conceptual unity for its inquiry as a whole. He associates this approach specifically with art history and art theory, or what we might today consider as the discipline of

\(^{47}\) Benedetto Croce maintains that the same concept of art that appears in Schiller, Schelling, Solger and Tieck, is present in Hegel, with only “minor differences” separating them. Cf. Croce, p. 297ff.

\(^{48}\) I will return to this important methodological distinction in Hegel in the next chapter.
art criticism. While its practice rightly demands an exacting empirical knowledge of individual works of art as well as a broad understanding of the cultural and historical context in which each work is situated, as such, this method yields only a sterile classification of artworks. We should note that, for a philosopher, Hegel was relatively well versed in the history of art, and that his views on art have had a lasting impact on the organizational and curatorial practices of art museums. But as a science that “starts from particular and extant [works]” (LFA, 21), art scholarship concerns itself only “with actual works of art from the outside, arranging them into a history of art, setting up discussions about existing works or outlining theories which are to yield general considerations for both criticizing and producing works of art” (LFA, 14). What such an approach lacks, Hegel complains, is an organizational principle that explains the unity and development of art in its myriad historical and formal manifestations. Without such a principle, art criticism provides an impressive array of particular facts with no clear relation to one another.

We may be surprised to find, however, that Hegel takes a much harder line against a purely theoretical approach to art, where “theoretical” implies that its

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49 As examples of the former approach, Hegel mentions, among others, Aristotle’s Poetics, Horace’s Ars Poetica, as well as, more contemporaneously, Charles Batteux, Goethe, J.H. Meyer, and Alois Hirt.

50 While delivering his Lectures on Aesthetics, Hegel was in fact involved in discussions which ultimately led to the establishment of the first national art museum, the Altes Museum in Berlin. In art history, Hegel is perhaps best known for his “periodization” of art history according to historical and cultural categories, a practice which remains the predominant organizational model of art museums today.
essence can be grasped abstractly, independently of its concrete instantiation in individual works of art. He warns that, with an overly idealist approach to art, “we see science abandoning itself on its own account to reflections on the beautiful and producing only something universal, irrelevant to the work of art in its peculiarity” (LFA, 14). He is particularly emphatic in repudiating the kind of Platonic essentialism often imputed to him in discussing the Concept of beauty. He makes it a point to distinguish what he means by “Concept” from the Platonic “idea” on the grounds that the latter “is itself not yet genuinely concrete” (LFA, 143). At one point, Hegel even laments that “in modern times, no concept has come worse off than the Concept itself,” because it is pervasively misconstrued as the “abstract determinacy and one-sidedness of our ideas” (LFA, 92). And so he is particularly compelled to emphasize the dialectical structure of the Concept in the Aesthetics. In this vein, he remarks, for example, that “we must grasp the Idea more concretely, more profoundly, since the emptiness, which clings to the Platonic Idea, no longer satisfies the richer philosophical needs of our spirit today” (LFA, 22). In a word, it is an impoverished conception of beauty that neglects its rich particularity and concrete substance.

It is clear, then, that the logical-ontological structure of the Concept, which underwrites Hegel’s formulation of beauty as the sensuous appearance of idea, and from which Hegel derives the particular and individual forms of art, is not to be conflated with either the empirically reductive method of art scholarship or the Platonic method of ideal abstraction. Rather, as Hegel has it:
The philosophical Concept of the beautiful, to indicate its true nature at least in a preliminary way, must contain, reconciled within itself, both extremes which have been mentioned, because it unites metaphysical universality with the precision of real particularity. (LFA, 22)

For this reason, a flat-footed reproach of Hegel’s speculative approach to art as inherently reductive seems highly misplaced. In the first place, the move to situate Hegel’s aesthetics among the “speculative” theories of art is at odds with the clear intention to add his own voice to the chorus of dissent against a top-down, theoretical determination of art. From Hegel’s standpoint, speculative philosophy determines only that the ontological orientation to art is grounded in its concrete actuality. So, instead of spearheading an essentialist quest from philosophy to art, Hegel actually deploys metaphysics in the Aesthetics as a way of underwriting the claim that a philosophical, or scientific, treatment of art must tend equally to what art is in essence (i.e., as a universal concept) and what art is in reality (i.e., as particular, concrete works of art).

2.3 The “Common Ideas” of Art

If the foregoing analysis gives us sufficient reason to doubt the claim that a speculative approach to aesthetics amounts to a de facto subordination of subjectivity, then the question that immediately arises is this: How then does Hegel undertake the philosophical explication of the Concept of beauty? Having noted the importance of proceeding with a Concept of artistic Beauty, Hegel raises the question himself and asks, “Whence do we derive this Concept?” (LFA, 23). Because
we cannot simply assume to have such a concept from the outset, he responds that “the only course left to us is to take up the Concept of art lemmatically,” that is, as a lemma, a presupposition to be developed from given postulates.51

According to Hegel, the need to proceed lemmatically with the Concept of artistic beauty follows from the nature of speculative science itself, which specifies that a science must first of all demonstrate “that there is such an object” in order to articulate “what that object is” (LFA, 25). That is to say, the ontological question precedes the definitional. For this reason, elucidating the Concept of art requires that we begin with beauty in its concrete existence. All that we have to work with, Hegel tells us, is “what is before us”—namely, the “elements and aspects of [the Concept of art] as they occur already in the different ideas of the beautiful and art held by ordinary people, or have formerly been accepted by them” (Ibid).

As it turns out, then, the Aesthetics does in fact proceed from a set of givens in arriving at a Concept of art. These are what Hegel calls the “common ideas [gewöhnliche Vorstellungen]” about art, which he goes on to enumerate as follows (cf. LFA, 25ff./W13, 44):

i). The work of art is no natural product; it is brought about by human activity.

ii.) It is essentially made for man’s apprehension, and in particular is drawn more or less from the sensuous field for apprehension by the senses.

51 Hegel thinks the lemmatic procedure is unique to the Concept of beauty. Unlike the natural sciences, a science of the beautiful has the peculiar disadvantage that it cannot demonstrate the existence of its object ostensively, by simply pointing out individual, subjective experiences of beauty (LFA, 25).
iii.) It has an end and aim in itself.

It is from this set of assumptions, or *common ideas*, that Hegel generates the core doctrines of the philosophy of art set forth in the *Aesthetics*. In what follows, however, I want to concentrate specifically on the first of these, namely, the notion that art is distinct from nature in being a product of human intellect. It is the dialectical development of this claim in particular, I argue, which bears directly on the question concerning the place of aesthetic experience in Hegel’s philosophy of art.

From the above detour through Hegel’s metaphysics of the Concept we can take away the modest but significant point that at least one of the presumed methodological distinctions outlined above begins to collapse under the weight of further scrutiny—namely, the assumption that Hegel proceeds dogmatically from the Concept of art to its particular determinations. Instead, we have located the dialectical starting point of Hegel’s strategy in a focused set of familiar presuppositions, or *common ideas*, about art. Beginning with the common idea that art “is no natural product,” we will soon see that it cannot be entirely correct to say, on the other hand, that Kant’s account of aesthetic reflecting judgment necessarily proceeds from particular intuitions. In the next section, we will consider how Hegel’s dialectical method bears on a further alleged point of incompatibility between Kant’s and Hegel’s aesthetics—namely the theoretical priority of artistic and natural beauty. At this point, however, it is possible to say that a more careful look at how Hegel actually undertakes his analysis of the Concept of art in the
Aesthetics at the very least complicates any effort to distinguish Hegel’s aesthetics from Kant’s on a strictly methodological basis.

2.4 The Beauty of Art and the Beauty of Nature

Hegel wastes little time in the opening pages of the *Aesthetics* making clear that, in pursuing a philosophy of fine art, “we at once exclude the beauty of nature” (LFA, 2). This is not just a semantic issue for Hegel; he really means to say that a genuinely philosophical account of the beautiful is exclusively concerned with artistic, not natural, beauty. That is not to say that nature cannot be beautiful in its own right, or even that a philosophy of art must dispense with the category of natural beauty altogether. Rather, it means that the beauty of art constitutes a fundamentally distinct, and indeed, “higher” form of beauty than that of nature because it is—in Hegel’s own words—“born of the spirit” (LFA, 2). As the product of rational intelligence, art is not only distinct from, but vastly superior to, the beauty of nature; so much so, in fact, that “even a useless notion that enters a man’s head is higher than any product of nature, because in such a notion spirituality and freedom are always present” (Ibid). A science of beauty must accordingly account for this fundamental distinction—hence the need for a philosophy of art.

Footnote 52

Indeed, Hegel offers a fairly exhaustive account of natural beauty in second chapter of the *Aesthetics*, called “The Beauty of Nature.”(LFA, 116-52; cf. also 160-74). His chief motivation in this section, however, is to make the case that, while nature (including the living organism) can be beautiful, it lacks the aspect of universality to be considered truly beautiful.
Most contemporary theories that look to Kant for a subject-centered account of modern art do so in protest of the radical ontological separation of the art object from everyday reality—what Schaeffer calls the “sacralization” of art—that Hegel seems to engender with the lofty proclamation that art is the sensuous expression of the Idea.\textsuperscript{53} I might also point out here that the singular rallying point of the \textit{Rezeptionsästhetik} in Germany was, after all, John Dewey’s clarion call in \textit{Art and Experience} to “restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doing, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience.”\textsuperscript{54} And indeed, at face value, it is tempting to suppose that Hegel simply assumes the ontological priority of reason over nature, and accordingly extols the philosophical virtues of art for \textit{not} being like nature.

But let us return to what Hegel considers the starting point of this position, namely the \textit{common idea} that the work of art is “brought about by human activity” (LFA, 25). Assuming, along with Hegel, that the work of art is \textit{essentially} an object of sense—that is to say, art is necessarily manifested in some material such as wood,

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{53} In his foreword to \textit{Art of the Modern Age}, Arthur Danto poignantly notes, “In view of Kant’s philosophical motives, it is something of an irony that ‘the Third Critique’ should be the one text among those anatomized by Dr. Schaeffer which has recommended itself to American philosophers of art.” Schaeffer, p. xiv.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{54} John Dewey, \textit{Art and Experience} (New York, NY: Perigee Books, 1980), p. 3. Notably, Dewey makes only passing reference to Hegel in connection with the idealist view under attack, and in fact adopts a far more critical stance toward Kant. The effect of the \textit{Critique of Judgment} upon subsequent theory, Dewey maintains, “was to give the separation of the esthetic from other modes of an experience an alleged scientific basis in the constitution of human nature” (p. 252). On the whole, one could easily make the case that Dewey’s aesthetic theory exhibits a far more Hegelian influence than his German torch-bearers would be willing to concede.
\end{quote}
stone, sound, words, etc.\textsuperscript{55}—then to say that human intellect is the efficient cause of art’s material form of is to say that the work of art cannot be merely sensuous in nature. Art is something more than material form: it is what Schiller calls “significant stone,” a natural object made meaningful by artistic activity. This does not imply, however—and this is important—that art is wholly intellectual, divorced from sensuous nature. It is crucial to Hegel’s analysis that the work of art exhibit both sensible and intellectual characteristics, while being reducible to neither. As Hegel explains, art:

\[\text{[...] is not yet pure thought, but, despite its sensuousness, is no longer a purely material existent either, like stones, plants, and organic life; on the contrary, the sensuous in the work of art is itself something ideal, but which, not being ideal as thought is ideal, is still at the same time there externally as a thing. (LFA, 38)}\]

So, in designating the work of art as the “sensuous appearance of the Idea,” Hegel by no means aims to remove the work of art from the sensible realm of nature. Instead, with the notion of art as a \textit{concrete universal} in sensible form, he carves out a unique ontological category for the work of art as an object that stands “in the middle between immediate sensuousness and ideal thought” (LFA, 38).\textsuperscript{56} And, since this

\textsuperscript{55} R.G. Collingwood and others have argued that the work of art need not be realized in outward, external form. However, if we look at the history of modern art that challenges the status of artwork as object, we find that even the most radically conceptualist works have some sensible component to them (e.g. texts, drawings, recordings, etc.) which manifests the idea of the artwork as a work of art.

\textsuperscript{56} This continuity between the sensuous and the intellectual in fact aligns Hegel’s view more closely with Kant’s view of beauty and distances it from the speculative aesthetics of Schelling, who regards the work of art as the absolute dissolution of the sensible and intellectual. Hegel’s point is that the work of art exhibits both sensible and intellectual characteristics, while reducible to neither.
category applies exclusively to the work of art, Hegel thinks we require a distinct mode of analysis that can account for the peculiar relation between sensuous form and ideal content. Again, we need a theory of art over and against a theory of aesthetic beauty.

With the concept of “embodied meaning,” Arthur Danto carries forth the Hegelian legacy today with the particular aim of developing an updated ontology of art. According to Danto, all that is required of an object to qualify as an artwork is that it be an intentional object, (i.e., that it be about something, that it has content, etc.), and that it embody this meaning in material form. This gives us, I think, a very effective conceptual basis for justifying a distinction between the art object and ordinary objects, and it does so in a way that rightly takes up Hegel's emphasis on the meaning or content of art. What is needed to fill out this picture a bit more, however, is a Hegelian analysis of the kind of experience involved in discerning meaning in the form of art. Supposing that Hegel can in fact give us an ontological basis for calling Warhol's *Brillo Box* a work of art, the further, and in many ways more interesting aspect of that question is this: What is the aesthetic experience of a work like *Brillo Box*? How do experience embodied meaning in art? Granting that we can give a Hegelian story about what makes a work of art a work of art, I am curious about the phenomenological implications of an ontology of art. How does the concept of “art” shape our experience of artworks? It is the pursuit of this inquiry, I

believe, that will yield some of most rewarding and relevant insights of the
Aesthetics—insights which remain largely untapped by contemporary philosophy of
art.

2.4.1 Experiencing Meaning in Art

First and foremost, aesthetic experience is an experience of a concretely material
object. As with any other non-mental item we could safely designate an object of
sense, it is comprised of wood, stone, words, paint, gesture, sound, words, etc. This
is important because it implies that art is like nature in one very important respect:
it shares with nature the essential character of having sensuous properties.
Moreover, art can be beautiful in many of the same ways nature can be beautiful, e.g.
in virtue of its symmetry, regularity, and harmony (cf. LFA, 134 ff.). Strictly
speaking, then, natural and artistic beauty are neither at ontological nor aesthetic
odds with one another; both are realized in objects of sense, and both are
discernible in terms of formally aesthetic properties.

Unlike nature, however, the work of art is a product of rational human
intelligence. This means, above all, that we experience the work of art as something

58 These are, not coincidentally, the traditional aesthetic principles discussed at length in Ch. 3 of Hogarth’s Analysis of Beauty, and briefly mentioned in relation to the “lawfulness” of taste in Kant’s Critique of Judgment. Hegel adopts an even thicker formalist dialect in his discussion of the particular arts. He explains, for example, that engaged columns appear “repugnant” (LFA, 672); that the Greek profile is “inherently beautiful” on account of the “fluid connection between the nose and forehead” (LFA, 727 ff.). Best of all: a “pyramidal” composition is most suitable for painting (LFA, 862).
meaningful, as material form imbued with intention or rational purpose. And indeed, if we look at the most philosophically salient difference between art and nature for Hegel, we find that he tends to construe this difference in phenomenological terms, as the distinction between form and sensuously meaningful form. What matters to Hegel is not the status of the object as such, but the distinct kind of experience the respective sensuous forms can afford us. The basis of this distinction lies in the fact that art, unlike nature, discloses its beauty in more than just the immediate sensuous presence of the work; it discloses its beauty (at least in part) through its meaning. Said differently, a work of art bears its meaning beautifully. It is in this further, aesthetic exhibition of content in relation to form that Hegel draws a line between aesthetic and non-aesthetic forms of experience. He even describes this experience as a kind of perceptual shift, a radical transition from mere perception to something like perceptual reflection: "In a work of art we begin with what is immediately presented to us and only then ask what its meaning or content is" (LFA, 19). Experiencing art, we go beyond the externally present sensuous form and consider its beauty as a more complex interplay of form and content. This perceptual shift from sense to meaning, therefore, is essential to the aesthetic experience of art.

59 I should indicate right away that meaningfulness is a necessary, but by no means sufficient condition, of art. Many, if not most, sensuous objects are conceived and formed in accordance with a purpose without having artistic value. Here I am concerned specifically with the role that rational purpose plays in the distinction between natural and artistic beauty. In the next chapter, I will address the further question regarding the distinction between artistic and non-artistic objects of sense.
It is in this way that the work of art is to be significant and not appear exhausted by these lines, curves, surfaces, carvings, hollowings in the stone, these colors, notes, word-sounds, or whatever other material is used; on the contrary, it should disclose an inner life, feeling, soul, a content and spirit, which is just what we call the significance of a work of art. (LFA, 20)

Just as we cannot grasp the beauty of art independently of the object’s form, nor can we grasp its beauty independently of our contemplation of its content. Hegel describes this feature of artistic beauty as its “demand for meaningfulness [Bedeutsamkeit]” (LFA, 20). As the product of rational activity, we experience the work of art as meaningful form, and herein lies the fundamental philosophical difference between art and nature for Hegel.

Drawing attention to the phenomenological character of the distinction between art and nature suggests a more palatable way of reading Hegel’s seemingly tendentious conception of beauty as the “sensuous appearance of the Idea.” What at first glance smacks of an overtly metaphysical definition of art begins to look more like a claim about the distinctly aesthetic way that art appears to us as meaningful. It is not an ontological distinction between art and nature that is motivating Hegel’s exclusion of nature from a philosophy of art, but rather the more basic insight that our experience of art and our experience of nature constitute phenomenologically

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60 Hegel borrows this notion of meaningfulness from his colleague, Alois Hirt, an influential art historian and archaeologist in Berlin. In an essay published in Die Horen, a literary journal edited by Schiller, Hirt develops the concept of the “characteristic [das Charakteristische]” as the principle of his aesthetic theory, by which he means, Hegel explains, “the degree of appropriateness with which the particular detail of the artistic form sets in relief the content it is meant to present” (LFA, 17-18). The concept of characteristic, Hegel goes on to note, is the precursor to his own view that the form of art must fully embody the content or meaning it expresses. What he adds to that view, however, is the notion of an essential reciprocity between form and content: not only must the form be adequate to the content, the must itself be adequate to the form (Cf. LFA, 70).
distinct and irreducible modes of apprehension—the latter as sensuous and the former as sensuously meaningful. In other words, what is at issue here is not so much what appears but how it appears to us in the form of art. Even more succinctly, for Hegel the ontology of art grounds the phenomenology of aesthetic experience. The aesthetic experience of artistic beauty goes beyond the externally present form and assumes behind it “something inward, a meaning whereby the external appearance is endowed with spirit” (LFA, 19). To perceive an object as a work of art—that is, to perceive it as a product of human intellect—is to perceive it as meaningful form.

Even with a speculative definition of art, then, Hegel pays tribute to the aesthetic subject by developing a Concept of artistic beauty from a conception of how we actually experience a work of art. From the awareness that “the work of art is no natural product” but rather one “brought about by human activity” (LFA, 25), there occurs a perceptual shift from sensuous form to sensuously meaningful form which for Hegel is precisely what renders the aesthetic experience of art philosophically significant. Far from reducing the work of art either to material form or to purely discursive content, Hegel’s analysis instead discloses a more complex account of aesthetic experience that seeks to explain what it means to ask “why” of an otherwise inert, material object. We experience art, not as an object, but as “a question, an address to the responsive breast, a call to the mind and spirit” (LFA, 71).

In fact, this conception of the aesthetic experience as a form of reflexive dialogue is key to understanding the significance of art for Hegel as a form of
knowledge or truth. In the next section, we will see that Hegel’s separation of art and nature on the one hand develops in continuity with Kant’s account of aesthetic experience in order to articulate that distinction in phenomenological terms. On the other hand, Hegel deploys these conceptual resources to arrive at a conception of aesthetic experience as a liberation from nature.

2.5 The Continuity Thesis

Of course, even if an account of aesthetic experience is built into the conceptual structures of Hegel’s philosophy of art, his exclusion of natural beauty from the discourse of philosophical aesthetics thus far hardly suggests that his aesthetic interests are aligned with those of Kant in any substantial way. If anything, his emphasis on the human character of artistic beauty seems to underscore the contrast Hegel draws between his own theory and the “ordinary way of looking at things,” according to which “the human art-product ranked below the product of nature” (LFA, 29).

Underlying this apparently fundamental incompatibility, however, is a more complex aesthetic narrative which shows Hegel’s claim about the uniqueness of the aesthetic experience of art to be an extension of, rather than an alternative to, Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment. This forms one essential aspect of the continuity thesis I develop here and in subsequent chapters, according to which Hegel takes his cue in the Aesthetics from Kant’s own attempt to reconcile the subject-oriented account of aesthetic reflecting judgment set forth in the “Analytic of the Beautiful”
with the account of conceptual content in fine art in §§43-54 in the third *Critique*. Conceiving Hegel’s project in terms of its fundamental continuity with Kantian aesthetics will in turn allow us to see how Hegel successfully navigates a middle path between considerations of aesthetic subjectivity and aesthetic meaning or content.

We can begin with Hegel’s own assessment of Kant as a foundation to the project of the *Aesthetics*. In a surprising shift of tone for the thinker who has defined his own philosophy largely in opposition to Kant, Hegel describes the *Critique of Judgment* in the Introduction as “the starting point for the true comprehension of the beauty of art” (LFA, 60). Here, as elsewhere in the *Aesthetics*, Hegel identifies the trajectory from Kant’s view to his own. His brief overview of the essential doctrines of the third *Critique*—namely, disinterestedness, universality, purposiveness, and necessary pleasure—clearly indicates that this continuity is predicated on the theory’s capacity to reconcile seemingly antithetical concepts.

Now what we find in all these Kantian propositions is an inseparability of what in all other cases is presupposed in our consciousness as distinct. This cleavage finds itself cancelled in the beautiful, where universal and particular, end and means, concept and object, perfectly interpenetrate one another. (LFA, 60)

The significance of beauty for Kant, according to Hegel, is that it forms a unity of standard conceptual dichotomies. In fact, he goes so far as to claim that Kant “sees the beauty of art, after all, as a correspondence in which the particular itself accords with the concept” (Ibid). This provides a telling indication of the direction in which Hegel intends to develop these core Kantian doctrines into a *philosophy of art*. By
Hegel’s lights, the continuity between his own project and Kant’s consists in a mutual interest in articulating artistic beauty as the reconciliation of universality in thought and sensuous particularity, even if, in the end, that will require demoting the philosophical significance of natural beauty.

Among the core doctrines Hegel mentions, the category of purposiveness [Zweckmäßigkeit] is especially relevant to the task of showing how he proceeds from a Kantian foundation while nevertheless driving a distinctly un-Kantian wedge between natural and artistic beauty. The notion that beauty exhibits purposiveness without a definite purpose is arguably the lynchpin of Kant’s elaborate account of reflecting judgment in the third Critique. While an exhaustive treatment of the doctrine of purposiveness is well beyond the scope of this paper, a rough sketch of its epistemological significance in the broader agenda of critical philosophy will be useful in drawing a theoretical connection between Kant’s theory of taste and Hegel’s philosophy of art. Just as it was necessary above to delve into the speculative breeding ground of Hegel’s views on art, here we will consider how the basic contours of Kant’s aesthetic theory are shaped by an epistemologically motivated account of judgment.

2.5.1 The Appearance of Purposiveness in Nature

In certain respects, it might strike us as peculiar that Kant’s name should be so narrowly associated with the contemporary appeal to what we call “aesthetic experience.” In the first place, it is—strictly speaking—somewhat anachronistic to invoke the category of aesthetic experience avant la lettre in the context of aesthetic
theory prior to the twentieth century. Kant never uses the term as such, and even among the writers who introduce the phrase to the modern lexicon of aesthetic theory—namely, Dewey, Mead, Dickie, and Beardsley—there remains considerable difficulty in pinpointing its exact etymological origin.61

More importantly, however, it is clear that Kant himself is not particularly interested in conceptions of aesthetic experience as such. For him, the question of individual aesthetic response arises in connection with the general epistemological inquiry that itself emerges from the theoretical account of cognition laid out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant’s primary interest in that text, we will recall, is in explaining the possibility of cognitive judgments, most notably, those he calls *synthetic judgments a priori*.62 How do I know there is a fit between mind and world? Because, Kant explains, the intellect, with its priori concepts, or categories, gives logical shape to empirical reality, while the forms of intuition lend it its distinct spatio-temporal structure. The reason I can reliably calculate the distance between stars, or reasonably maintain that fire consumes wood, is that I am judging of a world that is, in a certain sense, the product of my own concepts and intuitions.

In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant sticks to the same general definition of judgment—or, more accurately, the power of judgment—as “the ability to think the

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particular as contained under the universal.” Only now, nearly ten years after the first *Critique*, Kant feels compelled to give an account of judgmental forms which do not fit this model of theoretical judgment. In particular, he draws a crucial distinction between cognitive, or “determining” [bestimmend] judgments, which are possible (according to the first *Critique*) in virtue of a priori concepts, and those he calls “reflecting” [reflektierend], which proceed in exactly the reverse order: from particular intuitions toward a universal concept. The overarching aim of the third *Critique*, therefore, is to account for a class of reflecting judgments wherein the understanding “is obliged to ascend from the particular in nature to the universal” (CJ, 180).

While clearly motivated by non-aesthetic concerns, two central features of Kant’s account of reflecting judgment seem particularly attractive to the ongoing effort to secure a philosophical foundation for aesthetic experience. The first is that such judgments never fully complete this quest for conceptual totality, but translate instead to a pleasurable “free play” of the imagination. Confronted with the dizzying array of sensuous forms, the understanding—try as it may—fails to produce a determinate concept. The imagination, therefore, which otherwise sees to the

63 *Critique of Judgment*, translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987): 179. This and subsequent references to the Pluhar translation refer to the *Akadmie* edition, (i.e. Kants gesammelte Schriften [Königliche Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1900–]) and are hereafter abbreviated “CJ,” followed by the page number of *Akadmie* edition.

64 According to Kant, the understanding naturally seeks out increasing levels of generality. This is an assumption on Kant’s part akin to that of Spinoza’s claim that human beings possess a natural inclination to grasp knowledge of particulars *sub specie aeternitatis*, approximating to the greatest extent possible the universality of God’s knowledge.
synthesis of concepts and intuited particulars, lacks a determinate concept with which to vouchsafe the unity required for cognition. Thus Kant posits that reflecting judgments form a distinct and independent class of judgments that are both non-cognitive and non-determinate. This idea has stoked ample reflection on what philosophers of art today call the “autonomy” of the aesthetic.⁶⁵

A second, equally crucial feature of Kant’s account (the one that will chiefly concern us here) is that, in place of cognition, aesthetic reflecting judgment yields a specific kind of pleasure. Despite having to ascend the more arduous route from particularity to universality, reflecting judgment does not proceed independently of any principle whatsoever. Rather, the mind has recourse to a non-empirical (i.e., 
 *transcendental*) principle that provides the unity to nature’s heteronomy; Kant calls this the *principle of the purposiveness of nature*. This principle functions as a “special a priori concept” deployed by the imagination (not the understanding) in reflecting judgment as a way of presenting nature “as if an understanding contained the basis of the unity of what is diverse in nature’s empirical laws” (CJ, 180-81). So, in the absence of a determinate concept to secure cognition in the Kantian sense, the principle of purposiveness explains the harmony between universal concepts and particular intuitions necessary for judgment. In the case of beauty, reflecting judgment does not complete the synthesis of sense information and a priori categories required for cognition, but the principle of purposiveness facilitates a

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⁶⁵ We will consider the lineage of this category more adequately in the next chapter.
pleasurable harmony of the faculties by which we can judge the beauty of a representation.

With this concept of purposiveness in mind, Kant goes on to distinguish between aesthetic and teleological forms of reflecting judgments, and this distinction explains the somewhat peculiar juxtaposition of aesthetic theory and causal reasoning that forms the two-part division of the third Critique (cf. CJ, 192f.). While both forms of reflecting judgment rely on the principle of purposiveness, it is specifically the aesthetic application of this principle that concerns us here, since it is the mere appearance of rational purpose in beauty that for Kant defines judgments of taste. While natural purposes exhibit the concept of real, or objective, purpose (e.g., the eye has the purpose of sight), Kant explains that “we may regard natural beauty as the exhibition of the concept of formal (merely subjective) purposiveness” (CJ, 193). We judge beauty as if a rational purpose were objectively present in the object, when in fact we are judging on the basis of a purely subjective epistemic principle in us. We consider objects of beauty purposive

[...] merely because we can explain and grasp them only if we assume that they are based on a causality [that operates] according to purposes, i.e., on a will that would have so arranged them in accordance with the presentation of a certain rule. (CJ, 220)

Hence we arrive at Kant’s alluringly paradoxical claim that, in aesthetic judgment, we judge on the basis of a purposiveness without purpose (cf. CJ, 220f.). It is not the objective property of beauty in the object that we judge in matters of taste (though Kant admits we tend to talk this way), but rather a feeling of pleasure produced by the appearance of purposiveness in a representation. Instead of settling on a
concept, aesthetic reflecting judgment results in the pleasurable “free play” between the imagination and the understanding (CJ, 217).

The upshot of this view appears to be that aesthetic judgment is solely a function of subjective aesthetic experience. It is certainly this subject-oriented character of Kant’s aesthetics to which recent theories appeal in attempting to restore the aesthetic subject to prominence, having allegedly lost its stature in the wake of Hegelian aesthetics.

Interestingly, the current appeal to a Kantian version of aesthetic experience is, for the most part, concerned specifically with the aesthetic experience of art. This strikes me as something of an anomaly since, even if we grant the explanatory power that the principle of purposiveness carries with respect to Kant’s account of the beauty of nature (which today is quite doubtful), Kant is neither very knowledgeable nor particularly interested in matters of fine art. Speaking to this point, Danto poignantly observes that “In view of Kant’s philosophical motives, it is something of an irony that ‘the third Critique’ should be the one text [...] which has recommended itself to American philosophers of art.”66 More importantly, as we will see, the centrality of the principle of purposiveness in Kant’s doctrine of aesthetic judgment presents a particular problem for Kant when he turns his

66 In his Foreword to Schaeffer, xiv.
attention—somewhat abruptly, in the middle of the Deduction of Taste—to the beauty of art.  

2.5.2 The Appearance of Purpose in Fine Art

Kant introduces the topic of art in typical schematic fashion, by which he defines the work of art in explicit contrast to nature as “a production through freedom, i.e., through a power of choice that bases its acts on reason” (CJ, 303). Art exhibits purpose, which by definition distinguishes it from the merely subjective purposiveness found in nature. Now, Kant further specifies that the purpose of fine art [schöne Kunst] consists only in arousing the feeling of reflecting pleasure. But he is clear that “in dealing with a product of fine art we must become conscious that

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68 This distinction takes various formulations. In the first place, art is distinguished from nature as doing (facere) is distinguished from acting (agere), its product being a work (opus) rather than an effect (effectus). Second, art is the product of conscious, rational deliberation. Unlike even the honeycombs produced by bees (created by instinct), works of art are the products of rational deliberation, in which the cause has the thought of the effect, and consciously seeks to achieve that effect through its activity. Lastly, art is distinct from other purpose-oriented activities such as science or craft in that it is a practical, not a theoretical ability, intended exclusively for inducing aesthetic pleasure. Of course, any of these practices can be agreeable in their own right; Kant’s point is that the relation of means and ends in art is present, but defined by mere pleasure, unmitigated by curiosity, profit, functionality, etc.

69 Kant distinguishes fine art from mechanical art, which aims only to produce an agreeable sensation, such as a good joke, a hand of cards, or “table-music” [Tafelmusik]. Kant’s description of the latter highlights the relevant distinction by bringing to mind the status of something like Muzak for us today: It is “a strange thing which is meant to be only an agreeable noise serving to keep the minds in a cheerful mood, and which fosters the free flow of conversation between each person and his neighbor, without anyone’s paying the slightest attention to the music’s composition” (CJ, 305).
it is art rather than nature” (CJ, 306). Indeed, he describes the aesthetic judgment of art as “logically conditioned” in the sense that “we have to look beyond the mere form and toward a concept” (CJ, 312). The “logically conditioned” status of the aesthetic experience of art is important since, inasmuch as the awareness of purpose in the work of art precedes our judgment of it, the “as if” structure of reflecting aesthetic judgment necessarily falls away. In place of the merely regulative status of purposiveness essential to pure judgments of taste—i.e., purposiveness without purpose—fine art presents us with the concept of objective purpose.

So, the phenomenological distinction between natural and artistic beauty is every bit as integral to Kant’s philosophical explication of beauty as it is to Hegel’s. Indeed, a necessary condition of judging fine art aesthetically for Kant is that we can identify the beautiful object as a work of art. In order to determine whether the object in question is a proper candidate for aesthetic judgment, we have to be able to define the object in terms of the kinds of purposes it exhibits. But since the experience of the beautiful, “whether it concerns beauty in nature or in art,” consists solely in the pleasure of judging (i.e., independently of a concept) (CJ, 306), Kant has the additional burden of explaining how judgments of artistic beauty can nevertheless count as species of reflecting judgments. This is the task with which he is occupied in the sections of the third Critique devoted to fine art: to show that the account of aesthetic experience set forth in the Analytic of Taste can adequately accommodate an aesthetic experience of fine art that is logically conditioned by the concept of rational purpose. In short, Kant embarks here on a kind of
phenomenology of art, albeit with the aim of showing the aesthetic judgment of art to be consistent with the aesthetic judgment of nature.

Kant addresses this task directly in §45 by appealing to a kind of reciprocity between the “appearance” of art and the “appearance” of nature.\(^\text{70}\) Hence his famously paradoxical formulation of this relation:

> Nature, we say, is beautiful if it also looks like art; and art can be called fine art only if we are conscious that it is art while yet it looks to us like nature. (CJ, 306)

Acknowledging that the purposiveness in the form of fine art is distinct from that of nature in that it presents the concept of purpose or intention, Kant insists that the purposiveness in its form must “seem \([\text{scheinen}]\) as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature” (CJ, 305). For Kant, both judgments of natural as well as artistic beauty are made in the subjunctive—\(\text{as if}\) each exhibited rational structure in its form. But they do so in markedly different ways: just as nature appears to us \(\text{as if}\) it were the product of rational deliberation, so the work of art appears to us \(\text{as if}\) the mysterious mechanisms of nature had assigned it its form. We judge art, in other words, as if it were nature viewed \(\text{as if it were art}\).\(^\text{71}\) Yet, it is precisely this presumed reciprocity between the appearance of

\(^{70}\) Notably, Kant relies on a strongly phenomenological language throughout this short section in reference to art. He titles this section: “Fine Art is Art Insofar as It Appears at the Same Time to be Nature” (“\text{Schöne Kunst ist eine Kunst, sofern sie zugleich Natur zu sein scheint}\”) (CJ, 306). Moreover: Fine art must “seem \([\text{scheinen}]\) free of all constraint” (Ibid); fine art \(\text{looks} \ [\text{aussieht}]\) to us like nature” (Ibid); fine art must not “seem \([\text{scheinen}]\) intentional” (CJ, 307), which is to say, they are to “look \([\text{anzusehen}]\) like nature” (Ibid). Finally, a product of art “appears \([\text{erscheint}]\) like nature” (Ibid).

\(^{71}\) I am indebted to Fred Rush for this helpful formulation.
art and the appearance of nature that has come under scrutiny even by some of
Kant’s most committed advocates.72

We have already seen what it means to say, on the one hand, that nature
must have the appearance of art: nature must seem *purposive*, i.e., we must
presuppose a rational order behind the mechanisms of nature in order to make
reflecting judgments about it (aesthetic or teleological). But what does it mean to
say, on the other hand, that art must appear as nature? Kant’s own response to this
question is, in one respect, reasonable enough. He says that, to look like nature, art
must appear *natural*, that is, not forced, labored, wooden, perfunctory, etc. Fine art
appears natural, in other words, in appearing *effortless*. In another respect, however,
this answer is deeply unsatisfying in that it answers a question of aesthetic *reception*
in terms of aesthetic *production*. That is to say, rather than telling those who judge
beauty how the merely subjective principle of purposiveness might ground the
aesthetic judgment even where the experience of beauty is “logically conditioned”
by the necessary awareness of objective purpose in a work of art, Kant prescribes
what we might call a “phenomenological imperative”73 to artists to make the work
*seem* effortless, graceful, and free of any hint that—as Kant puts it—“the rule was
hovering before the artist’s eyes and putting fetters on his mental powers” (CJ, 307).
By appealing to an aesthetic standard of aesthetic production (a rather suspect one,

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72 Cf., for example, Ch. 12 of Henry Allison’s, *Kant’s Theory of Taste*, (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 2001), pp. 271-301.

73 It is considered “phenomenological” in the sense that it concerns the *appearance* of art in
relation to nature, and “imperative” in the sense that art is obliged to exhibit the kind of
purposiveness that diminishes the presence of objective purpose as much as possible.
no less), Kant leaves the more pressing question—namely, what it might mean from
the standpoint of aesthetic judgment for art to seem like nature—quite unresolved.
However adroit the artist may prove in concealing the “academic form” (CJ, 307) of
the artwork, it will not conceal the judging spectator’s awareness that the work of
fine art is a purposeful product of human rationality, which is precisely what is at
stake here.

2.6 Hegel’s Solution

From what has been observed so far, we can begin to get a sense of why Hegel
regards the Critique of Judgment as the “starting point for the true comprehension of
beauty,” but not its final endpoint. It is no small gesture that Hegel credits Kant for
having laid the foundation for a theory of the art predicated on the perfect unity of
sensible particularity and the universality of thought. Indeed, it is Kant, we will
recall, who “sees the beauty of art, after all, as a correspondence in which the
particular itself accords with the concept” (LFA, 60). But in the end, Hegel goes on to
say, “this apparently perfect reconciliation” between sense and intellect embodied
in the work of art proves illusory, since it “is still supposed by Kant at the last to be
only subjective in respect of the judgment and the production [of art]” (LFA, 60).
This explains, in very broad terms, why Hegel regards the project of the third
Critique as incomplete. Thus one of the primary tasks Hegel sets for himself in the
Aesthetics is the corrective task of developing Kant’s conception of fine art, partly in
spite of Kant, in order to yield the most rewarding results from it:
Only by overcoming Kant’s deficiencies could the comprehension [of beauty] assert itself as the higher grasp of the true unity of necessity and freedom, particular and universal, sense and reason. (LFA, 60-61)

Chief among the “deficiencies” Hegel refers to here, we may safely assume, is the untenable supposition that our experience of artistic beauty is predicated on the same subjective principle of purposiveness by which we experience the beauty of nature. While the *Critique of Judgment* contains all or most of the conceptual resources for a robust philosophy of art, Hegel seems to think that Kant ultimately concedes this robustness to the theoretical demands of the doctrine of reflecting judgment. In this particular case, Kant correctly identifies and analyzes that kind of phenomenological grounding that is, by his own account, built into the aesthetic experience of art. But he does not, Hegel thinks, follow this insight through to its logical conclusion, namely, that there is a fundamental difference between the appearance of nature and the appearance of art in aesthetic experience. Art does not appear to us as nature. And this, of course, is Hegel’s rationale for distinguishing so sharply in the *Aesthetics* between a philosophy of art (properly so-called) and an aesthetic theory of the Kantian variety.

Nevertheless, the theoretical continuity between Kant and Hegel consists in the fact that the difference between them is not principally one of methodological orientation, as is generally supposed. Instead, the difference consists in the final conclusions drawn from the *common idea* that art is “brought about by human activity.” Despite this difference in results, then, it is important to recognize the extent to which Hegel is working within the paradigm of Kantian aesthetics in
articulating the Concept of beauty in a way that exploits the very distinctions noted in the third *Critique* between the appearance of beauty in nature and the appearance of beauty in art. Hegel’s conception of artistic beauty as the “sensuous appearance of the Idea” (LFA, 111) is, as we have seen, consistent not only with Kant’s basic insight that a work of fine art by definition exhibits the concept of purpose or rational intent, but also with his further designation of the aesthetic experience of art as “logically conditioned” by the awareness of this purpose in the work of art. In short, then, Hegel thinks Kant’s aesthetic project is *completed*, not refuted, in drawing out the full implications of the recognition that art appears, not as nature, but as art—that is, as a product of rational human activity.

Moreover, Hegel can build on the Kantian foundation in a way that averts the above tension between Kant’s insights about fine art in §§43-54 and the general account of aesthetic experience developed in the Analytic of the Beautiful. The problem, as we have seen, is that the difference between artistic and natural beauty complicates Kant’s efforts to account for both forms of beauty with the principle of purposiveness central to the theory of reflecting judgments. According to the continuity thesis, however, this is a problem that Hegel thinks he can solve—and indeed, on Kantian terms. Hegel’s solution, then, is this: Give up the claim that art appears as nature and allow for an altogether different kind of judgment, irreducible to both discursive cognition and pure reflecting judgment. Kant has already given us sufficient reason to distinguish fine art from nature in terms of purpose, and it poses no threat, so far as I can see, either to the critical epistemology or to Kant’s general theory of taste, to make room within an already elaborate taxonomy of judgmental
forms for a distinctly *artistic* form of aesthetic judgment. Developing a philosophy of art on the premise of this division need not—as is often assumed—force the Kantian either to renge on the place of fine art within the theory aesthetic reflecting judgment or to compromise the internal consistency of that view. Instead, the Kantian can preserve the structure of reflecting judgments of natural beauty while at the same time allowing for the uniqueness and discreteness of the aesthetic experience of art along the lines suggested by Kant’s discussion of fine art.

In sum, the trade-off Hegel has in mind seems to be that, by sacrificing the theoretical claim that the aesthetic experience of art is qualitatively identical to the aesthetic experience of nature, one has a wealth of Kantian resources in place for getting at an account of the aesthetic experience of art that proves to be phenomenologically more complex and philosophically more interesting than the aesthetic experience of nature. Before proceeding with the evaluative aspect of this claim on Hegel’s behalf, however, it seems judicious at this point to consider some of the ways that the Kantian might want to defend Kant against the verdict reached by the continuity thesis thus far.

2.6.1 Objections to the Continuity Thesis

The Kantian may, of course, want reject the central premise of the continuity thesis, namely, that any such tension exists between natural and artistic beauty in Kant’s account of aesthetic reflecting judgment. It seems to me that there are but two ways of doing this: one can assert either that art and nature yield identical forms of aesthetic experience, or that they are unproblematically distinct. Either option,
however, reveals the limitations of a Kantian account of the aesthetic experience of art, each in its own way. This presents a dilemma that ultimately shows the continuity thesis to be the more viable alternative for an account of aesthetic experience that captures the uniqueness, richness and complexity of our engagement with art.

One possibility (and perhaps the more common) is to defend to the letter the consistency of Kant’s account of fine art and his general theory of reflecting judgment by insisting on the qualitative uniformity of aesthetic experience for both natural and artistic beauty. This view—call it the “identity” view of fine art—maintains that the aesthetic response to art is in all relevant respects identical to the aesthetic experience of nature and can therefore be judged by the same criteria, namely, that of a concept-independent pleasure based on the appearance of purposiveness. Given what Kant has told us about the presence of rational purpose in art, however, it seems the identity view achieves internal consistency at the cost of radically underdetermining the complexity of that experience. One would either have to suppress the awareness of purpose or intention in art in order to maintain the purity of aesthetic judgment, or adopt a strict aesthetic formalism which regards considerations of artistic intent, aesthetic content, or even historical or cultural significance as not only as superfluous, but also corruptive, elements of aesthetic judgment. Neither option strikes me as very satisfying.

With regard to the first point, we should begin by asking whether the suppression of this awareness of purpose in art is even possible from a psychological standpoint. In the case of natural beauty, I can reasonably suppose a
teleological principle underlying its form precisely because I cannot otherwise rationalize the diversity of nature under a single principle. But it is not simply the case that I am in fact aware that the work of art is a product of a finite rational intelligence; according to Kant I must be “conscious that it is art rather than nature” (CJ, 306) in order to make judgments of taste about it.74 Try as I may, I cannot overlook its purpose. This is what Kant means when he says the aesthetic experience of art is “logically conditioned” by the concept of purpose, and so I can hardly rid myself of the very awareness that allows me to judge works of fine art aesthetically. It cannot be the case, then, that Kant expects us to simply suppress the awareness of purpose in a work of art in order to achieve purity in aesthetic judgments.

Another take on the identity view is to construe Kant’s aesthetic imperative as an affirmation of a fairly strict aesthetic formalism. On this reading, what Kant means in saying that art must look like nature is that, in making judgments of taste, we tend exclusively to formal qualities exhibited by an object. Indeed, a very influential lot of writers and critics, including the Bloomsbury writers, Clive Bell and Roger Fry, and the notable art critic, Clement Greenberg, read Kant as an early champion of the formalist aesthetics they began advocating in the middle of the

74 John Zammito refers to this as “the grounding paradox of art” in Kant, since the aesthetic judgment of fine art must be grounded in both the recognition as well as the denial of the concept of purpose in the work of art. Cf. John Zammito, The Genesis of Kant’s Critique of Judgment (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
The implication here is that art’s having “the appearance of nature” for Kant means that its aesthetic value is determined independently of any considerations extrinsic to its form. Thus artistic intent, aesthetic content, or even historical or cultural significance are regarded as superfluous to the true appreciation of the work of art as an object of beauty.

I think it is not difficult to see how this brand of formalism in many cases yields a rather impoverished conception of aesthetic experience. As an empirical point, there are quite plausibly any number of artworks that may admit the kind of formal abstraction that this view requires of aesthetic judgment (e.g., Rodin’s sculpture, the music of Brahms and Beethoven, Abstract Expressionist painting, etc.). Granting even these, however, arguably the greater pantheon of historical artworks exhibits an aesthetic form that is essentially bound to an aesthetic content. Quite apart from theory, we have to ask ourselves: Is the aesthetic experience of Michelangelo’s *Pieta* corrupted by an understanding of the Christian thematic content in art (crucifixion, deposition, lamentation, etc.), or is it thereby enriched? Can we even begin to appreciate, say, the beauty of Buddhist sculpture without some understanding of Buddhism? Romantic poetry without the concept of “nature”? Socialist realism without Marx? To sever this connection between form and

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75 There are, of course, a number of important reasons to distinguish between Kant’s analysis of aesthetic form and later developments of so-called “formalist” aesthetics. In this case, the notable difference is that, unlike the formalists of the twentieth century, Kant’s immediate interests are not with art, but in establishing a single principle by which universal aesthetic judgments could be made of both natural and artistic beauty. For a more detailed analysis of the various conceptions of aesthetic formalism in relation to Kant, cf. Rachel Zuckert, “The Purposiveness of Form: A Reading of Kant’s Aesthetic Formalism.” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 44.4 (2006), 599-622.
and content in the name of theory would radically diminish, and in some cases even preclude, an aesthetic appreciation of the work of art.

A second, more promising, option is to argue, as Paul Guyer does, that the Kantian is not in fact committed to the claim that the experience of natural beauty and the experience of artistic beauty must be qualitatively identical. Instead, one can read §§43-54 of the Critique of Judgment as a significant departure from the otherwise formalist account of natural beauty suggested in the “Analytic of the Beautiful” in that it demonstrates the inherent complexity of judgments concerning artistic beauty. Call this the “complexity” view. According to Kant’s “real theory,” Guyer argues, the aesthetic response to art

> [...] does not require the suppression of any concepts but arises precisely from the complexity of the interplay between the form of a work of art and the content and spirit to which it gives expression.

Guyer’s objective is to challenge reductivist readings of Kant, such as the “identity” view described above, by calling attention to those features of artistic beauty that distinguish it from an analysis of pure form. On this view, Kant (despite himself) need not have held that art must look like nature in the first place since the purpose of which we are aware in a work of art is the purpose of producing a pleasurable free play of the faculties. In this case, what we are judging is whether the work of art


77 Ibid, p. 276.
in fact succeeds in producing this kind of pleasure, which we can do regardless of whether or not we are conscious of its intention to do so.

By dispensing with the reductivist view that artistic and natural beauty must elicit the same kind of aesthetic response, the complexity view certainly presents a more attractive analysis of art in Kant than its formalist counterpart. However, the arguments that Guyer puts forward in defense of an expressively complex, content-oriented account of art in Kant are more likely to reinforce the proximity of Kant’s view of art to Hegel’s than support a strong distinction in favor of the former. In other words, if such authors succeed in showing (as I think they do) that the experience of artistic beauty is for Kant qualitatively distinct from that of natural beauty by virtue of a more complex interplay of form and content, then it is but a short theoretical step to saying, as Hegel does, that art requires a distinct and more thoroughly developed philosophical analysis for precisely this reason.

Guyer cites significant contrasts between natural and artistic beauty as evidence against the reductivist reading of aesthetic experience in Kant. But the kind of experiential complexity he hopes to reveal in Kant’s account of fine art turns on making precisely the revisionary claim that we find in Hegel, namely that art does not, after all, appear as nature. In this way, the complexity view begins to approximate the continuity thesis between Kant and Hegel that I have been suggesting thus far. Indeed, the complexity view meets the first of Bubner’s criteria, noted above (p. 29) for extracting an account of aesthetic experience from Hegel, namely, that we “separate the Kantian approach from its predominantly epistemological context and develop it more along the lines of a content-based
conception of art.” Likewise, the claim in both cases is that the theoretical payoff for this relatively minor concession is that the appearance of art allows for much richer conception of aesthetic experience than that of nature, and indeed, one that more accurately reflects both the productive and receptive aspects of aesthetic experience than does the identity view.

However, Guyer, like Bubner and other critics, readily dismisses the converse possibility that Hegel’s speculative conception of art can accommodate the kind of aesthetic subjectivity that we get from Kant. Instead, Guyer shares the common view of Hegel as advocating a reductivist aesthetic theory, according to which the sole purpose of art is “to represent a single metaphysical idea.” But now, if we extend the same spirit of interpretive charity to Hegel that the complexity view does to Kant, we can begin to see that Hegel bases his conception of art as the “sensuous appearance of the Idea” on precisely this notion that the beauty of art appears to us as a more complex interrelation of concept and representation, content and form. An underlying aim of the remaining chapters, therefore, will be to showcase the various ways in which this more nuanced analysis of fine art in the third Critique functions as conceptual starting point for a more comprehensive account of aesthetic experience of art in Hegel. My aim in this final section, however, is to show how this notion of appearance [Schein] figures into Hegel’s account of aesthetic experience, and further, how it continues to do so in the era of post-classical art.

78 Ibid, p. 284.
2.7 “Schein”: The Appearance of Art in Hegel’s Aesthetics

In a recent interview, the contemporary American artist, John Baldessari, talks about the process of making art:

Art-making is about making choices. You have to choose one color over another, one line over another, and on and on. It’s all decision-making, and each time, you’re sharpening the way you make decisions. That’s it, in a sort of Cartesian way. Without that, you don’t have art.79

Interestingly, Baldessari is not referring to his own painterly habits, but to art-making in general; artistic production itself is a conscious, deliberative process of making a series of decisions. His point, I take it, is that nothing in art is arbitrary, that making art never happens without some rationale, however vague or precise, but rather is the effect of intelligent foresight.80

Accordingly, the work of art appears to us—the spectators—as having a form that is the result of a series of conscious, artistic choices. To put the same point in more Hegelian terms, to perceive an object as a work of art—that is, under the Concept of art—is to perceive it as an exhibition of meaningfulness in sensuous form. Again, this by no means implies that the natural form drops out of the aesthetic experience of art; sensuousness remains, as we have seen, an essential feature of the artwork. Rather, the sensuous form of nature becomes meaningful for

79 Art in America (October, 2009), p. 154.

80 Indeed, even art practices that exploit the element of chance and randomness in artistic production (e.g., John Cage’s aleatoric compositions, Jackson Pollock’s drip-paintings) are no less beholden to a consciously chosen principle of artistic production. Chance and randomness become just as much a part of the aesthetic rationale as color, medium, or composition. Insofar as each element of the work of art represents a decision, each element within the work subject to aesthetic scrutiny.
us because we have a concept of the object as the product of rational human intellect. The appearance of art is not the look of nature, but the look of nature transformed through rational activity:

The artistic presentation must appear here as natural, yet it is not the natural there as such but that making, precisely the extinction of the sensuous material and external conditions, which is the poetic and the ideal in a formal sense. We delight in a manifestation which must appear as if nature had produced it, while without natural means it has been produced by the spirit; works of art enchant us, not because they are so natural, but because they have been made so natural. (LFA, 164)

One detects that Hegel draws this comparison with an eye toward Kant’s claim of the reciprocity between artistic and natural beauty considered above. The important qualification to this claim, of course, is that that, over and above the resemblance of artistic and natural beauty, there is the crucial awareness that the form of the object is the product of human intellect. For Hegel, unlike Kant, this awareness serves as a cardinal asset, rather than a liability, for the development of a philosophy of art. Thus Kant’s worry about the “logically conditioned” status of artistic beauty on Hegel’s view is precisely what allows for the aesthetic transformation of nature that profoundly enriches the aesthetic experience of art.

The most significant implication of the Concept of art, therefore, is the phenomenological implication. Whatever we come to understand by the metaphysical content of the work of art (as a form of truth, knowledge, Idea, etc.), what matters is that it appears to us aesthetically, as the beautiful transformation of nature.
Indeed, according to Hegel, the conceptual dependency between truth and appearance is essential, since “truth would not be truth if it did not show itself and appear” (LFA, 8). What appears as true, however, is not something distinct from the appearance itself. Hegel indicates this in his fuller discussion of the appearance, or shining-forth [Schein] of truth in the Logic: “Essence accordingly is not something beyond or behind appearance, but—just because it is the essence which exists—the existence is Appearance.”\(^81\) It is not the appearance of truth, but truth appearing, that gives philosophical significance to art. Hegel elucidates this distinction in the Aesthetics by explicitly distinguishing between mere appearance and the “special kind of appearance” unique to art, according to which it “gives reality to what is inherently true” (LFA, 8/W13, 21). In the context of artistic beauty, Hegel aims, in the first place, to wrest the concept of “appearance” from the negative connotation afforded it in the philosophical tradition.\(^82\) Inverting the common order of appearance and reality, he argues that what we ordinarily regard as “reality,” “actuality,” “truth” is in fact the deceptive mode of existence.

It is precisely this whole sphere of the empirical inner and outer world which is not the world of genuine actuality; on the contrary, we must call it, in a stricter sense than we call art, a pure appearance and a harsher deception. (LFA, 8)

\(^81\) Part I, §131 (Zusatz), W8, 311-12.

\(^82\) In the Logic, Hegel opposes Kant’s use of the term “appearance” [Erscheinung] to refer to conditioned representation, in contrast to the way things really are apart from our subjective perception (Ibid). Likewise, in the Aesthetics, Hegel connects this tendency explicitly with mimetic theories of art, particularly with Plato’s ontological separation of art and reality.
I do not mean to claim that Hegel is entirely original in this respect. It is Schiller, in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, who emphasizes the positive significance of beauty in the concept of “schöner Schein,” of a beautiful appearance set against the deceptive appearance of reality. Like Hegel, Schiller diagnoses the modern era as one of moral discord and disillusionment and sees in beauty a potentially redemptive force within this dystopian setting. For Schiller, however, art offers momentary aesthetic respite in beauty and aesthetic experience removed from the otherwise harsh reality of modernity. Art retains its illusory character, but it is not a false or deceptive illusion. Instead, the appearance, or—as it is often translated—“semblance,” of beauty [*schöner Schein*] holds out the concrete possibility of something better, a promising vision of political and moral harmony. “The only kind of real semblance,” Schiller writes, “is aesthetic semblance (distinguished from actuality and truth). We love it as semblance, not because we take it to be something better.”

83 In the context of Schiller’s general claim that aesthetic education instills human beings with the moral proclivities necessary for social advancement, the uniquely redeeming quality of *schöner Schein* is that it offers an appearance of a utopian reality as an optimistically imagined alternative to the malaise of reality. 84


Now Hegel, upon whom the *Letters* exerted a profound influence in developing a philosophy of art, follows Schiller in distinguishing the truthful appearance of art from the deceptive appearance of reality. But he denies Schiller’s claim that art is in any way illusory, an appearance or “semblance” of reality distinct from and discontinuous from reality itself. Of course, Hegel has an ontological stake in this claim, since art is, as we have seen, essentially of a piece with the sensuous world. But Hegel quite consciously inverts the order of priority: the appearance of art is *higher* than that of reality. Or, better still: art is reality, stripped of illusion. Art discloses the real and the true in the otherwise deceptive nature of ordinary experience. So, the appearance of art is not that of mere semblance, or beautiful illusion, separate and distinct from the drudgery of reality. Rather, the *Schein* of beauty peels back the otherwise false veneer of everyday existence, as it were, and exposes its essence in its true light.

In this respect, we can understand aesthetic experience as an essentially *transformative* experience, in which art

> [...liberates the true content of phenomena from the pure appearance and deception of this bad, transitory world, and gives them a higher actuality, born of the spirit. Thus, far from being mere pure appearance, a higher reality and truer existence is to be ascribed to the phenomena of art in comparison with [those of] ordinary reality. (LFA 9)

Aesthetic experience is the experience of *Schein*, the appearance of things as they really are. So again, it is far too simplistic to dismiss Hegel’s view on the assumption

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85 Cf. esp. Hegel’s remarks on Schiller at LFA, 61f.
that beauty, as the appearance of the Idea in art, is reducible to the appearance of a fixed metaphysical idea. For Hegel, truth is in the *appearing* of beauty itself. That shining forth of beauty just *is* truth insofar art is able to remove the contingency of nature and present it in its true and essential form. To the extent that art can achieve this, aesthetic experience can allow us to feel *at home* in the empirical world.

   Seen in this light, it is Hegel, rather than Nietzsche, who deserves credit for inverting the Platonic hierarchy of original over image. The aesthetic thesis concerning appearance, which originates in Hegel’s ontology, asserts that the presentation of nature in the context of art allows it to shine forth from the “bad” world of contingent, sensuous existence in which its forms are otherwise enshrouded. Art has the potential to transform our perception of the everyday, to allow the mere appearance of nature to *shine forth*. “Through this ideality,” Hegel writes, “art exalts these otherwise worthless objects which, despite their insignificant content, it fixes and makes ends in themselves; it directs our attention to what otherwise we would pass by without any notice” (LFA, 163). This claim will have a strong echo in the twentieth century with thinkers such as Heidegger, whose phenomenological notion of “everyday being” makes a similarly normative claim that modern individuals have lost sight of the essence of things in the course of ordinary experience, and thus require higher-order modes of reflection to extract us from the immediacy and contingency of everyday existence. Hegel sees the potential in art to rend us free, by way of aesthetic reflection, from the contingency of
sensuous existence, not by opposing it, but by “grasping and displaying existence, in its appearance, as true” (LFA, 155).

With this robust claim, however, the worry returns as to whether Hegel’s claim of an end of art can sustain the foregoing analysis of art as meaningful, even transformative. It looks as though the Schein of art has lost its luster over time. Quite the contrary: we will see that the transformative significance of aesthetic experience is in fact one of the key features of Hegel’s aesthetic theory that not only survives the “death of art,” but takes on a far more interesting and aesthetically significant life in the post-classical era. Nowhere is an account of the transformative “appearance” of artistic beauty more fully developed, in fact, than in his treatment of romantic painting, specifically in his account of the late style of Dutch genre painting.

2.7.1 The “Death of Art” and Painting the “Sunday of Life”

Hegel states unambiguously that art “remains for us a thing of the past” (LFA, 11). Art cannot do for us what it did for the Greeks; it can no longer reveal to us our highest interests. Whatever else the so-called “death of art” or “end of art” doctrine might mean, we can say with certainty that it does not mean that art ceases as a practice. It is an empirical fact that art is still made, and indeed, I would even venture to say that artists are considerably more productive today than at any point in human history, given both the greater number of artists practicing art as well as the advances in technique, technology, and industrial means of production. But of course, quantity is not quality, and the key difference between classical and
romantic art for Hegel is that, even while artworks are still produced (and in great numbers), that art does not matter to us moderns the way it did for the Greeks. The highest vocation of art—revealing the inner depths of the human spirit—reached its zenith in Attic sculpture, never to return again. So if art is no more the appearance of the ideal of beauty, we are left to wonder: What is the significance, if any, of modern art? What continues to shine forth in art, after it has ended?

More pessimistic critics of Hegel take him to be downgrading the value of art that does not fulfill the lofty purposes that Greek art was able to achieve. But here we must guard against the oversimplified view that Hegel rings the death knell for modern art in the name of an unchecked classicist bias. The point is not that romantic art has lost its significance altogether, but that it has lost its significance as something divine. Hence “we bow the knee no longer” before the work of art (LFA, 103). This does not strike me as a particularly controversial claim nowadays. It should hardly surprise us today to hear that the work of art is not, either present or past, the object of sanctified veneration. We are apt to regard the Torso of Apollo as beautiful, but not because Apollo is a god. That immediate mode of aesthetic experience is simply no longer accessible to us in the art of the Greeks, and it would be equally peculiar to think that it is available to artworks of our own time. Imagine looking to Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings, Charles Simic’s poetry, or Andrew Calder’s steel sculptures for substantive answers about what we should do, who we should be, and what we should believe. We would not only be disappointed with what turns up, we would also, I think, be missing the point. Does anyone count on the moral authority of Jeff Koons? Does even the most devout lover of art go to
worship at the Guggenheim or the Metropolitan Opera? Even in the presumptuous and arrogant air of today’s artworld, I doubt that any artist could in all sincerity purport to offer a cosmology or comprehensive mythology in their work. So, if we take Hegel’s claim about the end of art to mean only that the work of art no longer holds the status of an object of worship, then I think he has only given philosophical stilts to what we all take to be obvious about the role of art today. Indeed, what is most surprising in Hegel’s account of art is not that it has lost this significance, but that it ever had this significance at all.

Moreover, even as Hegel laments the breakdown of normative unity in the modern era, he sees the consequent loss of art’s religious function as liberating for the continued pursuit of art:

Yet in this self-transcendence art is nevertheless a withdrawal of man into himself, a descent into his own breast, whereby art strips away from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment, and makes Humanus its new holy of holies: i.e., the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds, and fates.

(LFA, 607)

Divested of its lofty mythological status, art is free to explore the rich particularity of human existence—the Humanus—in all its complexity. Indeed, it is this insistence on the positive aesthetic value of art’s transition to secular humanism in art that I take to be the real mark of originality in Hegel’s view of modern art. Rather than staking the continued relevance of art on the prospect of returning to a golden age of art (as many of his romantic contemporaries do), Hegel locates the vitality of modern art in its celebration of the commonplace. With the breakdown of
cosmopolitanism in Greek ethical life, the notion of individual subjectivity begins to emerge in post-classical art manifests itself in disparate scenes of everyday life: a milkmaid at work, a boy picking fleas off a dog, a mother nursing her sick child. Once agency is understood in terms of individual subjectivity, as opposed to a defined social role, as a citizen of the polis, art begins to reflect this dissolving social cohesion in its focus on the inner life of the human existence. “Inner subjectivity” then becomes “the fundamental principle of romantic art” (LFA, 518/W1, 128), and “inwardness [Innerlichkeit]” its principal content (LFA, 519/W14, 129). What must now come to artistic representation is the “willing and self-knowing subject,” not as a subject beyond humanity, but “the human being as actual subjectivity” (Ibid). The subject matter of romantic art, therefore, is the whole of human existence. Drawing, no doubt, from the famous line from Terence, Hegel proclaims, “Nothing that can be living in the human breast is alien to that spirit any more” (LFA, 607). Both the form and the content of art become focused, the subject as “self-determining and considering, meditating, and expressing the infinity of its feelings and situations” (Ibid).

Thus the transformative character of aesthetic experience not only remains well beyond the end of art, in romantic art it becomes even more pronounced. Once nature is “emptied of gods” (LFA, 524) and the explicitly religious significance of art begins to wane, the subject matter appropriate for artistic depiction becomes

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86 Heauton Timorumenos, I. i. 25. Hegel cites this quote (incorrectly) in the Introduction: “Nihil humani a me alienum” [I count nothing human indifferent to me]” (LFA, 46). We will see in the next chapter, however, that there is a right way and a wrong way to present the appearance of banality in art.
radically diversified. The inward turn on the part of the modern subject opens up for art a new spectrum of subject matter depicting the limitless facets of human life. Its subject matter becomes “infinitely rich” and can “adapt its shape to ever-altered circumstances and situations in the most multifarious ways” (LFA, 525). Now that the human subject reflects on subjectivity as such, the “inexhaustible content” of art becomes “the whole of mankind and its entire development” (LFA, 526).

In spite of the cultural and normative decentralization of art, we should also note that Hegel does not think romantic art abandons its religious significance altogether. This is evident in the occasional return to Greek mythological themes, and especially in the predominance of Christian subject matter in Byzantine, Renaissance and Boroque art in Europe. But even if art retains a vestige of its religious heritage in its preoccupation with Christian iconography, Hegel’s point is that art itself is no longer the focal point of religious life. Indeed, the transition he is concerned with is the transition from art as religion to religious art; that is, from religion in the broad sense (i.e., as comprehensive mythology) to religion in the narrow sense (i.e., as Christianity), and indeed, a religion premised specifically on inner spiritually. Instead of providing a concrete embodiment of cultural normativity, romantic works of art begins to examine specific “virtues” (Cf. LFA, 553f) and individual character (Cf. LFA, 577f) independently of the social institutions that earlier gave shape to ethical life, such as the family or the state. Whereas Greek sculpture stood as the outward expression of a culture’s deepest interests, romantic art turns its attention to the free and self-sufficient subject that
holds such interests, and thus involves a level of individual reflection on the normative structures that make up a given culture.

Concurrent with the residual religiosity present in romantic art, however, is the increasing secularization of its content. Indeed, it is precisely this shifting tension between an eroding spirituality and an emerging sense of the reflective self that Hegel takes to be the most philosophically salient feature of romantic art. “Thus in romantic art,” he explains, “we have two worlds”: a spiritual realm and the realm of the external as such” (LFA, 527). Now that nature is emptied of gods and its natural forms “are no longer augmented symbolically” (LFA, 524), a rift begins to emerge between the outward, material form of art and its inner, spiritual content. On the one hand, Christianity’s focus on the inner life of the soul outstrips art’s potential to render adequately the more complex religious narrative in outward form (think, for example, of the use of gilded script in early Italian Renaissance paintings to depict the Annunciation: “Ave Maria, gratia plena dominius tecum…”). Art can no longer embody the whole of Sittlichkeit, or the ethical life of a culture, and so as moderns we can no longer bow the knee to the art object as such. On the other hand, however, this failure of art to fulfill our deepest religious needs at the same time ushers in a humanist interest in the everyday that, as Hegel suggests, makes romantic art more interesting aesthetically, even if less potent religiously. It is not the ideal harmony between the form and content of an artwork that constitutes the beauty of romantic art, but rather its capacity to transform the banal and commonplace details of human life through the Schein of artistic representation.
Thus Hegel introduces a new standard by which romantic works of art deserved to be called “great”. If modern works of art are judged in terms of the Ideal of artistic beauty (i.e., the perfect correspondence of form and content), he maintains, they “must undoubtedly fall short” (LFA, 596). However, romantic art has a feature that is still of “special importance”, namely,

> [...] the artist’s subjective conception and execution of the work of art, the aspect of the individual talent which can remain faithful both to the manifestations of spirit and also to the inherently substantial life of nature, even in the extreme limits of the contingency which that life reaches, and can make significant even what is in itself without significance [...]. In view of these aspects we may not deny the name of works of art to the creations of this sphere. (LFA, 596)

In short, the beauty of modern art consist in making significant the insignificant. In romantic art—which is, accordingly, the most developed of Hegel’s lectures on art by far—it is no longer just the anthropomorphic depiction of deities or the idealization of the human figure that constitute the sensuous appearance of the Idea, but the miscellaneous details and detritus of what Hegel calls “prosaic life.” This development can be observed most acutely, Hegel thinks, in Dutch genre painting.

In the earlier phase of romantic painting, Dutch artists—Jan van Eyck, Hans Memling, Jan Steen, Jan van Scorel, among others (cf. LFA, 599)—are predominantly concerned with a distinctly Christian subject matter. While residual images of Greek mythology remain, the early Dutch genre painters are specifically drawn to a codified set of Biblical scenes depicting the life of Christ. In addition to its innovative and distinct technical mastery, Dutch painting is most notable, Hegel explains, for its “transition from a more peaceful and reverential piety to the portrayal of torments
and the ugliness of the world generally” (LFA, 883). This is the transition from the artistic depiction of the gods to the artistic depiction of the everyday world, in all its banal homeliness. But note how Hegel speaks of the aesthetic representation as a profound transformation of the everyday:

Velvet, metallic luster, light, horses, servants, old women, peasants blowing smoke from cutty pipes, the glitter of wine in a transparent glass, chaps in dirty jackets playing with old cards—these and hundreds of other things are brought before our eyes in these pictures, things that we scarcely bother about in our daily life. (LFA, 162)

Genre painting takes the “trivial” and even the “repugnant” and springs them to life, giving them a liveliness [Lebendigkeit] absent from ordinary experience. Here Hegel makes a point to emphasize the banal character of aesthetic content when taken in the context of everyday life. The point is that even such seemingly insignificant detritus, the likes of which are otherwise bound to escape notice in the course of day-to-day affairs, becomes transformed in the context of art and take on an appearance worthy of intense admiration. When art has shed its occupation with the divine, it turns its gaze to the particulars of everyday life and “exalt[s] these otherwise worthless objects which, despite their insignificant content, it fixes and makes ends in themselves; it directs our attention to what otherwise we would pass by without any notice” (LFA, 163). The work of art may no longer ideal, but it can certainly still idealize the everyday.87

87 For an excellent and thorough discussion of Hegel’s account of the formal devices employed in painting to convey the emerging consciousness of modern subjectivity—framing, flatness, and glazing—see Chapter 2 of Benjamin Rutter’s recently published monograph, Hegel on the Modern Arts (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
The same is true of later developments in genre painting. Predicated on the emerging sense of *individualism* in the romantic era, Hegel interprets the predominance of realist portraiture in Dutch painting as a reflection of the modern consciousness of subjectivity. Hegel goes so far as to say that a portrait painting actually affords us a more truthful and insightful view of the individual person it is intended to represent, insofar as it affords a glimpse into the “soul” of that person. Take, for example, Albrecht Dürer, who in his portraits “has emphasized the features so simply, definitely, and splendidly that we think we have before us the entirety of a spiritual life” (LFA, 867). And as for the aesthetic experience: “The longer one looks at such a picture, the more deeply one immerses oneself in it, all the more does one see emerging from it” (Ibid). Speaking more broadly, consider also the *Portrait of a Knight* by Titian, one of Hegel’s most beloved painters. According to Hegel, a portrait executed by the hand of Titian “is more like the individual than the actual individual himself” (Ibid). The artistic rendering of the knight represented here gives the subject an appearance that transcends the purely sensuous existence of the individual. Such paintings “give us a conception of spiritual vitality unlike what a face actually confronting us gives” (LFA, 866).

If art is dead, then for Hegel there is liberation in death. If the end of art arrives when it can no longer present us with the embodied figures of the gods, then its new life is in the vitality or “liveliness [*Lebendigkeit*]” of Dutch painting. Modern art has a “new holy of holies” which is not the Divine, but the richness and variety of human life as a whole—what Hegel calls “the *Humanus*” (LFA, 607). Although Hegel is unwilling to admit the possibility of a return to a golden age of art after this
gradual transition from the unity of communal religious life to a secular modernity has taken place, he interprets this transition as the emancipation of art. Quite in opposition to the charge that “the Idea” that appears in art restricts artistic representation to a fixed metaphysical content, it is specifically in modern art, Hegel thinks, that “art strips away from itself all fixed restriction to a specific range of content and treatment” consisting in “the depths and heights of the human heart as such, mankind in its joys and sorrows, its strivings, deeds, and fates” (Ibid). In its capacity to traverse the whole spectrum of human content, from the sacred to the profane, Dutch painting holds out the promise that, while modern art can no longer satisfy our deepest interests, it can nevertheless offer the appearance of redemption in the transformation of the trivial details of human life through a rich and deeply reflexive form of aesthetic experience. With non-Ideal art, therefore, there remains an “ideal feature”: the “Sunday of life which equalizes everything and removes all evil” (LFA, 887). Aesthetic experience is the experience of life, transformed and held up to us for reflection. There is truth in Dutch painting that speaks to the present, but which at the same time is “an ingredient in any work of art,” namely, “the vision of what man is as man, what the human sprit and character is, what man and this man is” (LFA, 887).

It is, accordingly, this “new principle” of subjectivity underwriting the progressive liberation of romantic art that allows for an aesthetic experience of reflection. With the increased independence of what can be portrayed in art, what is brought to attention is not the content itself, but the relation of the viewer to that content; romantic works of art “make visible the liveliness of their treatment, the
participation of the spirit, the mind’s very indwelling in this uttermost extreme of externality [...]” (LFA, 794). In this, art is liberated from the vestiges of its religious past. Yet this liberation of art that arises with the new principle of subjectivity, in which we become aware of ourselves in the experience of art, gives way to a new and very important question: Can aesthetic experience be liberating for the modern subject?
In the previous chapter, we saw that a necessary condition of the aesthetic experience of art as pure appearance, or Schein, is that the awareness of rational purpose is built into the experience of artistic beauty; we experience art as meaningful form. Insofar as art appears to us as a product “brought about by human activity” (LFA, 25), there is, Hegel claims, a fundamental phenomenological distinction between the aesthetic experience of art and the aesthetic experience of nature. But the upshot of this analysis, we will recall, lies with the claim that the shining forth of art affords us a potentially transformative experience, an experience in which perceptual form becomes saturated with meaning and made the object of higher-order reflection. Moreover, it was this notion that gave theoretical stability to the idea of an aesthetic of the everyday in Hegel’s thought.

As it stands, of course, the mere awareness of art as a product of rational intelligence, though it grounds the perceptual distinction between art and nature, is insufficient to support the further claim that the experience of art can be somehow
transformative. In fact, the claim that modern art can aestheticize the banal draws attention to the fact that we have not adequately distinguished aesthetic from non-aesthetic forms of experience. Arguably the greater share of objects we encounter in experience are products of human foresight and industry, but they hardly elicit a response from us that can be called transformative in any aesthetically salient sense. A spatula in my kitchen is no less a “product” than the Elgin marbles in the British museum; but it certainly does not “shine forth” for me, nor would I ever expect it to. Even when these objects are made beautiful, such as a diamond brooch or a Persian rug, they do not seem to occasion the kind of imaginative reflection and interpretive analysis that Hegel thinks belongs to works of art. Thus it follows that being a “product of human activity” is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the kind of transformative aesthetic experience that the analysis has so far suggested.

What is needed to make good on the claim that the aesthetic experience of art can be transformative—let alone liberating—is a further condition that distinguishes artistic from non-artistic products of rational intelligence. If art is, as Hegel claims, distinct from nature in that we grasp it in terms of rational purpose, then this further condition will distinguish the artistic from the ordinary in terms of the kind of purpose each serves. For Hegel, the answer is, in one sense, rather straightforward: The work of art “has an end and aim in itself [Zweck in sich]” (LFA, 25/W, 44). Hegel allows that art admits of many purposes, among which he names “fleeting play,” “recreation,” “entertainment,” “decoration,” “pleasantness” as examples (LFA, 7). However, “what we want to consider,” Hegel specifies, “is art which is free alike in its ends and its means” (Ibid). Thus a brooch complements an
outfit, and a rug ties a room together, but it is only in virtue of this “freedom [Freiheit],” Hegel maintains, that fine art is “truly art” (Ibid).

So, in one sense, the task of specifying the Concept of art in terms of its final purpose is made simple in the characterization of art as an end in itself. Indeed, it is hardly necessary to look to the stratosphere of speculative metaphysics to legitimate this view—it is, again, one of the “common ideas” about art from which he aims to develop the Concept of art. It is essentially the view, succinctly and poignantly captured in the words of the German expressionist painter, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, is that “art is not there to serve as a milking cow.” Whatever else a work of art may be, it is not a source of mere gratification, entertainment, instruction, or profit. For Hegel, art has absolute value, without recourse to external purpose or utility. As such, it belongs to the ranks of religion and philosophy as a fundamental expression of human rationality.

But it is one thing to say that art is decidedly not a lactating heifer, and quite another to say what art is in positive terms without undermining art’s status as an end in itself. This is especially true for Hegel, who insists on what we might call the “aesthetic freedom” of the artwork, and then goes on to articulate the final purpose of art explicitly in relation to the freedom of the human subject. Freedom is, as Hegel

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88 In the previous chapter, the “common idea” under consideration was the view that “the work of art is the product of human activity” (LFA, 25).

89 Letter to Gustav Schiefler (Dec. 30, 1924), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner/Gustav Scheifler Briefwechsel 1910-1935/1938. Edited by Wolfgang Henze. (Stuttgart, Zürich: Belser Verlag, 1990) p. 324. My translation. It is worth pointing out that Kirchner states this in a letter to his gallerist and publicist, which makes it all the more poignant.
puts it, is “the highest destiny of spirit” (LFA, 97). In the schema of rational development, art advances this end by revealing to us our highest interests and helping us to realize these in the empirical world. Indeed, the concept of “freedom” is one of the central normative concepts—by some accounts, the central normative concept—of Hegel’s practical and political philosophy. And it is no accident that art plays something of a theodical role in the context of Hegel’s aesthetic theory in that it allows us to feel “at home” in the world, and helps us to overcome alienation from our social, cultural and political environment. In other words, if the aesthetic experience is said to be transformative (as claimed in Chapter One), the task now is to articulate this transformative experience in terms of the way in which art actualizes human freedom.

One worries, however, that by construing the essence of art in terms of this elevated capacity to realize the freedom of the subject, Hegel answers the questions of art’s purpose in precisely the instrumental terms that the notion of art as an “end in itself” would seem to rule out. Hence the notion of aesthetic freedom seems to entail something of a paradox, namely, that art, which has absolute value, is valuable in virtue of being constitutive of human freedom. So it appears that we must choose between the freedom of the artwork and the freedom of the individual subject. This dilemma, compounded with the further unsettling claim that art eventually loses out


91 On the theodical significance of art in Hegel’s aesthetics, see Chapter 4 of Raymond Geuss’ *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1999.
to philosophical thinking in this capacity, readily invites the accusation that Hegel’s aesthetic theory offers a severely reductive analysis of art in terms of its metaphysical function, and that it remains indifferent or even hostile to the inherent value of the aesthetic experience itself. Jean-Marie Schaeffer, for example, alleges that Hegel, in ascribing freedom to the artwork, only exchanges one functionalist account of art for another.

Defining Art by its content of philosophical truth, the speculative theory claims to describe its essence, whereas in reality it is only proposing one ideal among others. For this reason it is always a discourse of exclusion, as is shown in particular by Hegel’s Aesthetics [...].

In this chapter, however, I will argue that the problem looks quite a bit different when we grasp Hegel’s notion of aesthetic freedom in terms of the kind of experience it affords us, rather than an “essentialist quest” to develop a metaphysical ontology of art. In particular, I argue that the apparently contradictory conceptions of art as both an end in itself and a primary form of self-realization are reconciled in what I call the “dialectic of aesthetic freedom”—the interdependent relation between the objective freedom of the artwork from extrinsic purposes and the subjective freedom of the individual engaged in aesthetic experience. In this way, I read Hegel’s claims regarding the freedom of art to be deeply parasitic on the conception of practical freedom as a reciprocal relation between world and subject, construed in

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terms of aesthetic experience. Claims about art’s potential for liberating subjectivity are, I argue, dialectically bound to the experience of art as an end in itself.

However, the historical and conceptual dimensions of this problem cannot be separated from one another. In the first place, Hegel’s concerns about the final purpose of art arise in the context of an aesthetic tradition deeply enamored with the interrelation of aesthetic beauty and human freedom, and so it is important to situate our analysis within that context. In this regard, Hegel is in direct dialogue with Kant on the issue of beauty, particularly in regard concept of aesthetic disinterestedness. At the same time, though less explicitly so, Hegel is deeply engaged with the moral and political implications of the Kantian view as developed in the aesthetics of Friedrich Schiller. To the extent that Hegel is able to successfully broker between these competing conceptions of art, I believe we gain from this historical analysis a fresh perspective on the ongoing dispute between the autonomy and the sovereignty of art, which Adorno famously dubs as the central “paradox” of modern aesthetics.93

On the view of aesthetic freedom I develop here, Hegel’s attempt to reconcile the underlying tensions of 19th century aesthetic theory results in a balanced conception of art’s purpose which effectively deters various reductivist theories of art while situating it at the center of social, moral, and political discourse. Moreover,

I argue that Hegel makes a case for aesthetic freedom that goes beyond the mere *negativity* of art that persists in contemporary aesthetics. The account of aesthetic experience developed in the *Aesthetics* carefully triangulates a rich conception of human freedom with a regard for both the autonomy of art as well as the inherent relevance of art to the most substantial dimensions of human life. In the final analysis, then, I think the taboo question of modernity—Can art still be *liberating*?—is still on the table.

### 3.1 The Dialectic of Aesthetic Freedom

A central insight of Hegel’s aesthetic theory is that how we approach an object conceptually determines how we will experience it. In the course of our daily affairs, many, if not most, of the empirical objects we encounter are *objects of purpose*. These are largely objects of practical utility, either directly useful, as stairs are for climbing and cars are for driving, or indirectly, in relation to what Heidegger aptly describes as a “network of purposes”: a car will get me to the store; at the store I can get potatoes; with potatoes I can make potato soup; so on and so forth. With other objects, we adopt a more abstract or intellectual approach, a curiosity in things, as for example when the birdwatcher notes the color and feather of bird spotted in a tree, or the philatelist comes across a rare stamp. Each approach constitutes a distinct kind of *interest* in the object—what Hegel calls a *practical* interest and a *theoretical* interest, respectively. Neither approach, he argues, is appropriate for the contemplation of artworks. Rather, “the contemplation of beauty,” he explains:
 [...] is of a liberal kind; it leaves its objects alone as being inherently free and infinite; there is no wish to possess them or take advantage of them as useful for fulfilling finite needs and intentions. (LFA, 114)

This is, of course, part of what it means to say that we are to regard the work of art as an “end in itself” (LFA, 25). While it may not strike us as a particularly bold or novel stance, Hegel claims to be positioning himself between two historically distinct methodological approaches to art: one which grasps art in terms of its historical particularity, and the other which grasps art in conceptual terms. This discussion shows that, in the context of 19th century aesthetic theory, the “autonomy” of art was still in crisis.

Moreover, it will soon become clear that Hegel’s stake in this classic debate over methodology lies elsewhere, in the further and more philosophically substantial claim that our experience of art’s freedom is itself constitutive of our own, subjective freedom. In other words, Hegel argues that if we take the right approach to art, i.e., if we approach art as an end in itself, independently of our subjective interests, we will come to realize our own freedom through that experience—where “realize” indicates both the awareness as well as the actualization of this freedom. In this section, I will outline Hegel’s critique of the respective approaches to art just mentioned, the practical and the theoretical. I will examine each in turn to show how Hegel develops the notion of aesthetic freedom as a dialectical relation between the freedom afforded to the object in aesthetic experience and the freedom of the subject achieved in that experience. Clarity on what Hegel takes to be the appropriate approach to art will in turn shed light on
what he takes to be the philosophical significance of experiencing art as an end in itself.

3.1.1 The Practical Interest in Art

A practical interest in an object is, broadly speaking, a way of considering an object and its value in terms of one or more extrinsic purposes, whether monetary, decorative, religious, moral, political, or otherwise. In Hegel’s words, a practical interest is an interest motivated by “desire” (LFA, 36). Hegel’s choice of terminology here is significant, given the conceptual weight of the category of desire in his practical philosophy. And we will see that Hegel ensures that the highly-charged normative and metaphysical implications of this concept are not lost on the reader of the Aesthetics when talking about our conceptual approach to art. In the context of the debate concerning the proper approach to art, a practical interest in, or desire toward, the work of art is an interest in the mere particularity of the object. There is, in principle, nothing inherently wrong with the practical orientation itself; a practical interest is phenomenologically basic to our experience of the sensuous world. However, “this relation of desire,” Hegel urges, “is not the one in which man stands to the work of art.” Instead,

He leaves it free as an object to exist on its own account; he relates himself to it without desire, as to an object which is for the contemplative side of spirit alone. (LFA, 36-37)

As I’ve already suggested, a practical approach to art can place limitations on art’s independence in a variety of ways, from the benign (e.g., art as ornament) to
the more sinister (e.g., art as propaganda). But in the study of art, Hegel associates this view with the empirical approach to art, which he connects specifically with the prominent art historian, Karl F. von Rumohr.\footnote{Prominent art historian and critic in Germany (1785 – 1843); his extensive travels in Italy led to the publication of his well-known \textit{Italienische Forschungen} in 1827.} Though little of Rumohr’s influence is palpable today, he was well known in Hegel’s day for his rather lively invective against philosophical idealism’s foray into questions of art’s ultimate meaning. Hegel, in fact, is the preferred target of this calumny. In a thinly disguised allusion to Hegel in his influential \textit{Italienische Forschungen} of 1827 Rumohr sardonically remarks:

\begin{quote}
[I]ndeed people are fond of intimations of a higher wisdom and thus, veiled in the generality of the little word ‘idea’, of which the meaning, tottering between the sensuous and the mental, provides opportunity for all kinds of wild assertion, in which all manner of indeterminacy and vagueness is accommodated.\footnote{Quoted in Michael Podro, \textit{The Critical Historians of Art} (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), p. 28.}
\end{quote}

We are by now familiar with Hegel’s contentious characterization of beauty as “the sensuous appearance of the Idea,” (LFA, 111), and it is ostensibly this view against which Rumohr lodges the above complaint. According to Rumohr, our understanding of art begins and ends with the knowledge of particular works of art and their relation to one another in history. And beauty for him “comprises all those properties of things which stir the sense of sight satisfyingly or through it attune the should and rejoice the spirit.”\footnote{Here Hegel is quoting from Rumohr’s \textit{Italienische Forschungen}, (LFA, 107).} Given this fundamentally sensible orientation to art,
the appeal to abstract concepts, let alone the metaphysical construct of “the Idea,” has no place in the contemplation or appreciation of art in his view.

Evident in Rumohr’s critique is the underlying assumption that the empirical and the idealist approaches form two distinct and irreconcilable ways of understanding art. This assumption is deeply engrained in the philosophical aesthetics of his day, where an ideological battle began to unfold between the bottom-up approach to art, which took interest in the particularities of individual works of art, and the top down approach, which sought a conceptual narrative in relation to which its individual works have validity. In the *Italienische Forschungen*, Rumohr clearly and firmly aligns himself with the former, art historical approach, and accordingly condemns the latter, idealist approach as an affront to the genuine appreciation of beauty in individual, historical works of art.

Hegel’s part in this debate, while interesting from an art historical perspective, is philosophically significant for two reasons. First, it allows us to qualify Hegel’s view in a way that marks it out from the speculative tradition of aesthetics that is under attack here (and which is subject to a potent line of criticism today). Second, Hegel reformulates Rumor’s critique in philosophical terms and

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97 Jean-Marie Schaeffer’s treatment of the “speculative” tradition of art as a conceptually monolithic development that begins with Hegel, as discussed in the last chapter, is typical in this regard. Cf. also Gottfried Boehm, “Kunsterfahrung als Herausforderung der Ästhetik” in Willi Oelmüller, *Kolloquium Kunst und Philosophie*. Bd. 1: *Ästhetische Erfahrung* (Paderborn, München, Wien, Zürich: Schöningh, 1981), pp. 13-28. Boehm reports that “A hostility has existed between art and philosophy insofar as the work of art is considered an object of theoretical reflection.” The tension, he goes on to suggest, arises from the notion that the essence of art is to present the idea to sensuous appearance, since this assigns to art a “secondary status in illuminating on a non-sensible meaning,” p. 15; translation my own.
presents a far more convincing argument that an aesthetic theory yields equally one-sided and restrictive ideas about art when it attempts to grasp artworks purely in terms of theoretical abstraction. While drawing attention to the methodological shortcomings of an empirically-focused analysis of artworks, Hegel is careful to point out that this critique does not commit him to the alternative, abstract idealization of art that is often attributed to him. Rather, his conception of aesthetic freedom arises dialectically, from an internal critique of both the practical and the theoretical interest in art. Arriving at a dialectical approach to art that overcomes the limitations of both sides then lays the necessary groundwork for Hegel’s further claim regarding broader implications of aesthetic experience for human freedom.

Hegel’s initial response to Rumohr’s critique comes in the form of a counter-critique in which he aims to demonstrate the inherent limitations of a strictly empirical approach to art. He associates this view with the practical interest insofar as it seeks to grasp art strictly in terms of its particularity—its material and perceptual features, iconographic symbolism, cultural history, etc. Of course, Hegel in no way wishes to diminish the importance of art historical study, and one can hardly accuse Hegel of lacking this aspect in his own work. Indeed, one of the key virtues of the Aesthetics is that its analysis of art proceeds from, and is sustained by, a solid command of art history. This knowledge he gains not only through the newly emerging art-historical texts of his day (notably, Winckelmann’s), but also first

98 These considerations are, in fact, the primary points of analysis for the art-historical movement that Rumohr helped engender.
hand, from the theaters, opera houses, and extensive art collections that he experienced in Berlin.\textsuperscript{99} The point for Hegel, rather, is that knowledge of particulars must be met with universal concepts. Attending only to the individual works themselves will give us a one-sided conception of art as a contingent assemblage of forms and images, and will not account for the conceptual unity that distinguishes art from common sensuous objects. So, while an acquaintance with art in its historical detail can yield all kinds of important facts about particular works of art, it comes up short, Hegel thinks, in understanding beauty in any general, comprehensive way. As evidence of this, he cites the rather dubious conclusion Rumohr reaches when he does at last turn his attention to the question of art’s essential purpose and suggests that it consists chiefly in the “awakening of joy” (LFA, 107).\textsuperscript{100} Even Kant, Hegel goes on to note, “has already made an end of this reduction of beauty’s effect to feeling, to the agreeable, and the pleasant, by going far beyond the feeling of the beautiful” (LFA, 108). And so, the idea that the whole of art history is reducible to the single aim of joyful gratification, Hegel argues, constitutes

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{99} For an account of Hegel’s first-hand experience of art of both the Western and Eastern tradition in Berlin, see Otto Pöggeler, Hegel in Berlin: Preußische Kulturpolitik und idealistische Ästhetik. Zum 150. Todestag des Philosophen (Berlin: Staatsbibliothek Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 1981).
  \item \textsuperscript{100} Hegel does not question the usefulness of Rumohr’s expertise; his point is that such expertise in artworks becomes mere utility without an accompanying idea of art itself. This is the weakness of the art historical approach to which Hegel draws our attention. He quotes Rumohr as stating that “beauty, as understood in the most general way and, if you like, in terms of the modern intellect, comprises all those properties of things which stir the sense of sight satisfyingly or through it attune the soul and rejoice the spirit” (LFA, 107). For all the depth of aesthetic analysis pertaining to individual works of art, when it turns the question of art’s essence, the treatment of art by this “serious connoisseur” amounts only to this: “that the sense or spirit of sight, and the understanding too, is rejoiced, that feeling is excited, and that a delight has been aroused” (Ibid).
\end{itemize}
a practical interest on par with the overt exploitation of art for commercial or coercive purposes. Rumohr’s practical approach displays a richness of particular knowledge, but it restricts its essence to historical contingency and denies an underlying coherency among works of art. In other words, the art scholar is long on artworks and short on art.

But the critique of practical interest does not end here. In fact, for Hegel, the primary importance of formulating an approach to art which gives full expression to art as an end in itself is that the experience of art as free is directly linked to the felt awareness of our own freedom. The practical interest in art assumes a kind of freedom in submitting the work of art to a particular set of subjective interests. In this case,

It is things which are deprived of their independence, since the subject brings them into his service and treats and handles them as useful, i.e., as objects with their essential nature and end not in themselves but in the subject, so that what constitutes their proper essence is their relation (i.e. their service) to the aims of the subject. (LFA, 113)

If my grasp of art’s essential purpose ultimately has to do with its purpose for me, then in one respect I have satisfied my own will; but in doing so, I do not grasp the work as an end in itself, but rather determine its value in relation to my own subjective interests. In this case: “The objects have become unfree, the subjects free” (Ibid).

But this conception of freedom, as Hegel goes on to argue, is purely illusory, since the subject remains fundamentally bound to his own desires and interests, and thus dependent on the sensuous world on which he exerts his will. In this way,
Hegel explains that a false conception of freedom in relation to the external, objective world bears negatively on the status of subjective freedom:

The person too, caught up in the individual, restricted, and nugatory interests of his desire, is neither free in himself, since he is not determined by the essential universality and rationality of his will, nor free in respect of the external world, for desire remains essentially determined by external things and related to them. (LFA, 36)

Desire constitutes a basic, but ultimately unsustainable, form of consciousness that calls for a more substantial understanding of freedom. Spirit is therefore compelled to satisfy this inner need for freedom from the demands of the external world on the “higher ground” of art (LFA, 152). Aesthetic experience is therefore emancipatory for the subject in that offers a release from the grasp of an insatiable will over and against the world of sensuous existence. I will say more on this below; first let us consider the corresponding form of aesthetic unfreedom resulting from a theoretical interest in art.

3.1.2 The Theoretical Interest in Art

A similarly false conception of freedom is present in the theoretical attitude toward things. Hegel advances this argument in his further response to Rumohr, in which he goes to the heart of that critique in addressing the charge that “the Idea” functions in as a kind of magic lamp for the idealist to conjure up all sorts of groundless speculation and foggy conjecture about the purpose of art. His argument turns on the claim that Rumohr, like many others, has simply confused the “Idea” with the “indeterminate idea and the abstract characterless ideal of familiar theories and
schools of art” (LFA, 106-07). In this way, Hegel seeks to distance himself from the aloof intellectualism attributed to him even in his own time.\textsuperscript{101} Rather “what we mean by the word ‘Idea,’” he goes on to explain, “is in every respect free” because the Idea is something concrete, a “totality of characteristics” (LFA, 107). On these grounds, he deems it “unsatisfactory” when “a thinker thinks in vague ideas and in his thinking does not get beyond a purely vague subject matter” (Ibid).

This describes the mode of treatment Hegel calls the “purely theoretical relation of intelligence,” and which he contrasts with the practical relation in the following way:

The theoretical study of things is not interested in consuming them in their individuality and satisfying itself and maintaining itself sensuously by means of them, but in coming to know them in their universality, finding their inner essence and law, and conceiving them in accordance with their Concept. (LFA, 37)

This purely conceptual disposition, which he associates with the scientific comportment toward nature, restricts itself to the universal character of objects, treating of sensuous particulars only to the extent that they provide generalizations, laws, and abstract concepts. Instead of submitting objects to particular purposes, the theoretical approach restricts its interest to the inner essence and abstract lawfulness. “Out of something sensuously concrete it makes an abstraction, something thought, and so something essentially other than what that same object

\textsuperscript{101} We will recall from the previous chapter that Hegel’s criticism of prior idealist conceptions of art is that it trucks in pure abstractions and leaves its concrete forms untouched. Against the empty form of the Platonic Idea, “we have to grasp the Idea of beauty too in its actual existence[...] since it is Idea only as actual and has actuality only in concrete individuality” (LFA, 144).
was in its sensuous appearance” (LFA, 37). Hegel therefore not only endorses the view that a strictly intellectual treatment snatches at thin air; he goes further, and articulates that objection in terms of the unfreedom it implies both for the object—and, as we shall soon see, for the subject as well.

The one-sidedness of this view begins with a false conception of the freedom that it purports to give to the object. On the theoretical approach to art, “the object’s independence, although presupposed, is only an apparent freedom” (LFA, 113). The work of art is essentially a concrete, particular object; it is imbued with particular, sensuous properties and situated in a particular historical context shaped by particular beliefs, assumptions, and customs. A strictly conceptual handling of art admittedly does not seek to impose its will on the object, as does the practical, but a strictly negative freedom neglects the essential particularity of the object. To leave such features out of consideration is not to treat the object as an end in itself, but as an abstraction, a mere idea. The theoretical attitude is unfitting for the aesthetic treatment of objects because it is too heavily invested in the universality of its subject and thus loses sight of beauty as something that manifests itself through concretely particular objects. In this case, “beauty” becomes a concept rather than the beauty of this Rembrandt portrait or this Verdi opera.

Accordingly, with this one-sided freedom of objects, Hegel claims, “there is immediately posited the unfreedom of subjective comprehension” (LFA, 112). To view the world in a universal light is a worthy endeavor only to the extent that we still see and understand it as essentially comprised of individual things. Because it restricts thinking to abstract categorization of objects—i.e., it treats objects with
scientific curiosity—the theoretical attitude amounts to a limitation of subjective freedom; the subject cannot but see the forest for the trees. In this respect, Hegel criticizes the theoretical attitude for adhering to the inverse, but equally false and one-sided conception of freedom: now the object is made free, and the subject unfree. Such is Hegel’s reformulation and endorsement of Rumohr’s critique of idealist aesthetics.

A further word may be necessary, however, to clarify Hegel’s position toward the theoretical approach, as it will be central to our later discussion of Hegel’s relation to the Kantian tradition of aesthetic autonomy. As presented here, it is not entirely clear what the unfreedom of the theoretical approach consists in, and we hardly find illumination in Hegel’s explanation that “the finitude and unfreedom of this attitude lies in presupposing things to be independent [selbstständig]” (LFA, 112/W13, 153). How do we curtail freedom by granting independence? If the logic here isn’t itself flawed, at the very least it seems to contradict what Hegel has just told us regarding the practical interest in art, namely, that we achieve freedom of mind only by acknowledging the artwork’s independence from subjective our aims and interests—i.e., by treating it as an “end in itself.”

Without delving into the complex structures of Hegel's practical philosophy, the best I can do at the moment is to make a brief appeal to the parallel between aesthetic and practical freedom that underwrites many of Hegel’s claims about the nature and purpose of art. Because, what the practical concept of freedom does in Hegel’s philosophy, at the most basic level, is to show that individual freedom is achieved neither through unrestrained exercise of will nor through the stoic retreat
to the inner citadel of subjectivity. Rather, freedom for Hegel is a form of self-determination that is balanced against, and realized within, a complex set of socially structured relations particular to a certain historical and cultural context. By analogy, aesthetic freedom involves a synthesis of disinterest and meaningful interaction with the work of art. In this respect, in may be useful to drive a conceptual wedge between the terms “freedom” [Freiheit] and “independence” [Selbstständigkeit], even though Hegel uses the terms interchangeably. This will throw into relief an implicit but crucial distinction in Hegel’s thought between a conception of art as self-determining, free of subjective interests and purposes, and a conception of art as something altogether independent of us, that is, as a theoretical abstraction. The crucial feature of aesthetic freedom—which holds for Hegel’s philosophy in general—is that, in contemplating and evaluating works of art, we are already in the grip of a normative order. Freedom is realized through historically concrete social structures, and this is, consequently, no less true of aesthetic freedom.

Entailed in the conception of art as an “end in itself,” therefore, is the idea that the subject already stands in a substantial normative relation to the aesthetic object. In the first place, the work of art, conceived as a sensuous product “brought about by human activity” (LFA, 25), is more accurately a cultural product, an artifact that bears the inexorable stamp of Sittlichkeit. Its cultural markings are part of the artwork’s identity: “Now to whatever age a work of art belongs, it always carries details in itself which separate it from the characteristics proper to other peoples and other centuries” (LFA, 264). If this is right, then it follows that there can be no
phenomenological reduction of the work of art, no *epoche* of aesthetic experience. The work of art is a product of a socially conditioned consciousness, and for this reason, the attitude of detached objectivity that comes with the theoretical interest will not do for the contemplation of art. This poses a limit to subjective freedom insofar as it assumes a purely passive relation to the “independent” object, holds it apart as an abstract *other*, and accepts things as merely given, rather than relating to them at the level of historically and culturally engrained aesthetic content. For Hegel, aesthetic freedom consists, not in complete detachment and independence from the work of art, but in establishing the right kind of relation to the work of art, namely, as a true embodiment of the values, beliefs, customs, and prejudices essential to a particular way of life.

Hence I think Hegel’s strategy in this debate with Rumohr reveals a much deeper philosophical agenda. First, he defends a speculative approach to the Concept of art against the claim that it subordinates aesthetic subjectivity to the metaphysical principle of the Idea. He then turns this very allegation against the speculative tradition with which his view is often conflated and charges the one-sidedly theoretical conception of art with the “subjugation of subjectivity” (LFA, 112). Yet in this accusation, Hegel begins to address the broader the social and political implications of aesthetic freedom: reflective passivity renders the individual a “prisoner to belief in things,” insofar as we become “convinced that objects are rightly understood only when our relation to them is passive, and when we restrict our whole activity to the formality of noticing them and putting a negative restraint our imaginations, preconceived opinions, and prejudices” (Ibid).
Instead of *engaging* in a free relation to the work of art as such, a purely intellectual relation remains purely passive, indifferent to the historical and cultural particularity of the artwork. “Instead of subjective self-determination there enters the mere acceptance and adoption of what is there, objectively present just as it is” (Ibid).

It is from the inherent limitations present in both the practical and theoretical interest in art, therefore, that Hegel begins to formulate a dialectical alternative which serves as “the unification of both points of view, since it cancels the one-sidedness of both in respect of the subject and its object alike, and therefore their finitude and unfreedom” (LFA, 113). Hegel’s conception of aesthetic freedom consciously forges a middle ground between these two false conceptions of freedom, retaining the practical emphasis on art’s particularity as well as the theoretical emphasis on universal conceptions. It is premised on an approach to art that neither reduces aesthetic beauty to merely instrumental purposes nor isolates it conceptually from its substantial relation to the subject. In the following sections, we will see how Hegel deploys the dialectical of aesthetic freedom, first, in the negative task of critiquing various reductivist theories of art’s essential purpose, and second, in the positive task of reconciling art’s status as an end in itself with its constitutive role in realizing human freedom.
3.2 Objective Aesthetic Freedom: Art as an “End in Itself”

Hegel’s discussion of what we might call *objective freedom* of art, that is, the conception of the work of art as “an end in itself” (LFA, 25) arises in connection with a broader consideration concerning the “aim of art” in general (LFA, 25-55). Hegel indicates that this discussion promises further clarity to the “lemmatic” Concept of beauty initially set forth in the Introduction (cf. section 1.2 above). It is this inquiry, we are told, which “will lead us on at last to the true concept of art itself” (LFA, 25).

Yet, what emerges from this discussion, and what sustains the development of the Concept of artistic beauty throughout the *Aesthetics*, is anything but a definitional analysis of art. Hegel does of course have in mind a particular conception of art as a teleological, self-determining unity. To characterize art as an end in itself implies that the purpose of art is internal to its own logic, and that this purpose is realized historically and successively. But Hegel’s philosophy of art proceeds by way of dialectic, by assessing, negating, and ultimately sublating particular claims held as absolute. The dialectical process is particularly palpable in Hegel’s discussion of art’s final purpose, where he aims to achieve conceptual clarity by scrutinizing the “ordinary way of thinking [gewöhnliche Bewußtsein],” by which he means the various attempts to construe the essence of art in terms of non-aesthetic ends, and then demonstrating the implicit limitations of these (cf. LFA, 41/W13, 64). In this regard, Hegel’s commitment to a non-reductivist account of art proves to be one of the most consistent (and indeed, insistent) features of the *Aesthetics*. He speaks out at length, and at times quite spiritedly, against the prevailing tendency to answer the question of art’s purpose in terms of some
extrinsic value. While philosophers of his day eulogized the social and moral import of artistic beauty, Hegel roundly condemns the “perverse idea” that

The work of art is supposed to have a bearing on something else which is set before our minds as the essential thing or as what ought to be, so that then the work of art would have validity only as a useful tool for realizing this end which is independently valid on its own account outside the sphere of art. (LFA, 55)

In light of Hegel’s systematic rejection of historically substantive theories regarding the purpose of art, we might better characterize the conception of art as an “end in itself” as a kind of anti-definition in that it is designed to resist any specific claim regarding its final aim or purpose. If, as Schaeffer suggests, Hegel is on an “essentialist quest” to determine a Concept of art philosophically, it is the via negativa that he takes to get there, and it is a dialectical movement that at each point exposes the limitations inherent in each of the contending theories of art’s final purpose.

That being said, I should stress that dialectic is not in the business of negativity for its own sake; its primary objective is to formulate a more comprehensive, conceptual grasp of a given content—that is, to negate negation. With respect to the present question, Hegel’s aim in turning up contradictions in our common ways of thinking about art’s purpose is much more than an exercise in systematic skepticism; the chief aim, rather, consists in the sublation [Aufheben]¹⁰²

¹⁰² The German verb, “aufheben” has a range of rather disparate meanings, including (most literally) “to lift” or “to raise up”; “to cancel”, or more accurately, “to suspend” or “dismiss”; alternatively, it can mean “to retain or preserve.” In the context of Hegel’s speculative thought, “to sublate” (as it is generally translated) preserves all three meanings, with particular emphasis on the preservation of both the positing and the annulling activities.
of seemingly contradictory modes of thought, where the partial character of a given claim held to be absolute is preserved within a more comprehensive conceptual framework. The truth that dialectic aims at is, in Hegel’s words, “just the dissolving of opposition and, at that, not in the senses, as may be supposed, that the opposition and its two sides do not exist at all, but that they exist reconciled” (LFA, 55). Accordingly, the discourse that unfolds dialectically in response to the question of an essential aim or purpose of art turns out to be one of inclusion rather than exclusion.

3.2.1 Avoiding Some Potential Confusions

Before turning to Hegel’s handling of these particular views, however, it is worth taking a moment to ensure that we avoid a few potential confusions that the notion of art as an end in itself can easily give rise to. First, on the basis of what we have seen so far, it is tempting to equate Hegel’s view of art with the more familiar notion of autotelic art that has emerged in recent history: the idea of art for art’s sake. But even if we take Hegel at his word when he insists on the intrinsic value of art, we have good reason to suppose that Hegel would have rejected this view on the grounds that it proves no less restrictive a conception of art than that which frames the value of art in terms of some singular, utilitarian end (e.g., moral, ideological, commercial). Hegel indeed advances the goal of liberating art from its subordination to non-aesthetic purposes. But the distinguishing mark of his view, as I see it, is that asserting art’s immunity from extrinsic determinations of value reaffirms the substantial normative force of art in various dimensions of human life, rather than
repealing it. Again, Hegel does not deny the potential moral, pedagogical, or entertainment value that works of art may possess; he denies only that the value of art itself is reducible to any one of these. Moreover, he clearly and emphatically points out the perils of allowing the freedom of art to devolve into an esoteric and exclusionary enterprise. For this reason, it would be misleading to designate Hegel *ex post facto* as a senior member of the choir that chants the modernist mantra, “*l’art pour l’art*” throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Freedom, as Hegel understands the concept, consists in *proportioning* relations, not in severing them altogether. For similar reasons (that I will discuss shortly), we will also want to maintain a healthy distance between Hegel’s conception of objective aesthetic freedom and the discussions of aesthetic “autonomy” that feature prominently in present-day aesthetic discourse concerning art’s relation to various non-aesthetic forms of experience.

We must also avoid conflating the role of negativity in Hegel’s scheme with more radical strains of this idea at work in the domain of modern art. The subversive character of art is no doubt present in, and to some extent constitutive of, the view that Hegel develops. Indeed it is partly owing to the “never wholly eliminated resistance” of the work of art that neither practical nor theoretical orientation to it will suffice to grasp its essence (LFA, 113). But the present tendency...

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103 For the sake of fairness, it is worth pointing out that earlier, literary formulations of the *art for art’s sake* movement, exemplified in the writings of Theophile Gautier, James Whistler, and Oscar Wilde, were in fact much closer to Hegel’s own view in emphasizing art’s self-determining, or *autotelic*, character in response to prevailing didactic and moralistic conceptions of art. More recent adaptations of this view, e.g. Clement Greenberg, link art’s self-sufficiency with an aesthetic formalism that is consciously indifferent to non-aesthetic considerations.
to draw a theoretical trajectory from Hegel’s aesthetics to certain strands of “anti-art” movements in the twentieth century (most notably Dadaism) must be regarded with a degree of skepticism. While Hegel’s philosophy of art marks an important break from a strictly aesthetic appreciation of artworks that allowed such radically revisionary movements in art to flourish, Hegel himself would hardly entertain the proposition that art is so free because it lacks any purpose at all. Arguably, Hegel would be sympathetic to the idea that a work of art can effectively capture the irrationality of modernity. But if the negative agenda of anti-art is sincere, I think Hegel would immediately recognize the self-defeating character of this logic, just as Adorno does in pointing out that “Even the abolition of art is respectful of art because it takes the truth claim of art seriously.”104 That art follows any logic at all, even a purely negative logic that manifests the rejection of purpose in the act of artistic production, serves as confirmation of art’s inherent purpose. The very rejection of purpose in art can itself be an essential component of the internal logic of art. For this reason, it is important to regard the seemingly similar conceptions of art just noted among those that Hegel rejects, not as false, but as one-sided and restrictive.

Having averted these confusions, we return now to the kernel of Hegel’s conception of objective aesthetic freedom—that art has its aim and end in itself. Upon entering into genuine aesthetic contemplation, we check our subjective aims and interests at the door, as it were. It is this element that Hegel finds missing in

104 Adorno, p. 43.
traditional accounts of art’s essential purpose. But again, his strategy is not to rid the history of aesthetic theory of its past errors; the idea, rather, is to show that these various functions are entailed in, but irreducible to, a more comprehensive notion of aesthetic freedom. In the arguments which follow in this section, therefore, it is essential to bear in mind that Hegel’s conception of aesthetic freedom emerges in response to the kind of limitations that historically substantial aesthetic theories place on the concept of art; Hegel divides these into limitations of form and limitations of content.

3.2.2 Limitation of Form: Art as Mimesis

The primary target of Hegel’s critique is the notion that the ideal of art is to imitate nature. We have already seen one strand of this objection (section 2.7) in Hegel’s claim that the work of art becomes a form of untruth or deception if its business is in pawning off likenesses of the natural world. Here, however, Hegel takes aim at the very root of the problem: the conception that the purpose of art is in imitating nature. “According to this view,” Hegel explains:

> Imitation, as facility in copying natural forms just as they are, in a way that corresponds to them completely, is supposed to constitute the essential end and aim of art, and the success of this portrayal in correspondence with nature is supposed to afford complete satisfaction. (LFA, 41-42)

Now, it may well be that Hegel is working with a somewhat simplistic notion of “imitation” here as consisting in simply copying natural forms mechanically. And, in light of the more complex critical functions that Benjamin and Adorno later assign to
the idea of aesthetic mimesis, it may be that Hegel’s own view, which certainly involves the imitation of base normative structures, counts as a more sophisticated version of mimesis. At any rate, in challenging the view that the point of art is to imitate nature, Hegel clearly takes himself to be up against a formidable contender. For him, mimesis has functioned historically as the “universal principle” of aesthetics, a principle that is, as he puts it, “confirmed by high authority” (LFA, 45). This at least explains Hegel’s motives for launching an all-out assault on this view, which he does with an intensity he generally reserves for the likes of Schlegel and the romantics. In Hegel’s mind, mimetic theories of art pose some of the most severe limitations on a philosophical understanding of art’s essence—a concern that resonates deeply with Kant, Schiller, and the Jena romantics as well.

In the first place, Hegel argues that conceiving art purely as an imitation of nature makes artistic production a superfluous labor, since in that case artworks would only reproduce unnecessarily “what we already possess otherwise in our gardens or in our own houses or in matters within our narrower or wider circle of acquaintance” (LFA, 42). Furthermore, the attempt to imitate nature in its exact likeness would saddle art with a futile task since then it could never really quite measure up, a task Hegel mockingly likens to that of “a worm trying to crawl after an

\[105\] In his brief discussion of aesthetic Schein, for example, William Desmond suggests a useful distinction between negative and positive forms of mimesis, the former relating to “mere” imitation (such as we find in Plato’s Republic), and the latter to the idea that art can disclose something more basic to perceptual experience by emulating it in aesthetic appearance. Art and the Absolute (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986), p. 1-12; 140-41. In Chapter 4, I will consider in greater depth whether the reflexive structures that that Hegel finds built into aesthetic experience might qualify as a positive form of mimesis.
elephant” (LFA, 43). And, if the objective in art is simply to duplicate nature in its every detail, to render perfectly every vein and pore, as it were, then the kind of aesthetic pleasure taken in mere imitation would at best be “frigid and cold,” and at worst, “perverted into tedium and repugnance” (Ibid). We gauge the beauty of art not by its strict fidelity of outward appearance, but by the extent to which it reveals something more than what is externally present. Hence Hegel is clear that “the truth of art cannot be mere correctness, to which the so-called imitation of nature is restricted” (LFA, 155). Where aesthetic beauty aims no farther than correct imitation, we are left with only overburdened and underwhelming copies to consider. And on this point, Hegel invokes the authority of Kant, who has already observed that “we soon get tired of a man who can imitate to perfection the warbling of a nightingale” (LFA, 43).

None of this implies, however, that Hegel calls for the wholesale rejection of mimesis as an important, or even essential, aesthetic principle. Indeed, he could hardly dispense with natural form without undermining the ontological status of the work of art as a concrete universal, that is, as a sensuous, material object invested with rational thought. As Hegel himself states, it is “an essential element in a work of art to have a natural shape as its basis,” since, as he explains, “what it portrays it displays in the form of an external and therefore also natural phenomenon” (LFA, 45). The sole objective of the dialectical critique of mimesis, then, is to question the absolute priority of imitation as the “universal principle” of art. Even with his litany of arguments against this view, his aim is not simply to dismiss the principle of imitation, but to undermine its evaluative authority and assign it a more egalitarian
status among other essential features comprising art’s nature. In other words, Hegel *sublates* aesthetic imitation, preserving it as one component of art’s more comprehensive purpose. Thus, Monet captures on canvas the shades and colors of lilies in a pond; Bernini hews from stone the stunning likeness of the human form; and Wagner emulates the turbulent swell of water in the prelude to *Das Rheingold*; but, for Hegel, as is no doubt true for these artists, faithful imitation is but a single aspect of art’s total essence. We therefore cannot *reduce* art to mimesis:

> Even if external appearance in its naturalness constitutes one essential characteristic of art, still neither is the given natural world the *rule* nor is the mere imitation of external phenomena, as external, the *aim* of art. (LFA, 46)

Considerations of technical correctness and likeness with respect to natural forms admittedly constitute an important part of the contemplation and evaluation of artworks, but certainly not the whole of it. The history of art no doubt abounds with works of art whose fidelity to natural form is sufficient to produce deep admiration and awe in the spectator (e.g., landscape painting). But surely we exclude not only some of the most important works of art from the history of art (e.g. Caravaggio, Shakespeare, Picasso), but indeed entire art forms (e.g., architecture) simply because they do not confine themselves to the task of “mere description” (LFA, 45).

This brings us to Hegel’s primary rebuke against mimetic theories of art, which is that mere imitation excludes intellectual *reflection*. If the “purely formal” principle of imitation is upheld as the supreme measure of artistic success, then it effectively precludes the possibility of engaging with aesthetic *content*. Mimesis restricts itself to a strict analysis of form, and it does not extend this analysis to
considerations of the various interrelations of form and content. If my only interest in Van Gogh’s paintings, for example, is the extent to which his *Haystacks* look like haystacks, or his *Sunflowers* look like sunflowers, then I miss out altogether on the rich dimensions of *meaning* built into the image by the use of vibrant color, frantic brushstrokes, thick textures, and so on. Without this step from perception to reflection, aesthetic contemplation is reduced to an act of merely formal comparison. As I have argued, it is in this perceptual shift from merely sensuous form to the interpretive interplay of form and rational content that we can begin to understand the aesthetic experience as a potentially *transformative* experience. The principle of imitation proves overly restrictive, Hegel thinks, in debarring further engagement with the work of art as a locus of *meaning*. The notion of aesthetic freedom is achieved by a more comprehensive integration of the formal analysis of with its inherently intellectual dimension.

3.2.3 Limitation of Content: Aesthetic Instrumentalism

Once Hegel has completed his task of debunking mimetic theories of art for what he takes to be a severely impoverished conception of aesthetic form, he then turns his attention to theories that restrict the nature of art by presenting a one-sided analysis of aesthetic *content*. Content-based theories can be limiting in one of two ways: either by overgeneralizing aesthetic subject matter, or by enlisting art in the service of a particular kind of content (e.g., moral, religious, political, etc.). In either case, Hegel describes the limitation in terms of an anticipated *effect* aesthetic content is presumed to have on the subject. In this respect, we might refer to such
theories collectively as *instrumentalist* theories of art insofar as the purpose of art in each case is something extrinsic to the work of art itself. The focus of the critique here, then, bears on the general notion that the purpose of art can be determined by its non-aesthetic considerations. But as we shall see, it takes aim specifically at the idea that the nature of aesthetic content can determine the value of art.

Here again, Hegel’s arguments serve a twofold function. First, they help guard against the widely held view that he advocates a form of aesthetic instrumentalism in locating art’s purpose in “expressing the Divine, the deepest interests of mankind, and the most comprehensive truths of the spirit” (LFA, 7). His remarks in this context show that, like many contemporary views, he was deeply concerned with theories that overdetermine the work of art *via* its conceptual content and thereby preclude any substantial and sustained aesthetic engagement with it. What emerges from his critique of instrumental theories is a robust defense of art’s freedom to present content in sensuous form without having its entire purpose invested in the nature of the content presented. Furthermore, the arguments Hegel deploys in defense of aesthetic freedom can in turn offer an effective antidote to the increasing vulnerability of contemporary art to exploit aesthetic content by way of naïve sentimentalism, heavy-handed politicization, and overt propaganda.

The first of Hegel’s concerns has to do with the role of aesthetic content in general. When we pose the question, “What is the content of art?” or “Why is this content to be displayed in art?” the answer we are most likely to meet with, according to Hegel, is the “common opinion” that “that task and aim of art is to bring
home to our sense, our feeling and our inspiration everything which has a place in the human spirit” (LFA, 46). In other words, the content of art according to this view consists in nothing short of the whole spectrum of feelings, emotions, and experiences belonging to the human existence. But it is not entirely clear what view is under attack here. Hegel seems to have in mind a kind of radical aesthetic humanism, according to which art serves as an open forum for the wholly democratic display of all things human, as suggested by his invoking the famous lines of Terence’s *Heauton Timorumenus*—“I count nothing human indifferent to me” (LFA, 46). But if this is the case, then it is not exactly clear where the objection lies with this view. Is this not the Humanus of late romantic art? Is this not the very basis on which Hegel lavishes praise on the secularized humanism of Dutch painting—that it aestheticizes the banality of common life? How, then, can he condemn this view on the grounds that it embraces an unreserved openness to the artistic significance of the everyday?

It is unfortunate that Hegel does not elaborate the point further. However, the key distinction here seems to be that the radical humanist is interested in the content of art only in terms of the kinds of response it elicits. That is, Hegel takes issue, not with the content itself, but with the notion that the purpose of this content consists in “awakening and vivifying our slumbering feelings, inclinations, and passions of every kind” (LFA, 46). Yes, post-classical art, as a result of its de-mythologized character, opens up for aesthetic contemplation a broad range of subject matter bearing on all aspects of human life—the Humanus—but it does little to realize the residual potential of art to transform the everyday if its aim is simply
to evoke passion for what is already there. The reason for this is threefold, and the arguments follow a logic similar to that found in Hegel’s critique of imitation theories above.

First, Hegel claims that art assumes a *deceptive* role in reproducing content for the sake of arousing passions and refining sensibilities. For the desired stimulus in this case “is not given in this field by actual experience itself, but only through the pure appearance of it, since art deceptively substitutes its productions for reality” (Ibid). We will recall from the previous chapter the crucial distinction between the *pure appearance* of sensuous reality and the aesthetic appearance, or *Schein*, of reality through the lens of beauty. With this in mind, the problem with the humanist view of content appears to be that it aims to generate an aesthetic response by drawing attention to the appearance *as it is* [“*nur durch den Schein derselben*”] (LFA, 46/W13, 71)—that is to say, in the form of deceptive, sensuous reality. Thus a conception of art that neglects the distinctly *aesthetic* character of presentation is a conception of art that ceases to give us a true glimpse of reality, shorn of illusion.

Moreover, if art’s purpose is to invoke a general response to a general content, then ultimately it is of little importance whether the sought after effect is achieved through art or by some other means. According to this view, the purpose of art is to remind us, move us, and acquaint us with every dimension of human life, however profound or prosaic, delectable or grotesque. So long as this effect is achieved, *how* the content is presented becomes secondary. The work of art itself becomes unnecessary, superfluous. What Hegel has in mind is a conception of art that does more than simply reproduce the content of immediate, sensuous reality
for the sake of soliciting a certain response. Even where the banality of the everyday is the primary subject of art, as it is in much of romantic art, it nevertheless “exalts” (LFA, 163) and “enlarges” (LFA, 164) that content through its distinctly aesthetic presentation. Regardless of the content presented, the art remains the principal thing.

Finally, Hegel claims that this view is internally inconsistent. Since the aesthetic humanist’s fundamental claim is that art’s purpose is to make us notice and appreciate the diverse aspects of human life, he thinks it will give rise to an equally diverse and conflicting set of aesthetic responses. Confronted with such variety of content, “we are at once forced to notice that the different feelings and ideas, which art is supposed to arouse or confirm, counteract one another, contradict and reciprocally cancel one another” (LFA, 47). When this happens, the aesthetic humanist has no means of adjudicating between the conflicting responses. To this extent, Hegel’s argument can be seen as an aesthetic variation of the well-known “empty formalism” charge he levels against Kantian deontology. One aspect of that charge alleges that, if the guiding principle of moral deliberation is the categorical imperative, when applied to a particular content, it yields contradictory duties without offering recourse to any rational procedure for weighing between them. In a similar vein, if the “purely formal task” of art is simply to stimulate the

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106 Cf. §§419-432 of Phenomenology of Spirit.

107 There are, of course, a number of different ways to read the “empty formalism” charge in Hegel. Allen Wood, for example, distinguishes between stronger and weaker versions of that charge, cf. Allen Wood, Hegel’s Ethical Thought, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 12, 130, 154. The point here, however, is simply to draw a helpful analogy between the familiar claim that
senses, then in its application to concrete cases it will provide only “the empty form for every possible kind of content and worth” (LFA, 47). The aesthetic humanist has little to offer in the way of reconciling the diverse and contradictory responses to which the universal content of art inevitably gives rise. In the absence of an overriding principle or purpose among conflicting responses to aesthetic content, the egalitarian embrace of content yields only unresolved difference.

By contrast, to say that art has an absolute value is not to say that it simply permits contradictory responses to content, but that it sublates these within a broader conception of artistic purpose—the conception of art as an end in itself. Hence, for example, Sophocles’ Antigone appeals to the deeply conflicting allegiances to family and state that, according to Hegel, are basic to the ethical life of classical Greece. Aesthetic reactions to this tension will differ radically according to the historical and normative contexts that shape an individual’s experience. Underlying these differences, however, is the recognition that the content is presented in the context of art. It is not the content itself, but the aesthetic presentation of content, once removed from the actual conflict, where equivocation regarding a particular content forms an aesthetic harmony.

3.2.4 The Status of Aesthetic Content Today

Hegel’s arguments against various reductivist accounts of aesthetic content were designed to thwart a prevailing tendency in his day to put art to particular moral,

Kantian ethics fails to provide an action-guiding procedure for adjudicating between conflicting maxims that pass the formal test of universalizability.
political, or pedantic ends. Yet they also offer a sharp reproof of the prevailing supposition that aesthetic discourse requires a radically non-essentialist conception of art’s purpose. As postmodern theories continue to celebrate the endless deferral of meaning, or even the dissolution of aesthetic content altogether, the reality of contemporary aesthetic discourse has proven to be anything but indifferent to content. Art today seems quite self-conscious of the fact that it can be about anything at all, general or specific, and the closer one looks at the varying shades that span the ever-widening spectrum of aesthetic content, the clearer it becomes that the question of an underlying purpose of art is more pressing than ever.

This suggests a profitable way of approaching highly controversial works of art through a Hegelian lens. Consider, for example, Andres Serrano’s famously incendiary work, *Piss Christ*. This particular work is significant, not only for the contested meaning of its content, but also for the range of distinct and often conflicting responses that it set into motion in the public sphere. *Piss Christ* is a large-scale photograph depicting a crucifix submerged in a vitrine of yellowish liquid which, as it happens, is the artist’s own urine. When the piece was first exhibited in 1989, the artworld immediately praised it as a work of high artistic merit. Among other grants and awards, it was selected for the prestigious "Awards in the Visual Arts" prize from the Southeastern Center for Contemporary art. Shortly thereafter, however, it also caught the attention of religious and political conservatives, who harshly condemned the work for what they perceived as its blatantly sacrilegious and offensive content. At the center of the highly public, highly politicized controversy that ensued, was the broader question of what constitutes
the fundamental *purpose* of art. When the debate unfolded in the Senate hearings of 1989, Senators Jesse Helms and Alfonse D’Amato teamed up to publicly denounce the work of art as a “deplorable, despicable display of vulgarity” that belied the purpose of taxpayer funding for the arts.\(^{108}\) The immediate question regarding the artistic *value* of the work thus quickly gave way to more general considerations regarding aims and limitations of art. This important shift in discourse affirms Hegel’s view that we fail to mobilize aesthetic discourse among individually conflicting responses to artworks without appealing to these broader questions of art’s purpose. Aesthetic content, along with the various reactions it happens to elicit, only make sense in the context of an underlying rationale about what art can and cannot do. And if we do not enter into second-level discourse about what art is ultimately supposed to achieve, we remain at the level of conflicting opinion. Such are questions we can ill afford to defer indefinitely in the name of aesthetic negativity; in the politics of aesthetics, we limit the scope of discourse if indifference to content is made an aesthetic virtue.

\(^{108}\) “Comments on Andres Serrano by Members of the U.S. Congress.” Congressional Record. May 18, 1989. Of course, in this particular case, a level-headed look at Serrano’s own stated motives in making the work would no doubt have diffused much of the heated rhetoric on both sides. It helps to know, for example, that Serrano identifies himself as Catholic, and claims to be coming to terms with his religious beliefs in this and similar works. Moreover, Serrano claims to be exploring notions of corporeality that is strongly present in depictions of the crucifixion. Cf. interview with the artist in *Art on the Edge and Over: Searching for Art’s Meaning in Contemporary Society* (1970’s-1990’s) Edited by Linda Weintraub, Arthur Danto, Thomas McEvilley (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights Inc., 1996), p. 161.
3.3 Subjective Aesthetic Freedom

Seen in the context of 19th Century philosophy, Hegel is launching a fairly progressive campaign against reductivist notions of artistic value. While a general urgency among philosophers to give a genuinely philosophical account of artistic beauty had at the time produced numerous attempts to inscribe art’s purpose within the higher domains of morality or cultivation, Hegel clearly felt that these too had underdetermined the essence of art: “For other ends, like instruction, purification, bettering, financial gain, struggling for fame and honor, have nothing to do with the work of art as such, and do not determine its nature” (LFA, 55). Thus the dialectical task Hegel sets for himself in advancing the above arguments for the aesthetic freedom of the artwork is to make explicit the kind of contradictions that arise when we extend individual conceptions of utility to considerations of art’s final purpose, even where the utility in question concerns the moral or social benefit of art. This being the case, Hegel can hardly be reproached for pursuing a definitional analysis of art, let alone an analysis consigned to a “discourse of exclusion.” Hegel develops the Concept of art dialectically through a critical engagement with historically significant theories of art, and in doing so, shows how mimetic and instrumental theories of art pose severe limitations on the contemplation and experience of art.
Hegel is not, of course, entirely original in this regard. It is not certain who first advocated this kind of hands-off approach to aesthetic value, but Hegel’s view—namely, that aesthetic value arises independently of various non-aesthetic sources of value—certainly owes a good deal to Kant’s notion of “disinterested” aesthetic pleasure. Hegel readily acknowledges as much in his brief overview of the “chief results” of the Critique of Judgment (LFA, 58ff), where he refers to the idea that aesthetic judgments are “devoid of all interest” (LFA, 58), noting with marked approval Kant’s idea that the aesthetic object is to be appreciated for its own sake:

If we have an interest, curiosity for example, or a sensuous interests on behalf of our sensuous need, a desire for possession and use, then the objects are not important to us on their own account, but only because of our need. (Ibid)

Genuine appreciation of beauty, in other words, requires the individual to withdraw his particular subjective interest in the object so as not to influence or corrupt his estimation of it.

But for Hegel, aesthetic freedom involves much more than this. He begins with the “common idea” that art is essentially an end in itself, and shows how

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109 The idea, if not the concept, is already present in the aesthetics of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, both of whom, like Kant, drew a close parallel between aesthetic and moral judgments. However, identifying the rightful owner of this view (if indeed there is one) is no simple task, and one that I will gladly leave to others more competent in this capacity; for example, Jerome Stolnitz, “On the Origin of Aesthetic Disinterestedness,” The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Winter, 1961), pp. 131-43.

110 For the relevant passages in Kant concerning disinterested aesthetic pleasure, see (CJ, 204-05; 296-97).
various reductivist theories fail to account for art’s essence in terms of a particular purpose, be it a formal ideal (e.g. imitation) or the value of a particular kind of content (e.g. emotional, pedagogical, political). This inevitably delivers us, he argues, to a more general kind of consideration: “What unity are these manifold formations to be brought together, what single aim must they have as their fundamental concept and final end?” (LFA, 48). Rationality, in its natural inclination from particularity to noetic unity, “penetrates this jumbled diversity and demands to see, and know to be attained, even out of elements so contradictory, a higher and inherently more universal end” (LFA, 48). The notion of aesthetic freedom that we have examined so far therefore entails more than just a blunt repudiation of the various ways of imposing value on artistic beauty from without; it will also involve a positive account of aesthetic freedom.

Hegel’s originality, then, is in the development of this positive account of freedom. In particular, Hegel’s originality consists in his account of the dialectical relation between the freedom to the aesthetic object and the freedom of the aesthetic subject. We will see that the non-instrumental character of art, therefore, is ensconced in a broader conception of freedom as constituted by the subject’s relation to the world. Adorno has rightly identified the significance of this connection in writing that, with this notion of the “freedom to the object,” Hegel

111 Hegel, like Kant, assumes that reason, by its very nature, seeks out greater and greater degrees of generality. Whether or not this assumption is philosophically cogent claim about reason, it seems sufficiently clear in the case of art that we can assert very little about individual objects without recourse to general categories; e.g., to say that x is a work of art by itself presupposes a concept of art. To speak of this or that purpose for art, therefore, already moves us in the direction of generalization.
Paid homage to the subject that becomes subject in spiritual experience through self-relinquishment, the opposite of that philistine demand that art give him something.\footnote{Adorno, p. 17.}

Adorno recognizes in Hegel that the significance of retracting subjective claims on the work of art is not limited solely to the freedom of the artwork itself, but ultimately bears on the self-determining nature of the subject. However, he does not carry this insight further. He sees neither the autonomy nor the negativity of art as potent enough to mount the horrors of modernity and live up to Hegel’s “expectation of an actual realization of freedom.”\footnote{Ibid, p. 19.} Hegel’s belief in the redemptive, liberating character of art is perhaps a bit optimistic; more worrisome, however, is the fact that it hardly conceals the casual juxtaposition of the “vocation” of art, which is to “unveil the truth in the form of sensuous artistic configuration,” with its having “its end and aim in itself” (LFA, 55). For the tradition of aesthetic autonomy developed from Kant to contemporary strands of deconstructionist aesthetics, this truth character of art in Hegel is an automatic defeater of art’s parallel but independent relation to other forms of non-aesthetic experience. We need not think of aesthetic autonomy and aesthetic truth as in principle incompatible, but we will have to take due note of Lambert Zuidervaart’s insightful suggestion that “the
challenge for philosophers is to give an account of artistic truth that does not reduce art to either mere entertainment or pure instruction.”

As I see it, it is precisely this challenge that Hegel takes up *Aesthetics* in formulating a dialectical notion of aesthetic freedom. Various characterizations of this notion include a “mode of apprehension” (LFA, 36), a “relation” (LFA, 37), a form of “consideration” (LFA, 38), or “contemplation” (LFA, 114). Hegel clearly indicates that what is at stake in the idea of aesthetic freedom is the status of the *subject* that engages in aesthetic experience. In this regard, the *Aesthetics* cannot be a mere exercise in the ontology of art. Rather, the dialectic of aesthetic freedom emerges historically, in response to Kant and the immediate aftermath of Kantian aesthetics, in which thinkers like Schiller are trying to preserve both the notion of aesthetic autonomy as well as art’s fundamental relation to the institutions of morality, religion, and culture. With the notion of aesthetic freedom, Hegel aims to negotiate between the inherently negative character of art’s independence from extrinsic determination and its positive role in revealing and affirming the deepest interests of human beings.

Viewed this way, Hegel’s notion of aesthetic freedom is itself an adequate response to the paradox (or at least a prototype thereof) between the autonomy and sociality of art that Adorno takes to be the defining task of modern aesthetics. In the course of this inquiry, it has become clear that Hegel’s articulation of the Concept of

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art aims to go beyond the mere negativity of art. Hegel’s interest in preserving the intrinsic value of art has much more to do with articulating philosophically the significance of art in human life. It is for this reason that he grounds this notion of aesthetic freedom in a concept of practical freedom that aims to describe in positive terms the ideal relation of the subject to the world. The significance of art on this front is that it liberates us from desire.

3.3.1 Aesthetic Freedom and “Desire”

It is helpful to locate any claims about the purpose of art within the teleological framework of Hegel’s philosophy. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel tells the story of reason’s coming of age as the collective human quest for freedom. According to this narrative, human reason, or *Geist*, develops as a sequence of necessary stages, or *moments*, realized in the fits and starts of history, each one a rational advance upon the other. This fundamentally historical process culminates in what Hegel calls *Absolute Knowing*, the acme of rational thought, where the seemingly contradictory forms of consciousness find reconciliation in higher principles of reason and *Geist* at last finds itself “at home” in the world, free of contradiction.

At the bottom of this epistemic-ontological hierarchy is the purely sensuous relation to reality, in which the subject apprehends the objects of its environment exclusively in terms of purpose or utility—that is, as objects to be *consumed*. Hegel characterizes this consumptive relation in the *Phenomenology* as the relation of desire [*Begierde*], a rationally minimal form of consciousness in which the subject naïvely seeks to achieve “self-certainty” by exerting itself as pure will against the
world it inhabits (PhG §167; 174). The self-certain subject understands freedom as the unrestricted exercise of desire, and therefore seeks affirmation of this freedom through the negation of the world around it, grasping things in their brute particularity and submitting them to its own needs and ends. This conception of freedom “destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a true certainty” (PhG §174). In short, the subject affirms its freedom in purely negative terms, by attempting to deprive the other of its freedom.

In the Aesthetics, Hegel also reiterates the claim that “the poorest mode of apprehension” is the sensuous, and he goes on to describe, in equally disparaging terms, what he calls “the purely practical relation of desire [Begierde]” that consciousness bears toward sensuous reality (LFA, 36/W13, 57). When consciousness remains at this level of experience and assumes an “appetitive relation to the external world,” the individual

[...] confronts things as being individuals; likewise he does not turn his mind to them as a thinker with universal categories; instead, in accord with individual impulses and interests, he relates himself to the objects, individuals themselves, and maintains himself in them by using and consuming them, and by sacrificing them works his own self-satisfaction. (LFA, 36)

But this freedom is illusory, since negating the object that satisfies the desire only serves to recreate the desire anew. In the “system of sensuous needs,” the freedom found in the satisfaction of immediate desire is merely transitory, not “absolute,” and thus it happens that “a new want arises continually and restlessly: eating, satiety, sleeping are no help; hunger and weariness begin on the morrow” (LFA, 98).

Anticipating Schopenhauer’s notion of an endlessly recurring “cycle of desire,” Hegel
argues that once this object is destroyed with the satisfaction of desire, the subject has nothing over which to exercise its dominion, and so it must find another, and another, and so on. Self-consciousness can never supersede the object it consumes; it only reproduces the desire anew.

The further point Hegel wishes to extract from this discussion in the *Aesthetics*, of course, is that the beauty of art offers a higher-order experience of freedom within the sensuous world. He deploys the category of *desire*, central to his account of practical freedom in the *Phenomenology* and *Philosophy of Right*, as a dialectical point of contrast for introducing the notion of aesthetic freedom, the experience of freedom in works of art. It is this poignant juxtaposition that is cleverly exploited in George Bernard Shaw's observation that “If you compare the creation of a work of art with the production of a loaf of bread you come across some rather remarkable differences,” notable among which is that “the consumer, after buying a loaf of bread, eats it, and thus destroys it.” Instead of affirming freedom, consciousness winds up in quite the opposite predicament of being deeply dependent on objects. By way of contrast, Hegel maintains that with *art*, the subject “leaves it free as an object to exist on its own account; he relates himself to it without desire, as to an object which is for the contemplative side of spirit alone” (LFA, 36-37; emphasis added). The subject-object relation that defines aesthetic freedom is, in a word, the negation of desire.

This contrast allows us infer a good deal about Hegel’s conception of aesthetic freedom as well. The category of “desire,” after all, is specific to self-consciousness, the form of consciousness that marks the transition in the *Phenomenology* from the subject’s awareness of the world as other to the subject’s awareness of itself in relation to the world. The aesthetic experience facilitates this transition in that the work of art, as a sensuous-intellectual hybrid, offers resistance to the purely consumptive claims of desire that otherwise determine the subject’s relation to sensuous reality. A work of art can do any number of things for us: it can tell us about the past; it can offer a vision for a utopian future; or it can reveal human being’s deepest interests. But the Concept of art itself cannot be tracked down by any such singular purpose. This resistance throws the consumptive consciousness back on itself and demands that it engage with art at the level of thought rather than purely sensuous utility. In turn, consciousness is prompted to reformulate a conception of subjective freedom that is compatible with the independence of the object. Hence Hegel emphasizes the two sides of aesthetic freedom: On the one hand, the subject “leaves objects alone as being inherently free and infinite; there is no wish to possess them or take advantage of them as useful for fulfilling finite needs and intentions” (LFA, 114); and on the other, the subject, by relinquishing subjective claims upon the object, liberates himself from the false consciousness of desire.
3.3.2 Desire and Disinterest: Hegel’s Reading of Kant

I have already suggested the conceptual continuity between Hegel’s account of aesthetic freedom and Kant’s notion of disinterested aesthetic experience. Having laid out the basic structures of the practical concept of desire against which Hegel introduces the notion of aesthetic freedom, it is equally important to survey the theoretical landscape in which Hegel begins to explore the notion that aesthetic experience requires the withdrawal of subjective interest, as the points of continuity will also lend clarity to the points of contrast.

It is indeed a telling indication of how Hegel perceives this continuity when he notes in his closing remarks on the concept of disinterestedness, that this “important consideration” in Kant’s theory corresponds to his own view, elaborated at some length in the Introduction, that aesthetic contemplation requires the subject to dispense with the corrupting influence of desire (LFA, 58). But the similarity runs much deeper. Hegel draws an explicit connection between Kant’s notion of disinterested pleasure and his own conception of aesthetic freedom when he suggests that that Kant’s requirement that aesthetic experience be “devoid of all interest” means simply that it is "without any relation to our appetitive faculty" (Ibid). This suggests that the significance of disinterested pleasure for Kant is that it brings to light the inherent incompatibility between subjective interest and aesthetic appreciation. If we allow an interest into our contemplation of artistic

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116 We can only assume, as does Knox’s translation, that Hegel is referring to LFA, 36ff., where he discusses the freedom of the work of art from subjective desire.

117 For the relevant passages in Kant, see (CJ, 204-05); cf. also (CJ, 296-97).
beauty—be it in the form of sheer curiosity, desire for possession, or an intention to put the object to some specific use—we cannot form an estimation of the work of art on its own terms, but only by the measure of some extrinsic value, e.g., as useful, profitable, entertaining, etc. And we have Kant to thank, Hegel figures, for bringing to our attention the fact that genuine aesthetic appreciation does not allow us simply to foist our subjective interests on the object of beauty.

Consider, in particular, how Hegel explains the relevant contrast for Kant between interested and disinterested experience:

If, for example, I consume an object for the sake of nourishment, this interest resides solely in me and is foreign to the object itself. This situation with the beautiful, Kant maintains, is not of this kind. The aesthetic judgment lets the external existent subsist free and independent, and it proceeds from a pleasure to which the object on its own account corresponds, in that the pleasure permits the object to have its end in itself. (LFA, 58)

The normative claim in both cases is essentially the same. In Hegel’s view, and in his account of Kant’s view, the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic experience consists in the freedom accorded to the aesthetic object from the desires and interests of the aesthetic subject. In a word, Hegel clearly considers his conception of aesthetic freedom—understood as a relation in which the subject foregoes his desire and regards the object of beauty as an “end in itself”—as a confirmation and extension of Kant’s view that aesthetic experience is the experience of beauty devoid of interest.

It is a slightly different question, of course, whether Hegel actually gets Kant’s notion of disinterestedness right, a question that would deliver us to the front lines
of an ongoing battle in Kant interpretation that I have little interest in fighting here. My interest, rather, is in the genesis of aesthetic freedom in Hegel. I do think, however, that Hegel’s reading at the very least identifies two distinct versions of disinterested pleasure in Kant—a stronger and a weaker—and that he correctly identifies the latter as the more promising account of how individuals actually relate to beautiful works of art.

For the most part, Kant speaks of aesthetic interest in quasi-moralistic terms, as an inclination that must be shelved for the sake of judging impartially. It is a liking which “always refers at once to our power of desire [Begierde]” (CJ, 204). We will observe that this description of an interest agrees not only in name, but also (as Hegel himself notes) in character. “All interest,” Kant writes, “either presupposes a need or gives rise to one,” and this renders judgment about the object “unfree” (CJ, 210). Accordingly, Kant remarks that when our liking is free of desire or inclination, “the judging person feels completely free as regards the liking he accords the object” (CJ, 211).

Kant describes two different kinds of liking that constitute an interest: a liking based on the agreeable and a liking based on the good. A liking that is based on the agreeable presupposes a need insofar as the judgment, by means of sensation, “arouses a desire [Begierde] for objects of that kind, so that the liking presupposes something other than my mere judgment of the object” (CJ, 207). The claim here is simply that, instead of contemplating the mere presentation of the object itself, the liking is based on the gratification occasioned by the object (CJ, 206). Thus we can call this the weaker version of Kantian disinterestedness. This
liking constitutes an interest insofar as my judgment is based on the agreeable sensation it affords me; I judge the object based on my desire for it.

A liking that is based on the good, by contrast, gives rise to an interest insofar as it “contains the concept of a purpose, consequently a relation of reason to a volition” (CJ, 207). What constitutes an interest in this case is, I think, a bit more difficult to specify. The difficulty lies partly in the fact that the interest in the good is not related merely to sense (as is the liking for the agreeable), but rather to reason, insofar as it involves the concept of a purpose. If we connect judgment with the concept of a purpose, i.e., the good, then according to Kant we necessarily base our liking on the idea of what the object is good for. Now, he does allow that the good in question can be intrinsically good (we can like it “for its own sake”), in contrast to an immediate purpose, utility, or means to an end (Ibid). But even this, Kant maintains, contains the concept of purpose and thus constitutes an interest in the object which disqualifies it as a judgment of taste. We can call this the “stronger” version of aesthetic disinterestedness, since it exacts a far heavier toll for the purity of aesthetic judgment. Here, disinterested liking seems to require total abstraction from the object’s existence, since “in order to play the judge in matters of taste, we must not be in the least biased in favor of the thing’s existence but must be wholly indifferent about it” (CJ, 205). As we saw in the previous chapter, however, this disinterestedness is not absolute.

At times, Kant himself seems to acknowledge two different conceptions of disinterestedness. He notes, first of all, that a judgment of taste “is indifferent to the existence of the object,” and further, as an additional consideration, that such a judgment “is neither based on concepts, nor directed to them as purposes” (CJ, 209). Nevertheless, Kant goes on to insist that “to will something and to have a liking for its existence” are identical (Ibid). We might say, then, that the difference is only one of degree. To judge an object independently of a subjective relation of desire is...
proves particularly difficult, if not impossible, when the object in question is a work of art, since the concept of purpose is necessarily constitutive of aesthetic judgment. Our experience of art is “logically conditioned” by the awareness of purpose, and so we can hardly abstract the concept of purpose from that experience. Moreover, if disinterested aesthetic judgment attends strictly to the mere presentation of the beautiful objects, then we are required to withdraw any non-formal analysis from consideration of its beauty (cultural, historical, interpretive, etc.). Moreover, even if we could achieve this level of abstraction in judgment, disinterested judgment would imply that judgments of beauty about, say, the films of Leni Riefenstahl, would have to be made irrespective of their also being overt forms of Nazi propaganda.

To the extent that Hegel regards Kant’s conception of aesthetic disinterestedness as an “important consideration,” it is clearly the weaker version of that view that he takes to be the precedent of his own view. While Hegel offers no direct critique of the stronger version Kantian disinterestedness, his conception of aesthetic freedom rules out this possibility on the grounds that a conception of beauty that hermetically isolates the work of art from the substance of human life is equally impoverished as one that would put it to some moralistic or propagandistic end. That is to say, for Hegel, to consider a work of art as a work of art is precisely to consider it as something more than mere presentation, that is, as a sensuous product far less demanding in that it requires only that we avoid imposing extraneous purposes on the object of judgment. It requires that our judgment not be determined by extraneous considerations such as desire or purpose. Alternatively, to judge an object’s beauty on the basis of representational form alone requires us to abstract from the representation all conceptual content, including any historical, cultural, and political context.
shaped in relation to the rational content of human intelligence. So even if it is a
selective interpretation of Kant’s disinterested pleasure upon which Hegel develops
an account of aesthetic freedom, it is because he sees the need to strike a balance
between the autonomy of art and its far-reaching significance in concrete forms of
human existence.

3.3.3 Beauty and Social Freedom: Hegel and Schiller

If we are to understand Hegel’s notion of aesthetic freedom as an attempt to
supplement the more sterile interpretations of Kantian disinterestedness with an
account of the historical and social dimensions of beauty, it is useful to understand
that task in relation to its most important philosophical precedent: Friedrich
Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*. Schiller’s express aim in this
groundbreaking work is to merge an account of human freedom with a culturally
and historically informed retooling of Kantian aesthetics. This effort is not lost on
Hegel, who singles out Schiller for special praise in the *Aesthetics* for

   [...] breaking through the Kantian subjectivity and
   abstraction of thinking and for venturing on an attempt
   to get beyond this by intellectually grasping the unity
   and reconciliation as truth and by actualizing them in
   artistic production. (LFA, 61)

Hegel expresses deep reverence for Schiller’s aesthetic sensibilities, and the *Letters*
certainly count as one of the primary influences on Hegel’s philosophy of art.

Equally clear is the fact that this reverence turns almost exclusively on Schiller’s
capacity to go beyond Kant. According to Hegel, it is his keen artistic knowledge
coupled with philosophical principles that allows him to reconcile the residual
dichotomies of Kantian philosophy—universality and individuality, sense and reason, spirit and nature, etc.—and to “penetrate into the deeper nature and concept of the beautiful” (Ibid). More than anyone, Schiller answers the call of his day to grasp the Concept of beauty in art, even if at times this comes across, as Hegel further suggests, a bit too heavy-handedly in his poetry.

In the first of his Letters, Schiller clearly indicates his intention to formulate an aesthetic theory “based on Kantian principles.” But as he soon reveals, this intention is couched within a much broader set of concerns having to do with the disenchantment, political turmoil, and ethical corruption he took to be symptomatic of post-Revolutionary Europe. For this reason, Schiller is particularly drawn to the conceptual symmetry Kant draws between aesthetic beauty and morality, as he sees in this connection the possibility of redressing the moral and social degeneration of his day through the public cultivation of aesthetic appreciation. It is this line of thought that leads him to the central claim in the Letters that aesthetic education is the exclusive means of overcoming social alienation.

In particular, Schiller exploits Kant’s suggestive characterization of art as a “symbol of morality” in §59 of the Critique of Judgment. Beauty is symbolic of morality, Kant claims, because in aesthetic judgment we refer the beautiful to the morally good even though we lack a determinate concept of it. As with moral

judgments, aesthetic judgments do not involve a *schema* (a mental pattern by which the understanding subsumes intuitions under a given concept), but rather make use of a *symbol*, a cognition by analogy, which refers to something beyond the representation in which the theoretical and practical are united. Moral and aesthetic judgments refer neither to nature nor to freedom itself, but rather to something that is the “basis of freedom,” an idea Kant calls the “*supersensible*,” an idea in which freedom and the lawfulness of nature combine “in an unknown manner” to form an essential unity (CJ, 353). While aesthetic and moral judgments are analogous in this and other respects, the aesthetic experience of beauty allows us to move between sensation and moral reflection “without making too violent a leap” (CJ, 354).

Schiller constructs the philosophical armature for his view of aesthetic education on this Kantian notion that beauty harmonizes the rational and the sensuous. Between these two essential, though fundamentally opposed forces, or “drives” [*Triebe*], in human nature, Schiller refers to “a third fundamental drive which might reconcile [vermitteln] the two” (Letters, 13.1). This he identifies as the “play drive” (Letters, 14.3), a formulation he no doubt derives from Kant’s conception of aesthetic beauty as the “free play” of imagination and understanding. The beautiful satisfies both the rational and the sensuous while maintaining a natural system of checks and balances between them. Like many German Hellenophiles of his day, Schiller attributes this notion of perfect moral equanimity exclusively to the ancient Greeks, a people for whom “sense and intellect did not rule over strictly separate domains,” but rather formed a harmonious unity (Letters, 6.3). The idea for an aesthetic education clings to this ideal in the hope of salvaging
this inner harmony that modernity has torn asunder. The driving force behind the *Letters*, therefore, is to extend Kant’s insights on the moral significance of aesthetic beauty to the concretely historical realm in the service of moral integrity. Beauty is not simply the *symbol* of morality—for Schiller, it is the very basis of it.

What is more, Schiller imagined that, once beauty had achieved its moral purpose in harmonizing the conflicting drives in human nature, aesthetic education would then evolve to manifest political harmony. Beauty would bring about the ideal state, the “state of beautiful appearance [Staat des schönen Scheins]” in which social freedom would be fully realized (Letters, 27.10). Beauty would accordingly produce ideal citizens, exemplified in Schiller’s concept of the “ideal man,” the living unity of individual and collective subjectivity, between citizen and State. The ultimate value of beauty for Schiller, therefore, is its role in advancing social and political utopia. Aesthetic education is the means—indeed, the *only* means, according to Schiller—“that man makes his way to Freedom” (Letters, 2.4).

Given this snapshot of Schiller’s purpose in the *Letters*, we might expect from Hegel a blunt rejection of his attempt to moralize beauty. But he is oddly silent on this central aspect of Schiller’s thought. In his critique of the prevailing views regarding the final purpose of art, he vaguely remarks that “in recent times *moral* betterment has often been adduced, and the end of art has been placed in the function of preparing inclination and impulses for moral perfection and of leading them to this final end” (LFA, 51). Hegel implicates no one by name in this charge, but if he in any way intends to attach Schiller to the “false position” that “art has to serve as a means to moral purposes” (LFA, 55), it is a damning indictment indeed. We
might accordingly cite this as a radical difference in vision between Schiller’s and Hegel’s aesthetic theories.\textsuperscript{120}

But in fact the issue is far more complex than this, on the side of both Schiller and Hegel. To begin with, Schiller claims to endorse Kant’s doctrine of aesthetic disinterestedness, noting quite explicitly, for example, that “a moral or material interest in a work entails that it is not an aesthetic interest” (Letters, 22.6).\textsuperscript{121} Like Hegel, Schiller seems to accept a weaker version of that doctrine, according to which aesthetic disinterest entails a strong injunction against an instrumentalist conception of art’s purpose. Indeed, he at times expresses a view that very closely approximates Hegel’s notion of aesthetic freedom discussed above:

\begin{quote}
Beauty produces no particular result, neither for the understanding, nor for the will. It accomplishes no particular purpose, neither intellectual nor moral. It discovers no individual truth. It is in short unfitted to provide a firm basis for character. Nothing more is achieved by aesthetic education, then, than that man is enabled to make himself what he will—that the freedom to be what he ought to be is completely restored to him. (Letters, 21.4)
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{120} Hegel indicates two ways in which this view can be regarded as false. First, if the goal of art is to impress upon us a moral lesson, that lesson to devolves into moral relativism as soon as it is subject to aesthetic contemplation. For Hegel certainly agrees that “from every genuine work of art a good moral may be drawn” (LFA, 52). The problem with this view, however, is that “all depends on interpretation and who draws the moral” (Ibid). Hegel’s suggestion that the artistic depiction of Mary Magdalene may just as well inspire someone to reproduce her sins (because so beautifully represented) as learn from them the moral value of repentance and forgiveness may indeed be a bit far-fetched. But the general point is that art by its very nature undermines its own efforts to draw specific moral conclusions.

\textsuperscript{121} Elsewhere, Schiller speaks of disinterested pleasure as “one of the necessities of existence” (Letters, 27.5).
So even if the goal of aesthetic education is moral and political advancement, it lacks the element of *instruction* that Hegel finds so abhorrent in moralist theories of beauty.\(^{122}\) Aesthetic education is not, and should not be, a guidebook for a moral life. Schiller sees in the experience of beauty the makings of moral human beings who can live freely and harmoniously with one another in an ideal state. But this is not because aesthetic experience ever produces concrete maxims for behaving morally, but rather because it develops the frame of mind that allows us to overcome social alienation.

Seen in this light, we can agree with Andrew Fiala’s judgment that Hegel and Schiller agree “most obviously and fundamentally” on the idea that the ultimate goal of aesthetic education is *freedom*.\(^{123}\) But given the more complex picture of aesthetic freedom that we have seen emerge in Hegel, we should question the further claim that beauty for Hegel has “*no political consequences.*”\(^{124}\) Among other things, this suggests that thinking of art as an “end in itself” implies that it does not operate within the domain of social, moral, and political engagement. As we saw with Kant, this is precisely the conception of aesthetic autonomy that Hegel wants to avoid. Since he thinks freedom can only be realized within these institutions, it cannot be

\(^{122}\) Hegel writes in reference to moral instruction as the end of art: “This idea unites instruction with purification, inasmuch as art, by affording an insight into genuinely moral goodness and so by instruction, at the same time incites to purification and only so is to accomplish the betterment of mankind as its utility and its higher aim” (LFA, 51-52).


\(^{124}\) Ibid, p. 172.
the case that art relates to freedom but not its social forms. The subtler task for Hegel is to determine how art is of social, moral, and political consequence without sacrificing its status as an “end in itself.”

Hegel does of course deny the claim that art should serve explicitly political purposes. He warns, for example, against the ideological use of art. He rightly reasons that, if the content of art “is supposed to emerge and be explained directly and explicitly as an abstract proposition, prosaic reflection, or general doctrine,” then the form, “which is precisely what alone makes a work of art a work of art, becomes a useless appendage” (LFA, 51). So, we don’t need art to do our political bidding, but we do need art to make us aware of our deepest interests, of which the political is but one aspect. Hegel sees art as a window into the whole of cultural normativity. Through it we see the fundamental values, beliefs, prejudices, etc. manifested in a particular way of life, whether explicitly or implicitly, cast in the light of artistic beauty. Consequently, while Hegel may disagree with Schiller’s belief that fine art is “the instrument we seek for moral improvement, and through that, political improvement” (Letter, 9.2), it is certainly not because art lacks moral or the political purpose, but because he thinks the scope of its purpose extends well beyond immediate moral or political ends.

To be sure, the young Hegel displays a vigorous optimism toward the immediate political ends that can be achieved through aesthetic education. This thought appears as early as 1797 in the Oldest System Program, where Hegel
(assuming he is the rightful author of the text)\textsuperscript{125} claims in the spirit of his romantic contemporaries, Hölderlin and Schelling, that beauty can serve a “mythological” function in unifying and affirming a cultural \textit{Weltanschauung}. The concept of a “new mythology” introduced here would of course provide much of the intellectual fodder for the later circle of Jena romantics, particularly Schelling and Schlegel. But the phrase, as well as the idea behind it, is altogether absent from Hegel’s other writings. Likewise, Hegel’s intellectual development will also lead him to reject the distinctly Schillerian notion espoused in this early text, namely, that poetry could be the “teacher of humanity \textit{[Lehrerin der Menschheit]}” in the modern world. Hegel certainly shares with Schiller a deep nostalgia for the lost unity and simplicity of the ancient Greek way of life, and with this, a fairly bleak assessment of modernity as beset by the malaise of a deeply fractured worldview. But precisely for the reason that modern subjectivity is no longer premised on a seamless social cohesiveness, Hegel is deeply skeptical of claims regarding the continued \textit{mythological} significance of art. To look to art as the panacea for a divided modern consciousness is to abstract from the very historical conditions that lends art its moral and political significance. Schiller’s contribution to the philosophy of art, after all, is that he advances beyond Kant’s abstraction of beauty and historicizes art in relation to the

\textsuperscript{125} Alternatively, Hölderlin is believed to be the real author of this essay. Otto Pöggeler presents a fairly convincing set of reasons to doubt that Hegel was in fact the author of this brief fragment of text, among which is the claim that the strong influence that Kant’s philosophy exerted on Hegel would have been sufficient to deter him from claiming that beauty could serve modernity by erecting a “mythology of reason.” See “Hegel, der Verfasser des ältesten Systemprogrammes des deutschen Idealismus,” in Christoph Jamme, Hans Schneider (Hrsg.): \textit{Mythologie der Vernunft. Hegels ältestes Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus}. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988.
social world. If, in moving beyond Kant, however, we are to take seriously the historically embedded significance of aesthetic beauty (as Schiller proclaims to do), then Hegel thinks we cannot consciously employ art in the service of moral and political advancement without reducing it to purely instrumental value. Under certain historical conditions (specifically those in which subjectivity is cast in terms of cultural homogeneity, e.g., the Greek polis), Hegel believes that art can function as the primary means of affirming social freedom and normativity. Under any other conditions, however, we cannot value art as a magic formula for moral and political reform without forging a direct link between the means and ends of art that Kant has rightly excluded from our assessment of beauty. We do not solve the dilemma between the autonomy and sociality of art, in other words, by making art the “milking cow” of civic virtue. Hence Hegel takes it as basic that art has its end and aim in itself.

3.4 Aesthetic Freedom and Ethical Life

The notion of aesthetic freedom that we find in Hegel, therefore, responds to precisely this dilemma between asserting the autonomy of art on the one hand while defining its value in terms of shared normativity on the other. What it means to consider the work of art as an “end in itself” is neither to sever the link between art and non-aesthetic sources of value nor to construe aesthetic value exclusively in terms of explicitly moral or political ends. Rather, Hegel’s aim in discussing art’s purpose in terms of freedom is to show that there is a dialectical relation between a
non-instrumental approach to art and a conception of subjective, practical freedom as socially constituted. Hegel deploys the concept of social freedom as a theoretical tool for reconciling competing historical claims regarding both the autonomy of art (Kant) and its inherently moral and political significance (Schiller). Aesthetic contemplation does not require us to divorce the appearance or Schein of art and the concrete reality of human life. To treat artistic beauty as an abstraction not only deprives the object of its freedom, it also limits the subjective freedom of aesthetic contemplation. Rather, art has a direct and substantial bearing on human life which includes, among one of its elements, a relation to morality. But art entails morality, neither as a mere symbol of it, nor as a means of instituting it in society. More accurately, then, for Hegel art is a symbol of Sittlichkeit, an embodied expression of ethical life broadly construed, and its purpose is to reflect the totality of a given normative structure in the form of beauty.

Thus Hegel’s conception of aesthetic freedom suggests a much-needed corrective to the opposing conceptions of art in contemporary aesthetic theory: it prevents both the tendency to saddle art with an overtly political function as well as the postmodern infatuation with the idea that aesthetic experience requires an indefinite deferral of aesthetic content. The conception of aesthetic freedom that allows Hegel to claim that art has value both in itself and as an essential form of truth lies in the fact that the truth of art consists precisely in the potential for non-desirous, non-instrumental relation between the work of art and viewer. This relation consists in a dialectical engagement between the subject and the work of art that is centered on critical reflection. When we regard the work of art as an end in
itself, we establish a line of imaginative communication with it by freeing it of any particular purpose or criterion, and at the same time recognizing it as a particular product of a particular culture. It is precisely in this relation that Hegel believes “every work of art is a dialogue with everyone who confronts it” (LFA, 264). This notion of aesthetic freedom as involving a communicative exchange between the viewer and the work of art will, accordingly, be the focus of the next chapter, where I examine the role of the imagination in facilitating the dialogical relation between the artist, the audience and the work of art.
CHAPTER 4: 
THE POLITICS OF PHANTASIE: HEGEL ON ARTISTIC IMAGINATION

“For art does not exist for a small enclosed circle of a few eminent savants but for the nation at large and as a whole.” (LFA, 273)

In the course of our inquiry into the concept of aesthetic subjectivity, we inevitably arrive at a crucial, but all too often marginalized, aspect of such discussions—namely, the subjectivity of the artist. Few questions have elicited a more disparate set of philosophical reactions than the question concerning the creative imagination of the artist. Plato, we will recall, offers an unflattering description of artistic activity as the attempt to imitate or copy reality by way of an acquired skill, or techne, and famously banishes the poets from his fabled Republic for the socially corruptive effects of this activity. Though his student Aristotle is more charitable to the artist, he nevertheless consigns poetic imagination, or poiesis, to the lowest rungs of the epistemic ladder, far beneath practical cognition and only slightly above the kind

\[126\] I am aware that Plato’s attitude towards art, in the Republic and elsewhere (e.g. the Symposium), are more complex than this, and that imitation theories of art do not in principle underdetermine artistic creativity. But even this ambiguity in Plato stands in notable contrast to later attempts to establish the epistemic authority of art. Hegel belongs to this latter camp, with some significant qualification.

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of technical knowledge required for slave labor. This picture begins to change drastically in the early eighteenth century, when thinkers like Shaftesbury, Addison, Hutcheson, Hume, Burke, and Gerard shift the notion of aesthetic imagination to the center of discussions about taste and, to a lesser extent, artistic production.

While British aesthetics had already begun to veer in this direction, the evolution of aesthetic imagination takes an abrupt shift with the publication of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, where it is conceived as an “autonomous” mental activity, distinct and independent from cognition and discursive knowledge. Of pivotal importance to this development is Kant’s account of the genius—a figure he defines by the ability to “give the rule to art” (*CJ*, 207). On analogy with the autonomous moral agent thematized in his practical philosophy, Kant conceives the artistic imagination as a fundamentally self-legislating activity, which lays down the principle of aesthetic production and creates the work of art accordingly. While only tangentially significant for Kant’s overall critical epistemology, the notion of the genius as the artistically creative source of spontaneity resonates deeply with the subsequent generation of German romantics, many of whom donned the cloak of the poet as readily as that of the philosopher (e.g., Lessing, Schiller, Goethe, and Hölderlin). Thus the intellectual climate in Germany that took shape in the immediate aftermath of the publication of the third *Critique* took an intense and unprecedented interest in the imagination of the artist, as it suggested art as the ultimate expressive of human freedom.

For a select group of romantic intellectuals, however, the category of genius was the key conceptual foundation for an aesthetic theory that championed
originality, discursive indeterminacy, and absolute creative autonomy as the chief ideals of a modern, “romantic,” form of art.\textsuperscript{127} Loosely converging on the literary and philosophical ideas of Friedrich von Hardenberg (Novalis) and the Schlegel brothers, August Wilhelm and Friedrich, the so-called “Jena circle” of romantics radicalized the concept of artistic autonomy implicit in Kant’s account of genius and, in doing so, helped elevate the genius to an almost cult-like status in nineteenth century Europe. And, while the historical life of Jena romanticism was relatively short-lived, the influence of this aesthetic development has long since echoed through the writings of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Freud, and it enjoys a renewed vitality among various strands of postmodernist theory today.\textsuperscript{128}

Notably exempt from the swirling enthusiasm for the notion of genius at that time, however, is Hegel. Already known as something of an “old man” among his contemporaries, Hegel’s notoriously hostile rebuke of the romantics has since earned him the reputation as something of an embittered idealist. This is particularly evident in his treatment of his philosophical rival, Friedrich Schlegel. Hegel’s invective takes aim specifically at the concept of \textit{irony}, which Schlegel develops from Socratic dialogue as an aesthetic means of exploiting the critical

\footnote{\textsuperscript{127} In the context of Schlegel’s aesthetic theory, the term “modern” broadly denotes art of the post-classical period. Schlegel also uses it interchangeably with “romantic” art. Here I will use both terms in reference to their meaning for nineteenth century aesthetic theory.}

\footnote{\textsuperscript{128} This is primarily true of French deconstructionist literary theory from Derrida onward, including Paul de Man, Maurice Blanchot, Jean-François Lyotard, et al.}
distance between the artist’s activity and any substantive claims to truth.¹²⁹ Where Schlegel sees the artist’s ironic, non-committal relation to the content or meaning of the art as an effective literary device that facilitates critical reflection, Hegel sees only “absolute sophistry,”¹³⁰ “hypocrisy,” and—even worse—“insincerity.”¹³¹ Indeed, in his characteristically caustic fashion, Hegel concludes that “If irony is taken as the keynote of [artistic] representation, then the most inartistic of all principles is taken to be the principle of the work of art” (LFA, 68).

There is, I want to argue, some merit to this critique. However, there can be little doubt that it is fueled by a degree of personal animosity for his romantic contemporaries. Moreover, recent scholarship in German romanticism has thoroughly demonstrated that Hegel’s critique rests on a rather narrow understanding of the romantic project as a whole.¹³² But even with the rightful

¹²⁹ Bearing only distant familial resemblance to both the original Greek term, ἐρωνεία, meaning “dissemblance” or “deception,” as well as the contemporary colloquial use of “irony” to indicate saying one thing while meaning another (usually with a hint of sarcasm), Schlegel’s theory of irony as a rhetorical, literary, and artistic device is derived from the Socratic dialogues, according to which the speaker is able to separate him- or herself from what is said or expressed. As Schlegel explains, in irony “everything should be both playful and serious, both frank and obvious and yet deeply hidden” Lyceum Fragmenten, #108. This


¹³¹ Cf. LFA, 82ff.

vindication of Jena romanticism in contemporary aesthetic theory, we should avoid simply dismissing Hegel’s critique of irony as *mere* polemics. At the core of this critique, I argue, is a legitimate concern about the essentially *social* character of artistic imagination. In particular, I claim that Hegel’s concept of the artistic imagination, or *Phantasie*, presents a convincing account of artistic creativity as a deeply *normative* practice, bound to public consciousness and shared social experience. This is Hegel’s notion of artistic *sincerity*, which poses a genuine challenge to the *irony* of genius, but also gives us reason to question whether the notion of genius that we’ve come to inherit from 18th and 19th century aesthetic theory is a suitable category for understanding artistic subjectivity today.

I will begin by examining Hegel’s own assessment of Kant’s account of genius, and show how his account of *Phantasie* takes shape around the “common idea” that art is “essentially made for human apprehension” (LFA, 25). Showing the various ways in which art-making practices prove to be deeply normative on account of the inherent sociality of art, I will go on to reformulate Hegel’s critique of romantic irony in dialectic terms. Thus we can agree, on the one hand, that Hegel’s attack on the concept of genius is largely overstated and off the mark. On the other hand, a more nuanced analysis of German romanticism provided by recent scholarship in turn allows us to reformulate the core of Hegel’s critique with greater dialectical precision. Specifically, I will focus on those elements of the romantic project in which we can discern a clear commitment to the kind of social normativity that Hegel accuses his opponents of neglecting. Building on a slightly different line of argument in Hegel which stresses the notion of artistic “*sincerity* [Ernst],” I will then
attempt to reconstruct his critique of irony in a way that reveals these two distinct objectives—the absolute creative autonomy of the artist and the artist’s sincere intention to engage in social discourse—to be in strong dialectical tension with one another in romantic aesthetics. Finally, I will suggest Hegel’s notion of artistic sincerity as an alternative model for thinking philosophically about contemporary artistic practices.

4.1 The Place of Imagination in the Aesthetics

It is clear that the question Hegel inherits regarding the artist’s creative use of imagination is to a large extent the product of a complex philosophical narrative that begins with the Greeks and comes to prominence in the 18th and 19th centuries. The tradition of post-Kantian German idealist aesthetics is in many ways a diverse set of attempts to accommodate a deeper consideration of the moral and political implications of art within the autonomous space that Kant carves out for aesthetic experience. We have already seen in the figure of Schiller the philosophical motivation at work in the intellectual climate following the publication of the third Critique to exploit Kant’s aesthetic theory as a conceptual basis for social progress. It is much less clear, however, where Hegel fits into the course of this complex development. If we rely on the authority of prevailing scholarship, Hegel is a chief proponent, if not the spearhead, of a cognitivist theory of art that by its very nature stands in strict opposition to imaginative autonomy. This view frequently cites Hegel’s characterization of beauty as “the sensuous appearance of the Idea” (LFA,
111) in support of the claim that the metaphysical basis of Hegel’s philosophy of art is in principle incongruous with the modern ideal of sustaining a processual, open-ended, and communicative account of aesthetic experience. In that case—so it is argued—imagination is a secondary, instrumental accessory to the metaphysical task of rendering explicit the Idea in sensuous form. I believe, however, that the matter is far more complex than this.

This assumption is strongly at work in what I take to be the three principal views present in the literature concerning the role of artistic imagination in Hegel’s aesthetics. The first and most common view, shared even among the chief proponents of Hegel, is that his philosophy of art has only a marginal interest in the artistically productive aspect of imagination. Call this the indifference view. Stephen Bungay, for example, who provides one of the earliest English-language monographs devoted to Hegel’s aesthetic theory, straightforwardly maintains that “it is not part of Hegel’s aim to discuss artist or artistic production, as there is nothing philosophical to be said about either.”

A second view goes further and aligns Hegel’s alleged neglect of imagination with a metaphysical agenda that has ipso facto contributed to a general decline of aesthetic subjectivity beginning with the tradition of idealist philosophy. This view, which we can call the rejection view of imagination, is the unofficial position of

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“reception” aesthetics of Germany, as it holds the idealist legacy of Hegel singly accountable for thwarting a *communicative* model of aesthetic imagination for the sake of metaphysical consistency.\(^{134}\) Taking a slightly different tack, Jean-Marie Schaeffer advances a similar argument in his recent survey of post-Kantian aesthetic theory that the blame for this decline rests with the speculative tradition of aesthetics as a whole for overburdening, or “sacralizing” art with speculative philosophy. In doing so, he unproblematically aligns Hegel alongside other speculative thinkers, including Novalis and Schlegel.\(^{135}\)

Still others, dissatisfied with the allegedly anti-subjectivist leanings of Hegel’s view, have attempted to reformulate an account of artistic imagination in Hegel that more readily conforms to contemporary notions of aesthetic *negativity*, and lends theoretical support to the ideals of incompleteness, indeterminacy, and open-endedness in aesthetic discourse. Most notably, Kirk Pillow, as part of general strategy of advancing a theory of “sublime indeterminacy,” draws on Hegel’s earlier and more obscure discussions of *Phantasie* in the *Encyclopedia* in order to reconstruct an account of imagination that showcases its potential for its conceptually destabilizing, or “dehabituating” effects.\(^{136}\) Coupling this analysis with

\(^{134}\) Most notably, Rüdiger Bubner argues: “Hegel is at bottom interested neither in the technical aspect [*Technik*] of mimesis nor in the genius that creates an alternative reality. He deploys the concept of “work” only to provide an essence [*Dasein*] that can give sensible expression to principle of spirit, from which he derives his System. Bubner (1990), p. 74.


\(^{136}\) In particular, Pillow relies on the passages of the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* (1830), where Hegel draws a strong connection between imagination, broadly construed,
the non-Ideal forms of art in the *Aesthetics* (symbolic, romantic), Pillow argues that a certain view of Hegel’s aesthetic theory approaches the kind of reflective indeterminacy that originates in Kant’s aesthetic ideas, and which he thinks essential to contemporary theories of art. Call this the *revisionist* view of Hegel’s theory of imagination.

However, a careful analysis of Hegel’s discussion of *Phantasie* in the *Lectures* reveals a far more interesting and involved account of artistic imagination than any of the above views suggest. Not only does this account occupy a central place within Hegel’s philosophy of art, it is in direct dialogue with an aesthetic tradition that aims to reconcile the creative autonomy of genius with the moral and social implications of artistic production. Most importantly, Hegel brings to that dialogue the robust rejoinder that genuine imaginative freedom is constituted through *sincere* engagement with social normativity. The central notion that artistic subjectivity must be, as Hegel puts it, “*im Ernst*” with respect to aesthetic production—that is, that the artist must take seriously art’s capacity to engage the viewer in meaningful, substantial dialogue—in turn provides a more viable basis for a communicative model of aesthetic experience than traditional or contemporary accounts of genius.
can offer. For instead of espousing indeterminacy and incomprehensibility as aesthetic ends in themselves, Hegel emphasizes the inherent *sociality* of artistic production as a philosophical foundation for effectively facilitating aesthetic dialogue between artist and audience. In doing so, Hegel’s theory of *Phantasie* at least leaves open the possibility that artistic practices can do more than simply disrupt comprehension and deconstruct meaning. For this reason, if the objective is to find an extremely rich account of the socially communicative aspect of artistic production, we ought neither to dismiss Hegel’s view of artistic imagination as irrelevant or inimical to the significance of art and aesthetic experience nor assimilate that view to accommodate postmodern aesthetic ideals. Indeed, as we will see, avoiding both extremes is the linchpin of Hegel’s account of *Phantasie* in the *Aesthetics*.

### 4.2 The Contours of *Phantasie*: Artistic Imagination in the *Aesthetics*

While Hegel offers several insightful comments on the nature and activity of artistic production in the Introduction (cf. esp. LFA, 25-32; 65-69), his concentrated discussion of *Phantasie* unfolds in two major sections of the *Aesthetics*. The first occurs in the section titled “the Artist” (LFA, 280-298), and the second is a particular extension and application of this view as it pertains to creative activity of the poet (LFA, 996ff.). The role of the artist is in fact never far from Hegel’s thoughts in the *Aesthetics*, but these passages in particular reveal the central importance of artistic imagination for Hegel in articulating the philosophical significance of art. He clearly
indicates its significance, in fact, when he explains that due consideration of the artist’s activity comprises the third and final aspect of the Ideal of art (LFA, 280).

Having expounded the general “Idea of the beautiful,” and having set forth the specific modes of representing it in art, the only thing left to complete the dialectic of artistic beauty, he tells us, is to give an account of the particular activity of the artist:

Because the work of art springs from the spirit, it needs a subjective productive activity as its cause, and as a product thereof it is there for others, i.e. for the contemplation and feeling of the public. This activity is the imagination of the artist. (LFA, 280)

Hegel explicitly signals, in other words, that the philosophical discussion of art, in order to remain philosophical, will have to shift from the foregoing considerations of the artwork itself in order to explain how it is shaped by “creative subjectivity, by the genius and talent of the artist” (Ibid).

By the same token, it would be equally misleading to suppose that the account of creative imagination that follows serves only to fill a theoretical gap in determining the Concept of beauty. As with other central doctrines of the Aesthetics examined so far, Hegel’s account of Phantasie develops dialectically from a basic set of presuppositions, or “common ideas,” concerning the nature and significance of art (cf. LFA, 25ff.). In the first chapter, we considered what follows from the common idea that art “is a product of human consciousness”; in the second chapter we considered what follows from the common that art “has its end and aim in itself.” The task now, in regard to artistic imagination, is to consider what follows from the common idea that the work of art “is essentially made for human apprehension”
(Ibid). Taking this as a dialectical starting point, Hegel will make the case for himself, and against a number of his contemporaries, that any properly philosophical account of aesthetically productive imagination must proceed from the given assumption that the work of art is fundamentally a public artifact, that artistic creation is above all an audience-directed activity. Thus a robust account of artistic imagination is neither absent from the Aesthetics nor rigidly determined by a fixed conceptual system. Instead it is the inherently social character of art that for Hegel necessitates a philosophical account of how the artist employs creative imagination in the production of artworks.

Once Hegel has worked out an adequate account of the “work of art in relation to the public” (LFA, 263f.), he then turns in the next section, “the Artist,” to consider the artist’s specific role in facilitating this relation between artwork and audience. This marks the section of the Aesthetics in which he designates Phantasie specifically as the artistically creative imagination. This is significant, since he immediately enjoins us “not to confuse Phantasie with the purely passive imagination [Einbildungskraft]” (LFA, 281).137 The fundamental difference is that

137 As with many of the sharp conceptual distinctions to which Hegel attaches so much importance, he is not entirely consistent in practice when it comes to maintaining this distinction in the Aesthetics: he occasionally uses the terms “Einbildungskraft” and “Phantasie” interchangeably. Hegel refers, for example, to the “creative imagination [schöpferische Einbildungskraft]” (LFA, 5), which, strictly speaking, terminologically contradicts the conceptual distinction he has just laid out. For similarly ambiguous statements to this effect, cf. also (LFA, 40; 281; 282; 283). Terminological inconsistency aside, however, Hegel is unequivocal in telling us that “the source of works of art is the free activity of fancy [Phantasie]” (LFA, 5). It is therefore puzzling that T.M. Knox treats these terms as synonymous in Hegel, translating both Einbildungskraft as well as Phantasie as “imagination.” In a footnote to his translation of the Aesthetics, he chalks up this anomaly to a mere stylistic device in Hegel’s writing, explaining that “it is a trick of Hegel’s style not to repeat the same word in the same sentence, or, often, in a succeeding one, and in order to avoid repetition, he uses two different words as synonyms, even if they art not exactly synonymous” (LFA, 5-6 n.2). Hegel very clearly intends to
“Phantasie is creative” (Ibid), and in setting up the contrast between active and passive forms of imagination, respectively, Hegel appears to signal a deliberate rebuke to Kant’s account of genius, which not only makes artistic production the work of Einbildungskraft, but also disparages Phantasie for its lawless and illusory character. Indeed, Kant reasons that Einbildungskraft is the active faculty, since “we play with it,” whereas Phantasie is passive, since “it plays with us.”

It is tempting, therefore, to suppose that Hegel’s aim is only to invert Kant’s priorities and to champion the aesthetic value of unbridled fantasy over the conceptually structured imagination. But this is not at all what Hegel intends with the concept of Phantasie. True, Hegel wants to separate the artistic imagination from any conceptual alliance with the understanding—that is, from Kantian Einbildungskraft. But in doing so, he by no means suggests that Phantasie will exhibit the kind of lawless character that Kant seems to attach to that concept. Quite the contrary: Hegel’s notion of artistic imagination—and this is key—is a deeply normative concept. This is, I take it, is part of what Hegel means by the “sincerity” of

distinguish the creative imagination from the synthetic imagination. As Jennifer Ann Bates has convincingly argued, conflating these terms obfuscates a very important conceptual distinction Hegel draws between reproductive and creative imagination. Hegel’s Theory of Imagination (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 2004), p. 110-13. Pace Bates, however, I agree with Knox’s association of “poetisches Vorstellen” with “Phantasie,” as it is sufficiently clear that Hegel’s wishes to distinguish the poetic way of thinking from the prosaic in terms of its distinctly imaginative form (Cf. “Poetry,” LFA, 100ff.)

138 In the Critique of Judgment, Kant distinguishes Einbildungskraft as the faculty for discerning taste from the mere fantasies that “engage in fiction” (CJ, 243). A similar distinction features prominently in Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, (2:340), where Kant mentions the “illusions” and “figments” of the imagination in connection with Phantasie. In the Anthropology, Kant speaks of Phantasie as the involuntary production of images, which is therefore not genuinely creative (Ak. VII, 167-68).

139 Reflexionen zur Anthropologie (338), Ak. XV, 133.
artistic production—imagination must be answerable to others. To be “im Ernst” with respect to artistic production is to recognize that creative activity is inscribed in the limits of intersubjectivity. Moreover, because Hegel regards artistic imagination as in some sense hemmed in by the normative constraints of a judging audience, his account of Phantasie must address the very dilemma that Kant faces in giving an account of genius: he must give an account of imagination that secures both subjective, autonomous creativity as well as the possibility of objective aesthetic validity. In other words, Hegel must also give an account of what Kant calls “free lawfulness.”¹⁴⁰ We find, on the one hand, considerable overlap between Kant and Hegel with respect to the basic conviction that artistic genius consists neither in lawless caprice nor in mechanical application of learned principles, but in “giving the rule to art” (CJ, 307). On the other hand, there is a shared conviction that this creative autonomy must ultimately produce a form of beauty that is in some way universally communicable. At stake for both thinkers is a conception of artistic imagination as creative, but not absolutely spontaneous. Thus, while formidable differences still separate those two accounts, it is important to see that the varying accounts of artistic imagination develop in response to a similar dilemma, namely, that the genius is at once aesthetically autonomous in producing beauty from self-legislated principles, and aesthetically accountable in producing beauty for others.

¹⁴⁰ [freie Gesetzmäßigkeit]: Of course, Kant uses this phrase in reference to the imagination that judges in matters of taste. But it clearly applies to the imagination of the genius as well for Kant since the activity of the genius is not without rules, but rather involves giving the rule to art (cf. CJ, 307). The lawfulness of artistic imagination is particularly evident in Kant’s warning that imagination cannot be left to “lawless freedom” lest it produce “nothing but nonsense” (CJ, 319).
Artistic normativity, as we will see in more detail, accounts for substantial theoretical agreement between Kant and Hegel.

4.2.1 Phantasie and Talent

Hegel defines genius the “general ability for the true production of a work of art, as well as the energy to elaborate and complete it (LFA, 283). The genius does not simply set to work in creating works of art in virtue of being a genius; rather, Hegel thinks of genius as a kind of latent ability that has to be cultivated through industry and effort. In particular, the general ability of genius is realized through the exercise and development of a particular ability or skill. This specific aptitude Hegel calls “talent” (LFA, 283f.) and, like Kant, he distinguishes the particular ability of talent from the general creative capacity of genius.\footnote{According to Kant, in the act of creative production, genius furnishes only the rich material of fine art; “processing this material and giving it form requires a talent that is academically trained” (CJ, 178).} This is why he designates the former as a necessary condition of the latter. Talent functions as a kind of an enabling mechanism for the imagination, translating the potential for genius into the actual execution of artworks. In other words, giving the rule to art first requires learning the rules of art-making, then practicing and perfecting them. Attention to this particular aspect of Hegel’s discussion of artistic production is often eclipsed by the more extravagant claims about art unveiling “truth” and bringing home the “highest interests” of the human spirit. But we mustn’t forget that whatever exalted status Hegel assigns to art, realizing this in a work of art is largely contingent on the
competent execution of artistic form, and this requires the acquisition and cultivation of a particular skill.

Every artist works in a physical material and it is the peculiar capacity of genius to become a complete master of his material, so that one aspect of genius is skill and dexterity in technique and handicraft. (LFA, 775)  

Now, it isn’t entirely clear that the artist’s mastery of a skill must be specific to a chosen medium, and it is even less clear that the fruits of genius ripen only in advanced years.  

But Hegel’s general point that the creativity of genius is in one important respect a rule-guided activity is one that gets lost in many post-Kantian accounts of genius. The genius who wishes to paint, for example, must learn to stretch and prime a canvas, prepare a palette, and practice with diligence the various techniques for applying paint to a surface. This is, at bottom, how all great works of art begin.  

Hegel never explicitly rules out the possibility that a talent may be an innate capacity. He admits that the genius acquires talent all the more readily since she possesses a natural impulse to give shape to her external surroundings. But even if this capacity is inborn, Hegel emphasizes, the artist must foster and develop this talent over time. “All the arts require lengthy study, constant industry, a skill

142 Similarly, Hegel writes: “Apart from anything else, a main feature of artistic production is external workmanship, since the work of art has a purely technical side which extends into handicraft [...] Such skill the artist is compelled to have in order to master his external material and not be thwarted by its intractability” (LFA, 27)

143 Hegel states that “genius does burst forth in youth, as was the case with Goethe and Schiller, but only middle or old age can bring to perfection the genuine maturity of the work of art” (LFA, 283).
developed in many ways” (LFA, 286). However brilliantly conceived an artistic vision may be, the genius produces no work of art until it is manifested in concretely sensuous form, the successful execution of which requires rigorous training, repetition, and refinement. We will recall from the previous chapter the balance that Hegel seeks between the theoretical and practical ways of approaching art.

Analogously, he explains here that the artist has a gift for formation which he “does not possess merely as a theoretical idea, imagination, and feeling, but also immediately as practical feeling, i.e., as a gift for actual execution” (Ibid). In other words, if Michelangelo had set a chisel to a marble slab without the practical training and expertise that he acquired as an apprentice in the workshops of Florence, he never would have produced the David or the Pieta that we know today.

Talent is therefore a necessary condition of genuine artistic production on Hegel’s view. But it is by no means, he thinks, a sufficient condition. All the schooling in Italy cannot guarantee the successful execution of a David because, as Hegel puts it, “a purely learnt proficiency never produces a living work of art” (LFA, 286). Essential though the possession of a particular skill may be to the creation of great works of art, it is a fundamental feature of Hegel’s account of Phantasie that artistic production is irreducible to a strictly rule-governed activity:

Artistic production is not a formal activity in accordance with given specifications. On the contrary, as spiritual activity it is bound to work from its own resources and bring before the mind’s eye a quite other and richer content and more comprehensive individual creations [than formulae can provide].” (LFA 26)
In short, for Hegel as well as Kant, there can be no science of aesthetic production. The law of artistic creation rests ultimately with the imagination of the genius. Skillful execution remains at the level of mechanical craftsmanship if the creative activity is unaccompanied by the immediacy and naturalness of production that belong to the genius alone. Genius without talent remains untapped potential; on the other hand, talent without genius “does not get far beyond an external skill” (LFA, 284).

In this respect, Hegel initiates a formidable alliance with Kant’s account of genius in rejecting standard mimetic theories of artistic creativity. Kant takes it as a matter of universal consensus that the idea of genius, “must be considered the very opposite of a spirit of imitation” (CJ, 308), for the simple reason that it can neither be learned nor taught. On similar grounds, Hegel rejects the logic of various “rule-providing theories [regelgebende Theorien]” which conclude from the mere fact that artistic creativity is a conscious, skilled activity that it must be transferable by learning and imitation (LFA, 26/W13, 44). It goes without saying that Hegel has a more speculatively-motivated and exhaustive set of reasons for rejecting imitation as the primary principle of aesthetic judgment or production. But the particular rationale for treating artistic imagination as more than the correct application of

144 Notably, however, despite the non-communicability of genius, Kant has some interesting things to say about how artists indirectly relay genius through exemplary art (C), 309-10).

145 Hegel refers specifically to Aristotle’s Poetics, Horace’s Ars Poetica, and Longinus’ On the Sublime (LFA, 15).

146 Cf. Section 3.2.1 of the previous chapter.
practical knowledge corresponds to the Kantian distinction between the rule-
following capacity of talent and the rule-giving capacity of genius. Wherever
determinate prescriptions are offered in the way of aesthetic production, Hegel
debates, they invariably teeter between being so general that they offer virtually no
guidance at all, e.g., “the theme should be interesting” (LFA, 26), and being so
specific that they pertain to only a small body of works rather than to art itself, e.g.,
“What can be carried out on such directions can only be something formally regular
and mechanical” (LFA, 26). But alas, the genius has no recourse to principles and
precepts; the truly artistic imagination is left only to its own devices in determining
how to proceed with the blank sheet paper, the unhewn block of marble, or the
silent piano.

As with any theory of artistic production that aims to replace mimesis with
imaginative autonomy, Hegel’s view assumes the more difficult task of stating how
the imagination prescribes for itself a non-arbitrary principle of creation. Common
to both Hegel’s view and traditional theories of genius is the belief that technical
expertise is a necessary but insufficient condition for free artistic creativity. But this
view does not, of course, answer the further question of how the artistic imagination
actually creates. It is in virtue of this further, more interesting, question concerning
the origin of genius as a self-legislating, creative activity, rather than a principled
rejection of Kant’s doctrine of genius, that Hegel begins to draw a sharp distinction
between the active Phantasie and the passive Einbildungskraft.
4.2.2 Phantasie and Inspiration

If we were to pose the question to Kant, “From where does the genius derive this capacity to give the rule to art?” he would tell us that it is “conferred directly on each person by the hand of nature” (CJ, 309), by which he would in all likelihood mean that it is given under the auspices of a transcendent God. The genius is, as it were, the conduit through which some external power endows the subject some share of its divinely creative power. This implies that the creative imagination of genius is in Kant’s view a gift—that is, not an intrinsic capacity originating from within artistic subject, but something bequeathed from without.

An important consequence of Kant’s view, and indeed one which subsequent theories will emphasize as the defining characteristic of genius, is that the act of artistic creation is seen as a largely unconscious activity; the genius essentially does not know how she creates. Much of this view is bound up with the claim that artistic production involves giving the rule to art rather than the perfunctory execution of a skill—a point which, as we’ve just seen, Kant and Hegel are in fundamental agreement. But here it is a question of degree. Kant seems to assimilate the absence of a standardized canon for artistic production with the near-total inexplicability of creative spontaneity. The workings of the genius simply defy articulation. In fact, it is specifically the ineffable nature of artistic production that for Kant makes the artist uniquely suitable to the category of genius. We can easily recreate the conditions which led Newton to his discovery of the laws of inertia, but doing so clearly does not make every Physics 101 student a genius. Homer, by contrast, has left behind no lab manual to instruct the aspiring poet on the ingenious composition
of verse, and indeed could not have do so, since according to Kant it is not even clear to Homer himself how he creates (CJ, 309). Giving the rule to art, therefore, is something the genius does, but cannot account for.

Along these lines, the notion of an unconscious state of "inspiration" becomes something of a cherished meme in the aesthetic discourse of post-Kantian philosophy in Germany. As I have already mentioned, variations of this view appear in the aesthetic theories of romanticism (both British and German), Freud, Nietzsche, Valéry, and a lengthy docket of postmodernists. But Hegel attributes this fascination with inspiration specifically with the "Period of Genius" which begins with the early years Goethe and Schiller, but which has since given rise to "confusions [...] which prevail even today" (LFA, 27). Hegel is deeply and explicitly suspicious of the notion that artistic imagination acts as a kind of lightning rod struck involuntarily by the flash of inspiration. Despite his occasional tendency to speak of genius as an endowment or "natural gift," (LFA, 285), he vigorously opposes the idea that artistic creativity originates in some external source (such as nature), as something endowed upon the subject, and argues instead that imagination is an immanent capacity cultivated within the subject through conscious, active reflection.

If a work of art is to be produced, circumspection must enter instead of momentary feeling. Even the

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147 Kant does not wish to suggest by this, however, that artistic production is a wholly unintelligible activity. His account of "exemplary art" attempts to capture the sense in which artists influence one another in important ways, and he distinguishes accordingly between simple reproduction, or copying [Nachmachung] and aesthetically influenced creativity [Nachahmung]. As to how the latter is achieved, Kant admits, "is difficult to explain" (CJ, 309).
enthusiasm of inspiration should not be given free rein; on the contrary, a spiritual product must be developed out of an artist’s tranquility and take form in the mood of a seer with a clear vision of the world. (LFA, 1009)

To be clear, it is not the case that Hegel thinks inspiration plays no part in aesthetic production. What Hegel criticizes rather, is the self-sufficiency, or the “omnicompotence” of inspiration, the idea that this passing state of creative rapture is sufficient to produce genuine works of beauty (LFA, 27). Indeed, Hegel likes to quip that, if all that is required to produce great art is a temporary flourish of semi-conscious inspiration, then “the good services of the champagne bottle” will do the trick.  

For Hegel there should be a tight conceptual fit between imaginative production and artistic subjectivity. That is to say, what the artist produces should be an expression of who the artist essentially is. For this reason, Hegel does not deny that the genius is inspired, but he champions a conception of inspiration as a sustained capacity for artistic production, consciously and assiduously developed by the artist, rather than a momentary surge of creative motivation. In this way, artistic subjectivity becomes more than the external, efficient cause of beautiful form. Frederick Beiser helpfully clarifies this subtle but crucial difference by pointing out that, for Hegel, artistic representations do not simply mirror the powers of nature from an external standpoint, but instead “are themselves a manifestation of these

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148 (Ibid). Hegel makes essentially the same point later in recalling the remarks of the French poet, Jean-François Marmontel, who jokes that with six thousand bottles of champagne before him nothing poetic flowed out of them for him (LFA, 287).
powers of organization.”¹⁴⁹ For Hegel, the artist’s subjectivity is itself realized in the act of creation. The rule that genius gives to art issues forth from, and gives concrete shape to, the artist’s own thought and activity.

Hegel thus regards artistic production as a highly conscious activity that emerges from the diligent cultivation of artistic subjectivity. In contrast to the foregoing account of inspiration’s role in artistic production, Hegel tells us that “true inspiration takes fire on some specific material which the imagination seizes with a view to expressing it artistically” (LFA, 287). Technical capacity is one essential element of genius; but when we press the question concerning the origin of genius, Hegel’s rationale for distinguishing between active Phantasie and passive Einbildungskraft becomes a bit clearer. He sees artistic imagination as emerging immanently, from the conscious reflection and activity of the artistic subject.

Though the concept of genius remains in tact in Hegel’s view, it is qualified in a way that poses a significant contrast to traditional theories of genius, as Hegel neatly illustrates in a thinly-veiled attack on the Kantian view:

> It is therefore an absurdity to suppose that poems like the Homeric came to the poet in sleep. Without circumspection, discrimination, and criticism the artist cannot master any subject-matter which he is to configure, and it is silly to believe that the genuine artist does not know what he is doing. (LFA, 283)

Hegel regards the faculty of Einbildungskraft as a passive form of imagination insofar as it locates the original source of artistic creativity in a transcendent power

that ultimately evades the subject’s comprehension. This conception of genius renders the artistic subject—to use a fitting locution of Nietzsche—merely the ventriloquist of God.

4.2.3 *Phantasie* and Self-Articulation

If we turn now to Hegel and pose the very same question concerning the origin of the creative imagination, it is clear that he will want to situate *Phantasie* squarely in the subjectivity of the artistic. This question, however, is for Hegel preceded by a more basic kind of question, namely, “What is man's need [Bedürfnis] to produce works of art?” (LFA, 30/W13, 50). Pursuing this line of inquiry, he assures us, will yield a “deeper result” from the antecedent discussion of the nature and origin of artistic production (Ibid). In brief, his answer is this:

> The universal and absolute need from which art (on its formal side) springs has its origin in the fact that man is a *thinking* consciousness, i.e. that man draws out of himself and puts *before himself* what he is and whatever else is. (LFA, 30-31)

At the basis of every act of artistic spontaneity is a fundamental and universal need for *self-articulation*. On the assumption that human beings are fundamentally motivated by a rational need to experience inner thought in outward form, that we naturally possess a kind of *conatus* for externalizing ourselves in the empirical world, Hegel thinks that art alone satisfies this basic and essential need. He illustrates this point with the powerful image of a child who marvels at the ripples he creates by tossing pebbles into a pond, and draws from this the view that making art is in essence the supreme form of this self-expressive activity. So if we want to
ask about the origins of artistically creative imagination, Hegel argues that we have
to situate this question within a broader psychological understanding of the basic
human need to impress the stamp of subjectivity on the external forms of nature.

The “deeper result” promised by this regressive strategy, then, is a fuller
appreciation of the reflexive character of artistic imagination. That is, whatever
theoretical position we adopt in regard to the nature of artistic imagination will
have to proceed from a conception of artistic production as an activity that aims to
satisfy the human being’s “rational need” to “lift the inner and outer world into his
spiritual consciousness as an object in which he recognizes again his own self” (LFA,
31). Accordingly, this notion of the reflexive character of artistic production
provides the key to understanding Hegel’s designation of Phantasie as the active
form of aesthetic production: Phantasie entails the reflexive awareness of itself as a
self-articulating activity. By contrast, Einbildungskraft, although active in the (albeit
incomplete) process of synthesizing intellectual content and sensuous intuition, is
passive in the sense that it is only this synthetic activity, and not an awareness of that
activity as such. In other words, Einbildungskraft is not reflexive with respect to its
imaginative activity; the activity of creative imagination for Kant belongs to the
productive imagination and thus, while non-conceptual, is still bound up with the
conceptual thinking of the understanding. Hegel distinguishes Phantasie as the
uniquely creative form of imagination insofar as it involves an activity that is
explicitly directed back upon the subject as the activity of self-articulation. In other
words, Phantasie is distinct in that it never loses sight of itself as a reflexive activity.

With this in mind, we return now to the question regarding the nature of
artistic imagination. If Hegel is correct in characterizing imagination as an essentially reflexive activity originating in the need for self-expression, then it follows that that Phantasie is rightly understood as a matter of transforming what is already there rather than creating anew. Richard Eldridge usefully describes Hegel’s vision of the artist’s task as follows: “Combining technical mastery, internalization of the history of achievements in a medium, and awareness of the shape of rational activity in social life, the artist must find, more than arbitrarily invent, a way to speak in artistic forms to a historical present.”150 If in fact what motivates the artist to create a work of art is a fundamental need to give outer expression to inner substance, then the content of imagination is, in a sense, already given, and the primary task of the artist is to translate this substance into artistic form. Hegel explains that with the “productive activity of the imagination” the genius “takes what is absolutely rational in itself and works it out, as his very own creation, by giving it an external form” (LFA, 283). This rational substance that takes shape in a work of art he calls the “objectivity of the representation,” and he intends this to pose a more balanced alternative to the notion that genius consists in creating something from nothing with no knowledge of how this is done.

In the first chapter, we focused on Hegel’s conception of aesthetic experience as a potentially transformative experience which illuminates the already present, albeit obscure, reality of prosaic life with the Schein of beauty. And in the previous

chapter, we elaborated on this claim and set forth the conditions under which the experience of beauty can be liberating for human subjectivity. In the course of this chapter, we have given specific consideration to the subjectivity of the artist in realizing this experience in the work of art through the creative activity of Phantasie.

We can appreciate the enormity of the artist’s task when we tie these points together and consider that the aim of art is neither to reproduce ordinary reality, nor to create a fictional alternative to it, but rather, as Hegel puts it:

[...] to strip off the matter of everyday life and its mode of appearance, and by spiritual activity from within bring out only what is absolutely rational and give to it its true external configuration. (LFA, 289)

Far from turning out indeterminacy and illusion, the artist deploys the creative imagination not only in discerning the substantial “objectivity” of everyday reality, but also in extracting it from the finitely sensuous realm in which it is otherwise veiled, and transforming it into something true and beautiful. The genius is unique in this regard, since the “ordinary intellectual mode of apprehension” will not suffice for this task. The poetic imagination “gives us more” than ordinary experience because “it adds to the understanding of the object a vision of it, or rather repudiates bare abstract understanding and substitutes the real specific character of the thing” (LFA, 1002).

It should be sufficiently clear from what has been said so far that Hegel has in fact a good deal to say about the imagination that is neither ancillary to his philosophical agenda nor wholly antithetical to traditional theories of artistic genius. Not only does Hegel's account of Phantasie ensure the freely spontaneous,
non-mimetic character of the artist’s imagination in generating its own principles of production, it goes further in grounding this creative autonomy more firmly in human subjectivity by showing it to be an essentially reflexive activity. Instead of creating from unconscious moments of inspiration, Hegel sees artistic imagination as carrying out the twofold task of grasping the essence of a shared social reality, and then imparting to this “objectivity” the universally communicable form of beauty. This notion of the reflexive character of artistic imagination gives us a way of conceiving aesthetic communicability, not as Kant does, i.e., in the form of a judgment that demands universal consensus, but on the basis of a shared rational content, as the aesthetic language of Sittlichkeit. I will say more on this shortly. First, I want to note in response to the revisionist view of imagination in Hegel considered above that, precisely because he thinks the artist’s ability to communicate with an audience through the substance of ethical life, a conception of imagination that focuses exclusively on its conceptually “dehabituating” character is fundamentally at odds with Hegel’s account of Phantasie. Rather than trying to assimilate Hegel’s earlier discussions of imagination to the expectations of strictly non-cognitivist theories of art, I suggest we give further thought to Hegel’s account of Phantasie in the Aesthetics as the basis for a theory of art as social communication. Currently, there is a sincere and palpable effort on behalf of artists to address complex social issues in novel, illuminating, and sometimes very explicit ways, and this stands in direct contradiction to the continued theoretical bias toward notions of aesthetic negativity. Here, theory must conform to practice, and if a growing number of artists aim to engage directly with
an audience through their work, rather than simply evading, eluding, or mystifying them, then aesthetic theory must be able to accommodate this possibility. Thus if the concept of the artistic genius is to maintain any viability in the practice of contemporary art, it must be revised to reflect this shift toward aesthetic subjectivity as a deeply social form of subjectivity. As an alternative, then, we can turn to Hegel for an account of imagination that preserves aesthetic autonomy, but that goes beyond the negative task of frustrating comprehension by inviting viewers to engage in dialogue.

4.3 The Conditions of Communicability

The positive account of Phantasie that Hegel goes on to develop turns on the notion of artistic sincerity [Ernst], the idea that artistic imagination achieves creative freedom by taking seriously the socially communicative dimension of artistic production. The work of art is “essentially made for human apprehension” (LFA, 25), and the creative task of imagination is to engage the audience in dialogue with the work of art. Insofar as art generates from a common human need to externalize the inner world of thought and feeling in the external world of nature, Hegel sees a strong parallel between the expressive capacity of art and the expressive capacity of language:

> The primary and original need of art is that an idea or thought generated by the spirit shall be produced by man as his own work and presented by him, just as in a language there are ideas which man communicates as such and makes intelligible to others. (LFA, 635)
Indeed the primacy of language in Hegel’s philosophy as a vehicle of rational self-awareness has been the focus of a scholarly lineage stretching from Jean Hyppolite to Robert Brandom. But this discussion devotes surprisingly little attention to the fundamentally intersubjective character of aesthetic communication. Art, like language, is public: it addresses an audience of rational beings. And just as one commits oneself to a set of linguistic principles in order to make oneself intelligible in language, expressive freedom is gained for the artistic imagination by communicating a subjective insight or emotion to an audience on the basis of some shared normative foundation. Insofar as a work of art is in any sense communicative, it does not speak what Wittgenstein calls a private language—it recognizes socially recognized norms as its basis.

That being said, artistic expression is irreducible to discursive language. Hegel explicitly draws attention to this difference, noting, for example, that “the task of imagination consists solely in giving us a consciousness of inner rationality, not in the form of general propositions and ideas, but in concrete configuration and individual reality” (LFA, 282). Phantasie, in other words, gives rise to a distinctly aesthetic form of dialogue. This distinction is borne out explicitly in the case of poetry, where Hegel discusses the poetic imagination [das poetische Vorstellen] in relation to prosaic language. Since poetry inhabits the medium of language, it is particularly in his account of the creative activity of the poet that Hegel is forced to address the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic forms of communication, to reconcile the distinctly aesthetic, non-discursive character of Phantasie with the normatively objective content it purports to express. Fleshing
out this account of poetic imagination will, in turn, provide a useful point of contrast for assessing the faults and merits of his pointed attack on the romantic conception of the ironic genius.

In the first place, the poet must of course be able to fashion her ideas in linguistic form. But she must go beyond ordinary language; she “must treat it poetically in order to distinguish it from expressions in prose by choice, placing, and sound of words” (LFA, 969). Communication, poetic or prosaic, is normatively binding insofar as it is an audience-directed activity. The essential difference is that natural language is binding in terms of its form, whereas aesthetic expression is binding in terms of its content. A speaker achieves intelligibility in language by adhering to a common set of linguistic principles and grammatical rules, and this formal constraint allows the speaker to communicate a virtually infinite range of discursive content. One is of course free to invent a linguistic system of one’s own, or to cast rules aside altogether. But insofar as the principles of communication are not clear to others, the freedom of a private language is gained at the expense of unintelligibility. Absolute freedom in language implies linguistic nonsense for a community of speakers, and communication comes to a halt as soon as one is made to believe that “This person is not really speaking to me.” Phantasie is likewise bound to public norms; but what makes the aesthetic form of social communication possible is that it is grounded in the substantial content of a given form of ethical life. Insofar as the artist is sincere to a public, she does not close off aesthetic content from public access. Thus the freedom to communicate aesthetically consists, not in private language, but in the artist’s giving the rule to the aesthetic presentation of
that content. In other words, *Phantasie* exercises subjectively creative authority in
the formation of artworks in being constrained to a content that speaks to an
audience.

Tying the above points together—the communicative aspect of artistic
imagination and its distinctly aesthetic mode of communication—we can further
specify what *Phantasie* requires beyond the capacity of genius and the acquisition of
skill. We might call this the condition of aesthetic communication: *Phantasie* must
speak the language of ethical life in the language of art. The artist communicates
with an audience by giving concrete shape to the substantial content of a shared
social reality. As a sensuous embodiment of the deepest interests particular to a
given form of *Sittlichkeit*, the work of art makes itself accessible to its audience and
provides a context for contemplative engagement. Every dimension of artistic
subjectivity that goes into a work of art—genius, talent, skill, inspiration, self-
expression, insight, and effort—is reflexively bound to an objective world of others.
Imagination is not restricted to the domain of private subjectivity, but penetrates
the deeper structures of social reality: “However far the work of art may form a
world inherently harmonious and complete, still, as an actual single object, it exists
not for itself, but for us, for a public which sees and enjoys the work of art” (LFA,
263-64). This is why, Hegel tells us, “every work of art is a dialogue with everyone
who confronts it” (LFA, 264). When we go to see a dramatic performance, for
example, the actors on stage “do not speak merely to one another, but to us, and
they should be intelligible in both these respects” (Ibid). Speaking to the audience—
this is, in part, what Hegel means by the sincerity of artistic production. The freedom
of artistic imagination consists, not in unrestrained originality and arbitrary
invention, but in the capacity to communicate the substantial content of shared
sociality through the beautiful form of art. The artist’s Phantasie, in short, is
anything but the mere fantasy of the artist.

The condition of aesthetic communication begins to suggest a viable solution
to the dilemma of artistic imagination between creative freedom and social
normativity. On the one hand, it preserves the autonomy of imagination in that the
artist gives form to socially inscribed content in accordance with a self-discovered
logic of aesthetic production. On the other hand, by restricting the activity of artistic
imagination to the domain of shared social substance, the artist enables a reflexive
form of aesthetic experience, a reciprocal exchange between artwork and audience.
Before exploring this claim further, however, a more pressing question confronts us,
namely: How does the artist access this public content? How does Phantasie fully
grasp the essence of the social reality that it is to render in aesthetic form? What,
specifically, is required of the artist to be “im Ernst” in the imaginative production of
art? Here it will be necessary to spell out in more precise terms how Hegel
construes the artist’s relation to the objective world in view of the essentially
reflexive, socially communicative nature of artistic production.

4.3.1 Imagination and “Sincerity”

Given that the nature and task of Phantasie is to give artistic shape to a particular
historical and cultural substance, the artistic genius must possess not only the
motivation and technical mastery to produce art, but also a penetrating insight into
the rational structures of the outer, social world to which imagination gives aesthetic form. For this reason, Hegel’s account of Phantasie places a premium on the artist’s ability to grasp reality in concretely objective form.¹⁵¹ Now, if we attend exclusively to Hegel’s emphasis on the “objectivity of representation” discussed earlier, it can begin to seem as though the artistic imagination consists in little more than polishing the surface of things, bringing the dullness of the everyday to a beautiful shine so that the Idea can come to appearance. This would seem to diminish the significance of the artist and the artist’s imaginative activity considerably, as Pillow suggests when he claims that Hegel is “much more interested in works and their contribution to cognition for the Idea than in the productive imagination that creates them or the reflective imagination which judges them.”¹⁵² This view presupposes, however, that for Hegel the appearance of rationality in artistic form is not an inherently social activity, and that the individual artist is somehow secondary to the artistic expression. When we examine what Hegel thinks is demanded of the artist in order to bring to aesthetic appearance the objectivity of social life, it becomes evident that artistic subjectivity plays a pivotal role in his account of Phantasie.

To begin with, Hegel gives special weight to the memory of the artist. A retentive memory plays a distinct role in bridging the artist’s inner subjectivity and

¹⁵¹ Hegel indicates that this aspect is unique to Phantasie, since, having just distinguished Phantasie from the “purely passive” Einbildungskraft, he immediately tells us that “in the first place this creative activity involves the gift and sense for grasping reality and its configurations” (LFA, 281).

¹⁵² Pillow, p. 173.
the objective outer world in the process of artistic production. On the one hand, it aids the imagination by lending concreteness and determinacy to representation insofar as it allows the artist to call to mind with clarity the sheer abundance of imagery that ordinary experience affords. On the other hand, a solid recollection ensures that it is not simply the private sphere of inner, subjective consciousness that appears in artistic representation, but rather “the absolute truth and rationality of the actual world” (LFA, 282). This balance between subjective expression and shared objectivity that memory facilitates is in Hegel’s view liberating for the imagination, since in that case “the artist is not relegated to what he has manufactured by his own imagination but has to abandon the superficial ‘ideal’ (so-called) and enter reality itself” (LFA, 281). Memory thus puts the artist more directly in touch with an audience.

In addition to this practical advantage, memory also has an important aesthetic advantage: it provides the artist with a natural means of idealizing representation. That is to say, what is recalled in memory is the essence of an object or situation, which is what the artist aims to represent in art. Even a vivid memory tends to sift out the representationally accidental features of an experience, thereby whittling the significance of an experience down to its essential character. In producing a work of art, in which every representational element bears a non-contingent relation to the work as a complete whole, memory plays a very important role for the artist’s imagination because it “automatically succeeds in clothing characters, events, and actions in the garment of universality, whereby the particular external and accidental details are obscured” (LFA, 189). Thus the artistic
imagination’s capacity to transform reality relies heavily on the capacity of memory to present a clear image, already abstracted of inessential details, so that every sensory element has an underlying rationale in relation to the whole. What comes to appearance in the work of art, therefore, is the common substance of social life distilled by memory and shaped by imagination.

Moreover, *Phantasie* is acutely aware of its social environment. In pointed contrast to the largely prevailing tendency among nineteenth century thinkers to regard the artist as a free-spirited outsider, an asocial savant whose obliviousness is revered as the mark of genius, Hegel insists that genuine artistic production requires a solid grasp of reality. This follows, of course, from the view that the task of the imagination is to present a truer image of the world than ordinary experience can provide. If this is the task of imagination, the artist must form his image of reality, not by observing it from aloft, but by *immersing* himself in it, feeling out its many dimensions, and becoming intimately acquainted with it through experience.

The artist, therefore:

> [...] Must have drawn much, and much that is great, into his own soul; his heart must have been deeply gripped and moved thereby; he must have done and lived through much before he can develop the true depths of life into concrete manifestations. (LFA, 283)

*Phantasie* is deeply embedded in the ethical life of a culture. Just to be clear, Hegel certainly does not think that immersion in the world implies acceptance of it; the artists commits himself to a *knowledge*, not an endorsement, of the particular norms basic to a particular way of life. Most good art, in fact, tends to maintain some degree of critical distance from the social structures in which it operates most intimately.
The thrust of Hegel’s claim, however, is that if art is to communicate effectively, the artist must know what she is talking about. As Mark Twain so wisely remarks, “Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one’s lifetime.” This is true of art, and perhaps particularly true of art that engages in social critique, since critical distance itself requires deep insight into what is being criticized. To the extent that art aims to be at all socially relevant, the artist must be able to frame the content of a work of art, regardless of any particular position it may happen to endorse or denounce, in the language of shared social experience. The task of imagination calls on the artist to work toward a particularly insightful scrutiny of the reality it aims to address, and this insight is acquired only through direct and integrated experience.

Further, the level of obligation that the artist bears in grasping objective reality is proportionate to the level of normative complexity involved in a particular way of life. For the artist of classic antiquity, this complexity is at a minimum. According to Hegel, the Greek concept of subjectivity is essentially co-extensive with national identity, and thus for the Greek artist, “the content must already be there cut and dried, given, so that in its essential nature it is already determined for imagination [Phantasie] as settled” (LFA, 438-39). Phidias did not create Zeus, but he gave the Greek god its recognizable outward form. The modern poet, by contrast, confronts a social world in which private and public life have drifted apart; waxing poetic now requires him to “have absorbed the whole breadth of the world and its

phenomena into his own mind, and there have felt it through and through, have penetrated it, deepened and transfigured it” (LFA, 998). Naturally, Hegel’s rather traditionalist sensibilities could not possibly have permitted him to fathom the disparity, fragmentation, and social alienation pervasive in today’s global culture, let alone the reactionary trends of contemporary art. But as artists take on issues of race, gender, national identity, and other complex political categories more directly in their work, Hegel’s injunction to take seriously art’s capacity to shape public perception offers a promising remedy to the untenable notion that artistic creativity is exempt from the constraints of social normativity.

What follows from all this is that *Phantasie* requires a carefully calibrated balance between the subjective voice of the artist and the objective world of shared experience. Starting from the presupposition that the work of art as an object “essentially made for human apprehension” (LFA, 25), Hegel argues that the fundamentally public character of artistic production requires the artist to renounce a radical conception of creative autonomy. In order to bring forth works of art that resonate with an audience, the artist must

[...] be able to forget his own personality and its accidental particular characteristics and immerse himself, for his part, entirely in his material, so that, as subject he is only as it were the form for the formation of the theme which has taken hold of him. (LFA, 288)

The artist who relinquishes the false conception of creative freedom as entailing total aesthetic autonomy in exchange for one that ties artistic production with objective social norms thereby enables an aesthetically communicative relation with the audience through the work of art. Thus it is not a rejection of artistic genius that
drives Hegel’s account of *Phantasie*, but a rejection of the notion that the artist wields *absolute* freedom to produce when the work of art is essentially an object of public discourse.

On the other hand, Hegel’s reformulation of artistic genius by no means requires the artist to remove her subjectivity from the work altogether. While the work of art is ultimately intended for a public consciousness, it originates with the individual artistic subject, and evidence of this subjectivity is as essential to the work of art as its objectivity. Having mined the depths of human existence for its most substantial interests, the artist faces the still more difficult task of rendering this content in distinctly poetic form, which is where Hegel thinks the artist’s individuality shines through most brilliantly. This aspect of imagination consists in much more than simply putting the stamp of subjectivity on an objectively given content; according to Hegel, the artist’s subjectivity must *penetrate* the aesthetic content, since “however far an objectivity [...] may be demanded of the artist, his production is nevertheless the work of *his* inspiration,” and ultimately he fashions this content “out of the inner life of *his* heart and *his* imagination” (LFA, 291). Given the proximity of poetry to prosaic language, a distinctly artistic treatment of objective reality is made all the more taxing for the poet. Indeed, what separates poetic representation from both the abstract universality of philosophy as well as the prosaic particularity of common speech is that the subjective expression of the poet itself becomes an integral part of the representational content. What we get in Remarque’s depiction of trench warfare in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, is much more than a first-person account of a particular moment in
history—it is a macrocosm of distinctly human activity and behavior compressed into the single artistic vision of the author. The aim of the novel, as Remarque himself explains, “is simply to tell of a generation of men who, even though they may have escaped shells, were destroyed by the war.” This coupling of universal insight and individual poetic vision is reducible neither to prosaic nor to philosophical language, but rather presents what Hegel calls “reason individualized”: an image of objective reality wherein “subject-matter and mode of portrayal are made what they are by the ideas and ways of looking at things” (LFA, 977). In this way, poetic representation requires a balanced posturing of subjective artistic expression and the objective content of social life in order to be aesthetically communicative. *Phantasie* occupies a role that transcends the immediate, finite subjectivity of the artist, but not the limits of sociality.

### 4.4 Irony and Sincerity: Hegel’s Critique of the Romantics

Even if the positive account of *Phantasie* that we have seen emerge in the *Aesthetics* makes a compelling case for the interdependency of artistic subjectivity and social rationality, it is impossible to ignore the fact that the concept of aesthetic *sincerity* which defines this ideal balance is put forth as a vehement reaction to what Hegel regards as a terribly misguided notion of genius advanced by his romantic

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154 Erich Maria Remarque, *Im Westen nichts Neues* (Berlin: Propyläen, 1929). The author’s brief introduction to the work states the following: “Dieses Buch soll weder eine Anklage noch ein Bekenntnis sein. Es soll nur den Versuch machen, über eine Generation zu berichten, die vom Kriege zerstört wurde—auch wenn sie seinen Granaten entkam”
contemporaries. When Hegel speaks of the “romantics” (as opposed to the *romantic*, i.e., post-classical, form of art), he has in mind a distinctly German brand of romanticism that coalesces around the figures K.W.F. Solger, Ludwig Tieck, and the brothers, August Wilhelm and Friedrich von Schlegel, around the turn of the nineteenth century in the relatively liberal intellectual climate of Jena. Notably, however, Hegel singles out the latter as the prime culprit of the “non-philosophical” agenda of romantic aesthetics. He unblushingly paints Friedrich Schlegel as an arrogant, narcissistic dilettante, incessantly “greedy for novelty in the search for the distinctive and extraordinary” (LFA, 63). But apart from an apparently strong personal vendetta, Hegel concentrates his critique specifically on Schlegel’s concept of *irony*, which he variously characterizes as a form “hypocrisy” and “vanity” and—worst of all—“insincerity,” (LFA, 64ff). The feeling seems to have been mutual, as Schlegel remarks in a letter to his brother, August Wilhelm, that he finds the Hegelians “nauseating.” But clearly it is Hegel who instigates the notoriously spirited debate concerning the philosophical and aesthetic merits of irony, and it is clearly in response to the charge that the ironic genius “is not really *sincere* [im Ernst]” about artistic production that is behind the prominent role of *sincerity* in his account of *Phantasie*. Thus Hegel constructs an image of the ironic genius as

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156 The German term “Ernst” has a gravity that is not easily conveyed in English. T.M. Knox translates the phrase *im Ernst* as “in earnest,” which is terminologically correct, but does not convey the notion of genuineness or authenticity implied by Hegel’s use of the term. For this reason, I have chosen to translate *Ernst* in this context as “sincerity.”
recklessly aloof reactionary and juxtaposes this with his notion of *Phantasie* as objectively informed, socially engaged, and rationally substantive.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Hegel’s attack on romanticism is remembered more for its tone than its substance. Its unusually heavy-handed polemics mark it out as one of the more menacing instances of philosophical sabre rattling in intellectual history. And recent authors have duly noted that the simplicity and hyperbole of Hegel’s critique conveniently glosses over the real substance of romanticism’s aesthetic agenda. But even if we admit the coarse nature of Hegel’s argument against the romantics, it is possible that a substantive argument nevertheless remains. That is, it may be that the beneath the bellicose language and simplistic analysis is a legitimate critique of the dialectical tensions that threaten to collapse the romantic conception of imagination. I think such an argument is in fact present, and can be restated in dialectical terms. This will involve, on the one hand, drawing on the preceding analysis of *Phantasie* in order to frame that critique in terms of the romantics’ inability to satisfy the condition of aesthetic communication. On the other hand, this will involve a mediating figure, namely, Goethe, whose own tensions with romantic notions of subjectivity manifested in *Die Lehrjahre Wilhelm Meisters* offer a useful literary parallel to the

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philosophical critique Hegel attempts to formulate against his idealist contemporaries.

4.4.1 Hegel’s Polemical Critique

While Hegel exploits any opportunity to vilify Schlegel in print, the concentrated portion of his critique against romantic irony in the *Aesthetics* centers on three basic arguments set forth in the Introduction, each of which underwrites the general claim that irony entails a one-sided and radical form of subjectivity. Basically, Hegel sees Schlegel’s concept of irony as an adaptation and extension of Fichte’s “subjective” idealism, where the notion of a “self-positing ego” that Fichte proposes as a foundation to Kant’s critical philosophy becomes an *aesthetic* principle, a conception of artistic genius as a self-sufficient source of value. Irony, which forces a critically self-reflexive distance between the artist’s subjectivity and the work of art, co-opts the self-imposed distance that Fichte sets up in the *Wissenschaftslehre* between the *ego* and the normative world that it creates for itself, and puts it to aesthetic purposes. More generally, then, Hegel regards romantic irony as an unwieldy hybrid of two powerful philosophical currents at work in the nineteenth century: on the one hand, a radicalization of aesthetic sovereignty in Kant’s notion of the genius who “gives the rule to art,” and on the other, an aestheticization of the Fichtean ego manifested in the divine-like figure of the poet, solipsistically reveling in skepticism and nihilism.

While the exact extent of Fichte’s influence on romantic aesthetic theory is a complex issue which Hegel very well may have overstated, there is little question of
its having played an important role in Schlegel’s articulation of distinctly “modern”
form of poetry in contrast to the classical. Indeed, alongside the French Revolution
and Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, Schlegel lists Fichte’s philosophy as one of the
“greatest tendencies of the age” (AF, 216). By Hegel’s lights, at any rate, Schlegel’s
aesthetic agenda amounts to little more than a wholesale appropriation of the
Fichtean ego cast in the light of poetic creation. And this principle of unrestricted
autonomy, the “absolute principle of all knowing, reason, and cognition” (LFA, 64) at
the basis of Fichte’s philosophy, Hegel goes on to argue, ultimately undermines the
very conception of subjectivity it seeks to establish. By positing itself as the ultimate
source of value in the world, in purely negative relation to “the other,” the ego
achieves merely “abstract and formal” subjectivity, defined in opposition to what it
is not. By extension, the aesthetic variant of this ego in the ironic genius presents an
equally deficient conception of artistic subjectivity—a principle of normativity
lacking genuine identity. The ironic genius, then, is something of a poetic
Ozymandias, asserting its authority over and against what is, alas, nothing at all.

More troubling than the self-appointed power to create value, however, is the
self-appointed power to *negate* value, to undo with equal ease that which it posits as
substantial. This is the attitude that “whatever is, is only by the instrumentality of
the ego, and what exists by my instrumentality I can equally well nihilate again”
(LFA, 64). For the ironist, it seems, the only thing more important than the capacity
to lay down this or that particular form of normativity as absolute is the capacity to
posit *and* retract at will any claim to truth whatsoever. Consequently, nothing has
value or meaning *in itself*; irony recognizes nothing as sacrosanct in the work of art.
What matters is not the content of what is posited in the artwork, but the ironic distance between this content and the subjectivity of the genius. For example, the characters depicted in Schlegel's then somewhat risqué novel, *Lucinde*, do not deal straightforwardly with the issue of sexual mores per se, but rather, Hegel would argue, reveal the author's own lack of commitment to any particular position at all. What comes across as substantial in the work of art is really just “a show,” a “mere appearance due to the ego in whose power and caprice and at whose free disposal it remains” (LFA, 65). Accordingly, the work of art becomes little more than a private playground for the artist to fulfill his creative and destructive whims at his leisure.

Still, Hegel’s most direct argument against irony involves the claim that the ironic genius is not “im Ernst” with respect to either the content or production of art (LFA, 65). Drawing on the preceding arguments, Hegel now argues that sincerity is not even an option for the romantic genius. Artistic sincerity enters “only by means of a substantial interest, something of intrinsic worth like truth, ethical life, etc.” (LFA, 65), and this kind of engagement with the concrete objectivity of social life is in principle anathema to the ironist, who assumes for himself an absolute sovereignty over the objective world, a power of negativity that treats everything substantial as the arbitrary product of total creative autonomy. This notion of unbounded aesthetic freedom is famously typified in Fragment 116 of the *Athaneum Fragmenten*, where Schlegel boasts of romantic poetry:

> It alone is infinite, just as it alone is free; and it recognizes as its first commandment that the will of the poet can tolerate no law above itself. The romantic kind of poetry is the only one that is more than a kind, that is,
as it were, poetry itself: for in a certain sense all poetry is or should be romantic.\textsuperscript{158}

In moments of such artistic high-mindedness, Schlegel indeed seems to treat himself to a somewhat inflated notion of poetry. The will of the poet assumes a quasi-omnipotent status which Hegel mockingly characterizes as the “the divine irony of genius” (LFA, 66). Here, the foregrounding of the artist in relation to the artwork is unmistakable; the artwork serves only as a vehicle for the artist’s ironic attitude toward anything substantial. For Hegel, however, it is not just that the romantic genius subverts the actual content of the artwork to the subjectivity of the artist, but rather that he postures himself as the work of art itself. Above all, this entails, as Hegel explains, “living as an artist and forming one’s life artistically,”—a formula which plays (somewhat ironically) on the adjectival nuance of the German term, “\textit{künstlerisch},” which can imply either “artistically” or “artificially” (LFA, 65/W13, 94).

It is bad enough that the genius is insincere to himself in this way. Far more deplorable, Hegel thinks, is that this insincerity is directed toward others. If we proceed from the basic presupposition that the work of art is “essentially made for human apprehension” (LFA, 25), we are inevitably led to ask what happens if we couple romantic irony with the fundamentally social aspect of art. How does the purported aloofness and indifference of the artist ultimately square with the

\textsuperscript{158} Friedrich Schlegel, “Athenaeum Fragments” in \textit{Lucinde and the Fragments}, P. Firchow (trans.), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. Henceforth “AF,” followed by page number
presence of the spectator? Hegel, feigning the role of ironic genius, reasons as follows:

True, in the eyes of others the appearance which I present to them may be regarded seriously, in that they take me to be really concerned with the matter in hand, but in that case they are simply deceived, poor, limited creatures, without the faculty and ability to apprehend and reach the loftiness of my standpoint. (LFA, 65)

According to Hegel, the romantic ironist creates the illusion of sincerity by passing off as significant what is for him just self-indulgent mockery of all truth-claims. In this case, the artist creates ironic detachment not only from himself and his work, but also from the audience that experiences the work of art. Should others be naïve enough to experience the work of irony as something substantial and significant, so much the worse for them, as they are then not only duped, but also mocked and pitied, by the ironic genius: “He who has reached this standpoint of divine genius looks down from his high rank on all other men, for they are pronounced dull and limited, inasmuch as law, morals, etc. still count for them as fixed, essential, and obligatory” (LFA, 66).

The real danger of irony for Hegel, then, is not that everything becomes “mere show” in the self-contained monad of the artist’s mind, but that the artwork is inherently social, an object that exists “not for itself, but for us, for a public which sees and enjoys the work of art” (LFA, 263-64). And when this ironic attitude extends to others, the logical result, Hegel thinks, is a lofty disdain for those who lack the absolute and unfettered freedom of artistic imagination. Surely we would think it disingenuous if Picasso’s Guernica were more about Picasso the artist than the
Spanish Civil War. In a similar vein, Hegel’s worry is that the concept of “genius” seems to legitimize in the name of artistic freedom an arrogant condescension toward a community of agents who otherwise hold each other accountable for their actions and beliefs.

4.4.2 Critiquing Hegel’s Critique

Hegel’s arguments against romantic irony certainly pick out elements of romantic aesthetic theory that warrant heavy philosophical scrutiny regarding the coherency and viability of that project as a whole. Indeed, Hegel played his part in the historical dissolution of romantic aesthetics in Jena at the outset of the nineteenth century. But Hegel fails to develop these arguments in any systematic way, in the Aesthetics or elsewhere, and one cannot help but detect a tone of personal cynicism overriding the substance of the critique itself. On the whole, it is nowadays agreed that Hegel’s critique of his romantic contemporaries is as oversimplified as it is overstated, and that the exaggerated polemics of the Aesthetics mask a much deeper affinity between his own views and those he attacked.159 For whatever reason, in the effort to distance himself from what he perceived as the overly subjectivist leanings of the Jena circle of romantics in the wake of post-Kantian aesthetics, Hegel opted to erect a straw man in place of the complex intellectual history that is German romanticism and to attack it with all the combative force he could muster. However, the central

159 Judith Norman notes, for example, that Hegel is quite critical of the Schlegels’ theories, although he recognizes the proximity of their project to his.” “Squaring the Romantic Circle”, in Maker (2000), p. 132. Similarly, Jean-Marie Schaeffer observes that Hegel’s attacks on the romantics “are the sign of a close relationship as much as of an irrevocable opposition.” Schaeffer, p. 135.
claim of that critique—that romantic subjectivity is radically one-sided
appropriation of the Fichtean ego—is itself, as we shall see, somewhat one-sided.

Meanwhile, recent scholarship has come a long way in restoring the damaged legacy of Jena romanticism that Hegel helped inflict by offering a far more conceptually nuanced picture of the romantic project.\textsuperscript{160} Such efforts have shown the project of early romantic aesthetics to be anything but the monolithic movement under the Schlegels’ stewardship that Hegel presumes it to be. Rather, this research reveals a shifting constellation of ideas bearing the marks of diverse philosophical influences, including Spinoza, Kant, Schelling, Reinhold, and others—all of which converge in very different ways in the term “romanticism.” These authors have certainly made great strides in putting a more philosophically sophisticated face on what Karl Ameriks describes as the “inaccurate and unfair” caricature of romanticism that we have come to know from Hegel.\textsuperscript{161} And these efforts have effectively repudiated the view of romantic irony as a blind endorsement of Fichtean idealism. But we need not close the book on this important chapter of philosophical history, as many of these authors seem prepared to do, solely in virtue of Hegel’s superficial grasps of the complexities of romanticism. In fact, I think the clearer vision of the romantic project that these scholars offer puts us in a much better

\textsuperscript{160} Cf. fn. 26 above; as for the critical merits of irony, romantic or otherwise, cf. Uwe Japp, \textit{Theorie der Ironie}. (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1983); Rudolf Lüthe, \textit{Der Ernst der Ironie: Studien zur Grundlegung einer ironistischen Kulturphilosophie der Kunst} (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2002); Peter Szondi, “Friedrich Schlegel und die romantische Ironie mit einer Beilage über Tiecks Komödie,” In \textit{Schriften} (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), II, 21-22.

\textsuperscript{161} Ameriks, p. 229.
position to peel back the various layers of polemics and discover the real dialectical
kernel of Hegel’s critique. What this more fine-grained analysis of romantic
aesthetics reveals, after all, is that that, alongside claims about the unrestricted
autonomy of the artist, romanticism is clearly invested in the notion of art as a form
of social discourse. In the next section, we will consider some of the key claims of
romantic aesthetics that suggest a central preoccupation with the normative and
intersubjective character of artistic production. This will in turn allow us to
reformulate a more philosophically robust line of argument in Hegel which draws
on the unresolved tensions in romantic aesthetics between the subjectivity of the
artist and the sociality of art.

4.4.3 A Clearer Vision of Romantic Aesthetics
The most obvious point of consensus between Hegel and the Jena romantics
regarding the kinds of normative constraints relevant to artistic imagination is the
shared belief that ideals of beauty are realized historically. Schlegel belongs the
ranks of Winckelmann, Schiller, and, of course, Hegel, in breaking with Kantian
orthodoxy and regarding aesthetic judgment as determined, at least in part, by
historical and cultural conditions. With his abiding quest for a distinctly modern
form of poetry,¹⁶² Schlegel acknowledges the loss of a timeless and universal beauty.
But importantly, this by no means commits Schlegel to aesthetic relativism. In fact,

¹⁶² I use the term “modern” in the broad sense of 19th century aesthetics to denote art of the
post-classical period; in the context of Schlegel, “modern” art just is “romantic” art, and I will use the
terms here interchangeably.
one of the defining challenges of early romanticism is to render historical analysis compatible with the universality of Kantian transcendental reflection. The aesthetic dimension of that problem involves the difficult task of correlating the defining features of a given epoch or culture with an objective aesthetic taste. For Schlegel, this involves, more specifically, the task of articulating the distinctions in taste between “ancient” and “modern” poetry, a task that occupies him early and stays with him for the better part of his philosophical career. \(^{163}\) While Schlegel’s aesthetic sensibilities reside in spirit with the art of ancient Greece, it is, like Hegel’s, a nostalgia tempered by the pragmatic awareness that “ancient art simply won’t be resurrected” (AF, 192). His reasoning for this (also like Hegel’s) is that modernity has ushered in a new era of subjectivity in which the concept of reflective, individual agency replaces the communal identity of the Greeks that allowed for an immediate relation to beauty through, say, a marble bust of Athena or a Sophoclean tragedy. The recognition of this loss inspires Schlegel to sound the clarion call for an “aesthetic revolution,” a new yet equally valid set of aesthetic criteria suitable for the social and cultural conditions of modernity (SGP, 45ff.). He is, of course, far more optimistic about the prospects of such a revolution than Hegel. But it is significant that it stems from a shared recognition that the autonomy of the artist is inextricably bound to its history: modernity has become reflectively normative in a way that no longer allows us to create or evaluate beauty by classical standards.

say that the modern artist cannot resurrect a marble bust of Athena or a Sophoclean tragedy, therefore, is to say that artistic production is deeply and fundamentally committed to its socio-historical context.

An immediate consequence of this view is the central role that art history comes to play in both the production and judgment of art. Schlegel proclaims that “the true lover of art knows art history” (AF, 68). And his insistence that even the simplest aesthetic questions “cannot be answered without the deepest understanding of art history” betrays a conviction shared among German idealists, Hegel especially, that a chief deficiency of Kant’s aesthetics is the presupposition that aesthetic judgments can be made independently of great works of art. Schlegel presumably has Kant in mind when he speaks of an “aesthetic imperative” for the philosopher to consult the history of art in settling questions of art and aesthetic beauty. In place of a priori aesthetic judgment, aesthetic deliberation is for Schlegel a holistic process that involves, as one of its central elements, a process of aesthetic cultivation, or Bildung, such that personal and intellectual development comprise essential elements of aesthetic taste (SGP, 99).

While it far exceeds the scope of this discussion to examine the Enlightenment concept of Bildung and its pervasive role in the tradition of post-Kantian aesthetics, it serves our purposes here to note that, by deploying the richly

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{164}} \text{Friedrich Schlegel} \text{Kritische Fragmenten} \text{(#121). My translation. Henceforth, KF, followed by page number.} \]

\[ \text{\textsuperscript{165}} \text{For an extensive treatment of the notion of “Bildung” in European intellectual history, see W.H. Bruford, The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: Bildung’ from Humbolt to Thomas Mann, and} \]
normative idea of aesthetic cultivation, Schlegel’s intention is to make aesthetic judgment parasitic upon the cultural history of art without conceding the objectivity of aesthetic beauty. Indeed, as Schlegel straightforwardly exclaims: “The ultimate goal of modern poetry can be nothing other than the highest beauty, a maximum of objective aesthetic perfection.”¹⁶⁶ There is a distinctly “modern” standard of beauty, and articulating this turns on a firm understanding of how it has been realized throughout history.

Finally, the romantic attempt to unite aesthetic beauty with cultural normativity takes its most conspicuous form in its conception of the mythological character of art. For many of the early romantics, including Schlegel, modern poetry is not just emblematic of modern culture—it can provide a “new mythology” that is constitutive of cultural norms, much the way it is presumed to have been for the Golden Era of art. In other words, Schlegel believes modern art can still provide a comprehensive worldview, a normative center of gravity, for a particular way of life. This preoccupation with a new mythology of art is the focus of Schlegel’s early “classicist” phase, most clearly illustrated in his 1795 essay, Gespräch über Poesie, in which Schlegel recognizes that what is missing from modern art is its mythological status:

I’ll get right to the point. I maintain that our poetry lacks a middle-point, as mythology was for the ancients, and the most essential thing that keeps the modern art of

¹⁶⁶ Friedrich Schlegel, Über das Studium der grieschischen Poesie, p. 84. My translation.
If modern poetry is to achieve a new standard of aesthetic validity that is comparable, but irreducible, to the works of Homer or Aeschylus, its task, Schlegel argues, is to redefine the mythological significance of art in terms of modernity itself. The modern poet (i.e., Schlegel) must not only draft a blueprint of the base structures of cultural normativity, he must also give concrete and comprehensive form to modern consciousness in a way that transcends the particular context of experience. The work of art must speak to its own generation, but be heard by generations to come, just as Homer’s *Odyssey* in some sense shows us *how it was* for the Greeks.

Schlegel is under no illusion regarding the enormity of the artist’s task here, especially in light of his own diagnosis of modern existence as deeply fractured and increasingly despondent. It is his acute awareness of this, in fact, which prompts his aesthetic optimism, arguing that, precisely *because* radical subjectivity threatens to further fragment modern society, “it is time that we try earnestly to take part in producing [a mythology]” (Ibid). This demonstrates very clearly that, despite the tendencies inherent in the concept of irony toward negativity, indeterminacy, and non-commitment, the romantics in fact fostered a genuine appreciation for the ways that the values of art and the values of culture resonate deeply with one another.

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These features further demonstrate what is often missing from Hegel’s critique of romantic irony, namely, the recognition that the notion of artistic sincerity figures quite strongly in Schlegel’s appraisal of modern poetry. A more refined critique on Hegel’s part will therefore have to do more than simply accuse the romantic position of perpetuating Fichte’s radical conception of subjectivity in the figure of the ironic genius. Specifically, such an analysis will have to draw out the inherent tensions between the sovereignty of an artistic practice that recognizes “no law above itself” and its demonstrated commitment to both its own history and to the task of establishing normative coherency in the de-mythologized culture of modernity. The makings of this critique, I believe, are in Hegel’s—and, by extension, Goethe’s—account of the beautiful soul.

4.4.4 Hegel’s Dialectical Critique: The “Beautiful Soul”

Hegel is not always such a bully to the romantics. In the Aesthetics, there is no more mention of the “evil” or “hypocrisy” or “absolute sophistry” by which we have come to know irony in the Phenomenology and the Philosophy of Right. Quite out of character, in fact, he makes a brief overture to the accomplishments of the Schlegel brothers, who “with their critical talent, put themselves near the standpoint of the Idea” (LFA, 63). This gives them leverage, he continues, “to introduce into the different branches of art a new standard of judgment and new considerations which were higher than those they attacked” (Ibid). But these remarks, along with the occasional praise for the Schlegels’ refined taste in art (e.g. Italian painting, Indian poetry), seem dull consolation for the critical sting that abruptly follows:
But since their criticism was not accompanied by a thoroughly philosophical knowledge of their standard, this standard retained a somewhat indefinite and vacillating character, so that they sometimes achieved too much, sometimes too little. (LFA 63)

As much as they aimed for, the principal failing of the romantic project was that it lacked a proper philosophical foundation. The attempt to ground the insights of romantic aesthetics in the philosophically bankrupt foundation of Fichte’s “subjective” idealism ultimately results, as we have just seen, in a radically subjective and one-sided conception of genius.

However, Hegel then goes on to discuss another form of ironic negativity, and here he introduces a rather different argument strategy. Instead of dwelling on the ironist’s alleged disregard for sincerity and substantial content, here he draws attention to the competing disposition in romantic irony to forge substantial relations with the world of others that we observed above. As we know, irony loves to bask in artistic sovereignty and negate all things “factual, moral, and of intrinsic worth” (LFA, 66); but on the other hand, Hegel tells us:

The ego may, contrariwise, fail to find satisfaction in this self-enjoyment and instead become inadequate to itself, so that it now feels a craving for the solid and substantial, for specific and essential interest. (Ibid)

At issue here is not the negativity of irony itself, but rather the tension between this self-appointed negativity and the genuine yearning for objectivity in what the artist produces. In short, irony is in fact invested in sincerity. Hegel now acknowledges as much, and thus advances a different argument against the romantic position, focusing specifically on the “contradiction” that:
On the one hand, the subject does want to penetrate into truth and longs for objectivity, but, on the other hand, cannot renounce his isolation and withdrawal into himself or tear himself free from this unsatisfied abstract inwardness. (Ibid)

The ironic genius wishes to engage in something meaningful, but this would require him to close the distance that irony demands. He longs for relevancy in his art, but has already endorsed the irrelevancy of everything as the appropriate stance for the artist. He wants to speak the language of ethical life through poetry, but since his poetry is bound to recognize “no law above itself”, novelty and originality trump aesthetic dialogue. The genius, in other words, finds himself constrained by the unrestricted freedom of his imagination.

This contradiction between private and public normativity corresponds with Hegel’s account of the “beautiful soul” in the *Phenomenology*, and it is significant that he invokes this traditionally ethical category in the context of romantic aesthetics. Departing significantly from the legacy of moral philosophy that gave the title to the notion of a “beautiful soul [schöne Seele],” Hegel sides with Goethe in taking a rather critical stance of that ethical ideal. Whereas thinkers like Rousseau and Schiller had had valorized the self-cultivated piety and ascetic inwardness of the beautiful soul and help raise it to an almost cult-like status in eighteenth-century Europe,¹⁶⁸ Hegel

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¹⁶⁸ The idea of moral beauty, or kalokagathia [καλοκαγαθία] has a rather mixed heritage, deriving in part from Aristotle’s conception of the “good man [kalos kagathos],” along with later Hellenistic variations of the same idea, was taken up in the Catholic philosophy of St. Augustine. However, the notion of moral beauty acquired its full form in the religious tradition of Pietism, founded by German theologian, Joseph Spener, in the seventeenth century. Although the concept of a “beautiful soul” growing out of that tradition became largely secularized in eighteenth century moral philosophy, it retained many of the ideals of religious asceticism that we observe in Schiller and Rousseau, as well as the more critical accounts that we find in Goethe and Hegel. For an excellent and
raises serious doubts about the sincerity of a moral interiority that takes itself to be entirely self-sufficient. He does not doubt the good intentions of the beautiful soul, which finds it necessary to withdraw from the world in order to seek morality in inner sanctity. Indeed, in the rational development of ethical thought described in the Phenomenology, Hegel sees this inward turn as the only rational option for moral self-consciousness that seeks to overcome the inherent dualism of Kantian ethics, which posits duty as the rational trump card to personal inclination. The beautiful soul reacts against Enlightenment deontology and “abandons, or rather supersedes, the internal division which gave rise to the dissemblance, the division between the in-itself and the self” (PhG §634).169

What Hegel doubts rather, is that the beautiful soul can ever achieve morality in isolation. Specifically, the problem confronting the beautiful soul lies in translating moral principle into moral action. “In order to preserve the purity of its heart,” Hegel writes, the beautiful soul “flees from contact with the actual world, and persists in its self-willed impotence to renounce its self which is reduced to the extreme of ultimate abstraction” (PhG, §658). The beautiful soul adopts absolute self sufficiency—what Hegel calls moral “autarky”—as its cardinal ethical tenet, only to discover that it cannot realize its moral principle in the world without returning to the very division between inner principle and outer reality from which it flees. Said


169 For an even earlier formulation of this view, cf. Spirit of Christianity and the Positivity of the Christian Religion.
differently, the moral principle of the beautiful soul prevents it from acting morally.

“It is now the law that exists for the sake of the self, not the self that exists for the sake of the law” (PhG, §639). The price of moral purity is inaction, and this gives way to the internal contradiction which fills the beautiful soul “with a sense of emptiness” (PhG, §658).

There is little doubt that Hegel’s critique of romantic moral inwardness in the *Phenomenology* owes a great deal to Goethe’s literary treatment of the beautiful soul in *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship*, a work widely heralded as Goethe’s greatest literary achievement.¹⁷⁰ Hegel adopts not only the term “schöne Seele,” popularized in the Sixth, and arguably most critically analyzed, chapter of *Wilhelm Meister*, “Confessions of a Beautiful Soul,” but also the complex and critical stance that Goethe develops there toward prevailing conceptions of moral subjectivity in romantic thought. The character of the beautiful soul in Goethe’s novel is a young, intelligent woman outfitted with all the ideals for which that distinctly eighteenth century brand of Pietism came to be known—critical self-reflection, inner fortitude, and complete moral autonomy. She possesses both education and culture, or *Bildung*, and is driven by strong religious devotion and the pursuit for moral

¹⁷⁰*Wilhelm Meister* gives birth, not only to the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, or “coming-of-age” novel, but arguably also to the discipline of literary criticism. Notably, Friedrich Schlegel publishes his commentary on *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* in the literary journal, *Athenaeum*, which he co-founded with his brother, August Wilhelm, in 1798. The notion of what he called a “critical” approach to literature is often regarded as opening up the way to modern literary criticism.
perfection. In other words, Goethe takes care to depict her self-imposed inwardness as neither naïve nor pathological, but rather as issuing from a sincere yearning for absolute moral purity.

That being said, Goethe ascribes to her character a level of inner complexity that is for the most part absent from antecedent accounts of moral beauty. This ambiguous representation of the beautiful soul breaks with a fairly stable paradigm of Pietist-influenced moral thought in eighteenth century, including, most notably, Goethe’s closest literary companion, Friedrich Schiller. Quite unlike Schiller’s treatment of the schöne Seele, who overcomes the tension between moral duty and inclination, Book Six of Wilhelm Meister unfolds a complex dialectical narrative, a kind of Bildungsroman within a Bildungsroman, in which the admirable moral striving of the beautiful soul commits herself to an ascetic isolation that begins to collapse under its own weight. Disenchanted with religious stricture and popular morality, she retreats into her own inner sanctuary:

There was nothing binding me to the world of society, and I was convinced that I would never find there what was right for me. And so I entered on a state of peace and calm, and in renouncing one sort of life, I was sustained in life.172

171 Goethe very likely models the character of the beautiful soul on the personality of his sister, Cornelia, for whom he had deep fondness and respect, as detailed in his autobiography, Dichtung und Wahrheit.

Initially, she embraces this inwardness with the prideful assurance that she achieves proximity to God by distancing herself from others. But the success of her yearning for moral purity, we come to recognize, is contingent upon, and directly proportionate to, her renunciation of the world around her. This developing awareness of the increasing disconnect between her inward exile and social isolation culminates toward the end of the chapter, where the confessional monologue\textsuperscript{173} of the beautiful soul is suddenly interrupted by the introduction of her Uncle, who engages her in a respectful dialogue concerning the faults and merits of a private morality.

Goethe decks out the scene of the famous dialogue—the Uncle’s estate, where he is hosting a lavish wedding for her sister—with symbolically-charged imagery reflecting the cultivation and enlightened humanism of the Uncle: Renaissance architecture, fine paintings, and a vast collection of books, which, as he explains, “help us toward true enlightenment and the achievement of proper perspective” (VI, p. 249). None of this escapes the attention and admiration of the beautiful soul, who sees in the works of art “the images and symbols of moral perfection” (VI, p. 248). At this point, the Uncle poignantly replies to his niece, “You are absolutely right, and one should not pursue the cultivation of one’s moral life in isolation and seclusion” (Ibid). It is necessary to complement moral cultivation with worldly cultivation, he further admonishes, “[…] so as not to run the risk of losing

\textsuperscript{173} It is worth noting Goethe’s choice of the term “confession [Bekentnisse]” in relation to the beautiful soul, a form of speech that by its nature implies some kind communicative relation between speaker and audience.
[one’s] foothold on those moral heights, slipping into the seductive allurements of uncontrolled fancy and debasing his nobler nature by indulging in idle frivolities, if not worse” (*Ibid*).

This gives us a rough sketch of how Goethe manages to tease out some of the most deeply imbedded tensions implicit in the eighteenth century conception of moral beauty with subtle literary prowess. As Robert Norton keenly observes, “Goethe discerned in the idea of moral beauty—then at the crest of its popularity—an inherent tendency toward the vacant aestheticization of the self that *Bildung* can produce when it is not grounded in ethical being.”

Speaking more generally, it is largely agreed among scholars that the publication of *Wilhelm Meister* coincides with a period of Goethe’s own intellectual development in which his views evolve considerably beyond the romantic ideals that define his early years as a writer. Situated within a complex literary constellation that takes shape around the notion of *Bildung*, the exchange between the inwardly pious beautiful soul and her civic-minded, humanist Uncle captures the spirit of that tension between personal and public morality that is at once autobiographical and yet emblematic of the underlying divisions in ethical theory of that period.

In the context of Hegel’s relation to the romantics, I want to say that the beautiful soul is emblematic of its aesthetic divisions as well. Though perhaps lacking some of the subtlety and literary finesse of *Wilhelm Meister*, it is important

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174 Norton, p. 262

175 See, for example, Daniel Farrelly, *Goethe and Inner Harmony* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1973).
to see Hegel’s own critique of romanticism as framed in dialectical terms similar to those we find in Goethe’s account of the beautiful soul. That critique is itself the product of a transition in Hegel’s thought, similar to Goethe’s, from an early romantic nostalgia for inner ethical unity in the face of modern fragmentation to a later recognition of the implicit dangers of trying to preserve that unity at the cost of moral isolation. It would be misleading, therefore, to say that for Hegel the morally beautiful soul simply jettisons normative constraint altogether, that it embraces radical subjectivity. More accurately, Hegel’s position can be summed up in the famous lines of the Uncle, who proclaims, “Nothing can be achieved in the world without sincerity [Ernst]” (VI, p. 247). Hegel regards sincerity as more than the good intention to achieve normative validity, but as the practical ability to realize such norms objectively, in the context of social reality. And this is impossible by adopting the stance of subjective self-sufficiency.

Hegel clearly aims for a tight conceptual fit between the “moral genius” of the beautiful soul and the “ironic genius” of the romantic poet.\(^{176}\) To the extent that his critique of the former involves the dialectical strategy of revealing the internal inconsistencies of a moral code which takes itself to be self-sufficient, we can likewise construe Hegel’s argument in the \textit{Aesthetics} as posing a similar challenge to the romantic conception of the ironic genius: either reign in the notion of aesthetic autonomy by recognizing an objectively normative world of others, or risk confining

\(^{176}\) As noted already, Hegel makes passing reference to the beautiful soul in his criticism of irony in the \textit{Aesthetics} (LFA, 66-67). In the \textit{Philosophy of Right}, he makes this connection explicit, where his discussion of irony refers the reader specifically to the account of the “beautiful soul” in the \textit{Phenomenology} (§140).
the activity of artistic imagination to isolation and irrelevance. Sharp-tongued polemics notwithstanding, there is in fact a more dialectical strategy available to Hegel according to which he would strongly emphasize the ironist’s evidently deep commitment to social normativity and then show that this yearning for objectivity is frustrated by an inflated conception of creative freedom afforded to the ironic genius. Rather than merely accusing the ironist of dwelling on an inflated notion of subjectivity, Hegel shows that the ironist contradicts himself in espousing both the primacy of aesthetic subjectivity as well as the normative constraints of the social world. Drawing up the contradiction in this way allows him to deploy the communicability condition of artistic imagination and argue that, because the ironic genius aims to engage an audience in substantial aesthetic dialogue through the work of art, romanticism will have to re-evaluate its commitment to complete aesthetic autonomy.

Striking a balance between creative autonomy and social normativity is—in a nutshell—the sincerity of Phantasie. And indeed, Hegel offers a slight indication that this sincerity is compatible with the romantic project, as suggested by the novel distinction he introduces in the Aesthetics between the “morbid” and the “truly” beautiful soul. The morbid beautiful soul, as we are by now aware, is bound to a radically insulated notion of autonomy, and thus “lacks the strength to escape from this vanity and fill himself with a content of substance” (LFA, 67). But Hegel also

177 In his monograph on the philosophical concept of irony, Uwe Japp formulates this dilemma in quite similar terms: “On the on hand, [the ironist] eyes reality with deep-seeded reservation, while on the other hand he must accept certain assumptions about reality in order not to become unreal himself.” Theorie der Ironie. (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1983), p. 26.
speaks for the first time of a “truly beautiful soul” who “acts and is actual” (Ibid).

Unfortunately, this is all we will hear of the truly beautiful soul from Hegel. But even the minor concession that the beautiful soul could in principle break from its radical self-sufficiency and take part in the world holds out, at the very least, I think, the possibility that sincerity is a viable option for the romantic genius.

Framing the argument in the dialectical terms I have suggested not only builds on recent scholarly achievements in the burgeoning field of romantic aesthetics as a way of furthering debate about Hegel’s relation to this rich philosophical tradition, it also allows us to split the difference in this debate. Hegel may well have grossly misconstrued the romantic project and compromised his arguments through incendiary rhetoric, but he rightly perceived at the core of that project a deep tension between the principle of irony and the yearning for social engagement through art. In his more Goethean moments, he does not treat romantic irony as simply a wholesale rejection of objective normativity, but rather addresses the conflict between the notion of artistic subjectivity which “can tolerate no law above itself” and the inherent sociality of imagination. In its dialectical form, then, we can see Hegel’s critique of romanticism as more of a cautionary reminder that objectivity in the work of art requires the artist—any artist—to relinquish a conception of absolute artistic subjectivity.

In this respect, Hegel’s notion of artistic sincerity may offer a potent corrective to many recent attempts to co-opt the romantic project as the theoretical predecessor to postmodern aesthetics. Coupled with a more nuanced picture of romanticism, Hegel’s a clear-sighted account of artistic imagination as an inherently
intersubjective, socially communicative activity fends against the notion that absolute freedom, radical subjectivity, and total indeterminacy of meaning ever were, or ever could be, the chief aesthetic ideals of an artistic movement that is at all concerned with the social relevance of art. So, it may be the case that Hegel loses the thread of the dialectical where he accuses romantic theories of artistic genius of merely reveling in self-reflexive negativity. And he may have to allow that certain forms of irony can count as exhibiting the kind of self-critical sincerity he thinks essential for artistic production. But the dialectical thrust of this critique makes evident the very palpable danger of the conceit in believing that artistic practices somehow transcend social normativity. Art is ineluctably social. It possesses incredible potential as a potent form of critique as a catalyst of social consciousness. But when the critical strategy of art, whether we call it irony or something else, is reduced to principled negativity, when it becomes skepticism for its own sake, and when it fails to ground its critical logic in a deep-level acquaintance with the actual substance of social life, art ceases to communicate to a public at all. Negativity can only get so far in art. The contemporary artworld has, it appears, effectively jettisoned the notion of the artistic genius as the possessor of a privileged, but inarticulable, insight—the artist, like everyone else, must give an account of what he or she does. And the more that art seeks a voice in political and cultural discourse, the more appropriate Hegel’s emphasis on the intersubjectively normative significance of artistic imagination becomes. The underlying premise of his account of Phantasie is the conviction that art generates dialogical interplay, not by systematically slapping away the hand that tries to grasp it, but by engaging its
audience with a shared and public content. Hence the conditions of a postmodern era call on us more than ever to give heed to Hegel’s recommendation that art “should not seek to maintain an absolutely isolated position in the real world, but must, as itself living, enter into the midst of life” (LFA, 995).
CHAPTER 5:
IMAGINATION AND INTERPRETATION IN HEGEL

“The creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act.”

- Marcel Duchamp

We turn at last to the question of aesthetic interpretation in Hegel. It is somewhat ironic that Hegel is far more renowned and respected for his own interpretations of art than for his philosophical views on artistic interpretation. Indeed, his analysis of Sophocles’ Antigone as a clash, not of good versus evil, but of two equally valid and inviolable goods, remains one of the more interesting and influential accounts of the classic Greek tragedy to date, albeit not wholly undisputed among literary critics. Yet Hegel’s analysis of Antigone, as well as his more basic claim that art now requires philosophical interpretation, is underwritten by the far more contentious supposition that art is for us “a thing of the past” (LFA, 11). Aesthetic interpretation is a reflective, and alas, fundamentally retrospective enterprise that Hegel seems to

have entrusted to the conceptually-minded philosopher. After all, on Hegel’s view:

“Art invites us to intellectual consideration, and that not for the purpose of creating art again, but for knowing philosophically what art is” (LFA, 11).

Taken one way, it can seem that Hegel’s theory is ultimately pushing for what Danto has dubbed the “philosophical disenfranchisement of art.”\(^{179}\) If Hegel’s view is that philosophy comes late on the scene, conceptual toolbox in hand, to discern and disclose the meaning of artworks, one is rightly left to wonder what role, if any, imagination might play in aesthetic experience. And if the chief task of art is to present the content of the Idea in beautifully sensuous form, as Hegel contends, then there appears to be little work left for the creative imagination of the artist, and even less for the interpretive imagination of the spectator. In his inquiry into the relation of aesthetics and subjectivity, Andrew Bowie expresses precisely this concern:

The problem with Hegel’s aesthetics is the assumption that the truth of a work of art emerges completely via its conceptual articulation. The assumption is that the truth is already there when I interpret a literary text for example. All I have to do is reveal the mediations that are present in the text. This means that my role as interpreter is just to read what is supposedly latent in the text, not to reveal things about the text via my individual creative initiative.\(^{180}\)


Let us call this the problem of “interpretive closure” in Hegel’s *Aesthetics*.\(^{181}\) The claim here is that, by reducing beauty to the sensuous presentation of universal content, Hegel ultimately compromises both the integrity of art as well as the value of individual aesthetic reflection. In particular, his emphasis on art as a form of truth or knowledge allegedly does away with important subjective features of aesthetic experience, such as imaginative and interpretive freedom. This is particularly problematic for the viability of Hegel’s theory since, as Dieter Henrich points out, “modern interpretative techniques are based primarily on the analysis of form,” whereas Hegel, he claims, “seems to develop in sovereign, or ignorant, indifference to this analytic potential, the elements of which were already beginning to be provided by the science of aesthetics in the middle of the eighteenth century.”\(^{182}\)

The objection is by no means unique, and so I will address the problem of interpretive closure in Hegel in a fairly general way. T.M. Knox, translator of the *Lectures on Aesthetics*, considers it a “fatal flaw” in Hegel’s philosophy of art that he believes that the meaning or content can be discerned and expounded.\(^{183}\) Many others have followed suit in adopting this view.\(^{184}\) However, I shall take particular

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issue with the most recent thread of this objection, advanced by Kirk Pillow, which claims that it is specifically this feature of Hegel’s theory that renders it irrelevant for contemporary aesthetics.

The diversity of our contemporary narrative self-understandings, our critical suspicions about the political dimension of knowledge, our feeling of hurtling into a very uncertain future—our “form of life” calls for an aesthetics of sublime indeterminacy, rather than an Hegelian cognitivist appropriation of the aesthetic, and it is certainly no wonder that the sublime has become so fashionable.185

Specifically, I shall argue against the underlying assumption of this view, namely, that the sought after depth, complexity, and open-endedness of aesthetic interpretation demands the kind of indeterminacy and ambiguity of aesthetic content believed to be characteristic of aesthetic ideas in Kant. Instead, I argue that, if an interactive and communicative model of aesthetic imagination is to be the ideal of contemporary theory, then this interpretive potential is most adequately realized by the kind of interplay of particularity and universality in the work of art advocated in Hegel’s aesthetics. Drawing on the conclusions of the previous chapter, I will sketch an account of Hegel’s view as a preferable alternative to both the tendency to burden art with an overt political agenda and the tendency to strip art of all clarity and determinacy of content. This account proceeds from a deep appreciation of interpretative imagination as a fundamentally intersubjective activity, bound to the normative structures of social communication.

185 Pillow, p. 136.
In this chapter, I will begin by giving an account of the genesis of Hegel’s account of the interpretive imagination in his early writings. While this account, as we shall see, develops from Kant’s suggestion of an “intellectual intuition,” I will show that Hegel retains the notion of a distinctly aesthetic form of imaginative understanding, but moves away from the idea that this requires the kind of conceptual indeterminacy of aesthetic ideas that Pillow suggests. In fact, I do not think this is exactly Kant’s view either. But I will argue against the neo-Kantian position that Hegel’s shift toward the socially communicative aspect of aesthetic imagination presents us with a new theory of aesthetic subjectivity, according to which interpretive variety enters, not at the level of indeterminate thematic content, but rather at the level of contextual variation among and within distinct and overlapping forms of individual and collective experience.

5.1 The Genesis of Imagination in Hegel’s Thought

The evolution of Hegel’s idea that beauty can provide humans with a sensuous mode of knowing begins with one of his earliest texts, *Glauben und Wissen* (1802), in which he claims that Kant is “driven to the idea” of a non-discursive intellect. To situate this claim in some context, Hegel’s interest in art as a potential form of intuitive understanding arises in connection with a general critique of *reflection* in the philosophy of Kant, Fichte, and Jacobi. The critique presented in this text is in

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many ways a prototype of Hegel’s signature rejection of the dualisms present in standard “psychologistic” accounts of reflective knowledge: subject-object; form-matter; sense-intellect; etc. In contrast to the Kantian-inspired theories of reflection, according to which the mind imposes its categories onto sensible matter, Hegel holds out the possibility of a more organic conception of experience in which these conceptual dichotomies merge into comprehensive unity.

The focus of this text, however, is decisively on the side of formulating a dialectical critique of reflection rather than developing a positive alternative. He begins with Kant’s account of reflecting judgments in the third Critique, which, interestingly enough, he describes as “the most interesting point in the Kantian system” because it is “the point at which a region is recognized that is a middle between the empirical manifold and the absolute abstract unity” (FK, 85). In terms of bridging the gap between the intuition and the understanding, Kant’s account of reflecting judgment is in Hegel’s view a significant advance upon the notion of a transcendental schema, which he sees as the deus ex machina of Kant’s theory to explain the unity of sense and intellect required for determinate judgments. For instead of simply applying universal concepts to intuited particulars, Kant’s account of reflecting judgments, which proceed from empirical particulars to a universal concept, at the very least suggests the possibility of intuiting a totality of particulars.

It is in this sense that Hegel thinks Kant is “driven” to the idea of an intuitive intellect (though Hegel in fact never calls it that). “Thus it is Kant,” he writes, “who establishes the possibility of thinking a non-discursive intellect” (FK, 87). Indeed, Kant recognizes that the very idea of cognition as dependent on a receptive faculty of
intuitions gives rise to the counter-concept of an entirely *spontaneous* power of intuition—a non-discursive intellect which proceeds from the intuited whole to its parts. It is the contingent character of human cognition, its fundamental division of sense and intellect, which leads to the idea of their possible unity. But Kant wishes to stress that this is *only* an idea; the notion of an intellectual intuition has merely a regulative status, and can never be constitutive of experience. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he associates this kind of intuitive thinking with a *divine* understanding which, in effect, could *think* its presentations into existence. This idea of a God-like *intellectus archetypus*, an understanding that proceeds from the whole to the parts, likewise appears in the third *Critique* as the negatively conceived counterpart to the discursive intellect we in fact have, an *intellectus ectypus*, which necessarily proceeds in judgment from intuited parts to a whole. In short, given the conception of our own cognition, we must be able to at least “conceive of an understanding that, unlike ours, is not discursive but intuitive” (CJ, 407).

We might note here that both Hegel’s praise for and critique of Kant’s philosophy is centered squarely on its exhibited potential to reconcile the traditional conceptual schisms in philosophy. Of particular concern in this case, of course, is the schism between sense and intellect. In his view, Kant had the insight to set forth the sought-after unity between the empirical and the conceptual in the idea of an *intuitive understanding*. According to Hegel, however, Kant did not take this insight far enough; instead, he “makes this dissolution and reconciliation itself into a purely *subjective* one again, not one absolutely true and actual” (LFA, 57). The particular case that he makes in *Faith and Knowledge*, however, is that Kant
introduces the philosophically robust conception of a reconciled unity of sense and intellect, but is ultimately bound by his own theoretical constraints to assert the lawfulness of the understanding over the freedom of imagination in reflective judgment. The central idea to which Hegel thinks Kant is necessarily driven—that of a non-discursive, intuitive intellect—is sold short on account of the transcendental idealist’s intractable commitment to the epistemic dichotomy between sense and intellect. Kant does not follow his most important insights through to their striking conclusion, namely, that “the transcendental imagination is itself intuitive intellect” (FK, 89). By Hegel’s lights, Kant flirts with the idea of a non-discursive intellect, but for the sake of architectonic posterity ultimately reverts to a theory of reflection, according to which the understanding simply “applies” the mind’s principles to externally given material. The ripe conception that Hegel comes away with in this essay, therefore, is that the productive imagination can in fact play a constitutive role in unifying concepts and intuitions in aesthetic experience. It is through his early interest in Kant’s aesthetics that Hegel begins to explore the possibility—per impossible for Kant—of a kind of intuitive understanding.

5.1.1 The Aesthetic Imagination

Rather than simply dismissing Kant’s faculty psychology in toto and embarking on an altogether different philosophical path, Hegel works dialectically, from within the
Kantian paradigm, to flesh out the suggestion of an intuitive understanding. In particular, he explicitly links this potential with Kant’s account of the *productive imagination*. He states point blank, in fact, that the “transcendental imagination is itself intuitive intellect” (FK, 89; emphasis mine). Hegel’s attempt to forge an alliance between these two Kantian doctrines is admittedly somewhat peculiar given that Kant holds them quite firmly apart, both textually and conceptually. But the motivation for Hegel is that there is a distinctly Kantian problem for which he proclaims to have a distinctly Kantian solution. The problem is that Kant’s account of reflection presupposes a duality between thought and sensation for which it is philosophically engineered to give theoretical unity. And the solution Hegel proposes is the productive imagination, which he claims can play a constitutive (i.e., not merely regulative) role in achieving this unity. In a word, the imagination is for Hegel the ideal reconciling force between spontaneity and receptivity, and his early theoretical interest in the imagination has chiefly to do with the possibility of articulating a sensible mode of understanding. Rather than simply reversing the

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188 Kant’s discussion of the possibility of an intellectual intuition arises in §§76-77 of the *Critique of Judgment*, in the Dialectic of Teleological Judgment, and thus, in the architectonic of Kant’s thought, is considerably remote from the concept of the productive imagination at issue in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

189 In *Faith and Knowledge*, for example, Hegel praises Kant’s notion of a transcendental unity of apperception as the basis of both concepts and sensations, and sets out to explicate this higher faculty in terms of Kant’s own conception of the productive imagination. “This original synthetic unity,” Hegel explains, “must be conceived, not as produced out of opposites, but as a truly necessary, absolute, original identity of opposites [...] This shows that the Kantian forms of intuition
order of priority between imagination and understanding in aesthetic experience, as Kant does, Hegel sees the imagination as a fundamentally integrative structure, one that draws on both conceptual and intuitional modes of experience.

More to the point, Hegel locates the possibility of an intellectual intuition specifically in the experience of beauty. And here I think Hegel’s account of imagination begins to gain some philosophical momentum. Since beauty is the intuition of an idea (in the Kantian sense), “the form of opposition between intuition and concept falls away” (FK, 87). This leads Hegel to entertain the notion of a distinctly aesthetic form of imagination, the function of which cannot be reduced to merely discursive interpretation. Indeed, Hegel’s aim is to grant a far more privileged role to the imagination in relation to beauty. Not only is aesthetic imagination entirely independent of the “reflecting” understanding, it also plays a direct role in accessing non-discursive truths. In this respect, Hegel’s analysis of imagination anticipates one of his central criticisms of Kant’s theoretical philosophy, namely, that it assumes the priority of the understanding in thought. Generally, when Hegel airs this concern, he is taken to be arguing in favor of elevating reason above the understanding. Here, however, it is the aesthetic imagination instead which integrates intuition and understanding into a more basic structure of consciousness. For the Hegel of Faith and Knowledge, at any rate, what is most disconcerting about Kant’s view of the aesthetic imagination is the extent to which it

and the forms of thought cannot be kept apart at all as the particular, isolated faculties which they are usually represented. One and the same synthetic unity [...] is the principle of intuition and of the intellect.” Translated by Walter Cerf and H.S. Harris (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1977), p. 70.
remains fundamentally bound to a model of cognition that gives priority to the understanding.

Kant does maintain, of course, that the imagination takes precedence over the understanding in aesthetic judgment. He briefly notes that, in aesthetic judgment (as opposed to cognition), the standard hierarchy of faculties is reversed, such that “understanding serves the imagination rather than vice versa” (CJ, 242). Nevertheless, he speaks of aesthetic judgment as containing a “principle of subsumption,” not of intuitions under concepts, but rather, he explains, one of the “power of intuitions or exhibitions (the imagination) under the power of concepts (the understanding)” (CJ, 287). This occurs because the imagination in its freedom still harmonizes with the understanding in its lawfulness. So, just as in logical judgment an intuition is subsumed under a concept, so in aesthetic judgment imagination must ultimately yield to the laws of the understanding.

Nowhere does the presumed authority of the understanding over the aesthetic imagination in Kant emerge more clearly than in his doctrine of genius. We saw in the previous chapter how the aesthetically creative imagination does not in Kant’s view entitle the artist to absolute autonomy in artistic production. Kant stresses that imagination is of course free from the cognitive restraints of the understanding insofar as it “gives the rule to art” (CJ, 307). But he is equally clear that, to the extent that the freedom of imagination is limited in the genius, it is limited by the proviso that it “be commensurate with the lawfulness of the understanding” (CJ, 319). Hence taste, which requires this commensurability of imagination and understanding, is the conditio sine qua non of aesthetic judgment.
Originality is held in check by taste. Or, as Kant puts it, taste “disciplines” genius, it “severely clips its wings,” and makes it “civilized” and “polished” (Ibid). And, should a conflict should arise between taste and genius, Kant insists that the sacrifice must be on the side of genius (C, 320). Perhaps the clearest articulation of understanding’s priority over imagination can be heard in Kant’s remark that, “If the imagination is left in its lawless freedom, all its riches [in ideas] produce nothing but nonsense [Unsinn]” (Ibid). According to Kant, art deserves to be called fine art only insofar as it demonstrates principled taste, and this—not the imagination itself—is what we must attend to “above all” when we make judgments of fine art.

While Kant lays the foundation for an intuitive understanding through the experience of beauty, Hegel thinks Kant cannot seriously entertain this possibility on account of his unwavering fidelity to the cognitive priority of the understanding over the imagination, even in aesthetic experience. This will be one of Hegel’s lifelong complaints against Kant. As he puts it in the Aesthetics, the understanding fails to comprehend beauty because it “clings fast to the differences exclusively in their independent separation” (LA, 111). If beauty is to involve an autonomous, non-discursive form of understanding, then the first thing on the aesthetic agenda is to overcome the limits of the understanding altogether. Indeed, Hegel will make the case that the very inability of the understanding to grasp artistic beauty signals the need for an account of aesthetic experience as a higher mode of cognition. This higher mode is the imagination, which deals specifically with the sensuous character of experience. But for the mature Hegel, imagination is no longer, as we shall see, equated with the notion of an intuitive intellect.
5.1.2 The Shift Toward Determinacy

Given what we've seen of Hegel's argument thus far, we can read *Faith and Knowledge* as a useful hermeneutical device for tracking the continuity of Hegel's later account of aesthetic imagination from his early assessment of Kantian reflection. In particular, it suggests, *pace* Hegel's critics, that he originally conceives aesthetic imagination as a distinctly sensuous mode of understanding, modeled on the idea of an intellectual intuition, and that the meaning or *truth* of an artwork is incommensurable with, and irreducible to, purely discursive conceptual analysis. By drawing out what he takes to be the logical implications of Kant’s suggestion of a non-discursive form of understanding, Hegel arrives at the idea that the imagination can afford an experience of a unified intuition of particulars, an idea that clearly underlies his later conception of beauty as the “sensuous appearance of the Idea” (LFA, 111).

However, the limits of this hermeneutical advantage are inscribed in the fact that the positive task of constructing an alternative account of aesthetic imagination remains fundamentally incomplete in *Faith and Knowledge*. As Pippin rightly indicates, Hegel's task in this essay “is to show that certain sorts of rational self-determination in relation to the contents of experience are not empty forms but concrete universals.” Yet, as he goes on to observe, “this remains a promissory note in *Faith and Knowledge*. When Hegel revisits many of these ideas in the

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191 Ibid.
Aesthetics, much of the groundwork is already in place for developing the kind of philosophy of art that his earlier analysis of Kantian reflection only tentatively began to suggest. But this is not what Hegel does. Instead of building on the momentum of a Kantian-inspired intellectual intuition of beauty, we observe in the Aesthetics a decisive shift toward the determinacy of aesthetic content. What matters now is that works of art be “immediately intelligible” (LFA, 273), that “every content is grasped in an immediate way and brought home to the imagination” (LFA, 102). For Hegel, it becomes essential that the content or meaning of an artwork “is something in itself simple,” and that in the work of art “nothing is there except what has an essential relation to the content and is an expression of it” (LFA, 95).

This transition toward determinacy of content is a far cry from the position he begins to develop with respect to aesthetic content in Faith and Knowledge. Initially, Hegel is drawn to Kant’s notion of an “aesthetic idea” in the third Critique, as it suggests for him the possibility of a non-discursive form of cognition vis a vis aesthetic experience. He finds in Kant not only the conceptual foundation for an account of a distinctly aesthetic imagination, but also—with the concept of an aesthetic idea—an account of how imagination can grasp rational content by way of sensuous intuition:

With respect to beauty in its conscious form, Kant sets up the Idea of an imagination lawful by itself, of lawfulness without law and of free concord of imagination and intellect. His explanations of this sound very empirical, however. When he tells us, for example, that “an esthetic Idea is a representation by the imagination which gives rise to much thought without any particular concept being adequate to it, so that it cannot be reached by, and made understandable in any
language," there is no sign that he has even the mildest suspicion that we are here in the territory of Reason. (FK, 87)

This suggests that the content involved with an intuitive mode of understanding will be structurally similar to an aesthetic idea, an idea in a work of art which Kant defines as a “presentation of the imagination for which no conceptual exposition can be given” (CJ, 316). We will have occasion to consider Kant’s account of aesthetic ideas shortly; it is necessary here only to point out the significant conceptual shift from the earlier suggestion that imagination is an intellectual intuition of aesthetic ideas to the firm position that the imagination presents clearly defined and determinate ideas in sensuous form.

A telling indication of this important transition in Hegel’s thought is the fact that he drops this possibility altogether from his later discussions of aesthetic content. So far as I can tell, there is not a single mention of aesthetic ideas in the Aesthetics. Instead, what we find is an account of aesthetic content as something quite determinate, a specific and accessible subject matter, and clearly articulated theme. I want to suggest that this omission reflects a more general development in Hegel’s thought away from the notion of intuitive intellect developed in Faith and Knowledge, and a further consideration of the way that aesthetic content is read through various modes of aesthetic experience. Unlike Hegel’s earlier interest in the possibility of an intuitive intellect which can think without concepts, Hegel’s mature aesthetic theory ascribes to art a social and political significance according to which the content of aesthetic expression involves determinate concepts or ideas held essential for a given culture—e.g., heroism, bravery, devotion, etc. In other words,
aesthetic imagination involves, not intuitive understanding, but a non-discursive hermeneutics of aesthetic content. This entails a conception of aesthetic experience that is far less metaphysically burdensome than the straightforward notion of an intellectual intuition might suggest.\textsuperscript{192} The intuitive, experiential character of aesthetic imagination remains pivotal to that account, but it is tied to a particular subject matter that is grounded in the concrete substance of social life. The shift from the cognitive to the social character of aesthetic experience defends against the charge that Hegel tries to resurrect the mythology of immediate sensuous knowledge that Kant had rightly laid to rest. But beyond this, I will argue that Hegel’s shift in thinking about the content of aesthetic imagination as defined by a particular socio-historical structure offers an important interpretive framework in which the viewer stands in an interactive, or \textit{dialogical}, relation to the work of art.

\section*{5.2 Aesthetic Coherency}

Having abandoned the early and tentative suggestion that Kantian aesthetic ideas might provide an account of the non-discursive content of aesthetic imagination, Hegel goes on to articulate the relation between form and content in the work of art in terms of an internal coherency. At the center of this account, as we have already

\textsuperscript{192} I am grateful to Thomas Teufel, whose comments to an earlier draft of this chapter presented at the 2010 annual ASA meeting made evident the need to emphasize this important shift in Hegel’s thought. The Hegel of the \textit{Aesthetics} no longer views aesthetic experience as a potential form of intellectual intuition in unmitigated form. Rather, Hegel builds on the idea of a non-discursive intellect that Kant introduces to suggest a form of aesthetic understanding of intersubjective experience.
seen, is Hegel’s emphasis on the determinacy of aesthetic content in the work of art. And indeed, given Hegel’s tumultuous relation with the program of the Jena romantics observed in the previous chapter, we can read this transition toward thematic clarity as reaction to the then prevailing notion that the work of art strives to say the unsayable, present the unpresentable. Taking aim at his nemesis, Friedrich Schlegel, Hegel writes:

> For what is supreme and most excellent is not, as may be supposed, the inexpressible—for if so the power would be still far deeper than his work discloses. On the contrary, his works are the best part and the truth of the artist. (LFA, 291)

With his vigorous rejection of the indeterminacy of aesthetic meaning, Hegel begins to place a great deal of stress on the content of artworks. Indeed, the call for complete *clarity* in aesthetic content suggest that the imagination plays little, if any, role in the interpretive analysis of art. Instead, the Hegel of the *Aesthetics* at times begins to speak as if discerning the meaning of an art work were tantamount to discerning the meaning of a proposition. Having derived the various forms of art on the basis of their specific content, he writes, for example:

> For it is the content which, as in all human work, so also in art is decisive. In accordance with its essential nature, art has nothing else for its function but to set further in an adequate sensuous present what is itself inherently rich in content, and the philosophy of art must make it its chief task to comprehend in thought what this fullness of content and its beautiful mode of appearance are. (LFA, 611)

Great art should be able to articulate clearly a central theme, the details of which being answerable at every point to that theme as a whole. And a philosophy of art
should be able to articulate what all this means at the privileged position of conceptual thinking.

The notion that beauty is a function of its content is one that certainly advances Hegel’s view beyond both mimetic and purely representational theories of art. Yet it is this same idea that works against Hegel in more recent discussions in the philosophy of art that attempt to re-assert the role of the subject in aesthetic experience. Pillow, for example, believes that “the promising content orientation of Hegel’s aesthetics is vitiated by his subordination of aesthetic experience to determinate cognition.”\(^{193}\) And as he goes on to explain, the reason for this is the presumed penetrability of aesthetic content by discursive thought:

For Hegel the content of an art work is a single fixed theme wholly available to conceptual analysis, and so its meaning can be determined by concepts in a manner alien to the open-ended interpretive play of a Kantian sublime understanding.\(^{194}\)

The objection, then, is not just that Hegel’s notion of thematic coherence within a work of art shuts off the possibility of a sustained, processual form of aesthetic experience, but also, and more problematically, that it bankrupts an open-ended form of aesthetic interpretation. Instead, it suggests that the interpretation of a work of art is wholly and completely saturated by conceptuality, and thus the imagination, alas, is of relatively little importance to the Hegelian scheme.

\(^{193}\) Pillow, p. 8.

\(^{194}\) Ibid.
Authors who level this objection against Hegel’s aesthetics invariably draw on a particular passage in the *Aesthetics* that appears to settle the matter decisively.\(^{195}\) He begins by noting, as a matter of historical fact: “Many are of opinion that the beautiful as such, just because it is the beautiful, cannot be grasped in concepts and therefore remains for thought a topic which is not conceivable” (LFA, 91). Again, we can safely presume that Hegel’s romantic contemporaries are not far from his mind here, and that he offers this retort in response to the cherished notion of “incomprehensibility”\(^{196}\) in romantic aesthetics. It will be useful to quote this passage at length:

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[...]

Even if today everything true is pronounced to be beyond conception while only phenomena in their finitude, and temporal events in their accidentality, are conceivable, it is just precisely the true alone which is conceivable, because it has the absolute *Concept* and, more closely stated, the Idea as its foundation. But beauty is only a specific way of expressing and representing the true, and therefore stands open throughout in every respect to conceptual thinking, so long as that thinking is actually equipped with the power of the Concept. (LFA 91)
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Suddenly, the non-discursive orientation that underwrites Hegel’s account of the aesthetic imagination seems undermined by the determinacy and conceptual transparency of aesthetic content that he insists belongs to the beauty of art. Kai Hammermeister has suggested that this presents a contradiction in Hegel that

\(^{195}\) Pillow cites the passage as well, and notes that “this determinateness of beauty indicates the radical difference between Kant’s and Hegel’s aesthetics,” p. 179.

\(^{196}\) The notion of conceptual indeterminacy in romantic thought is most explicitly formulated in Schlegel’s essay, “On Incomprehensibility” [*Über die Unverständlichkeit*] of 1800. In Firchow (1971).
“cannot be solved.” However, we have enough conceptual resources in place at this point, I think, to show that thinking about art by way of its Concept in no way precludes the distinctly imaginative experience and interpretation of art.

It is not necessary to repeat here the dialectical structure of the Concept discussed in the first chapter. However, it will be useful to reiterate briefly the essential difference between the “Concept” and empirical concepts in order to avert the confusion that imagination is for Hegel in any way reducible to discursive thought. We will recall that the philosophical Concept of the beautiful “unites metaphysical universality with the precision of real particularity” (LFA, 22). Again, what is fundamental to the Concept is that it is neither an empty abstraction nor an assortment of finite particulars, but the negation of both in a reconciled totality. Just as the concept of the soul, or “ego,” consists of a variety of particular specifications, these are bonded together, as it were, in an “ideal unity,” reducible neither to these determinations nor to the abstract unity (cf. LFA, 108-109). With respect to the work of art, then, we need only point out that this unity translates in the work of art as an internal coherency of an inner idea with the outward expression of it:

The true has existence and truth only as it unfolds into external reality; but on the other hand, the externally separated parts, into which it unfolds, it can so combine and retain in unity that now every part of its unfolding makes this soul, this totality, appear in each part. (LFA, 153)

Hence Hegel describes the work of art as a *concrete universal*; it is “true individuality as universality closing only with itself in its particularizations” (LFA, 109). He does think the Concept of art is itself *determinate* insofar as it is possible—by means of a “scientific,” or philosophical, approach to art—to articulate what art is in its essence. But to say that the task of philosophy is to discern a determinate Concept of fine art is decidedly not the same as saying, as Hegel’s critics do, that interpretive analysis of a particular work of art must yield a singular, discursively transparent content. We saw in Chapter Two that in fact Hegel is quite explicit in warning that any reductive way of thinking about art poses a limitation to conceptual thinking (thinking by way of the Concept) precisely because art’s essence or purpose is not exhausted by any particular claim, even if it can be said to be true of art.

Thus the work of art displays an essential unity between the ideal content (clearly and determinately presented) and the individual details of its outward form. In clear distinction from the presumed incomprehensibility of aesthetic content, artworks are beautiful in virtue of their internal *coherency*. But as Hegel is quite explicit in telling us, the meaning of art “is not exhausted by analysis, its being assimilated to a general viewpoint, and it has a coherence which is not that of a coherent argument” (LFA, 145). Consequently, the fact that Hegel thinks aesthetic interpretation “stands open throughout in every respect to conceptual thinking” does not, by itself, present an irreconcilable contradiction for his aesthetic theory. While Hegel’s decisive shift toward an aesthetics of content in the *Aesthetics* appears to downgrade the imagination to a form of discursive knowledge, it will become clear, as we begin to unfold Hegel’s account of aesthetic coherency, that it involves a
distinctly imaginative grasp of aesthetic content in relation to aesthetic form. As Albert Hofstadter points out, the kind of truth or knowledge that Hegel believes art entails “is not an empirical knowledge; it is experiential knowledge that comes about in and through the actual living artistic experience and, in its immediate form, is identical with that experience.”

5.2.1 Art as Reflective

Now, it is precisely because we moderns have reached an age of reflection that Hegel thinks art is “a thing of the past” for us (LFA, 11). Art is no longer an object of immediate aesthetic experience (as presumably it was for the Greeks). After the so-called “end of art,” works of art become what Gadamer calls “Reflexionskunst,” the art of reflection and contemplation. We now reflect on works of art, and this involves both the content of art as well as its means of presentation, and “the appropriateness or inappropriateness of both to one another” (Ibid). So, just as our grasp of the Concept of art involves the ideal synthesis of universality and particularity, so will our conceptual or philosophical consideration of particular works of art involve the relation of a universal idea or subject matter to the particular details of its external form. Aesthetic experience, therefore, is the dialectical relation of the universal and the particular in the work of art. What is “universal” in this context is relative to a given work of art; it is the primary content

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or guiding theme to which every individual aspect of the artwork relates. The universal theme of the *Laocoön* statue, we may say, is the suffering that the mythological figure and his sons must endure for having sinned against the gods in exposing the ploy of the Trojan horse. In the famous sculpture, the theme of suffering is conveyed at every point in the visual form: the twisted limbs and writhing serpents, the strained and contorted muscles, the expressive cries of agony, and so forth. The Hellenist aesthetic that defines every feature of the sculptural form, down to the sinews of the figure’s tightly clutched hand, adequately corresponds to the guiding principle of the work. No part of the composition strikes us as extraneous, idiosyncratic, or visually amiss in relation to the theme of the whole—it is aesthetically *coherent*. As with the *Laocoön*, every work of art has the task of “articulating this variety of separate parts, and bringing them together into an harmonious whole” (LFA, 861). The work of art arranges the disparate parts of its form—whether in visual space, musical tones, poetic language, and so on—under the organizational unity of a central and determinate thematic unity.

Hegel presents us with a theory of aesthetic experience as the imaginative process of relating individual details to a universal or guiding conception. And while it is tempting to say that the work of art as a whole is *determined* through a given universal content, Hegel insists that the subject matter of art “is not the universal as it is in philosophy” (LFA, 977). Instead, it is a fundamental *interdependency* which defines the distinctly aesthetic relation of particular form and universal content in a work of art. Hence Hegel often speaks of the relation of form and content, or *shape*
and meaning, as a dialectical exchange between the appearance of freedom and the appearance of necessity in the work of art:

In the beautiful object there must be both (i) necessity, established by the Concept, in the coherence of its particular aspects, and (ii) the appearance of their freedom, freedom for themselves and not merely for the unity of the parts on view. (LFA, 115)

The work of art has an inner necessity, an internal guiding principle which determines how its form will appear in its individual details. Each of its separate parts are so essentially linked to the central theme of the work that the work as a whole appears as though it could not have been presented otherwise. At the same time, this necessity “must not emerge in the form of necessity itself” but must “give the appearance of undersigned contingency” so that each individual part displays an independence of itself (Ibid). The relation of parts to wholes in a work of art is in this respect (not coincidentally) analogous to the ideal political state: Every individual detail forms an independent and self-standing unity in relation to the whole, and the whole is indistinguishable from the totality of its individual parts. The particular and the universal form a harmonious and coherent whole. The work of art forms a unity of universal idea and its individual details, and it is crucial for Hegel that these stand in an interdependent relation to one another—the individual detail has significance in relation to the whole while the whole has significance only as manifested in its individual parts.
5.2.2 Art as Reflexive

In one of his more fascinatingly cryptic remarks, Hegel tells us that “art makes every one of its production into a thousand-eyed Argus, whereby the inner soul and spirit is seen at every point” (LFA, 153-54). By invoking the image of the mythic creature with panoptic powers as an analogue to the work of art, Hegel reinforces the notion, suggested above, that aesthetic experience involves the dialectical interplay between the particular and the universal in a work of art. The eye is in this context an appropriate metaphor for describing the universal content in an artwork insofar as it is the eye, Hegel thinks, in which the entire soul is concentrated. Yet the work of art conveys this concentrated unity at every level of remove; its aim is “to convert every shape in all points of its visible surface into an eye” (Ibid), such that we can read into the part the whole and into the whole the parts.

More significantly, however, the analogy illustrates the kind of dialectical interaction that Hegel thinks essential to aesthetic experience. The work of art not only invites our gaze—it is also gazing back at us at every point. This implies that the aesthetic experience of art is not only reflective (an object of contemplation), but also reflexive, in the sense that our own experience of the artwork becomes a constitutive element of its content. The work of art, in other words, is more than an object of thought: it is an object to be reckoned with. It calls attention to the experience itself, to the subject experiencing the art object. Or, to put Hegel’s point in Kantian terms, the aesthetic experience is a kind of transcendental apperception of the I, a felt subjectivity via the work of art. Thus the aesthetic experience is not an
experience of an object per se, but more accurately, an experience of *ourselves* cast in the appearance, or *Schein*, of aesthetic beauty.

The work of art must disclose to us the higher interests of our spirit and will, what is in itself human and powerful, the true depths of the heart. The chief thing essentially at issue is that these things shall gleam through all external appearances and that their keynote shall resound through all other things in our restless life. (LFA, 279)

Art is a mirror through which we grasp the content of human life. We cannot stand in a passive relation to beauty since it makes a claim on us to grasp it as a testament to our own way of life.

In this context, it is in scholarly vogue to draw a conceptual connection between Hegel’s notion of the work of art as a thousand-eyed Argus with the oft-quoted lines of Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem, *Archaischer Torso Apollos*, describing the experience of viewing the famous bust of Apollo:

> denn da ist keine Stelle, die dich nicht sieht/  
> Du mußt dein Leben ändern.199

Some have cited this connection to suggest the possibility of an immediate experience of aesthetic beauty in Hegel’s philosophy of art,200 while others have cited it as evidence of an unsettling disparity in Hegel between aesthetic and non-


200 Arthur Danto, for one, draws this connection in analyzing the category of “attractiveness” in art, noting that, for Hegel and Rilke alike, there is an appeal to the notion that “to see quality in art is to feel oneself seen by the art in question, as if it were occupied by a soul.” Fred Rush, “The Contemporary Significance of Classical German Aesthetics: A Discussion with Arthur Danto and Dieter Henrich” In *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus/International Yearbook of German Idealism* 4 (2006), p. 37.
aesthetic forms of experience. In the first place, it is doubtful that Hegel would readily endorse the idea that art offers us direct ethical injunctions such as “You must change your life.” But more importantly, what is essential to the reflexive character of aesthetic experience for Hegel is that we encounter in it something concrete and determinate—it speaks to us of a particular way of life. Art offers a glimpse of ourselves, not through the abstract concept of subjectivity itself, but in relation to the concrete reality of lived experience. For Hegel, the work of art confronts us with an outward image of our inner cultural consciousness—our values, beliefs, prejudices, etc.

This introduces the concept of what we might call aesthetic reflexivity, the idea that the aesthetic experience is essentially a reflexive process in which the spectator confronts an individual or collective form of consciousness in the work of art. The experience of art is essentially the experience of a self-encounter, a process or practice of self-articulation. And, as Hofstadter observes, for Hegel “the essential characteristic of practice is the self’s recognition of itself in the other upon which it practices [...]”, noting further that the practice of art is “an even more advanced form of giving the predicate ‘mine’ to things,” where this “mine” is not something merely personal and private but reflects the whole spirit of a cultural identity. Accordingly, if we conceive aesthetic experience in this way—as the self-reflexive

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201 In the spirit of German reception aesthetics, Dieter Wellershoff characterizes Rilke’s sentiment as the expression of a “fundamental elitism [Höerrangigkeit]” of the artwork as ideal, “the appearance of essence, the epitome of a reality over and against this one.” Instead, he recommends a contemporary aesthetic theory that “no longer distinguishes between this hierarchy of art and life, art and reality.” Die Auflösung des Kunstbegriffs (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1976), p. 56.

process of shifting between the particularity of aesthetic form and the universality of aesthetic content—then it hardly follows that imagination is for Hegel ultimately reducible to determinate cognition. To the extent that what is expressed in the work of art is a product of how it speaks to us through its form, the imagination grasps meaning only by way of a dialectical process that relates the universality of content and the particularity of form. Whatever truth or knowledge a work of art discloses, it is disclosed non-discursively, through the aesthetic experience.

On the other hand, insofar as aesthetic meaning is for Hegel something concrete and determinate, i.e., a content manifested in a particular historical or cultural context, Pillow is quite right to suggest that the chief distinction between Kant’s and Hegel’s aesthetics turns on the question of determinacy:

Hence the Idea presented in the beauty of a coherent theme will not assume for Hegel the form of a Kantian aesthetic idea. The content of an Hegelian artistic Idea will possess the determinacy and organic unity of a product of reason for which the place of every part is determined in the whole, whereas Kant’s aesthetic idea falls short of such unity and achieves only a loose network of relations between its parts.\(^{203}\)

For Hegel, art is the “sensuous appearance of the Idea,” which is a concrete and determinate unity, not the presentation of aesthetic ideas, which, according to Kant, are conceptually indeterminate, incomplete, and open-ended. In the genesis of Hegel’s account of aesthetic imagination, he clearly rejects the kind of indeterminacy of content implied by Kantian aesthetic ideas.

\(^{203}\) Pillow, p. 132.
However, determinacy of aesthetic content is not in and of itself deserving of rebuke. Implicit in the standard critique of Hegel is the assumption that a clearly articulated subject matter constitutes a serious deficiency on the side of interpretation and places a constraint on aesthetic imagination. It is this assumption that I want to question here. Having just seen that the reflexive interrelation of form and content not only allows, but entails a processual form of aesthetic experience on Hegel’s view, we are now in a position to consider the relation between the determinacy of aesthetic content and the nature of aesthetic interpretation. Indeed, we can address this further question from both ends. We can begin by turning the critique of Hegel around and asking whether and to what extent the proposed indeterminacy of aesthetic ideas in Kant actually provides the imagination with the richness and freedom of aesthetic experience that it claims to provide. Alternatively, we can inquire whether the kind of determinacy involved in the interpretive hermeneutics of Hegel’s aesthetics might in fact allow for a more engaging form of aesthetic dialogue with the work of art. In the end, I think the distinction between the two positions turns out not to be as radical as recent critics suggest. I will argue, however, that if the work of art is to facilitate a kind of social communication, a certain degree of specificity is required of aesthetic content, and that interpretive depth and complexity is the result, not of ambiguous aesthetic content, but of variation among subjective, highly-contextualized forms of aesthetic experience.
5.3 Aesthetic Ideas: Indeterminacy and Interpretation

For the most part, Kant’s theory of aesthetic judgment refers to beauty in a generic sense, encompassing both natural and artistic beauty and basing such judgments on the form of the presentation alone. It is this notion of a purely formal account of taste that makes it so attractive to many modern aesthetic theorists, including Clement Greenberg, whose legendary comment that Kant’s aesthetic theory remains “the most satisfactory basis for aesthetics we yet have” has been widely echoed in recent philosophy of art. However, we saw in Chapter One how the formalist account of beauty that Kant develops in the Analytic of the Beautiful of the third Critique begins to unravel somewhat in the sections concerning the beauty of fine art insofar as art, unlike nature, exhibits conceptual content. Since we are here interested in the question of interpretation, it is a good point to consider Kant’s account of aesthetic content as set forth in his doctrine of aesthetic ideas.

Again, Kant defines an aesthetic idea as “a presentation of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought whatsoever, i.e., no [determinate] concept, can be adequate” (CJ, 314). Despite the slightly misleading terminology, aesthetic “ideas” are essentially Kantian intuitions; that is to say, they are sensible presentations belonging to the imagination rather than the understanding. Kant characterizes aesthetic ideas as the intuitional counterparts to rational ideas discussed in the first Critique: Whereas ideas of reason represent the

thought of an unconditioned totality that cannot be met with in intuitions (God, freedom, immortality). Aesthetic ideas represent intuitions that cannot achieve totality in thought. Aesthetic ideas are at the very least idea-like in that, like rational “ideas,” they strive toward a completeness or totality that lies beyond the bounds of experience. Thus, both rational and aesthetic ideas are purely regulative thoughts, not constitutive of empirical reality. But unlike rational ideas, aesthetic ideas meet their limitation in concepts rather than experience; it is an intuition for which no determinate concept can ever be adequate.

Although it is essentially an intuition, an aesthetic idea nevertheless does have a significant conceptual dimension. After all, an aesthetic idea is a presentation of the imagination which not only produces aesthetic pleasure, but which also “prompts much thought” (CJ, 314). For Kant, of course, conceptuality is always a matter of degree, and at times, he comes suspiciously close to attributing a cognitive status to the aesthetic content of artworks. Indeed, his awareness that art conveys some level of conceptual content in a way that nature does not is implicit in the sudden (perhaps unconscious) transition from the language of representation [Vorstellung] to the language of expression [Darstellung] in the sections on fine art (§§43-54). This occurs most notably in his discussion of the artistic genius, who possesses an aesthetic spirit [Geist] that Kant describes as “nothing but the capacity for the expression [Darstellung] of aesthetic ideas” (CJ, 313). The general issue that

Kant aims to confront here, however, is that aesthetic ideas in art provoke a torrent of thought in the subject and that the aesthetic response to art cannot, therefore, be restricted to mere presentation of form. Rather, in the case of art, the mind grasps aesthetic form in connection with a given content. Even if the content communicated in an aesthetic idea exceeds the domain of conceptual understanding, Kant nevertheless explains that aesthetic ideas strive to approximate an expression [Darstellung] of rational concepts (CJ, 314). The significance of Jupiter’s eagle in a work of art (to use Kant’s example) is that it functions symbolically, as a non-determinate signifier of an idea. It is not the image of the eagle itself that comes under aesthetic consideration (as we might judge an eagle the animal to be beautiful), but rather the “multitude of kindred presentations” it evokes—an abundance of content to which the symbol gives rise in the mind of the viewer (CJ, 315).

An aesthetic idea, therefore, indeed gives rise to thought [denken]. But as Kant emphasizes at every point, the presentation gives rise to such an abundance of thought that it cannot adequately be “expressed [dargestellt] in a concept determined by words” (Ibid). Aesthetic ideas are minimally conceptual in the sense that they provide us with an idea of something, but they do so with such a level of indeterminacy that it falls shy of being called cognition in the strictly Kantian sense. The imagination indeed connects a give intuition with the conceptual activity of the understanding, but in a way that “makes reason think more, when prompted by a [certain] presentation, than what can be apprehended and made distinct in the
presentation” (CJ, 315). Specifically, Kant describes this conceptual limit in aesthetic ideas as

[...] a presentation of the imagination which is conjoined with a given concept and is connected, when we use imagination in its freedom, with such a multiplicity of partial presentations that no expression that stands for a determinate concept can be found for it. (CJ, 316)

“Partial” is the key word here since, whenever Kant speaks of aesthetic ideas, the emphasis is always on the inadequacy of language to articulate fully the conceptual significance contained within the representation. The understanding is overwhelmed, as it were, by the wealth of partial presentations coming from the imagination, and this is for Kant the very source of aesthetic pleasure in art:

Hence it is a presentation that makes us add to a concept the thoughts of much that is ineffable, but the feeling of which quickens our cognitive powers and connects language, which otherwise would be mere letters, without spirit. (Ibid)

Discursivity runs aground in its attempt to articulate the wealth and depth of presentations. Given this cognitive limitation, Kant repeatedly emphasizes the purely regulative function that ideas have with respect to cognition. Aesthetic ideas employ the imagination to range over a variety of presentations, but without prescribing any definite rule for subsuming this manifold under any given concept. In a word, the aesthetic idea leaves the object conceptually indeterminate. Aesthetic ideas are “unexpoundable presentations of the imagination” (CJ 342). They produce in us a vast web of conceptual associations that cannot possibly be exhausted by conceptual thinking.
If the foregoing account of aesthetic ideas is right, then when it comes to the relation of conceptual content with the beautiful form of artworks, the difference between Kant’s and Hegel’s aesthetics is not so much a difference of principle as it is a difference of degree. We might ask, then: What degree of indeterminacy is required of a work of art in order for it to “quicken the cognitive powers” (CJ, 316)? At what level of partiality does the aesthetic idea “give the imagination a momentum which makes it think more in response to [works of art]” (CJ, 315)? Of course, Kant was not incredibly well schooled in the arts, but his brief analysis of the following poem (presumed to be that of Frederick the Great), gives us some sense of what Kant has in mind with respect to the conceptual indeterminacy of aesthetic ideas. He quotes:

Let us part from life without grumbling or regrets,
Leaving the world behind filled with our good deeds.
Thus the sun, his daily course completed,
Spreads one more soft light over the sky;
And the last rays that he sends through the air
Are the last sights he gives the world for its well-being.

Now, Kant tells us that in this poem that the author is “animating his rational idea of a cosmopolitan attitude” (CJ, 316). The poem doesn’t necessarily explain the concept of a cosmopolitan attitude in discursive terms, but rather employs language in poetic or symbolic way in order to suffuse the concept with more than can be said in words. The idea or concept at work in the poem (cosmopolitanism) is coupled with an aesthetic attribute (the sun), and this coupling, according to Kant, “arouses a multitude of sensations and supplementary presentations for which no expression can be found” (CJ, 316). The concept, by virtue of its poetic treatment, entails
infinitely more imaginative free play than the concept of a cosmopolitan attitude could itself provide.

Could we not say, then, that the king’s cosmopolitanism is the subject matter of the poem? And could we not also say that the individual attributes of the poem—the sun, its traversing the sky, the radiant sunbeams, etc.—correspond to the central theme? If so, it is hard to see how Hegel’s account of the relation of form and content in a work of art constitutes any radical departure from that of Kant’s. Based on what Kant says, the above poem is about the cosmopolitan attitude of a king in very much the same way that Hegel thinks that, say, Corregio’s Mary Magdalene is about the repentant sinner of the New Testament. And just as the poet has, in the former case, made use of literary form to capture the guiding theme of the poem, so has the painter in the latter case, according to Hegel, made use of the whole visual presentation—“the figure, facial traits, dress, pose, surroundings, etc.”—to convey her spiritual innocence (LFA, 868). Consequently, it is not clear either that Kant’s account of aesthetic content demands the level of conceptual determinacy that recent Kantian-based approaches to aesthetic interpretation seem to suppose, or, for that matter, that Hegel’s emphasis on thematic clarity in art commits him to the kind of interpretive closure that his critics charge him with. In fact, it appears that in both cases the nature of the aesthetic content poses some limitation on the spectrum of possible thoughts prompted by the imagination in response to art. If a poem is about cosmopolitanism, then presumably it is not about, say, fascism, or erotic love, or romantic chivalry, or any other number of “kindred presentations” belonging to aesthetic ideas (unless, of course, the poem itself suggests such associations). In fact,
I want to say that it is precisely the limitation of conceptual indeterminacy in a work of art that is a necessary condition for thinking about aesthetic experience as a form of communication. Drawing on previous discussion of aesthetic communication in the previous chapter, I argue, in particular, that the crucial difference between the two theories concerns the way that the determinacy or indeterminacy of artistic content figures in the socially communicative aspect of aesthetic experience.

5.3.1 Art and Social Communication

Even though Kant’s account of aesthetic judgment rests on the claim that aesthetic experience will not produce any determinate cognition, he does make the suggestive claim in this context that fine art is a way of presenting that is purposive on its own and that furthers, even though without a purpose, the culture of our mental powers to facilitate social communication” (CJ, 306). For Kant, of course, this form of communication is strictly non-discursive; it is not the objective content, but rather the subjective pleasure, of aesthetic judgment that is universally communicable. On what grounds does Kant base the possibility of a universally communicable pleasure? On the necessary uniformity of experience. For Kant, a pleasure that arises from a harmony of the faculties presupposes that all rational beings share essentially the same set of cognitive faculties. Hence he appeals to the notion of a “sensus communis,” or common sense, which guarantees the uniformity of aesthetic experience. He writes:

We solicit everyone else’s assent because we have a basis for it that is common to all. Indeed, we could count on that assent, if only we could always be sure that the
instance had been subsumed correctly under that basis, which is the rule for the approval. (C, 237)

Stated differently, the potential for universal agreement in aesthetic judgment—one that “demands” unanimous consent—rests solely on the presupposition of a shared set of faculties by which every rational being can, in principle, reach universal consensus in matters of taste. The claim for universality is not, of course, that all rational beings will in fact agree (empirically universal), nor that such agreement is demonstrable through concepts (logically universal), but rather that aesthetic judgment is “subjectively universal” in the sense that it rests on a subjective feeling which, under ideal conditions, and on the assumed uniformity of faculties, can be demanded of everyone. Just as synthetic judgments a priori can be universal and necessary only insofar as we grant uniformity to the faculties of sensibility, understanding, and imagination across all rational beings, so is the pleasure upon which we base aesthetic judgment “universally communicable” (CJ, 238).

A sensus communis, in other words, is a necessary condition for the universal pleasure that arises from the free play of the imagination and the understanding. Kant goes so far as to say, in fact, that:

The only way for it to be conceivable that what is specific in the quality of such a sensation should be universally communicable in a uniform way is on the assumption that everyone’s sense is like our own. (CJ 293)

If the machinery of the mind were in some way variable, there would be no way to guarantee the uniformity of experience from person to person. In that case,
disagreement concerning matters of taste could never be resolved since, even if we manage to remove all subjective interests and inclinations bearing on the judgment, there could never be a guarantee that the imagination and the understanding, all else being equal, would harmonize in the same way, if at all.

So, granting that Kant got something right about art as a non-discursive form of social communication, the crucial evaluative question to ask at this point is whether this communication and the interpretive and imaginative practices it involves would be more adequately realized in an account of aesthetic experience that demands the indeterminacy of content and the uniformity of experience, or alternatively, in an account that calls for clarity and determinacy of content while recognizing substantial variety of experiential contexts. It is this question that I will address in the next and final section.

5.4 Art as Idea: Determinacy and Interpretation

If we accept that the content or the meaning in a work of art is not grasped as discursive knowledge, but by a quasi-intuitive aesthetic imagination, then we need only ask how this content is grasped in aesthetic experience in a way that is nevertheless communicative. We observed above that, insofar as we allow that works of art have aesthetic content, that content will provide some kind of conceptual framework for interpretation. Frederick the Great wrote a poem about the cosmopolitan attitude. Raphael painted a picture about the Biblical figure Mary Magdalene. Herman Melville wrote a lengthy novel about a wayward sea-captain out
for revenge against a killer whale, and called it *Moby Dick*. I do not want to suggest, of course, that it is always so simple and straightforward to state unequivocally what a work of is *about*. I would certainly hesitate, for example, to explain what Samuel Beckett is up to in his writing with any degree of certainty. Indeed, in Beckett’s writing, the deferral of meaning is essential to virtually every narrative description and line of dialogue. But this uncertainty functions no less as a *limit* to my understanding and interpretation of the text. However much *Waiting for Godot* may thwart a full comprehension of its meaning, I know that its elusiveness (as well as, for that matter, my own uncertainty as a reader) becomes part of the text’s *meaning*. In each case, I enter an interpretive space with boundaries, even if those boundaries are not always clearly defined.

John McCumber offers a useful category for characterizing the idea that the specified content of a work of art functions as a *way of orienting the imagination* within an interpretive framework. He calls this a “parameter” of the artwork, an interpretive limit within which the imaginative interplay between its meaning and its particular details occurs. The thematic content of a work of art, he explains

[...] has *parametric* status in that it provides a coherent, reconciling relationship among the details of the work. The spectator’s appreciation of this is the institution of a similar relationship between his mind (which formulates the universal) and his senses, and hence is emancipatory.206

The idea is that the parameter set by a work’s content does not set rigid limits on the way that the imagination can relate its individual sensory components to a

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guiding theme or principle. A parameter, rather, gives us a conceptual handle on the content which allows us to occupy the work and engage with it imaginatively. In fact, McCumber thinks the parameter not only facilitates interpretive access to the work, but also provides the viewer in some cases a considerable degree of free association between its individual details and its universal thematic content. Where the meaning of the individual detail “is up to the spectator,” then the dialogue with the artwork begins with what he calls “poetic interaction.”

McCumber does think that Hegel’s account of interpretive imagination is poetically interactive in the sense that it is modeled on a dialogical engagement with the work of art. The parameter of aesthetic discourse is set by the guiding theme of the work, and the viewer engages with it as if engaging with a speaker in conversation. “Every work of art,” Hegel writes, “is a dialogue with everyone who confronts it” (LFA, 356), and McCumber is certainly right to draw on such features of Hegel’s account to indicate at least a minimal sense in which modern viewers can interact communicatively with works of art on that view. Moreover, he is right to emphasize the aesthetically reflexive character of that interaction. But his assumption that Hegel develops his account of aesthetic dialogue on the cognitive structures of social interaction outlined in the Phenomenology leads him, in my view, 

Ibid, p. 85. Similar in this regard is William Desmond’s account of “open wholeness” in Hegel’s aesthetics. His aim is to make Hegel’s ascription of absoluteness to art compatible with negative methods of subversion central of deconstructionist aesthetics. The very concept of wholeness, or absoluteness that we find in Hegel, he argues, is itself dialectical, by which he means that our interpretation of aesthetic perfection can itself be considered open-ended in the sense that “its realization is open to a plurality of possible actualizations.” Art and the Absolute (Albany, SUNY Press, 1986), p. 68.
to the false conclusion that, in the final analysis, Hegel downgrades the role of the spectator in determining the work of art.\textsuperscript{208}

It is important to see, however, that Hegel does not rely exclusively on the metaphysical structures of the \textit{Phenomenology} to make his case for a communicative form of aesthetic experience. What we find in the later, more developed view set forth in the \textit{Aesthetics}—and which is absent in Hegel’s earlier texts, including the \textit{Phenomenology}—is an attempt to formulate a distinctly \textit{aesthetic} form of experience by which the operations of the imagination are inscribed within a particular socio-historical context. The crucial feature of Hegel’s aesthetics overlooked by communicative theories of aesthetic imagination is that, unlike Kant, for whom imagination is a uniform cognitive faculty, Hegel regards the aesthetic imagination as a highly \textit{contextualized} way of interacting with works of art. For Hegel, the content is universal, but the particular \textit{relations} between shape and meaning can vary radically based on the historical, cultural, and normative orientation of individuals. In other words, the parameters of imaginative interpretation are defined just as much, if not more, by the experiential context of the \textit{subject} as they are by the thematic content of the artwork itself.

\textsuperscript{208}In particular, he argues that Hegel’s account of aesthetic experience is based on the concepts of \textit{recognition}, \textit{externalization}, and \textit{reconciliation}, but wrongly, I think, describes that account as “strained” because of the inherent distinctions between aesthetic interaction and intersubjective relations.
5.4.1 Contexts of Aesthetic Experience

Imagination gives us access to the work of art through a relatively narrow parameter, an initial basis for engaging with the work of art as an internally coherent whole, but which does not dictate how the complexity of the work in its details relates to the guiding conception of the work as a whole. This is because the particular processes involved in relating individuals and particulars within a work of art are, in Hegel’s view, the product of a socially embedded form of consciousness. However individualized modern subjectivity may become, no man is an island:

In the world of today the individual subject may of course act of himself in this or that matter, but still every individual, where he may twist or turn, belongs to an established social order and does not appear himself as the independent, total, and at the same time individual living embodiment of this society, but only as a restricted member of it. (LFA, 194)

Hegel’s philosophical advantage in the sphere of fine art, then, consists in his recognition that aesthetic experience is, to a certain extent anyway, context specific, and that the notion of a universal and timeless account of beauty does not capture the richness, complexity, and variability of aesthetic experience among distinct, subjective standpoints. Instead of dismissing Hegel’s theory as a hyper-rationalist aesthetics of content, we can perhaps begin to see that the Aesthetics does not displace aesthetic experience for a full disclosure of discursive content, but rather locates interpretive discourse in the various imaginative contexts in which determinate content can stand in relation to artistic form. Beauty is for Hegel “the sensuous appearance of the Idea” (LFA, 111), but it is crucial to that account that our grasp of the Idea—how it appears to us in works of art—is never independent of
the particular experiential context in which it is grasped. The guiding content of an artwork is universal, and yet our *experience* of that content is radically shaped by the normative structures specific to that context. Hence in Hegel we find an account of aesthetic dialogue that registers within a particular context of experience, and yet transcends this particularity by virtue of a shared rational content.

The “great themes of art,” Hegel tells us, are “ethical and religious relationships: family, country, state, church, fame, friendship, class, dignity, honor, and love” (LFA, 220). The subject matter in works of art consists of the universal preoccupations of human life in general. And while I would certainly hesitate to say that Hegel has given us an exhaustive list of universal aesthetic themes (*sex, power, and race* stand out as notable additions), the thrust of the claim, namely, that there are in fact “powers over the human heart,” or invariants of human experience (Ibid), seems fundamentally correct. These are all what Hegel calls the “pathoi” of humanity—forces inherent in us which, though individually different, are “inherently rational” (Ibid).

Although the *content* of each theme is in this respect universal, the experience of this content is phenomenologically encoded within a particular form of ethical life. The concepts of “family” or “class,” for example, are not fixed and eternal like Platonic Ideas, but take shape organically, in the mold of a historically evolving forms of consciousness. Works of art are inescapably products of their own time on Hegel’s view: “Every work of art,” Hegel tells us, “belongs to its own time, its own people, its own environment, and depends on particular historical and other
ideas and purposes” (LFA, 14). Thematic content is universal, but our experience of it is highly contextualized, cut from the pattern of Sittlichkeit.

For the most part, Hegel construes contextual variation along cultural and historical lines. Works of art convey the essence of a particular place and time. “In works of art,” Hegel writes, “nations have deposited their richest inner intuitions and ideas” (LA, 11). What is significant about art is that we can trace the trajectory of rational development throughout cultural and historical epochs in particular, historical works of art. In Van Eyck’s paintings, we come to know the reality of feudal life; we learn the truth about Greek Sittlichkeit in Sophocles’ Antigone; Shakespearean drama expresses the emerging malaise of the modern era. In each case, the form of social rationality that the work of art embodies is reflexively thrust back onto the subject in the form of aesthetic contemplation. This is what Lambert Zuidervaart has aptly termed the “cultural orientation” of art. And this is what it means to say that beauty is a form of truth: it discloses what is universal in a particular way of life. Artworks confront us with an outward image of an inner cultural consciousness. They embody that which resonates within a given culture as true and essential, which is why Hegel thinks that “art is often the key, and in many nations the sole key, to understanding their philosophy and religion” (LFA, 11). As Dieter Henrich so eloquently puts it, “what is claimed to be true is not simply an

209 Zuidervaart, p. 65ff.
ontological reality, but rather a human one: namely, the dynamic of life as it is carried forth in a particular world, or even in an epoch.”

So, the basic normative structures of a culture are encoded in both the productive and interpretive imagination. However, the imagination—and this is key for Hegel—cannot wholly *inhabit* those particular structures in making and interpreting works of art. The parameters of aesthetic experience are culturally and temporally specific; art is always bound to the present. Hence “no Dante, Ariosto, or Shakespeare can appear in our day. All material, from whatever time or nature, acquires artistic truth only when imbued with living and contemporary interest” (LFA, 607-08). It is by no fault of the art or the artist that we cannot access past works of art as the spectators of past cultures once did, but rather a necessary consequence of a teleological rationality that develops and assumes different experiential contexts over time. We cannot remove the present, as it were, in reading into past works of art. Hegel calls this the “necessary anachronism” of art: “The inner substance of what is represented remains the same, but the development of culture makes necessary a metamorphosis in its expression and form” (LFA, 278).

The aesthetic imagination, therefore, stands at the intersection of temporal and normative cross-currents. In particular, the context of aesthetic experience shifts between two distinct axes: first, the present as it stands in relation to the past, and second, individual subjectivity in relation to a shared and universal experience. “To cling to either of this in their opposition,” Hegel maintains, “leads to an equally

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\(^{210}\) Quoted in Rush (2006), p. 22.
false extreme” (LFA, 265). Thus, on the one hand, we cannot simply resurrect the past in works of art. We cannot, as the youthful poetic genius of Goethe and Schiller once aimed to do, “win back again within the circumstances existing in modern times the lost independence of the [heroic] figures” (LFA, 195). The circumstances of modernity will not allow it. “Chivalry and the feudal system in the Middle Ages are the only proper ground for this sort of independence,” and any attempt to resurrect this experience in the work of art results, Hegel thinks, in an absurdity “of which Cervantes gave us such a spectacle in his Don Quixote” (LFA, 196).

This is, of course, the logic of art’s decline. We can no longer see a god in the marble bust of Zeus, and thus “we bow the knee no longer” to the work of art (LFA, 103). Indeed, doing so would, in Hegel’s mind, be deeply “insincere” [nicht im Ernst]: “If […] we nowadays propose to make the subject of a statue or a painting a Greek god, or, Protestants as we are today, the Virgin Mary, we are not seriously in earnest [im Ernst] with this material” (LFA, 603). It is the vocation of art to “find for the spirit of a people the artistic expression corresponding to it,” and to the extent that art achieves this end it is “sincere [im Ernst]” (LFA, 603). But on Hegel’s view, it is not only absurd to suppose that we can confront works of art irrespective of our grounding in the present, it is also highly disingenuous, an aesthetic form of bad faith. What we make of the work of art is, to a great extent, what the work of art has made of us.

On the other hand, just as we cannot abstract our interpretation of the work of art from the social and historical parameters in which it operates, nor can we suppose that art speaks only to the immediate present. Art bears the trace of its
Zeitgeist throughout, but it must be understood that, even where artworks exhibit determinate, context-specific content, it forms a dialogue that cuts across historical and cultural lines. In aesthetic interpretation, we grasp the same set of contents, albeit from a quite different interpretive standpoints. We cannot read Sophocles’ Antigone with the eyes of a fifth-century Athenian, but we can certainly read, appreciate, and interpret the tragedy from the context of modern life because its central theme—conflicting obligations to family and state—is a human pathos that transcends the particularity of experience. And what makes this communication possible is the determinacy and universality of aesthetic content.

What follows from the interrelation of these two interpretive axes—the historical and the subjective—is that, while aesthetic content in a work of art may be explicit, determinate, and invariable, the meaning of a work of art is itself quite elastic. Because aesthetic experience is front-loaded with a particular normative framework, the act of decoding a work of art will be largely a function of the kind of encoding one brings to that experience in virtue of being situated in a particular context. Interpretive parameters enclose not only the domain of aesthetic content, but also the domain of aesthetic experience. But it is the constantly shifting relation within and between these various parameters that create new paradigms for aesthetic analysis. The meaning of any great work of art is inherently elastic in that, as its significance endures over time (long after the end of art), experiential contexts will evolve and create radically different and increasingly complex and sophisticated forms of dialogue between the subject and the work of art.
Aesthetic imagination for Hegel thus involves the hermeneutic practice of orienting oneself reflexively within the work of art, entering into a thematic space, shifting between various contexts of past and present, private and personal, and building up vast structures of meaning which, in the end, have validity only within the domain of subjective imagination. And all of this is done, not with the aim of reaching any firm and final conclusions, but by engaging communicatively with oneself and with others through the work of art. Imagination does not discern truth once and for all, but seeks out ways of responding aesthetically to a work of art that it regards as “essentially a question, an address to the responsive breast, a call to the mind and spirit” (LFA, 71).

5.4.2 A Concluding Question

The pregnant question with which I would like to conclude, then, is whether this account of imagination as contextually specific might not be far more specific today than Hegel suggests in the Aesthetics. In other words, if this kind of encoding of aesthetic experience occurs along cultural lines, there is in principle no reason why it would not occur along other forms of shared or individual identity. If experience is broadly structured by the particular form of ethical life to which one belongs, then why couldn’t we say that experience today is the outcome of even more complex and narrowly defined normative structures, such as race, gender, economic status, political affiliation, or sexual orientation? Do we not nowadays count these among the most basic structures of our belief systems? Are these more individually specific forms of identity not constitutive of contemporary ethical life? If so, then it seems
self-evident that what is required of Hegel’s view—namely, that works of art embody the spirit of an age—is that works of art today reflect, not the truth of a totality, but rather that of a complex of highly individualized forms of subjectivity. And indeed, Hegel’s tri-partite phenomenology of art’s development from the quest for normative coherence (symbolic art) to an ideal unity of social life (classical art) to the dissolution of collective identity and the emergence of individual subjectivity (romantic art) leads to the logical conclusion that post-romantic interpretive practices will have to accommodate a plurality of experiential contexts, each of which having the potential to add another layer of complexity and diversity to contemporary aesthetic analysis. This possibility I believe poses a far more promising theoretical alternative to both the modern reactionary tendency to saddle art with an overtly political function as well as the prevailing trend of poststructuralist theory to frustrate aesthetic interpretation indefinitely and to debar aesthetic dialogue by insisting on the endless deferral of meaningful content in works of art. With Hegel, we have a theory that acknowledges, on the one hand, that thematic content sets an interpretive parameter for the imagination, and on the other, that imagination moves freely between the form and content of a work, and only settles on a fully articulated meaning within the space of a specific, subjectively determined experiential context.

Consider, very briefly, how this interpretive potential might play out in a contemporary controversial work of art, such as Ang Lee’s recent film, Brokeback Mountain. The film, based on a short story by Annie Proulx, is a romantic drama of two men who discover an unlikely love for one other while working together as
ranch hands on a mountainous sheep ranch in idyllic rural Wyoming. This is, first and foremost, a film about homosexuality. This is uncontroversially the guiding theme of the work. We can say more generally that it is a film about love, or more narrowly about a complex kind of love. But the point is that its being a film about homosexual love already sets a relatively narrow interpretive parameter around the work. Its aesthetic content is decidedly not about, say, the perils of war, such as Das Boot, Catch-22, or The Deer Hunter; nor is it about race, the way that Uncle Tom's Cabin or Invisible Man are, nor religion, nor industrialism, nor any other determinate subject matter. But does the fact that the film presents a determinate and relatively narrowly-defined subject matter exhaust aesthetic dialogue? Does the fact that the particular visual and formal elements of the film respond aesthetically to its content in any way entail interpretive closure on the part of the viewer? Hardly so. If anything, the clarity of subject matter is precisely what generates and amplifies the controversy over the film’s meaning. Under dispute is not the content of the work itself, but rather the relation of aesthetic form to a specific content. What one makes of the content in relation to, say, the richly saturated colors, the slow pace, the god's-eye view camera angle, etc., is largely a product of one's own subjective experiential context. For example, a substantial conservative contingency predictably found the film objectionable on moral grounds for what it perceived as the aesthetic glorification of homosexuality. By contrast, the liberal community for the most part lauded the film for what it claimed was a bold and beautiful depiction of a socially sensitive issue, winning eight nominations at the 2006 Academy Awards, including Best Director (narrowly losing the award for Best Picture, it is worth noting, to
Crash, a film that unambiguously addresses issues of race). Meanwhile, a fairly strong reaction began to emerge within the homosexual community against what many considered to be the reckless aestheticization of homosexuality. Indeed, it is certainly fitting that, James Schamus, the producer of Brokeback Mountain, said in response to the ensuing controversy of the film, ”I suppose movies can be Rorschach tests for all of us.” We all see the same black blots of ink on the paper, but the activity of interpreting the image is driven by a complex intermixture of cultural, historical, political, and personal dispositions; so much so, in fact, that no single standpoint can claim absolute interpretive authority on the matter. Rather, as Hegel would have it, the true is the whole, where the whole is the vast spectrum of experiential variation among different cultures and even among different individuals interpreting works of art. As with Brokeback Mountain, it may be that in all works of art, the open-endedness of aesthetic dialogue is better served when the imagination operates within the interpretive parameters of an artwork’s thematic content and seeks out depth and variety by surveying and exploring the various subjective contexts that are inevitably encoded into the experience of art. And for this reason, it may be that the “end of art” is precisely the place for contemporary

211 Film critic D.A. Miller aptly notes that it is precisely the “universality” of the film that makes it ripe for controversy. He writes: “So cannily rotated is the homosexual theme that, under one aspect or another, it lends support to virtually all the conflicting positions, attitudes, and judgments that make it so thrillingly—and bankably—contentious.” His own point of contention with the film, however, is that it sells the idea that the viewer through the eyes of the closet homosexual when in fact it only makes the viewer feel more comfortable at a voyeuristic distance. “On the Universality of Brokeback Mountain” Film Quarterly. Vol. 60. No. 3 (Spring 2007): 50-60.

212 Ryan Lee "Probing the 'Brokeback Syndrome'" Southern Voice (January 13, 2006).
aesthetics to begin re-evaluating the role of the modern subject in relation to the
aesthetic discourse and analytic practices of today. With an eye toward a new theory
of aesthetic subjectivity, I think we will profit greatly from a second look at Hegel's
aesthetics.
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