THE SPONTANEOITY OF GENIUS: KANTIAN GENIUS RECONSTRUCTED

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§ 0. Abstract

I develop an interpretation of Kant’s theory of “genius”—a talent that, according to Kant, is required for the production of all beautiful art—that shows how Kantian genius might avoid charges of elitism and individualism that twenty-first century aestheticians have leveled against the notion of genius. I contend that Kantian genius can be fruitfully understood as the power to act in ways that are not planned out in advance, but that arise “spontaneously.” My interpretation counts a much broader range of activities as expressing “genius” than those activities that are traditionally understood as artistic activities. I further contend that my interpretation of Kantian genius illuminates an underappreciated connection between Kant and Nietzsche: Kant’s genius and Nietzsche’s aesthetic experience both console us to existential suffering by providing us with an opportunity to see ourselves not only in our rational, deliberative faculties, but also in our subconscious drives and dispositions.

§ 1.

In the world of art historians and critics, genius has a bad rap. Writing in the New Yorker recently, Alex Ross declared that the idea of “genius” is an artifact “of the Romantic religion of art, implying a superior race of demigods who loom above ordinary life” and is “rooted in the cult of the male artist—the disheveled Beethovenian loner who conquers an indifferent world” (Ross 2017). Carolyn Korsmeyer notes that “While genius is a rare gift, according to most theorists the pool of human beings from which genius emerges includes only men” (Korsmeyer 2017, § 2). Darrin McMahon’s recent cultural history of genius makes clear that the adoration of genius characteristic of European Romantic thought treated genius as a general phenomenon associated with “great men,” scientists, philosophers, and artists (McMahon 2013). While McMahon acknowledges that Kant regarded genius as a confined and specific phenomenon connected exclusively with the creation of fine art in a manner that “went very much against the tenor of the times” (McMahon 2013, 97), Kant’s insistence that
genius is rare because “the genius is a favorite of nature” (Kant 2000, 5:318) grates against our egalitarian post-romantic sensibilities.

In this essay, I develop an interpretation of Kant’s theory of genius that helps to salvage it from the charges of elitism and individualism advanced by recent art critics and historians against genius. I will contend that Kantian genius can be well understood as the spirit of spontaneity that wells up and expresses itself through the wide range of human activities that we undertake without planning them out in advance and that are intelligible to a more or less wide audience.¹ This interpretation allows that genius might also be occasioned by many artifacts and activities that we do not ordinarily think of as “fine art” and makes Kantian genius appear less rare than an initial reading suggests.

§ 2.

In Critique of the Power of Judgment, Kant describes beautiful aesthetic art as “a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and, though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication” (Kant 2000, 5:306). Such art that “pleases in the mere judging” does not please “in sensation” (by causing pleasurable, non-cognitive feelings) or “through a concept” (by allowing people to pleasurably judge that it falls under some concept) but by occasioning “non-conceptual thought” and eliciting perception of an aesthetic idea that leads the mind to think of a manifold of related representations in the imagination (Kant 2000, 5:306). Concepts, in this context, are rules or patterns used by the understanding to process the contents of the imagination (Cohen 2002, 2).

For Kant, beautiful art that promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication “must be aware that it is art, and not nature; yet the purposiveness in its form

¹ I use “spontaneity” in the everyday sense of the term, rather than in Kant’s technical sense.
must still seem to be as free from all constraint by arbitrary rules as if it were a mere product of nature” (Kant 2000, 5:306). Beautiful art must be “aware” that it is art—meaning that it must elicit a response from its audience as something made—because part of the distinctive pleasure of art is its capacity to generate the realization that humans are among nature’s beauty-makers. At the same time, “beautiful art must be regarded as nature, although of course one is aware of it as art” (Kant 2000, 5:307). The judging of art as beautiful depends on it appearing as natural (and as something that emerges from some part of nature that lies beyond our current explanatory powers) rather than on its metaphysical status as natural or made. Beautiful art must seem to be as free from rules as are mere products of nature—meaning that it must arise from something independent and outside of conceptual thought—because natural beauty pleases in the mere judging by appearing to us as something not created according to a rule.2

Here Kant’s account faces a difficulty: if beautiful art must be generated by artists exercising a capacity for choice that grounds itself in reason but must also appear to be a product of nature (e.g., not a product of conceptual thought) “without showing any sign that the rule has hovered before the eyes of the artist and fettered his mental powers” (Kant 2000, 5:307), how can human artists, possessing faculties of (conceptual) understanding and (non-conceptual) imagination make beautiful art?

Kant’s answer lies in genius. Kant defines genius as “the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art. Since the talent, as an inborn productive faculty of the artist, itself belongs to

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2 Art that is aware of its status as art but that also appears unconstrained by arbitrary rules gives rise to a “feeling of freedom in the play of our cognitive powers” (Kant 2000, 5:306). For Kant, beautiful art can generate such a feeling of freedom only because it elicits thought without using concepts. Such art pleases “in the mere judging” rather than in the making of particular judgments, like judging that A is an instance B, or in judging only through sensory feelings, like an immediate reaction to a sound. The feeling of freedom generated by beautiful art grounds the pleasure “in the mere judging” that is “universally communicable though without being grounded on concepts” (Kant 2000, 5:306).
nature, this could also be expressed thus: Genius is the inborn predisposition of the mind
(ingenium) through which nature gives the rule to art” (Kant 2000, 5:307). Given this definition
of genius, beautiful art must be art of genius, a claim for which Kant provides the following
argument:

The concept of beautiful art ... does not allow the judgment concerning the
beauty of its product to be derived from any sort of rule that has a concept for
its determining ground, and thus has as its ground a concept of how it is
possible. Thus beautiful art cannot itself think up the rule in accordance with
which it is to bring its product into being. Yet since without a preceding rule a
product can never be called art, nature in the subject (and by means of the
disposition of its faculties) must give the rule to art, i.e., beautiful art is possible
only as a product of genius (Kant 2000, 5:307).

Beautiful art must be regarded as a product of nature because, in order to please in the mere
judging, it must not seem to be intentional. If beautiful art appeared to aim at the production of
a determinate object, then it would please through the concepts that fit the determinate object
it produced, rather than pleasing in the mere judging.³ Because genius is the manifestation of
nature in an artist, genius is the avenue through which beautiful art might be produced. Kant
further argues that genius that allows for the creation of beautiful art and that allows the
manifestation of nature in an artist must have four characteristics.

³ In contrast to “mechanical art,” which is created for remuneration or as propaganda, and “agreeable
art,” which provides immediately pleasurable sensations, like an aurally pleasing set of tones or a
visually pleasing set of colors, beautiful art please by making us think, but not simply using our
existing stock of concepts. This is why truly beautiful art must be doubly free for Kant: “it must not be a
matter of remuneration, a labor whose magnitude can be judged, enforced, or paid for in accordance
with a determinate standard; but also, while the mind is certainly occupied, it must feel itself to be
satisfied and stimulated (independently of remuneration) without looking beyond to another end” (Kant
2000, 5:321). Beautiful art cannot be judged by a determinate standard because beauty outstrips our
understanding and so outstrips the determinate standards that we might use to judge or pay for it. At
the same time, beautiful art must make the mind feel itself satisfied and stimulated without looking
beyond to another end, because if the mind looks to something else, it fails to take pleasure in the mere
judging, and because if the mind looks to something else, it fails to experience beautiful art as
something undertaken for its own sake.
First, Kant regards genius as a talent characterized by originality that allows an artist to produce “that for which no determinate rule can be given” rather than “a predisposition or skill for that which can be learned in accordance with some rule” (Kant 2000, 5:307). For this reason, “originality” must be genius’s “primary characteristic” and genius is “entirely opposed to the spirit of imitation” (Kant 2000, 5:308). Genius is thus neither imitative nor rule following.

Second, genius is exemplary for Kant. Kant notes that “there can also be original nonsense,” but believes that this must certainly be something different from genius because original nonsense fails to cultivate the mental powers for sociable communication and fails to provoke the universally communicable pleasure of the feeling of freedom (Kant 2000, 5:308). Therefore, genius’s “products must at the same time be models, i.e., exemplary” and “while not themselves the result of imitation,” works of genius “must yet serve others ... as a standard or a rule for judging” (Kant 2000, 5:308). To do this, beautiful art must contain something “mechanical” that is elaborated by an academically trained talent and that “can be grasped and followed according to rules” (Kant 2000, 5:310). More specifically, it is only by acquiring taste through the practice of making aesthetic judgments about art and nature that an artist can give the academic correctness that works of art need to be beautiful works of art. Taste “is the discipline (or corrective) of genius, clipping its wings and making it well behaved or polished” (Kant 2000, 5:313).

Third, genius cannot, for Kant, “describe itself” and cannot “indicate scientifically how it brings its product into being,” for if it could do so, it would lack the capacity to give rise to non-conceptual cognition about a manifold of representations associated with an aesthetic idea (Kant 2000, 5:308). Because genius “gives the rule as nature,” an artist producing a genius artwork “does not know himself how the ideas for it come to him, and also does not have it in his power to think up such things at will or according to plan, and to communicate to others
precepts that would put them in a position to produce similar products” (Kant 2000, 5:308).

Asking a “genius” poet writing in free verse why they put a line break in one place rather than a slightly different place cannot elicit an answer, at least not a satisfactory one, because there is no principled formula for the composition of poems that exhibit genius. A poet might write using structured forms, but a sestina cannot occasion a judgment of its beauty without a concept as its determining ground merely in virtue of following the technical rules for the construction of a sestina. We might be pleased in judging that the poem is, indeed, a sestina—that it lives up to the formal rules (thirty-nine lines, seven stanzas, etc.)—but the pleasure of such a judgment “has a concept”—the concept of what a sestina is—as its determining ground. The pleasure accorded by artistic genius lies instead with artists’ transformations of experience “in accordance with the principles that lie higher than reason...” (Kant 2000, 5:314).

Fourth, Kant sees genius as limited in scope: “[B]y means of genius nature does not prescribe the rule to science but to art, and even to the latter only insofar as it is to be beautiful art” (Kant 2000, 5:308). Science is an activity associated with the faculty of understanding, undertaken using concepts and tractable to theoretical and linguistic explanation. Science does not give rise to the “feeling of freedom” about the play of one’s cognitive powers that beautiful art provides, and so is not aptly described as involving genius.

These features of genius demonstrate that, for Kant, genius is not only different from learning (which is “nothing but imitation”) but also different from originality and invention in science. Newton does not qualify as a genius in Kant’s view because “no matter how great a mind it took” to discover the principles of his natural philosophy, “Newton could make all the steps that he had to take, from the first elements of geometry to his great and profound discoveries, entirely intuitive not only to himself but also to everyone else, and thus set them out for posterity quite determinately” (Kant 2000, 5:308-309). Everything that Newton
expounded upon “can be learned” (Kant 2000, 5:308). In contrast to Newton’s scientific brilliance, generated from a great and powerful understanding, “one cannot learn to write inspired poetry, however exhaustive all the rules for the art of poetry and however excellent the models for it may be” because “no Homer or Wieland can indicate how his ideas, which are fantastic and yet at the same time rich in thought, arise and come together in his head, because he himself does not know it and thus cannot teach it to anyone else either” (Kant 2000, 5:308-09). When artists cannot explain why they constructed their poems or sculptures as they did, this reflects their tendency to regard their creative choices as not exhausted by their own determinate concepts and reflects an engagement with their own immediate experience of the world in a manner that cannot fully be captured in their existing conceptual repertoires. Kantian genius is the talent that breaks free from the conceptual apparatus and the structure or form in which our concepts are arranged (Gould 1982, 182). This contrasts with science, which makes use of already available concepts to theoretically capture and communicate about features of the nature world.

At the same time, products of genius expand the set of concepts available to us for dividing up the world. Art is not a chaotic event that breaks up and defeats the understanding. Rather, the use of imagination in the creation of works of artistic genius makes rational ideas, such as the ideas of invisible beings and eternity, “sensible beyond the limits of experience...” (Kant 2000, 5:314). The genius imagination does not merely point out that all that there is to a rational idea like “the kingdom of hell” is not captured in reason but makes it possible to sense and experience some of the part of the idea that outstrips understanding.

When the imagination is truly creative, and therefore is of the variety of imagination manifested in works of genius, the stimulation of thought provided by imaginative representation is not completely detached from the concepts associated with and inadequate to
the idea. Rather, the abundance of thinking occasioned by the imaginative representations “aesthetically enlarges the concept in an unbounded way...” (Kant 2000, 5:315). The creative imagination surpasses the fittingness of concepts for its ideas, but in doing so it enhances and expands the fittingness of conceptual thought for imaginative ideas. The genius imagination produces representations associated with a given concept that connect the unbounded inner intuitions occasioned by an imaginative idea with the concept but that also “provide, beyond that concord with a concept, unsought, extensive undeveloped material for the understanding...” (Kant 2000, 5:317). In this fashion, genius makes that part of the boundless thought that is occasioned by representations of the imagination communicable. The “spirit” that is present in works of genius is a talent that “express[es] what is unnamable in the mental state in the case of a certain representation and make[s] it universally communicable...” (Kant 2000, 5:317). Real artistic genius allows for the creation of art that occasions a relationship between the unlimited thought of the imagination that is not determined by concepts and the conceptual thought of the understanding.

Genius artists cannot provide principled explanations of why they made all the artistic choices that they made even to themselves. It follows from this point that genius artists cannot—at the outset of their creation of beautiful art—aim to produce the specific work that ultimately results from their labors. If they could do so, there would be some “rule” for their creation that anyone could learn. Such non-genius activity might relate to genuine artistic genius. If an artist creates a beautiful woodblock that must be mechanically applied to paper to produce finished works of art, the use of the woodblock to create prints is part of the labor of creating artworks but is not properly understood as the locus of genius. It also follows that beautiful art cannot be produced algorithmically, where, for instance, the placement of each blotch of paint on a canvas is settled in advance by an aim for the painting together with a set
of specific rules for achieving that aim. Genius has no end other than the production of
pleasure and, specifically, of the pleasure of non-conceptually cognizing an aesthetic idea.
Genius thus makes possible the special experience of purposelessness associated with beautiful
art and it allows for an undetermined exploration of the possibilities of being human.

§ 3.

Where does this discussion of genius leave us? For Kant, genius is not conceptual,
scientific, or imitative. Genius is original. It provides a source of artistic material that is located
beyond the understanding. And while genius is “nature,” it is also connected to the human
artist who exercises it and so “steps beyond nature” in such a manner that apprehending its
products can provoke the realization that we humans are among nature’s beauty makers.
When an artist creates genius art, the artist produces the art, but it is nature—something
external to the artist—that “gives the rule” to it. Genius involves the power of identification
with sources of action distinct from our agential capacity for reflective guidance of our actions.

For these reasons, the exercise of Kantian genius depends on the artist experiencing
spontaneous freedom—the experience of freedom from planning and antecedent deliberative
control of one’s actions.\(^4\) Spontaneous freedom is required for the creation of art that is genius
because in order to create unprecedented art, an artist must take themselves not to be merely
following a plan, which is also the central feature of spontaneous freedom. An artist who takes
themselves to be following a plan, either is not actually following a plan, in which case they
are deluded and are not creating art in a causally appropriate way for it to be art of genius—they
are merely a “mad” genius—or else they are merely a “Newton,” following the
determinate plan that they take themselves to be following when they create their art, creating

\(^4\) For a full account of the nature of spontaneous freedom, see Gingerich 2018.
art through steps that the artist knows and that could be taught to others rather than truly unprecedented art.

While many experiences of spontaneous freedom are not universally communicable, in genius artistic creation, spontaneous freedom takes a form that is exemplary and is brought together with expression, it gives rise to products of art that elicit in their audiences a partial experience of spontaneous freedom. An encounter with genius art partially recreates the exercise of the capacity for novelty in its audience, by giving rise to thoughts that its audience has not already had and that outstrip the audience’s existing conceptual resources. Beautiful art elicits in its audiences an experience with the same phenomenological character as the experience of the artist who creates it. Additionally, in apprehending exemplary, genius art, we find not only a capacity in ourselves, individually, to learn to see or represent in a new way but an inter-subjective capacity to express new ways of conceiving of things. Beautiful art is valuable, in part, because it validates our apprehension that we, collectively—as humanity or as a more localized society—have the capacity to recreate our understanding of the world anew. When I see that I or anyone else have the power to act in a manner that does not simply play out an existing plan, then we are not trapped by our history.5

§ 4.

It might be objected to my reconstruction of Kant’s theory of genius as involving artistic spontaneity that my interpretation makes genius too rare and accidental. A common experience of art school is that an art student feels caught up in the throes of genius, creates

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5 This is not to deny that there is a great deal of variety among the experiences of genius’s creativity available to us. One’s activity can diverge from one’s preexisting plans to a greater or lesser degree, and one’s activity can diverge from preexisting plans set in place by others, as well as those set by ourselves. The greater the divergence of one’s spontaneous activity, the more it satisfies our need to see ourselves as sources of creativity and novelty.
what they take to be their masterpiece and, after creating their masterpiece, comes to realize that their work is, actually, entirely derivative. Does this suggest that it is only the rarest of art that can express the capacity of novelty? In this section, I contend that understanding Kantian genius as the intersubjectively communicable expression of subjective experiences of spontaneous freedom can help us to see how the “rarity” of genius might amount to the special place that it occupies in many people’s lives, set apart from workaday, instrumental activity, rather than amounting to its presence only in the work of a handful of elite artists.

We must distinguish a pleasure that comes from our capacity to reframe our understanding of the world for ourselves from the capacity of humanity as a whole to reframe how it understands and sees the world. Once we make this distinction, we can see that what happens in the critique of the art student’s painting is not that their painting fails to exhibit the capacity for novelty, but rather that the exercise of that capacity was restricted to their individual, subjective understanding of the world. This can be replicated on a larger stage: perhaps an entire community of artists comes up with a new style of art that is new to them only to later find out that it only recapitulates what has already been done by others. This community of artists may succeed in renovating their own understanding of the world but fail to do so at the grand scale of humanity as a whole.

Furthermore, we should recognize the distinction between the reframing of a genius artist’s understanding that is reflected in the artist’s works and the capacity of artworks to elicit new understandings in their audiences. An adolescent poet might discover a form of expression that is, from their subjective standpoint, absolutely new, but that strikes any audience that their poems happen to find as wholly unoriginal. For Kant, part of the “universal

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6 I owe this example to Gabe Greenberg.
communicability” of genius artworks is their capacity to elicit in their audience the same sort of unbounded, non-conceptual thinking that accompanies their creation. Even if we do not want to ride along with Kant all the way to universality, we might think that genius art must have the capacity to make a claim upon some audience, demanding that members of some audience revamp their ways of thinking and dividing up the world (cf. Moran 2012, 308). The adolescent poet’s poems might fail the test of genius if they do not demand of their audience, whoever happens to compose it, that they come to think and see the world in new ways. But this is not so difficult a test to satisfy: what is needed for genius is an experience of spontaneity that someone successfully communicates to others in a manner that provides the audience with some residual experience of spontaneous freedom.

Of course, there are audiences, and then there are audiences. Stanley Fish tells a story of a college poetry class given a list of last names but told that the random selection was a religious poem. In engaging with the random selection of last names, the class came up with thoughtful, well-argued readings that expanded, in some sense, their understanding of religious poetry. Fish concludes that “paying a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities” (Fish 1980, 326). We need not think that the qualities of artistic artifacts play no role in their reception to acknowledge that the capacities and dispositions that an audience brings to an aesthetic encounter might have just as much (or more) to do with art’s capacity to elicit new ways of thinking. How great a role the audience of art plays in determining whether the art elicits such thoughts will do much to determine how ubiquitous genius art is. If all that it takes is an arbitrary list of names presented as a poem, instances of genius art might be all around us, although, in this case, it might be more apt to locate genius in the interpretive capacities of audiences.
Perhaps little art, if any, can provoke a transformation of understanding at the scale of “humanity.” But it would, perhaps, be odd for art to aspire to transform all human conceptual thought. Even the “highest” of art collected by the most elite of art museums typically works in one artistic tradition, aspiring at most for a localized transformation of how we see. Beautiful Kantian art can provide its audience with an undetermined exploration of what it means to be human whenever it allows a particular audience to “break out” of its existing patterns of conceptual thought, even if it does not have the same effect for all audiences. This reading of Kant on genius can avoid making genius rare, but it need not treat genius as ubiquitous either: insofar as art must be able to elicit an experience in its audience parallel to the experience of the artist who creates it, not every creative act that accompanies an artist learning to see things in a new way will qualify as beautiful art. Beautiful art must call for its audience to think of a manifold of representations that go beyond conceptual thought, although it can call forth this response in more local or more universal contexts.

My account of genius is also compatible with regarding all sorts of “exemplary” artifacts and performances as “beautiful art” in Kant’s sense, whether they are explicitly intended as art or not. Consider, for instance, the case of William Cimillo. One day in 1947 Cimillo, a bus driver who had driven the same route through the Bronx for the Surface Transportation System of New York for seventeen years, got into his bus and, instead of driving north to the Bronx as usual, turned south, switching the destination sign on his bus from “Subway” to “Special.” Cimillo kept driving south through Washington, where he saw the White House for the first time in his life, and on to Florida where he took a midnight swim. In a later interview, Cimillo said, “Just get away from everything. That’s what I wanted to do” (This American Life 2014, Prologue). Cimillo was ultimately arrested in Florida and charged with grand larceny, but there was a tremendous outpouring of public support for him. One
Michigan newspaper wrote, “Across the nation today, thousands of office workers and laborers went to their humdrum jobs with hearts a little lighter, because of what William L. Cimillo did to escape the same kind of boredom that fills their ordered lives” (This American Life 2014, Act One). Other New York City bus drivers organized a fund-raiser to pay for Cimillo’s legal fees, the charges against him were dropped, and the New York City bus system gave him back his job. On his first day back on his route, hundreds of people lined up to try to board his bus (This American Life 2014, Act One).

The most interesting feature of Cimillo’s story is the public’s reaction, which suggests a distinction between the experience of spontaneous freedom and other experiences that we happen to desire. When we hear about a stranger planning a vacation to Hawaii, we do not, typically, vicariously experience their pleasure in their Hawaiian vacation, though we might envy them. But when strangers learned of Cimillo’s adventure, they felt a sense of possibility and a feeling that their own lives could head in new and surprising directions. The distinction between the Hawaiian vacation and Cimillo’s joy ride is that Cimillo’s adventure was received as exemplary—it impressed a sense of possibility on audiences across the United States—and, in this respect, it realized the same value for its audience as do other genius artworks. This reception of Cimillo’s adventure as exemplary did not depend on Cimillo’s conscious intention to do something exemplary, or to create art. However, the fact that Cimillo described his trip to the media in a way that made his motives and experiences intelligible to a broad audience sufficed for it to satisfy the requirements of exemplarity, eliciting a response from its audience as something made.

Finally, the value of seeing ourselves as sources of creativity and novelty that experiences of genius’s spontaneity make possible differs from many other sorts of intrinsic value. On many conceptions of value, the best things are static and unchanging. For Plato, “the
best things are least liable to alteration or change” (Plato 2004, 380e2). On some conceptions of value as unchanging, for a thing to have a value, it must participate in an unchanging form or must satisfy objective criteria that are fixed across time by reason or a moral law. Instances of change are good, on such views, when they move us closer to satisfying unchanging requirements or participating in unchanging forms, even if we can never fully reach them.

The value achieved by the capacity for spontaneous freedom realized in genius art, by contrast, is dynamic. Its value does not come from moving us closer to understanding the truth of the values that we are attached to. Instead, its value derives from our recognition of an ability individually and collectively to find divergences between the world and our linguistic and conceptual resources for understanding, representing, and acting upon the things that make up the world and their relations to one another. This value must be repeated over and again. It can be attained only for a brief period during which the revelation of a new structure of things seems fresh to us. It is also dynamic in that it requires us to move away from our present modes of expressing and acting upon the world. In Whitman’s words, “You must not stay sleeping and dallying there in the house, / though you built it, or though it has been built for you” (Whitman 1881, 128). The intrinsic value of genius’s spontaneity is realized by abandoning one’s well-worn understanding of the world, even if such a departure is not calculated to bring us closer to the true or the good. Its value resides instead in confirming, by transforming how we see and understand the world, that our understanding and our plans themselves contain an unlimited manifold of possibilities.

§ 5.

Nietzsche famously criticizes Kant’s theory of art for its focus on universal communicability, its emphasis on the role of the audience rather than of the creator, and, especially, its claim that aesthetic experience gives pleasure without interest (Nietzsche 2006,
III, § 6). My reconstruction of Kantian genius suggests, however, that a current of Kantian aesthetic thought is present in Nietzsche’s aesthetics, in spite of Nietzsche’s criticisms of Kant, and in spite of deep disagreements between Nietzsche and Kant about the relationship between art and morality (Nietzsche 1996, I, § 152) and about whether only artists or also scientists and other creators count as geniuses (Nietzsche 1996, I, § 162). Particularly, the experience of genius’s spontaneity and the relationship between ourselves and nature that it reflects can provide a form of consolation to the existential suffering of feeling that life is pointless.

In Nietzsche’s account of art, in the face of pointless suffering, the brevity of life, and pervasiveness of immorality, art “justifies” life and “seduces” its audience to a continuation of life (Nietzsche 1999), making life “endurable” and drawing us away from suicide and disgust (Nietzsche 2001, § 107). In Nietzsche’s early view of art developed in Birth of Tragedy, art does so through “Dionysiac” experiences that console their audiences of tragedy to suffering. In Attic Tragedy, Nietzsche thinks that classical Greeks underwent an experience of identifying with a satyric Chorus that provided a “succession of discharges” of a vision representing “the breaking asunder of the individual and its becoming one with primal being itself” (Nietzsche 1999, § 8). Experiences of tragedy consoled the Greeks to the suffering associated with death by imparting a wisdom that individual people are, in some respect, not really individuals but instead part of a single and eternal living being.

The Dionysiac insight consoles by offering an alternative perspective to that which is available from our empirical experience of the world as individuals. The wisdom provided by Dionysiac experiences that “living being” is one and eternal and that we are part of the one living being is achieved through temporary experiences of tragedy. Tragedy allows the experience of Dionysiac wisdom to be limited to “brief moments” and allows its audience to go on as individuals, carrying Dionysiac wisdom with them rather than dissolving their
subjectivity permanently into primal being, losing their psychic unity altogether (Nietzsche 1999, § 17). Thus, when tragedy succeeds in classical Athens, it provides an experience of the temporary dissolution of selfhood that can then be reintegrated into their existing psychology.

Experiences of genius’s spontaneity can likewise console us to existential suffering by leading us to identify ourselves with sources of the self that are outside of our conscious, conceptual faculties and so to regard the conflict between our evaluations of the meaningfulness of life and the meaningfulness of the day-to-day things we care about as less pressing. When someone experiences spontaneous freedom, experiencing their activities and ideas as arising out of themselves and yet as not fully determined by preexisting plans, they temporarily identify themselves with a source of action distinct from their conscious, deliberative standpoint. Experiences of spontaneous freedom lead one to temporarily identify oneself with “nature” by regarding one’s own (artistic) activity as arising from motivations or drives that are distinct from one’s capacity for rational agency. Like tragedy, genius’s spontaneity also involves an experience of individuation—a creator draws boundaries around what counts as “their” experience—when they identify activities and ideas that arise from “the universe itself” as “their own.” This corresponds to the integration of Dionysiac wisdom into individuated lives following the conclusions of tragedies in Nietzsche’s theory. By retrospectively making an activity mine, I connect “myself” to the wisdom of an experience that seems to arise from a unified nature with which I cannot fully identify without dissolving myself. In doing so, I can, sometimes, at least temporarily, console myself to the suffering of life.

As Brian Leiter has noted, Nietzsche’s account of the function of art in *Birth of Tragedy* embeds a Shopenhauerian, neo-Kantian metaphysics, where the Dionysiac experience provides a sort of identification with the primal unity of existence behind the world of appearance
(Leiter 2018, 161). However, this sort of Shopenhauerian metaphysics is not required for my account of how genius can provide consolation to existential suffering. The consolation of identifying with something other than one’s conscious, deliberative nature through the experience of genius’s spontaneity requires only an experience of being other than our conscious, deliberative natures, and of exceeding what we take ourselves to be, even if the “other” that we experienced ourselves to be is not the “primal unity” underlying the world of appearance. Thus, while my reading of the connections between Kantian genius and Nietzsche’s philosophy of art has focused on Birth of Tragedy, my reading is also compatible with Nietzsche’s later account of aesthetic experience (cf. Nietzsche 2006, III, § 6).

Genius’s spontaneity, then, achieves a further value, beyond satisfying a drive to create and beyond making creative art possible: in connecting us to nature or non-conceptual thought as a source of our agency, genius reconciles us to a sort of existential suffering that arises from a deep conflict between human meaning and the impersonality of the natural world. In addition to its great psychological value, such conciliation may also conduce to avoiding the arrogance of thinking oneself ahistorical and to cultivating the virtue of humility about one’s own situated-ness as an agent. That genius can serve this function, suggests a surprising connection between Nietzsche’s view of tragedy and Kant’s view of genius: both genius and

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7 In his reading of Nietzsche on aesthetic experience, Leiter persuasively argues that “the ‘spectacle of genius,’ that is, the spectacle of human achievement that induces aesthetic pleasure, whether in the clearly aesthetic realm (for example, Beethoven) or on the historical stage (for example, Napoleon, another popular nineteenth-century exemplar of genius)” (Leiter 2019, 167). Leiter does not, however, provide an account of why the spectacle of genius in particular (rather than any experience of art or creativity, genius or not) is necessary to “arouse aesthetic pleasure” and thus provide us with “an affective attraction to existence” (167). My account of the value of genius helps to explain why, in Leiter’s interpretation of Nietzsche, the spectacle of genius is required to attract us to life, for it is genius in particular that provides us with the experience of seeing ourselves both as having the power to exceed what we believe ourselves to be and the experience of seeing ourselves not to be confined to our rational, deliberative nature.
tragedy can help us to see how we might become other than what we understand ourselves
now to be and how we might find pleasure, rather than terror, in that experience.

§ 6.

I have argued that we can fruitfully understand Kantian genius as the spirit of
spontaneity that expresses itself through a whole range of human experiences that are
undertaken without being fully planned out in advance. Such experiences are valuable, at least
in part, because they provide us with a sense of possibility and novelty, both individually and
as part of humanity, and they helps to reconcile us to existential suffering by leading us to
identify with the non-conscious, non-deliberative parts of ourselves.\(^8\)

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versions of this essay.
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