

# KANTIAN GENIUS RECONSTRUCTED

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**ABSTRACT:** I develop an interpretation of Kant’s theory of ‘genius’—a talent that, according to Kant, is required for artists to produce beautiful art—that shows how Kantian genius might avoid charges of elitism and individualism that twenty-first century aestheticians have levelled 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.

*‘The meaning of what the artist is going to say does not exist anywhere—not in things, which as yet have no meaning, nor in the artist himself, in his unformulated life.’ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’ (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 283)*

## § 1. INTRODUCTION

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 dishevelled 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). Whilst 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 favourite 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 we might have thought it to be.

In developing my interpretation of Kant's theory of genius, I aim to show how it might be worth thinking about Kantian genius given our contemporary aesthetic and ethical commitments.<sup>2</sup> In spite of Kant's comments about the rarity of genius that seem implausible to modern audiences, Kant's claim that a special sort of creativity that cannot be bought or bribed is central to the creation of beautiful art remains deeply attractive. By engaging with the central aspects of Kant's theory of genius, I aim to show how we might find instances of genius outside of the artistic production of upper-class European male artists. In taking this methodological approach, I will not aim to vindicate every statement that Kant makes about genius or beautiful art, but rather to show that the core of Kant's idea of genius expresses an attractive aesthetic ideal.

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<sup>1</sup> I use 'spontaneity' in the everyday sense of the term, rather than in Kant's technical sense. For a further clarification of the sense in which I use the term 'spontaneity', see § 3.

<sup>2</sup> In developing my interpretation of Kant, I follow the methodology of Barbara Herman in her study of Kant on sex and marriage, in which she aims to show how it could be 'worth thinking' about Kant's views on sex and marriage in spite of his dreadful comments about women, sex, and the body (Herman 1993).

In § 2 of this essay, I present a reading of Kant's account of genius in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, emphasising the attractive features of his ideal that make it worthwhile for contemporary readers to think about Kant on genius. In § 3, I draw on this reading of Kant to present my interpretation of Kantian genius as embodying spontaneity. In § 4, I argue that, in addition to providing an attractive rendering of Kantian genius, my interpretation exposes a surprising connection between Kant's account of art and Nietzsche's: both accounts provide us with an opportunity to see how we are present not only in our rational, deliberative faculties, but also in our subconscious drives and dispositions. As I will argue, this experience of seeing ourselves in our non-rational parts is central to the value of artistic genius.

## § 2. KANTIAN GENIUS

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 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 realisation 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.<sup>3</sup>

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 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

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<sup>3</sup> 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).

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.

First, Kant regards genius as a talent characterised 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

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<sup>4</sup> 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 colours, *beautiful* art pleases 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 labour 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.

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 unnameable 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 labours. 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 labour 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 cognising 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. THE SPONTANEITY OF GENIUS

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 whilst 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 realisation 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. In this section, I will argue that Kantian genius can fruitfully be understood as involving *spontaneous activity*, where I mean by ‘spontaneity’ the sort of activity that we tend to think of when we think of a ‘spontaneous person’ or a ‘free spirit’. I will contend that by thinking of Kantian genius in this light, we can see how genius need not be so rare as the romantic ideal makes it out to be, how the operations of genius can be more equitably distributed between artist and audience rather than situated exclusively or primarily with the creator, and how genius can arise in a wide range of everyday cultural activities rather than exclusively in ‘high’ art.

What is spontaneity?<sup>5</sup> When we think of a ‘spontaneous person’, or of someone experiencing a ‘moment of spontaneity’, we tend to think of people having *unplanned* and *unscripted* experiences. Someone who is ‘being spontaneous’ is not simply executing a plan, or following a pre-existing script, nor do they experience themselves as following a plan or script. Spontaneous activity involves an experience of freedom from planning and antecedent deliberative control of one’s actions. Spontaneous activity is also *non-obligated* in the weak sense that, when someone is behaving spontaneously, they do not experience

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<sup>5</sup> For a full account of the nature of spontaneity, see Gingerich n.d.

their activity as precisely dictated by their beliefs about what law or morality or another person requires of them. Such activity is also *unalienated* in the weak sense that, in doing something spontaneously, one feels that one's activity is one's own, rather than an alien imposition on them. So, spontaneous activity is activity that is experienced as unplanned, unscripted, non-obligated, and unalienated, and that is in fact unplanned and unscripted. Such activity is also typically, if not always, pleasurable, and is something that comes in degrees, in the sense that a person can be more or less spontaneous.

These features of spontaneity understood in the ordinary language sense align with the reading of Kant on genius that I have advanced in § 2. First, to create unprecedented art, an artist must take themselves not to be merely following a plan or script, which is also the central feature of spontaneity. 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 art through steps that the artist knows and that could be taught to others rather than truly unprecedented art. Not only that, a genius artist must not *in fact* be following a plan or script, for an artist who was, unbeknownst to themselves, executing someone else's plan would not display true originality—we would think that whatever originality their work expressed would be attributable to the person who created the plan, not the person who algorithmically executed it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In suggesting that genius, and thus beautiful art, exhibits spontaneity, my view parallels Berys Gaut's contention that 'creative activity must have an element of spontaneity' (Gaut 2018, 135). In contrast to Gaut, however, I see spontaneity as requiring more than that an activity not be planned in advance, and, unlike Gaut, I contend that spontaneous activity is *itself* genius art when it is exemplary and communicable, rather than contending that spontaneity is one element of artistic creativity. Furthermore, because Gaut is concerned with the aptness of aesthetic praise, he thinks that creativity cannot be the product of luck (Gaut 2018, 130-31). I am not here concerned with questions of the aptness of praise and, as will become clear in § 4, my view allows that spontaneous genius might arise as a matter of luck.

A genius artist also must not take their creative activity to be obligated by some law or duty, for, since obligations can be expressed conceptually, if an artist took their creation to be compelled by some obligation, they would be creating according to a determinate rule. Of course, insofar as a duty allows for discretion in how it is satisfied, the discretionary space that the duty allows might provide an opportunity for spontaneity and genius. Furthermore, a genius artist must be unalienated from their creative activity at least in the weak sense that they feel that it is *theirs*, for if an artist felt that their creation was the work of a completely alien daemon that took them over completely, they could not see their creation as expressing their own power to create beauty in the world. Finally, genius activity is typically, if not always, pleasurable, in that the art that it produces gives rise to pleasure in the mere judging of it. For these reasons, the activity of a genius artist appears to require *spontaneity*.

Whilst creating genius art may require spontaneous activity, much spontaneous activity is clearly not an instance of genius, but rather exhibits ‘original nonsense’ or mere silliness. This is because many experiences of spontaneity are not disciplined by taste and are not universally communicable or communicable at all. I will contend, however, that we can productively understand Kantian genius as amounting to spontaneity that is exemplary and is brought together with expression. When spontaneity takes this form, it gives rise to products of art that elicit in their audiences a partial experience of spontaneity, thus eliciting in its audience an experience with the same character as the experience of the creator. An encounter with genius art partially recreates the exercise of the capacity for originality and 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. 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 localised 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 I see that we are not trapped by our history.<sup>7</sup> Understanding Kantian genius as the intersubjectively communicable expression of exemplary subjective experiences of spontaneity 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 fortunate artists.

To see more fully what it means to think of Kantian genius as amounting to an exemplary experience of spontaneity that is brought together with expression, and to begin to see how such a form of genius might realise the values that make it worthwhile for us to think about Kantian genius in the twenty-first century, it will help to consider an example. Consider 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

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<sup>7</sup> 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.

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 organised 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 spontaneity 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 realised the same value for its audience as do other genius artworks.

The case of Cimillo suggests that all sorts of 'exemplary' artifacts and performances qualify as 'beautiful art' in Kant's sense, whether they are explicitly intended as art or not. 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*.

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

genius, creates what they take to be their masterpiece and, after creating their masterpiece, comes to realise that their work is, actually, entirely derivative.<sup>8</sup> Does this suggest that it is only the rarest of art that can express the capacity of originality and novelty? 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 originality, 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 recognise 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 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

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<sup>8</sup> I owe this example to Gabe Greenberg.

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 spontaneity.

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. When an audience’s spontaneous interpretation of a work is itself exemplary and is communicated, that interpretation itself qualifies as a work of genius, and if all that it takes to provoke such spontaneity is an arbitrary list of names presented as a poem, instances of genius art might be all around us. If this is the case, it might be more apt to locate genius in the interpretive capacities of audiences. At the same time, one way in which genius works of art might be particularly successful in their communication of genius is by giving rise to an indefinite, inexhaustible array of interpretations by their audience. ‘[W]e seem to have the greatest esteem for those works that never admit of a completed and finalized set of judgments. We cherish a sort of aesthetic bottomlessness’ (Nguyen 2019, 1151). Works that exhibit such bottomlessness formally communicate the human capacity for novelty and originality through their pliability to interpretation.



Perhaps little art, if any, can provoke a transformation of understanding at the scale of ‘humanity.’ But it would, perhaps, be odd for art (at least in our contemporary world) to aspire to transform *all* human conceptual thought. Even the ‘highest’ of art collected by the most prestigious of art museums typically works in one artistic tradition, aspiring at most for a localised 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.

In showing how we might think of genius as amounting to an exemplary experience of spontaneity that is brought together with expression, I have advanced an interpretation of the core of Kant’s idea of genius according to which genius art need not be intended by its creator as art, can involve an audience that need not encompass all of humanity but can be of any size, can arise equally in the interpretive work of audiences as in the work of creators, and is ‘rare’ not because it is infrequent but because of the special place that it occupies in creators’ and audiences’ lives.

Whilst my interpretation of genius departs from some of Kant’s dicta about the rarity of genius, understanding genius in this way captures much of the value at the heart of Kant’s idea of genius. Experiences of genius’s spontaneity realise a value of seeing ourselves as sources of creativity and novelty that 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 of spontaneity might be understood in a manner that is compatible with this sort of Platonic view of value. For instance, Berys Gaut contends that we value spontaneity as an end because we value artworks as ‘achievements’ and, if there are two identical artworks, ‘one composed and the other improvised, then the improvised one is, other things equal, the greater achievement, since it is harder to produce something on the spur of the moment than when one has multiple opportunities in composition to create and revise it’ (Gaut 2018, 136). Seeing the ‘final value’ of spontaneity as consisting in its contribution to achievement is compatible with seeing its value as unchanging.

However, in contrast to Gaut’s view of the final value of spontaneity, my reconstruction of Kantian genius suggests that the value achieved by spontaneity realised in genius art is, at least in part, *dynamic* in the sense that its value does not come from moving us closer to understanding the truth of the values that we are attached to.<sup>9</sup> C. Thi Nguyen has argued that an important but philosophically underappreciated category of art are ‘process arts’, which ‘are the arts in which artifacts are made for the sake of bringing about first-personal aesthetic experiences of mental and physical processes’ (Nguyen 2020, 3). In Nguyen’s view, the value of such process arts lies not in the stable aesthetic properties of the work of art itself, but instead in ‘its capacity to instigate aesthetically valuable activity’ (Nguyen 2020, 25). Likewise, the value of spontaneous genius derives, at

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<sup>9</sup> Although Gaut does not consider the possibility of the value of spontaneity or creativity taking this form, his account of their value leaves open the possibility that he could embrace such dynamism as part of the final value of spontaneity (see Gaut 2018, 135-37).

least in part, 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 over 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 realised 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.

Other philosophers have advanced reconstructions of Kant's view of genius that, like mine, attempt to exonerate genius for a contemporary audience. Alison Hills and Alexander Bird, for instance, advance an interpretation of Kant according to which genius is necessary but not sufficient for the production of beautiful art and is valuable only when it is also exemplary (Hills & Bird 2018, 104). For Hills and Bird, such an interpretation of Kant is the most charitable reading of Kantian genius because, in their view, creativity alone does not have value: '[t]he accountants of Enron ... were certainly creative, but their ideas were not good in any relevant respect' (Hills & Bird 2019, 702).

Hills and Bird are certainly right that not every instance or product of creativity is all-thing-considered valuable, and that not every product of creativity is desirable for its creator or audience, and are likely right that, as with the accounting feats of Enron, not every work of creativity is a good instance of whatever kind of thing it is. But they do not consider the possibility that the value of genius lies largely in that it confirms to us that we

are not trapped by the past. For genius to do so, instances of it must be widespread and abundant. Every instance of creativity or genius is in some respect valuable insofar as it contributes to realising this human power, but this does not mean that each token of creativity is all-things-considered valuable, or even good as an instance of its kind.

Considering the dynamic, 'process' value of spontaneous activity shows us why we should seek to reconstruct Kant's theory in a way that ascribes a sort of value to all genius activities and products in virtue of their spontaneity, even if they are not all-things-considered valuable.

#### **§ 4. KANTIAN ART AND NIETZSCHEAN ART**

In this section, I will contend that, in addition to capturing the value of the openness of possibilities that I described in the previous section, my reconstruction of Kantian genius both shows how genius realises a value of seeing ourselves in our subconscious drives and dispositions and exposes an underappreciated connection between Kant's work on art and Nietzsche's.

Nietzsche famously criticises 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, I will argue that 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 contends 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 spontaneity, they experience their activities and ideas as arising out of themselves and yet as not fully determined by preexisting plans. This results in one temporarily identify themselves with a source of action distinct from their conscious, deliberative standpoint. Experiences of spontaneity 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 can 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 Schopenhauerian, 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 Schopenhauerian 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, whilst 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).<sup>10</sup>

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 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.

## § 5. CONCLUSION

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

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<sup>10</sup> 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)' 'attracts us to life' (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' (Leiter 2019, 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.

individually and as part of humanity, and they help to reconcile us to existential suffering by leading us to identify with the non-conscious, non-deliberative parts of ourselves.<sup>11</sup>

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