

Without Criteria

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It is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true. This statement is almost a tautology.

–Alfred North Whitehead

1. “There is no science of the beautiful [*das Schöne*], but only critique,” Kant says in the *Critique of Judgment*, “and there is no fine [*schön*] science, but only fine art” (172). I’ll come back to what Kant is saying here about the difference between art and science; but first, I want to concentrate on his definition of beauty.
2. Beauty, Kant says, is not cognitive, not conceptual. There is no objective or scientific way to determine whether an object is beautiful, and – if it is – to explain why. This is because of the strange status of aesthetic judgment. I may judge a flower to be beautiful, yet I know that “beauty is not a property of the flower itself”; the flower is beautiful “only by virtue of that characteristic in which it adapts itself to the way we apprehend it” (145). So beauty is not objectively there, in the world. It is not *in* nature; it is something we attribute to nature.
3. An aesthetic judgment, Kant says, is one “whose determining basis *cannot be other than subjective*” (44). But at the same time, beauty isn’t *merely* subjective; it isn’t just something that we project on what we see, hear, feel, touch, or taste. The attribution of beauty is not an imposition, but an uncoerced *response* to the object that is being judged beautiful. Aesthetic judgment is a kind of *recognition*: it’s an appreciation of how the object “adapts itself to the way we apprehend it,” even though, at the same time, it remains indifferent to us.
4. I’m inclined to read “adapt” here in a Darwinian sense (even though, of course, Kant couldn’t have intended it this way). Deleuze and Guattari use the familiar scientific example of the orchid and the wasp. The orchid “adapts itself” to the way the wasp apprehends it; as a

result, the wasp finds the orchid beautiful. The orchid isn't beautiful in and for itself; it is only beautiful *for* the wasp (and perhaps, too, for ourselves). The orchid's interests, however, have nothing in particular to do with the wasp; the orchid only uses the wasp as a vector for its own pollination. It suits the plant just as well if a human being, having been seduced by the flower's beauty, pollinates it instead. Thus the orchid is indifferent even to the existence of the wasp; the exchange between the two organisms is what Deleuze and Guattari, quoting Rémy Chauvin, call "the *aparallel evolution* of two beings that have absolutely nothing to do with each other" (10).

5. You might say that the beauty of the orchid is what Alfred North Whitehead calls "a lure for feeling." Whitehead prefers to speak of *propositions*, rather than judgments, because the notion of judgment tends to imply, wrongly, that "the one function" of propositions and theories "is to be judged as to their truth or falsehood" (*Process and Reality* 184). Whitehead insists, rather, that "at some point" in the entertainment of a proposition "judgment is eclipsed by aesthetic delight" (185). Sometimes, of course, what supervenes is aesthetic repulsion rather than delight. But in any case, whether true or false, delicious or repugnant, a proposition is a *potentiality* (186, 196-197). That is to say, propositions are neither actual nor fictive; they are "the tales that might be told about particular actualities," from a given perspective, and that enter into the construction (or what Whitehead calls the *concrecence*) of that very perspective (256). As such, propositions are possible routes of actualization, vectors of non-deterministic change. The "primary role" of a proposition, Whitehead says, is to "pave the way along which the world advances into novelty... A proposition is an element in the objective lure *proposed for feeling*, and when admitted into feeling it constitutes *what is felt*" (187). The orchid is not beautiful in itself: but something *happens to* the wasp, or to the gardener, when he/she/it encounters the orchid and feels it to be beautiful.
6. Though Kant uses the terminology of "judgment," rather than that of "propositions," he is in accord with Whitehead at least to this extent: he says that aesthetic judgments have nothing to do with determinations of truth and falsehood. (They also have nothing to do with moral determinations of good and evil). This is because the judgment of beauty is affective, rather than cognitive. More precisely,

it is a feeling entirely divorced from objective knowledge. “A judgment of taste,” Kant says, “is merely *contemplative*, i.e., it is a judgment that is indifferent to the existence of the object: it [considers] the character of the object only by holding it up to our feeling of pleasure and displeasure.” Such a judgment “is neither *based* on concepts, nor directed to them as *purposes*” (51). In an aesthetic judgment, I am not asserting anything about what is, nor am I legislating as to what ought to be. Rather, I am being lured, allured, seduced, repulsed, incited, or dissuaded. And this is part of the process by which I *become* what I am.

7. Beauty is an *event*, a process, rather than a condition or a state. The flower is not beautiful in itself, but beauty *happens* when I *encounter* the flower. Beauty is therefore fleeting, and it is always imbued with otherness. It does not survive the moment of the encounter; it cannot be recovered, but only born afresh in another event, another encounter. A subject does not cognize the beauty of an object. Rather, the object *lures* the subject while remaining indifferent to it; and the subject *feels* the object, without knowing it or possessing it or even caring about it. The object *touches* me, but for my part I cannot grasp it or lay hold of it, or make it last. I cannot dispel its otherness, its alien splendor. If I could, I would no longer find it beautiful; I would, alas, merely find it useful.
8. This is why the apprehension of beauty is *disinterested*. The beautiful object is unconcerned with me; and in return, I have no actual interest in it. I don’t care what benefit it can offer me, nor what empirical “gratification” (47) it can give me, nor even if it exists or not. I am only concerned with how it makes me feel; that is to say, with how it *affects* me. Outside of cognition or utilitarian interest, this is how the beautiful object allures me. In Whitehead’s terms, “the basis of experience is emotional. . . the basic fact is the rise of an affective tone originating from things whose relevance is given.” This *affective tone* is the “subjective form” through which “the experience constitutes itself” (*Adventures of Ideas* 176-177).
9. In this way, the aesthetic experience is *intense* precisely to the extent that it is devoid of interest. “All interest,” Kant says, whether empirical or rational, “either presupposes a need or gives rise to one”; only aesthetic judgment is detached from need. Kant notes that a starving person will eat just about anything; it is “only when their need has

been satisfied,” only when they are well-fed and assured of remaining so, that people have the leisure to develop and express their *taste* with regard to food. It’s only when I don’t *need* something that my liking for it, my being-affected by it, can be “disinterested and *free*” (52).

10. Aesthetic disinterest may seem cold and detached, but it isn’t neutral. From the indifference of the object to the disinterest of the subject – or from the former’s superfluous self-exhibition to the latter’s ungrounded reception – the experience of beauty is one of distance and separation. This distance is not a mere absence; it is something positively felt. When I contemplate something that I consider beautiful, I am moved precisely by that something’s separation from me, its exemption from the categories I would apply to it. This is why beauty is a lure, drawing me out of myself and teasing me out of thought. Aesthetic experience is a kind of *communication without communion*: in Kant’s words, “a universal communicability that is indeed not based on a concept” (79). Beauty is a pure effect, divorced from its material causes. The painter Francis Bacon conveys this point well when he says that, in his paintings of “the human cry,” he “wanted to paint the scream [itself] more than the horror” that provoked it (Sylvester 34, 48). Bacon’s scream paintings are disturbingly beautiful, all the more so in that the situations to which they refer are not.
11. A good synonym for Kantian disinterest might well be *passion*. The scandal of passion is that it is utterly gratuitous: it has no grounding, and no proper occasion. In this sense, it is entirely free (though I am not free with regards to it). Passion has nothing to do with my actual needs, let alone with my self-interest, or with what is “good for me.” It doesn’t seem to be anything of mine. It moves me, drives me, takes possession of me; but it always remains *apart* from me, outside of my control. I pursue my passions even to the detriment of my interests and needs. (This is, of course, the dimension of human experience that is entirely left out of consideration by “rational choice” theory in economics and political science).
12. At the same time, that passion is divorced from need, it also does not have the grandeur and seriousness that we commonly associate with desire. Kant is quite explicit about the difference between “the power of desire” (as theorized in the Second Critique) and the “feeling of pleasure and displeasure” that is the main topic of the Third (16). He defines desire as “the power of being the cause, through one’s presen-

tations, of the actuality of the objects of these presentations” (16). This is a difficult formulation, but it is worth unpacking. Desire, for Kant, is what determines the will. It cannot be understood in terms of negativity and absence, for it is an active, autonomous power of the mind. The ‘object of desire’ is not something that the subject lacks; to the contrary, it is what the subject imagines and creates. The act of desiring is the cause, and the existence of the desired object is the effect.

13. In short, *desire produces the real*. (Deleuze and Guattari are rigorously Kantian when they assert this, in opposition to Hegelian and Lacanian definitions of desire as “lack”). Kant insists that the empirical existence of failed and unfulfilled desires does not contradict this formulation. For even when a desire turns out to be “insufficient,” so that the corporeal forces it calls on are unable to fully actualize its object, there is still a positive “causal relation” between the desire as a mobilization of force, and the effect towards which it was striving (17). This is also what links desire to morality. In its pure form, the power of desire is Reason and universal Law: it legislates, and produces, the categorical imperative. Of course, just as empirical actions never fully conform to the categorical imperative, since they have other motivations than that of respect for the Law: so empirical desires are never pure, but always “pathological,” or tinged with interest. Nonetheless, even the most limited and pathological desire, far from compromising the Law, bears witness to it, as a sort of “evidence of things not seen.”
14. We can thus oppose desire to passion, reason to feelings of pleasure and displeasure, moral disinterest to aesthetic disinterest, the concerns of the Second Critique to those of the Third. Desire is autonomous, absolute and universalizing, while passion is heteronomous, gratuitous, and singular. Reason transcends all interests; aesthetic feeling subsists beneath or before any interests. Desire is active and expressive: it comes out of the subject, and legislates for the world. Passion, in contrast, emerges out of the world, and approaches, or proposes itself to, the subject. More precisely, passion is not just passive (as its etymology suggests), but hyperbolically more-than-passive. The subject is not so much acted upon, as it is incited to remake itself. Desire is how the self projects itself into, and recreates, the world; aesthetic feeling is how the world projects itself into, and recreates, the self.
15. These differences correspond to Kant’s doctrine of the faculties. “All

of the soul's powers or capacities," he says, "can be reduced to three that cannot be derived further from a common basis: the *cognitive power*, the *feeling of pleasure and displeasure*, and the *power of desire*" (16). The doctrine of the faculties has little currency today; but it's worth looking at more carefully, because of the structural distinctions it allows Kant to draw. While cognition and desire are powers (*Vermögen*), the aesthetic capacity is a feeling (*Gefühl*). Cognition and desire *go out from* the subject to the world, while the pleasure of beauty *comes into it*, from elsewhere. In desire, as in cognition, experience begins with the subject; in aesthetic feeling, experience begins outside, and culminates, or *eventuates*, in the subject.

16. All this can also be stated in terms of Kant's distinction between concepts of understanding and ideas; and among ideas between aesthetic and rational ones. "Ideas, in the broadest sense, are presentations referred to an object... but are such that they can still never become cognition of an object" (214-215). So many of our thoughts are not statements of matters of fact; so many of our utterances are not constative. And these non-cognitive "presentations" are themselves of two sorts. *Aesthetic ideas* are "inner intuitions to which no concept can be completely adequate" (182-183); "an *aesthetic idea* cannot become cognition because it is an *intuition* (of the imagination) for which an adequate concept can never be found" (215). In contrast, "a *rational idea* can never become cognition because it contains a *concept* (of the supersensible) for which no adequate intuition can ever be given" (215). Aesthetic ideas are "*unexpoundable* presentations," while rational ideas are "*indemonstrable* concepts" (215). An aesthetic idea is a singular intimation of beauty; it "prompts much thought," but "no language can express it completely and allow us to grasp it" (182). A rational idea has to do, rather, with the sublime; it resists and subdues thought, yet thereby seems to prompt an excess of language. I cannot understand a sublime experience, but I am impelled to speak endlessly about my failure to understand it. (This would seem to be the strategy of deconstruction, which I regard as little more than a footnote to Kant).
17. Though Kant famously wrote in the First Critique that "thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind" (*Critique of Pure Reason* 107), now in the Third Critique he discovers otherwise. For rational ideas are precisely thoughts that no content

can fill; and aesthetic ideas are intuitions that admit of no concept. Once we leave the realm of the understanding, we discover a fundamental asymmetry between concepts and intuitions, such that each of them exceeds the powers of the other. In the Second Critique, we are obliged to affirm – and indeed to live by – certain concepts, even though we know them to be undemonstrable. But at least we still have concepts, and the will that legislates these concepts is still our own. The Third Critique goes much further, as it dispenses with concepts altogether, as well as with an active, ordinary self. Aesthetic ideas are no more moral than they are conceptual. Beauty is felt, rather than comprehended or willed. Intuition is decoupled from thought; and what Whitehead calls the “suppressed premise” of Kant’s system, the claim that “intuitions are never blind” (*Process and Reality* 139) – or that all apprehension is, in principle and in fact, already governed by concepts – is violated.

18. Whitehead describes the difference between his own philosophy and Kantian critique thus: “For Kant, the world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world – a ‘superject’ rather than a ‘subject’” (88). Kant’s greatness, Whitehead says, is that “he first, fully and explicitly, introduced into philosophy the conception of an act of experience as a constructive functioning.” But the problem is that, “for Kant the process whereby there is experience is a passage from subjectivity to apparent objectivity. The philosophy of organism inverts this analysis, and explains the process as proceeding from objectivity to subjectivity, namely, from the objectivity whereby the external world is a datum, to the subjectivity, whereby there is one individual experience” (156). Whitehead thus presents his own philosophy as the inversion, correction, and culmination of Kantian critique: “a critique of pure feeling, in the philosophical position in which Kant put his *Critique of Pure Reason*. This should also supercede the remaining *Critiques* required in the Kantian philosophy” (113). In this way, he performs a philosophical “self-correction” of the “initial excess of subjectivity” of Kant’s own critiques (15).
19. Whitehead continues to ask the Kantian question of “constructive functioning,” of how the subject arises in and through experience. Kant and Whitehead do not presuppose a subject existing outside of, and prior to, experience, as Descartes does; but neither do they dissolve the subject into the flux of experience, as Hume does. However,

Kant assumes, in the First Critique, that experience is fundamentally conscious and cognitive. Whitehead says, to the contrary, that “in general, consciousness is negligible” (308) in subjective experience. Most of the time, even for human beings, let alone for other entities, experience is “implicit, below consciousness, in our physical feelings” (229). These “physical feelings” precede the subject; the latter is best described as the integration (in a quasi-mathematical sense), or as the “end” (both sequentially and causally), of the former. The subject is solicited by the feelings that comprise it; it only comes to be through those feelings. It is not a substance, but a process. And this process is not usually conscious; it only becomes so under exceptional circumstances. This is why Whitehead devalues knowledge, inverting the Kantian relation between subject and object, self and world. It may well be, Whitehead concedes to Kant, that “in every act of experience there are objects of knowledge”; but he ironically adds that this is no reason to assume that these objects actually are cognized, or that cognition is actually involved, in a given experience. Most of the time, it is not. “The inclusion of intellectual functioning in th[e] act of experience” is in fact quite rare (156).

20. This is also why the subject is not self-perpetuating, but must be continually renewed. The subject does not outlive the feelings that animate it at any given moment. “The ancient doctrine that ‘no one crosses the same river twice’ is extended,” Whitehead says; “no thinker thinks twice; and, to put the matter more generally, no subject experiences twice” (29). Each new experience, even each repetition of what we think of as the “same” experience, implies a fresh creation, and a new subject. To say this is not to deny the sense of continuity that we actually feel, from one moment to the next. Such a sense of continuity is easily explained, in Whitehead’s terms, by inheritance. For the “datum” of any new experience is largely composed of the remnants of immediately past experiences, located in the same bodily mass, or in the same close neighborhood. But Whitehead’s crucial point is that this sense of continuity is not self-evident, not given in advance. We cannot presuppose it, or take it for granted. It is rather what most urgently requires explanation. For the default situation of the subject, as of everything that exists in time, is to perish. Locke’s phrase, that time is a “perpetual perishing,” runs like a leitmotif through the pages of *Process and Reality* (e.g. 29, 147, 208ff).

21. I've already mentioned that, for Whitehead, the subject is better thought of as a *superject*: not something that underlies experience, but something that emerges from experience, something that is superadded to it. This doesn't mean that Whitehead abolishes the subject, as "postmodern" thinkers are often accused of doing. Indeed, for Whitehead, just as much as for Kant, there is nothing outside of experience, and no experience without a subject. "The whole universe," Whitehead says, "consists of elements disclosed in the experiences of subjects" (166). There is always a subject, though not necessarily a human one. Even a rock – and for that matter even an electron – has experiences, and must be considered a subject/superject to a certain extent. A falling rock "feels," or "perceives," the gravitational field of the earth. The rock isn't conscious, of course; but it is *affected* by the earth, and this *being-affected* is its experience. What makes a subject/superject is not consciousness, but unity, identity, closure, and transcendence. Each subject is "something individual for its own sake; and thereby transcends the rest of actuality" (88). It is different from everything else; nothing can be substituted or exchanged for it. "The term 'monad' also expresses this essential unity at the decisive moment, which stands between its birth and its perishing" (*Adventures of Ideas* 177). In the moment of its actualization, a subject is entirely, irreducibly *singular*. Right afterwards, of course, the moment passes, and the subject is "objectified" as a "datum" for other occasions; but that is another story.
22. I've been dwelling upon Whitehead's self-proclaimed inversion of Kant, because I want to suggest that Kant himself already performs something like this inversion, or self-correction, in the Third Critique. For there, Kant proposes a subject that neither comprehends nor legislates, but only feels and responds. The aesthetic subject does not impose its forms upon an otherwise chaotic outside world. Rather, this subject is itself *informed by* the world outside, a world that (in the words of Wallace Stevens) "fills the being before the mind can think." Being thus informed, the aesthetic subject is *contemplative*: which means that it is neither active nor quite passive, nor even really self-reflexive, but best described grammatically in the *middle voice* (which unfortunately doesn't exist in German or English). In aesthetic contemplation, I don't *have* particular feelings, so much as my very existence is suspended upon these feelings. The only "causality" of an aesthetic presentation, Kant says, is "to *keep* [us in] the state of [having] the

presentation itself. . . We *linger* in our contemplation of the beautiful, because this contemplation reinforces and reproduces itself” (68). It’s a kind of auto-affecting short circuit. The contemplated object perpetuates itself in, and for, the contemplating subject; the subject subsists only to the extent that it resonates with the feelings inspired by that object. We can say, somewhat paradoxically, that the subject is *auto-affected* by the objectified “datum” that enters into it. The feelings cannot be separated from the subject for whom they exist; yet the subject itself can only be said to exist by virtue of these feelings, and in relation to them.

23. Expressed in this auto-affecting short circuit, and without any concept to determine it, beauty is always singular. An aesthetic judgment responds to a unique situation; it cannot be repeated, generalized, or codified into rules. In Kant’s terms, we are faced with “the universality of a singular judgment” (144): the claim to beauty is absolute, and yet at the same time limited to just this one instance. Each encounter with beauty is something entirely new; each aesthetic judgment responds to a contingency. This is why beauty is *incommunicable*: it cannot be copied and imitated, just as “it cannot be couched in a formula and serve as a precept” (177). Rather, Kant says, beauty is *exemplary* (175). An artwork of genius, for instance, “is an example that is meant not to be imitated, but to be followed by another genius. . . The other genius, who follows the example, is aroused by it to a feeling of his own originality, which allows him to exercise in art his freedom from the constraint of rules” (186-187). That is to say, although we cannot mimic or replicate what we find beautiful, or explain it to others (or even to ourselves), it can inspire us to an act of emulation. And where we cannot communicate the inner sensations of beauty, or the grounds for any particular judgment of taste, the only things that do remain “universally communicable” (157) are “the subjective conditions for our employment of the power of judgment as such” (155). In short, there are no rules, methods, foundations, or criteria for the creation and appreciation of beauty. All we have are examples of what is beautiful, and the “subjective conditions” for striving to equal or surpass them.
24. Kant’s aesthetics is just one part of his system. He insists that aesthetic judgments are non-cognitive, in order to differentiate them from judgments of understanding (which concern matters of empirical fact)

and from moral judgments (which are categorical obligations or commands). This attempt to distinguish different sorts of judgment, and to circumscribe the powers and limits of each, remains crucial today. For it warns us against the totalitarianism of reason, or (to express the point more modestly) against the endeavor of scientists, philosophers, political despots, and religious fanatics to impose a unified field of assessment, in which the same fundamental critical standards would apply across all disciplines. Such an imposition could only have catastrophic consequences, for it would mean the end of any sort of novelty, creativity, or invention. Needless to say, this dream of totalizing reason is as incapable of realization as it is undesirable in principle. But it's also a dream that never goes away, since it is what Kant calls a "transcendental illusion," a self-deception built into the very nature of reason. Since we are always being lured by this illusion, like moths to a flame, we always need Kant to warn us against it. In the end, of course, the mania for reason, truth, foundations, and universally valid criteria is as singular, as gratuitous, and as intractable as any other passion.

25. The *Critique of Judgment* might seem to play merely a marginal role in Kant's system. But when Whitehead says that philosophy should begin with a "critique of pure feeling," instead of reason, this amounts to putting the Third Critique first. For Whitehead, affect precedes cognition, and has a much wider scope than cognition. Understanding and morality alike must therefore be subordinated to aesthetics. It is only after the subject has constructed or synthesized itself out of its feelings, out of its encounters with the world, that it can then go on to understand that world – or to change it.
26. I'd like to end by suggesting that such a revision or "correction" of Kant is more relevant today than ever. Kant was trying, among other things, to separate science from art, in order to define the proper limits of each. In practice, this meant preserving the arts and humanities from scientific encroachment, something that is still important today. But we also live in an age of astonishing invention and relentless innovation, when (as Fredric Jameson puts it) "aesthetic production" has become the "dominant cultural logic or hegemonic norm" (4-6). Despite the pretensions and protestations of the scientists themselves, even positivistic science finds itself approaching ever closer to the condition of aesthetics. Theoretical physics, for instance, seems to

leave questions of empirical verification behind, as it pursues an ever-receding “final theory of everything,” whose sole justification lies in the beauty of its theorems, the elegance and internal self-consistency of its mathematics.

27. Genetics and biotechnology are even more perplexing, since they are less about understanding the external world, than they are about experimenting on – and thereby altering – ourselves. Such practices are inherently risky and unpredictable. How can we come to terms with forms of “knowledge” whose very effect is to change who “we” are? How do we judge these disciplines, when they undermine, or render irrelevant, the norms and criteria that we have previously used to ground our judgments? What will we do when advances in these practices force us to redefine, more and more radically, what we mean by such basic notions as self, life, humanity, and nature? The new biology, as much as any new work of art, requires us to abandon everything we think we know, and make singular judgments that cannot be subsumed under pre-existing criteria. Aesthetics precedes cognition in such cases, because we are dealing with practices that can only be comprehended through the new categories that they themselves create. The question we should be asking, therefore, is not: How can we establish valid criteria and critical standards?; but rather: How can we *get away* from such criteria and standards, which work only to block innovation and change?

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