“What is Aesthetic Cognition?”

This paper investigates the following question: What is aesthetic cognition according to Schopenhauer? By aesthetic cognition I mean a judgment of beauty, or the recognition that something is beautiful. And I wish today to ask: What does the act of aesthetic cognition consist in?

I’ll begin by saying something about why I find this question hard. Schopenhauer tells us that the so-called ‘aesthetic way of looking at things’ belongs to a variety of intuitive cognition, whereby we apprehend the so-called Ideas which, in Schopenhauer’s system, constitute the essences of the appearances that we encounter in the natural empirical world. But there’s some trouble that comes with this story. For when we appreciate things aesthetically, we appreciate beauty in sensible particulars, or as I shall call them, empirical individuals: we find beauty in a painting, a piece of music, a vista in nature. – And none of these empirically individuated objects are Ideas. To behold a painting in which we find beauty, is rather to appreciate an object of ordinary perception, or in Schopenhauer’s terminology, an object of understanding. And this is what makes it hard to determine how aesthetic cognition works. For the empirical individuals in which we find beaty are not Ideas. Yet when we appreciate a painting’s beauty, Schopenhauer tells us, the object of our cognition *is* an Idea. It seems, then, that there are two things going on at once: we gaze upon a painting, and we grasp an Idea. Aesthetic cognition draws some kind of connection between the two. But what connection does the aesthetic subject thereby draw between a painting and the Idea in the act of aesthetic appreciation? My modest goal today is to answer that question.

2.

To achieve our goal we’re going to want to know what exactly the cognition of Ideas consists in. When Schopenhauer introduces this question in Book 3, he explains it by contrasting it with so-called ordinary cognition of the understanding, whose object is the empirical individual; cognition of the Ideas arises, Schopenhauer cryptically tells us, through a ‘modification’ of the subject of the understanding, which consists in the ‘abolition’ of the principle of sufficient reason, or PSR. We’ll have to get a grip on what these claims mean, and more particularly what it is for the subject of understanding to abolish the PSR, if we’re going to figure out how aesthetic cognition works. So I’ll start by sketching Schopenhauer’s theory of the ‘ordinary’ act of the understanding. After that’s done we’ll turn to aesthetic cognition.

The ‘understanding’, in Schopenhauer’s system, is defined with reference to its object. The object of understanding is the empirical individual, or the things that a perceiver perceives: a tree, a person, etc. So the understanding is best understood as a faculty of perception; all animals with sense-organs employ the understanding to perceive and navigate the world around them. The subject of understanding, moreover, is the subject of *perception*: the perceiver.

Let’s describe how the perceiving subject exercises the faculty of the understanding. The faculty is partly made possible by the possession of sense-organs; sense-organs endow the animal with a capacity for sensation or, what is the same, intuition. In Kantian terms, the capacity for sensation is known as the faculty of receptivity. The faculty of receptivity is a capacity of the animal body to be *affected* by external objects *in such a way as* to enjoy the sort of subjective experience we call sensation. So, when a tree emits light that reaches your eyes, your body is affected in such a way that you experience certain colors possessed of certain shapes in your visual field; that affection is a sensation, or an exercise of the faculty of receptivity.

Now, it’s important to distinguish bare sensations registered by the faculty of receptivity – a bit of greenness in your visual field caused by light emitted from a tree – from a *perception*, or cognition. The object of perception, or cognition of the understanding, is the tree itself. When you direct your eyes to a tree, the subjective experience of some green sensations in your visual field *is not the same as* cognition of a tree. For there’s more to cognition of the tree – more to seeing a tree – than having sensations of greenness in your visual field. To have cognition of a tree, the subject must *interpret* those sensations in a certain way: it must interpret the green as *being the appearance* of the tree, i.e., manifesting a quality of greenness which *belongs* to the tree. So we can think of a cognition of the understanding as an interpretive act whereby the subject interprets sensation as constituting the appearance of a distinct individual object such as a tree.

The faculty of understanding is thus a kind of *interpretive* faculty: it is a power of interpreting sensations in a certain way, namely, as presentations of empirical individuals: things like trees and flowers and paintings and books and persons. When you have a sensation of greenness in your visual field, the faculty of understanding is the power to cognize, i.e. interpret, that greenness *as* a visible quality belonging to a tree. And that’s how you perceive or cognize or grasp the tree at all.

But how is this interpretation of sensation possible? Whence does the faculty of understanding inherit its power of cognizing sensations as presentations of empirical individuals? Here is my answer. It inherits this power from its grasp of the Principle of Sufficient Reason, or PSR. The PSR, as I’ll now explain, is the interpretive principle of the understanding, which it applies to sensations, whereby it cognizes them as presentations of empirical individuals.

Here’s how it works. The PSR is a principle which states that every effect must have a cause that is sufficient to produce the effect. This principle provides for the understanding a rule for interpreting sensations. It tells us to interpret a sensation *as* an effect *with* a cause sufficient to produce it. So, when the subject is affected with tree-shaped green blotches in her visual field, the PSR tells her: “This sensation has its causal origin in an external object, a distinct individual!” And this insight, granted by the PSR, permits the subject to *interpret* the green sensation *as* an effect *on the subject* having its *causal origin* in a distinct individual, in this case a tree. It is through this very interpretive act that we become aware of the tree at all; the subject becomes aware of it as the cause of its sensation. Thus, by recognizing the sensation as the effect of the tree, the subject regards the sensation as the guise or appearance under which the tree *presents itself* to the consciousness of the subject; and this presentation of the tree through the sensible qualities which it produces in the subject, achieved by interpreting sensation in the light of the PSR, is what the act of the understanding consists in.

Okay. Let me pause for a moment and sum up what we’ve just learned about the faculty of the understanding. The understanding yields cognition of empirical individuals through the combination of two elements: sensation and the PSR. The PSR is a principle for interpreting sensation. The act of the understanding is to apply the PSR to one’s immediate sensations, so that we regard sensation as the mode by which (for example) a tree presents itself to consciousness; the sensation *is* the tree’s immediate appearance to the subject. A cognition of the understanding consists precisely in thus grasping the tree *through* an interpretation of sensation *as* the presentation of the tree.

3.

That concludes my discussion of the understanding. Here’s why I took the trouble. Schopenhauer tells us that aesthetic cognition occurs when we ‘abolish’ the PSR, and thereby ‘modify’ the subject of the understanding. My goal in the foregoing was to get us clear on how abolishing the PSR could modify the subject of cognition. The answer is this. The PSR dictates the way the subject cognizes, or interprets, sensation and the field of intuition more broadly; the PSR tells the subject to interpret sensation as the effect of an external cause, through which the cause presents itself to the subject’s consciousness. So for the subject to ‘abolish’ the PSR is simply for the subject to abandon the PSR as an interpretive principle; and a subject who abandons the interpretive principle of the PSR ceases to cognize or interpret sensation as a presentation of an empirical individual. Such a subject is freed up to cognize or interpret the sensation in some other way; and the ‘modification’ that the subject thus undergoes is a modification in the form of interpretation that it imposes on its immediate field of appearance. I’ll explain how this works.

Let’s start by asking: What is left to the subject, when it has abandoned the PSR? Well, there now remains *before* the subject an uninterpreted field of sensation, the deliverance of the faculty of receptivity, a field of appearance; and there remains likewise a subject who refuses to interpret the field of appearance as the presentation of an external individual. This is where aesthetic cognition becomes available to a subject. Aesthetic cognition arises when the subject provides *a different* interpretation of one and the same field of appearance; it interprets sensation *aesthetically* rather than empirically or perceptually.

But what does this ‘aesthetic’ reinterpretation of the field of appearance consist in? Here’s the answer I’ll explain for the duration of the paper. It consists precisely in interpreting one’s immediate appearance as a presentation of an Idea, rather than the presentation of an empirical individual (cf. e.g. p. 234). Thus, to contemplate a tree aesthetically, i.e. to appreciate its beauty, is to regard that tree’s sensible appearance as the presentation of the universal Idea of Tree, the real essence present to all and every tree.

This result brings us back to the puzzle I raised at the beginning of this paper, when we saw that aesthetic cognition seems to have a double object: we appreciate beauty *in* the empirical individual like the tree, but the object of aesthetic cognition is the Idea. Now we can rediagnose this puzzle. We have learned that aesthetic cognition *reinterprets* the sensible appearance *of* an empirical individual, so that one and the same appearance presents rather the Idea instead of the individual. The question now is this: what connection does aesthetic interpretation draw between the sensible appearance and the Idea presented therein? How does the aesthetic subject draw this interpretive connection between the two?

4.

To answer this question, we’re going to have to develop a modest account of what an Idea is exactly in Schopenhauer’s system, and how it relates to the individuals that appear to us in empirical life. Schopenhauer cryptically describes the Idea as the *essence* of the individual tree, in which the individual finds its unity. The individual, Schopenhauer even more cryptically tells us, manifests or presents the Idea in its very unity. We’re going to want to understand what these locutions attempt to express.

Let’s work through these remarks by continuing our consideration of the tree. We’ll work up to an understanding of its relation to the Idea.

Begin with the thought that the individual tree is a material object composed of many material parts: thousands of fibres, leaves, roots, bark, etc. So the individual is a kind of multiplicity of parts. But though a tree is a multiplicity, its many parts also achieve an organic *unity*: they function together in a kind of living system – the system of metabolic processes that constitute the tree’s own vital activity, whereby the tree nourishes, preserves, and reproduces itself – in short, the processes whereby the tree lives its life.

Now, in this living system, the sovereign purpose of realizing the tree’s life process *subordinates* the tree’s many material parts to itself, and *orders them* teleologically so that each part serves an assigned role in contributing to the tree’s overall life process. Thus, for example, the matter at the base of the tree, which is to constitute its roots, is shaped to serve a certain purpose, that they may function as a site of entry for water and nutrients to be extracted from the earth. The matter at the tree’s crown is shaped differently so as to serve a different purpose: absorbing sun for photosynthetic production. And each of the other parts of the tree is likewise shaped and arranged to contribute its proper share to the overall life of the tree. – The organic unity of the tree is constituted through this subordination of the tree’s many parts to the unitary end of realizing the tree’s life. The multiplicity of material parts find their unity in this teleological system, all collectively acting in concert as the expression of a single vegetative agency: that of the tree striving to live its life, sending its roots into the ground and its leaves in the air as expressions of a single individual’s vital activity.Schopenhauer refers to this teleological unity as the tree’s *inner purposiveness*. And the manifestation of this inner purposiveness to a subject is – and this is important – the manifestation of the tree’s own Idea: the guise under which the Idea appears to us. We see the Idea in the tree, by seeing the purposive unity which binds the many parts of the tree into a teleologically organized whole.

But *how* does inner purposiveness, or teleological unity, manifest the tree’s Idea? Recall here that the term ‘Idea’ denotes a representation of the Will, and the Will is, precisely, the will to life, a striving to live. And recall that the purpose which the tree’s inner purposiveness serves is the purpose of living the tree’s life. So the purpose which the tree’s organization serves is the same as the endof its Idea’s willing and striving: namely, that the tree should live. The Idea is thus the source of the tree’s purposive organization, and the Idea’s willing of its own life is expressed *in* the teleological organization of the individual tree. Schopenhauer will likewise sometimes speak of the individual tree as an ‘objectification’ of the will: for the living tree is, quite literally, the object of the will to life: the unfolding of life itself, the end for which the will strives.

The Idea of the Tree is, then, the individual tree’s internal will to live, which organizes its parts. The Idea is the organizing principle of the tree’s inner purposiveness.

These remarks conclude a crash course on the connection between the Idea and the individual. The Idea is the individual’s own internal will to life; and its action on the individual consists in the organization of the individual’s body and behavior so as to realize the life that it wills.

I have investigated this connection between Idea and individual to answer a question about aesthetic cognition, namely: How does the subject of aesthetic cognition come to regard a sensible appearance *as* the presentation of an Idea? Here, now, is my answer: the subject recognizes that an individual’s sensible appearance has been organized by its Idea: the subject sees that the appearance realizes the life and vital activity that is the goal of the Idea’s willing and striving. Aesthetic cognition, in short, apprehends the sensible appearance as an expression of an Idea, by cognizing how the appearance is organized by the Idea.

Where does beauty fit into all this? For aesthetic cognition, whatever else it does, must cognize the beauty of the things we appreciate aesthetically: things in nature and art. Beauty, I suggest, is a special property of a sensible appearance: it is the property of being organized by the Idea. Thus aesthetic cognition can appreciate beauty *in* an empirical individual like a tree, even as at the same time it cognizes non-empirical Ideas: for the beauty we cognize is the individual’s property of being organized by an Idea, and we cannot recognize this property unless we apprehend the Idea as an organizing principle. We could therefore regard aesthetic cognition as the appreciation of an appearance’s principle of composition: it appreciates why an organized individual’s parts have been distributed throughout its whole in the way that they have, and the overall purpose served by an individual so composed. And that’s just to appreciate how the Idea orders the individual’s internal multiplicity.

What I want to emphasize as crucial to this account is that aesthetic cognition does not have one object but two: the first is the purposively organized appearance, and the second is the Idea which organizes it. Aesthetic cognition is the act grasps the connection that binds the two objects to one another: it grasps the Idea *as* the organizing principle *of* the appearance.

The first time I read WWR, I did not understand that aesthetic cognition has a double object: that it connects the organized apparent manifold to the organizing Idea. I had the mistaken impression that aesthetic cognition was a kind of pure apprehension of the Idea all by itself; and I could not understand what looking at a painting had to do with this kind of solitary communion with the immaterial Idea that resides outside of all space, time, and visibility. But now I do not think that can be right. Now I think that the subject cannot apprehend an Idea *unless* the subject perceives or imagines some sensible appearance, or entertains a sequence of conceptual thought; the subject may subsequently cognize the Idea only to the extent that she recognizes how these sensible and conceptual appearances have been organized so as to manifest the Idea’s drive to order and unify multiplicities into purposive systems. It is *seeing* the purposive organization of sensible and conceptual appearances that *elevates* the subject to the cognition of the Idea: the manifestation of purposiveness in a sensible or conceptual object is required to raise the subject to a consciousness of the source and imposer of the object’s purpose. And aesthetic cognition is the understanding we enjoy when we gaze upon the object from such a height.

And that concludes my discussion. There’s a lot more to say about aesthetic cognition. One would like to know more about Schopenhauer’s cryptic remark, for example, that it elevates the empirical individual to the status of pure subject; or that it “almost” eliminates the subject-object distinction; or that the object of aesthetic cognition is itself a representation of the subject, and so in fact it constitutes a form of self-consciousness. But I will not explore these questions today. Thanks for listening.