A B S T R A C T

This essay considers the powerful influence of dualistic thinking in aesthetics and the capacity of aesthetics to transcend and heal that division. I locate the origins of this influence in a distinctively Western cultural tradition that begins in classical Greek philosophy, especially in Plato, is carried forward in early modern philosophy and aesthetics by Kant, and has continued in various forms to the present day. This kind of thinking presumes that aesthetic value must have an objective status and tries to locate this value in a separate object, and it claims further that aesthetic satisfaction can only be subjective. I argue, on the contrary, that we must develop an understanding of aesthetic value in relation to appreciative experience and the contexts in which such experience occurs. These occasions exhibit a unified, holistic character that can be characterized by the concept of aesthetic engagement. Replacing the dualism inherent in the Kantian theory of aesthetic disinterestedness, aesthetic engagement offers an alternative account of appreciation that has implications for a broader and more inclusive understanding of the aesthetic.
I. Introduction

Modern aesthetics in the West has been dominated by the influence of Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* (1790). This concluding volume of his systematic elaboration of an epistemologically grounded world view developed concepts that have shaped thinking about aesthetic experience for the more than two centuries that followed its publication. Kant’s epistemological turn introduced an innovative direction in subsequent philosophical speculation, making the possibility and conditions of knowledge the center of concern.

Not often remarked is the influence on Kant of Platonic metaphysics, with its skepticism of sense experience and its refuge in a rational conceptual order. Similar motives shaped Kant’s direction. Although Kant gave a more balanced value to perception and ratiocination, he nonetheless emulated Plato’s bifurcated world view, and this led to a difficulty he readily acknowledged and endeavored to resolve. Beauty, Kant held, must have some objective standing, yet our experience of beauty is necessarily subjective and therefore cannot yield cognitive judgments that, by their nature, must be universal. Thus Kant faced the same difficulty as Plato had, and as Descartes encountered a century before Kant: how to reconcile these essentially disparate and incommunicative realms. Kant’s answer was ingenious though not very convincing. He placed cognition in the realm of perception, shaped and mediated by the categories of the understanding. The real itself was inaccessible, although one could take solace in certain unprovable possibilities for which it provided. Thus embedded in this tradition was a division that has colored the course of Western aesthetics, and philosophy more generally, to the present day.

This essay considers the powerful influence of that dualistic metaphysics on aesthetic theory and the capacity of aesthetics to transcend and heal that division. This is aided by recent developments that extend aesthetic appreciation to situations that go beyond the arts. These lead us to recognize aesthetic value in objects and conditions that also possess other kinds of value, such as environment and the objects and activities of everyday life. From this it follows that aesthetic value need not be exclusive to be recognized as such. Aesthetic engagement offers an alternative account of aesthetic appreciation that replaces the dualism inherent in the Kantian theory of aesthetic disinterestedness. Finally, I shall elaborate the place that sense perception and sensibility have in this unified aesthetic.

It will become clear that the difficulties in Kant’s position emerge from its inherently dualistic structure. Not only is such an order presumptive: it is, I hold, false to the experience of
beauty in the arts and to aesthetic experience more generally. The remainder of this discussion will develop aesthetic experience as an active process that integrates sensible data with discriminating intelligence, an experience I call aesthetic engagement.

II. The influence of dualistic metaphysics in aesthetics: Plato and Kant

The long tradition of dualistic metaphysics that originated in classical Greek philosophy requires its own historical analysis. Its pervasive influence extends throughout Western intellectual culture including theorizing about the arts. The idea appears in attempts to objectify beauty by giving it an identity and a location. We see this in Plato’s description in the Symposium of how we move through the encounter with beauty in bodies to beauty in souls, in pursuits and laws, and in science, to attain an understanding of Beauty itself, absolute. Plotinus followed a similar course leading from the beauty of a body to the beauty of the Forms, culminating in the beauty of the Good in which all the Forms join. He gave attainment of the One, a wholly integrative intellectual principle beyond material form, an almost mystical status.

We find similar attempts to objectify aesthetic value in the effort of some recent aestheticians to locate aesthetic value in so-called aesthetic properties that inhere in objects. A cluster of concerns in aesthetics reflects this kind of thinking, ranging from attempts to define art as denoting objects that possess aesthetic value to efforts to locate the musical work and the dance object.

Central to these issues is the presumption that such value has objective status while dismissing appeals to appreciation as subjective. Attempts have been made, of course, to relate beauty and appreciation within this divided field, a notable one being Santayana’s definition of beauty as objectified pleasure. Yet the pattern of objectifying aesthetic value persists. A full historical analysis of this kind of thinking would be fascinating to uncover, but my purpose here is only to identify the pattern.

The issues change once we become aware of the dualistic assumption in establishing the problem and in attempts to resolve it. If, for example, there is no separable, independent object of aesthetic appreciation that possesses aesthetic value and no internalized consciousness that appreciates it, the explanation of aesthetic value and of recognizing and appreciating it becomes a matter of explicating the situation in which such experience takes place. The problem thus becomes context-based rather than object-based.
However, Kant’s doctrine has long stood as the standard for aesthetic appreciation in Western philosophy, and it would be instructive to inquire into the reasons for its pre-eminence and plausibility. Any such inquiry would, I suspect, reveal much about the cultural influence of classical metaphysics. One obvious source can undoubtedly be found in that powerful predecessor of Kantian philosophy, Plato, whose doctrine of forms seemed to provide a brilliant cognitive solution to the need for coherence amid the overwhelming multifariousness of experience. It is a doctrine that sacrifices detail to the dictatorship of the idea, with the consequence that cognition succeeds only at the expense of the individuality of the instance. My political metaphor is not incidental, for this move empowered a tyranny over the particularity and uniqueness of sensory experience.

It might seem that art could stand as an antidote to the hegemony of cognition for, to a greater or lesser degree, the arts have encouraged the cultivation of perceptual acuity and have honored creative uniqueness and originality. Yet Kantian doctrine has triumphed here in the requirement of aesthetic disinterestedness that sequesters the aesthetic. Proper appreciation, Kant proclaimed, requires that we assume a disinterested attitude toward the object of aesthetic perception: “[T]aste in the beautiful is alone a disinterested and free satisfaction; for no interest, either of sense or of reason, here forces our assent.”5 Kant clearly had his reasons for excluding practical interests from aesthetic appreciation, but they were not aesthetic ones. By removing the object of appreciation from the contingencies of practice that may confuse and obstruct aesthetic pleasure, one could center inquiry on what makes an object aesthetic without any qualifying factors that might obscure that distinctive value. Recognizing that aesthetic value may be found in many forms, not all of them unmixed, Kant drew a distinction between pure and dependent beauty. Under proper conditions, no practical exigencies should intrude to compromise beauty’s self-sufficiency and no concept constrain its purity. Free beauty presupposes “no concept of any purpose which the manifold of the given object is to serve, and which therefore is to be represented in it.”6

Such a demand seems reasonable if we think it necessary and possible to exclude any other claim on the aesthetic object and to locate aesthetic value as separate and distinct. But pursuing such an inquiry assumes that an aesthetic object can be isolated and considered dispassionately in subjective consciousness. And that effort would lead to yet another difficulty in achieving the universality of aesthetic judgment that knowledge presumably requires. Kant admitted that because aesthetic judgment is subjective, it cannot be cognitive, and universality
can only be assumed subjectively by presumption. “The judgment of taste itself does not postulate the agreement of everyone...; it only imputes this agreement to everyone....” This conundrum is another instance of the cognitive difficulties caused by a dualistic metaphysics. The consequences of the demand for universality are still more destructive because such a requirement obstructs the scope and variety of aesthetic appreciation. Kantian dualism, in short, is false to the experience of art and to aesthetic appreciation more generally.

III. Aesthetic appreciation

A growing literature in recent aesthetics stands in opposition to the domination of this model. Aesthetic appreciation has been extended to objects of practical use, such as the tool, the automobile, and the airplane. Its scope has been enlarged to encompass environments, not just the classic view of scenic beauty, but the forest, the bog, and the city. Included now, too, in the scope of aesthetic value are human relations and political orders. Such occasions may not be identified and constructed primarily for aesthetic delectation, but at the same time the presence and importance of their aesthetic value has begun to be recognized. Aesthetic value is pervasive.

Aesthetic appreciation stands as one of the clearest instances of pure normative experience. As it is often described, the appreciation of art and natural beauty offers experience of intrinsic value, of experience valued for its own sake. The value of such occasions is widely recognized but how they have been described and understood is a striking example of the domination of culture over experience. I call the influence of cultural assumptions “domination” because appreciation is forced to conform to a pre-established cultural model rather than freely reflecting the actual characteristics of appreciative experience. The very difficulty of doing this informs my thesis in this essay, which is that our cognitive structures and our sensory experience are so interdependent that it is difficult to consider either of them separately. The close interrelation of conceptual understanding and sense experience may seem to be a Kantian point but for a profound metaphysical difference: Kant gave ontological status to the structures of the understanding, whereas my claim is that its status is itself no more and no less than a cultural construct.

To return to appreciation, it is often said that aesthetic experience is valuable in its own right, in itself, it requires no external justification. Accounts of appreciative experience differ, but
in one respect they agree: aesthetic appreciation has intrinsic value. It does not follow from recognizing the intrinsic value of aesthetic experience, however, that appreciative occasions cannot at the same time possess other values. Indeed, the presumption of atomistic “simples” infects this issue as it does so many others.\textsuperscript{12} It does not enhance aesthetic appreciation to make it exclusive, although aesthetic value may dominate the most compelling occasions of aesthetic experience. Many acknowledge that the experience of beauty is an essential part of a fulfilled life, although at the same time many recognize that one may have such experiences along with other, different ones. Enjoying the beauty of landscape is often inseparable from the physical pleasure of tramping or the kinetic pleasure of driving through the countryside. And one can learn a great deal about human behavior, social interactions, and cultural milieux from reading novels.

What is at issue here is not only what things, places, and situations can properly claim aesthetic value but the nature and standing of that value: how it can be identified and characterized. Here the metaphysical template of dualism demonstrates its inadequacy and, indeed, its destructive consequences. In fact, experience does not exemplify the subjective pleasure of an aesthetic object that itself possesses objective value; rather, aesthetic experience is a paradigm of the unity of experience. What I can do here is only suggest how the aesthetic exemplifies this harmony.

For many people, the enjoyment of outstanding scenes of natural beauty are among the most powerful experiences of life. A rainbow is an arresting sight that is always seen in relation to the observer. One cannot go to a base of a rainbow since its location shifts as one moves: observer and rainbow are completely interdependent.\textsuperscript{13} Many compelling occasions enrich our lives: the view of the Rocky Mountains rising out of the Great Plains in the American West as one approaches the massive range, the exhilaration in achieving the summit of a high hill or a mountain and surveying the panorama that extends below and beyond and, on the opposite side of the scale, the delicate beauty of a trillium amid the desiccated rubble of an early spring woodland that leaves one feeling disarmed and humble. The boundaries of the self that we unthinkingly carry with us disappear, replaced by open vulnerability as one enters into communion with the object, the scene, and the other features of the occasion. This experience may be described as continuity, as enfolding, or as immersion, but I think that the most inclusive term for understanding the experience of continuity in aesthetic appreciation is “engagement,” aesthetic engagement.\textsuperscript{14}
Appreciating art has a similar form. On its most dramatic occasions one may experience perceptual continuity with a van Ruysdael or Hobbema landscape, entering perceptually into the pictorial space and engaging the scene. Or one may have an extraordinary human exchange with the eyes in a Rembrandt self-portrait. Indeed, a successful portrait offers an opportunity to interact with the personality in the image. Sculpture, in its own way, charges the space that it inhabits, space that encloses us as we enter its penumbra.\textsuperscript{15} Music often provide a direct and forceful occasion for aesthetic engagement because music cannot easily be objectified but rather creates a context in which the listener, in joining and following the sound, becomes an active participant.\textsuperscript{16}

Aesthetic appreciation as engagement thus emphasizes perceptual involvement in a situation of interdependent, continuous factors. But at the same time aesthetic experience integrates sensibility with intelligence, for knowledge and practice contribute to our active aesthetic engagement, making our experience more sensitive, more aware, more discriminating.

IV. The aesthetic unity of experience

Aesthetic engagement thus emerges as an alternative to the concept of aesthetic disinterestedness that was central to traditional aesthetic theory but inadequate for accommodating these innovative developments.\textsuperscript{17} Unlike the dualism of Kantian aesthetics, which treats experience as subjective, aesthetic engagement emphasizes the contextual character of aesthetic appreciation, involving active participation in the appreciative process, sometimes by overt physical action but always by creative perceptual involvement. In place of contemplative, psychological distance, engagement stressed the continuity and interpenetration of perceiver and object. It returned aesthetics to its etymological origins by emphasizing the primacy of sense perception. Sensible experience and perception, itself, were reconfigured to recognize the mutual participation of all the sensory modalities, including kinesthetic and somatic sensibility.

The concept of aesthetic engagement epitomizes a contextual aesthetic. It rejects the traditional separations between the appreciator and the art object, as well as among the artist, the performer, and the audience. It recognizes that all these functions overlap and merge, the customary divisions and oppositions among them disappearing in the continuity of appreciative
experience. This makes it no longer necessary to maintain the usual separations: artist, object, appreciator, and performer became functional aspects of the aesthetic process rather than separate objects or actions, and the appreciative experience was seen as perceptually direct and intimate.

Understood in this way, aesthetic engagement is an especially useful concept for understanding these recent developments in art and appreciation. It lends itself particularly well to the increasing interest in environmental aesthetics, where engagement is a more appropriate description of environmental appreciation that had left the distant view from a scenic outlook and descended to tramping a woodland trail or paddling a stream. Aesthetic engagement is useful, too, for the still more recent interest in everyday aesthetics that the Kantian model of disinterested contemplation cannot accommodate. Both for its theoretical value in recognizing artistic innovations and for its ability to encompass developments in aesthetic appreciation that extend to ordinary life and activity, aesthetic engagement has proved particularly helpful.

While aesthetic engagement is the keystone of an alternative to the aesthetics of disinterestedness, it does not in itself speak to the range of concerns that a comprehensive theory must be able to account for. Engagement is rather central to a broader theoretical account that takes the aesthetic field as the context of aesthetic experience, integrating creative, appreciative, objective, and performative functions, and recognizes aesthetic sensibility as its perceptual dimension. Moreover, aesthetic engagement is indebted to American pragmatism. It makes more explicit in aesthetic theory Dewey’s emphasis on the continuity of humans in nature and the integration of aesthetic experience into the full course of human life. Engagement thus offers a sound basis on which to pursue the course of aesthetic experience as it is manifested in the wider domains of human social life, and it exemplifies a holistic understanding of perceptual experience.

1 I.e., the possibility of the existence of God, of freedom, and of immortality.


3 Plotinus, *The Enneads*, Third Tractate, 1, 2.


Ibid., §16.

Ibid., §8, pp. 50-51.

I develop a wide-ranging critique of Kantian aesthetics in “Aesthetics without Purpose,” Aesthetics beyond the Arts (Farnham, UK and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), pp. 149-158.

Lewis Mumford, Technics and Civilization (1934), (Harbinger,1963).

From 2003-2012 the Finnish publisher Maahenki issued a series of six volumes, in Finnish, based on six international conferences on the aesthetics of different environments held from 1994-2009 and organized by Yrjö Sepänmaa. These environments included water, forest, farmland, bog, rock and stone, and sky and space.


I owe this observation to my wife, Riva Berleant.


Philip Alperson, for example, argues for the continuity of instrument and performer. He claims that to consider the performer’s performing the work assumes a false ontology. The performance of a work is a single musical entity and the performance is the work. A similar case can be made for painting, literature, and the other arts. See “The Instrumentality of Music,” Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism.

Arnold Berleant, Art and Engagement; Re-thinking Aesthetics, Rogue Essays on Aesthetics and the Arts (Farnham, UK & Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2004), Part I.