Chapter Eleven. Perceptual Politics

Aesthetics and politics

It is clear that the critical power of the aesthetic makes it an effective instrument for social analysis, one that has not yet been adequately recognized or utilized. Its significance lies not only in the ability of the aesthetic to serve as a critical tool for probing social practice but as a beacon for illuminating the direction of social betterment. This may seem at first to be an outlandish claim but for the fact that the aesthetic has begun to emerge as a key factor in political theory, although its transformative implications have not been reckoned.

In recent times this connection between aesthetics and politics has become explicit. The literature is large, ranging from observations of an aesthetic politics that began with Nietzsche (although preceded by Kant and Hegel), moving through Heidegger, Benjamin, Blanchot, Adorno, Marcuse, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, and most recently to Derrida, Lyotard, Deleuze, and Rancière, to cite only some of the more prominent contributors.
Two significant features mark the discussions of the social relevance of the aesthetic in this body of literature. One is the focus of philosophical commentaries on what art and literature signify and contribute to our understanding of truth and being. The other is their concern with the social relevance of the aesthetic in experience, politics, and the nature of society. For many of these thinkers the aesthetic is uttered in the same breath as art, and art is often seen here through either a Marxist or a psychoanalytic lens, or through both.

We can take Herbert Marcuse as one example. Marcuse’s views reflect the influence of both Marx and Freud. Art, he holds, has a liberating function: “it is committed to an emancipation of sensibility, imagination, and reason in all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity.” Important as this emancipation is, it has its source, Marcuse argues, in “Eros, the deep affirmation of the Life Instincts in their fight against instinctual and social oppression.” Art has an ideological function, as well, but Marcuse is critical of Marxist aesthetics for its class-based analysis of art, even though he acknowledges that there is always a social presence in art. Art contributes to the political struggle by helping achieve a change of consciousness.¹

Both of these influences, Marxism and psychoanalysis, characterize the writings of the Frankfurt School, with which Marcuse was associated, and are central in the work
of Theodor Adorno and its other leading figures. Adorno’s lengthy *Aesthetic Theory*, a representative example, deals almost exclusively with art. Without contesting Adorno’s case for the significance of art in culture, society, and politics, I claim that art is not the most fundamental factor in aesthetic analysis.

We find the same identification of the aesthetic with the arts in theorists associated with post-structuralism and deconstruction. Jean-François Lyotard, for example, coupled aesthetics with the arts in his intense concern over their critical function. His belief in the “deep-seated exteriority of art” sees art as a political force and an alternative to theory, and aesthetics, he believed, shares this critical role. Gilles Deleuze made a similar association where “the two senses of the aesthetic become one, to the point where the being of the sensible reveals itself in the work of art, while at the same time the work of art appears as experimentation.”

It is of basic import, however, to recognize the difference between art and the aesthetic and to separate the consideration of each from that of the other. From all that has gone before in this book, it is clear that, even though intimately related, these terms have very different meanings and referents. I have maintained that the aesthetic is a mode of experience that rests on the directness and immediacy of sensuous perception, perception that is deeply influenced by the multitude of factors affecting all experience –
cognitive, cultural, historical, personal. Art, on the other hand, denotes the multifarious ways in which people shape that experience. Traditionally this process of shaping direct experience has been done through artifacts, especially in painting and sculpture, poetry and fiction, and most of the other art forms. This fashioning of experience has gone on regardless of whether the arts are traditional or classical, contemporary or popular. Art has also been made by directly manipulating the perceptual materials of immediate experience, as in performance art and conceptual art, as well as in dance. Since perception as an experiential condition precedes the activities through which it is shaped, channeled, and ordered, it denotes the fundamental ground of all artistic activity. Aesthetic perception is thus the foundation of art, and aesthetic theory should deal with both art and perception.

Certainly the breadth of aesthetic perception invites pursuit in many directions. But here I focus on one that is especially important for its critical potential: the social. My intent in this book is to explore the foundational significance and social uses of aesthetic perception. And as neither perception nor cognition is self-contained, consideration of the one will illuminate the other. The appearance of the aesthetic as a prominent theme in political theory is one of its striking uses.
Moved by the pervasiveness and insistence of political forces in social life, many scholars have been drawn increasingly to recognize the strands of the aesthetic that are woven into its texture. They have gone beyond dealing with the ways that the arts are used in political propaganda and for arousing patriotic feeling. The aesthetic has come to be recognized as a perceptual domain of considerable power and influence, and some analysts have assigned it a crucial place in political theory. Making the aesthetic central in political theory may be surprising, for two such dissimilar domains of thought and experience might seem, at first, difficult to reconcile. Yet the association of aesthetics with politics has been made, and it will be illuminating to look at some applications that assign the aesthetic dimension a critical place in social and political thought. Let me then trace some of the appeals to the aesthetic in founding political theory, first considering Friedrich Schiller before moving into contemporary proposals.

**Schiller’s *Letters* and beauty as a condition of humanity**

This recent scholarly trend has its most direct source in Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795). This early work by the German romantic poet continues to radiate a benign influence despite profound changes in the intellectual climate. Schiller’s detailed and eloquent study openly reflects the early influence of Kantian philosophy. At the same time, his own thinking developed over the several years during which the *Letters* were composed. We find in them, then, not so much a
consistent philosophical exposition as an expanding understanding of the conditions of human fulfillment in what he called the aesthetic state.

Schiller went to eloquent lengths in recognizing and attempting to accommodate the different and sometimes conflicting aspects of human experience, principally the physical, sensory factors and the rational, cognitive ones. Following Kant, he found their reconciliation in a balance that allows absolute dominance to neither but rather integrates their forces in harmonious interplay. The ‘disposition,’ as he called it, that emerges in this process and makes this resolution possible is the aesthetic. Humanity is most fulfilled, Schiller claimed, in the contemplation of beauty, and a genuine work of art, requiring both our sensuous and intellectual powers, creates in us the loftiness and strength of spirit that characterize freedom.

This brings us to the heart of our present concern for, Schiller argued, through beauty people acquire a social character, and taste makes social harmony possible by establishing harmony in the individual. Thus a homology emerges between the fulfilled person and the aesthetic state that is reminiscent of Plato’s theory of justice in The Republic. “Everything in the aesthetic State, even the subservient tool, is a free citizen having equal rights with the noblest….” In such a condition of aesthetic appearance the ideal of equality is fulfilled.
For Schiller, then, the beautiful world exemplifies its moral standing and represents the freedom of the citizen in which every person is restored to a harmony of rational and sensory forces. “Beauty alone can confer on him [Man] a *social character.*” At the same time this is no private, individual affair but is social through and through, for an aesthetic sensibility promotes empathy and an awareness of others. Schiller thus brought together the aesthetic, the moral, and the social. No one has united these strands of human value more explicitly or more eloquently.

Finding a model of community in the aesthetic has become a recurrent theme in recent political philosophy. This shows not only the suggestiveness of the aesthetic but also displays the widely different interpretations it has received. Let me consider several representative examples here, not with the intent of developing a full-blown critique of each but rather of revealing some of the uses to which the aesthetic has been put in political theory.

**Ankersmit on aesthetic politics**

In his book *Aesthetic Politics,* F. R. Ankersmit uses the aesthetic in an original and provocative defense of democracy. The core of his argument is based on an analogy between pictorial representation and that which is represented, on the one
hand, and between the state and the citizen, on the other. It is mistaken, Ankersmit insists, to assume that there is some kind of unity between the work of art and the world. The separation between representation and represented is unbridgeable; moreover, this same “aesthetic barrier” exists between citizen and state. Ankersmit argues that this breach must be recognized as the foundation of the democratic model, for it is out of their conflict that political power and the proper forms of its disposition arise.

A democratic state, therefore, cannot develop by means of direct democracy or out of a common bond between citizen and state. Such attempts lead to bureaucratic social and political intermediaries that provide the basis for totalitarianism. Thus political differences about whether a state properly represents its people is like disagreeing over whether a painting represents reality properly. Such disputes can never be objectively resolved but reflect differences in taste or feeling that are similarly unresolvable. And, Ankersmit holds further, just as there are no fixed rules that tell painters how to go from the landscape to their picture of it, aesthetic political theory makes us aware of an aesthetic gap or void between the represented and the representative, between the state and society. Thus like the artist’s picture, political theory ought to retain a prominent role for the state and we should focus on its enhanced position to better understand present-day democratic politics.
Ankersmit carries the aesthetic analogy further. Each artist and each distinctive style determines anew how to make the transition from the represented to its representation. This constant process of renewal is also why all works of art belong to a new or different world that cannot be reduced to the world that we experience. Such an approach confirms the view that legitimate political power originates in this aesthetic difference between the individual citizen and his or her representative. Therefore, Ankersmit concludes, political power possesses an 'aesthetic' rather than an 'ethical' nature, and an ethical approach to politics should be replaced by an aesthetic one.

Ankersmit’s political argument is guided entirely by this underlying aesthetic analogy, and the scope and detail with which he develops it are impressive. It is all the more surprising that a case so inclusive and replete with historical and analytical detail should devote so little attention to establishing and justifying this reading of the aesthetic. For the claims on which his argument rests are not commonly acknowledged. Ankersmit’s use of the aesthetic actually begs the question of the separation between the landscape and the painting of the landscape. While these may be different, their relationship can be explained in various ways, not all of them by an unbridgeable gap. Some accounts emphasize their resemblance and stress the continuities between landscape and painting and between the experience of landscape
and the experience of painting. Other accounts see painting as self-sufficient and find no need to reconcile or compare it with what might seem to be represented. What Ankersmit simply takes for granted as the unbridgeability of the representation and the represented treats one of the most obstinate and unresolved puzzles in aesthetics — the ontology of the work of art — as settled. Moreover, this issue is not generally considered to be the central concern of aesthetic theory.

The pertinence of Ankersmit’s analysis, then, is highly questionable. For some theorists the illumination that art offers is accessible only when centered on the work of art alone and does not depend on a close relation with an external subject-matter. The subject of a portrait, for example, is not the person who sat for it but the person in the painting, itself. Museums are filled with portraits whose models, if known at all, are long gone. Such information, moreover, is generally considered as of historical interest only and aesthetically irrelevant. The painting is complete and self-sufficient and simply offers itself as such. Indeed, in the hands of a master, the brush can tell us more about the person than we may be able to articulate from knowledge of the actual individual. Furthermore, for many aestheticians the comparison is irrelevant. Much the same can be said of the landscape. The Platonic comparison of an image with its reality is beside the point: the only reality is the image.
This dualism of a painting and its subject, like so many other divisions of the world, creates other problems. For when we compare a painting with its subject, we are engaging cognitive concerns that obscure the painting that is before our eyes with the question, How close is the likeness or resemblance? Furthermore, this problem does not exist for abstract art, where there may be hardly a recognizable bond between the pictorial surface and the surface of the world. That is to say, art is about itself, and only in the illumination we gain by engaging with the work can we gain a resonant understanding that we can carry away. Much more can be said in response to this supposed problem, but it is sufficient here to recognize both the assumptiveness of Ankersmit’s argument and its questionability.

But this is not the only difficulty with Ankersmit’s case: its logic is seriously flawed. For even if his aesthetic claim were solid, it would provide only a flimsy base for his political analysis. Arguments from analogy have a weak logical status for they are suggestive rather than demonstrative. An analogy does not prove the parallel that is drawn; it only proposes a resemblance in the expectation that this will suggest how the parallel could be more complete. A purported resemblance between a painting and its subject-matter, on the one side, and an individual and the state, on the other, thus fails on logical as well as aesthetic grounds. For whether or not there is a disjunction inherent in the aesthetic relation proves nothing about the political one. More
compelling reasons than an aesthetic parallel that is itself questionable must be given if Ankersmit wishes to reject any intermediary or continuity in the human-political relation. However, he simply assumes the separation and proceeds to utilize it as an explanatory principle.

What is perhaps most interesting here is that an appeal is made to aesthetics to justify a political theory. And just as the aesthetic involved is a particular feature or issue and not a theory, so, too, are the social meanings to which it is unquestioningly applied. For Ankersmit’s view of the political problem lies in a disjunctive relation of the individual and the state, a relation and the conflict it engenders that stand, he asserts, as the basis for political democracy. This, however, is no statement of political or social fact but a problem that arises from the very way it is structured, a conceptual dilemma far more common than is usually recognized. The discussions earlier in this book have made the case that no entities are wholly discrete, yet it is an unquestioned axiom of liberal democracy that the difference between the individual and the state is fundamental and ineradicable: it is a distinction made into an opposition. Many of the various political theories and mechanisms that have been proposed are efforts not so much to reconcile as to balance these presumably opposed interests. This is what can be termed, following the phenomenologist Marvin Farber, a methodogenic problem, one
that arises out of the adoption of a method, in this case, a methodology of division, and not from the substance of the situation.\textsuperscript{13}

This political analysis, then, receives little support from what turns out to be a basic disanalogy with art. For whatever may be the case in aesthetics, art has little in common with political theory other than, in Ankersmit’s analysis, a separation into pairs of irreconcilable parts. Can aesthetics contribute to politics anything more than an imaginative logical suggestion? That Ankersmit has recourse to the aesthetic suggests that a special value may reside there. His use, unfortunately, does little to identify or profit from it, but the value of aesthetics, heuristic or substantive, is something that others have nonetheless considered. Like the arts, aesthetics has been put to multiple purposes and it is instructive to continue to follow its uses in political theory, as distinct from its traditional role in a critical analysis of art.

\textbf{Ferguson on aesthetics and community}

Kennan Ferguson offers another such appropriation of the aesthetic by appealing to Kant’s theory of judgment to provide the basis for community.\textsuperscript{14} Kant’s recourse to a \textit{sensus communis}, the capacity for judging in a fashion that is common to human reason as a whole as the grounds for affirming a subjective universal, leads aesthetics, like morality, to the public sphere. Like others, Ferguson credits Kant with creating an
ethical aesthetics, "a normative public sphere that directs, teaches, and demands communal standards." It is by means of disinterestedness, he holds, that aesthetic judgment, like moral judgment, can overcome its subjective grounds and affirm its public setting.

As he develops his case, Ferguson is rightly concerned to retain the integrity of those differences in identity that are invariably present among people and spawn social diversity, determinants that are variously ethnic, cultural, and gender-based. He thinks that, by recourse to the non-linguistic figuration of aesthetics, we can hope to grasp the complexities and ambiguities of political identity and communal understanding. "The potency of aesthetics is in its very flexibility and contingency."

We find here the important recognition that the aesthetic, like the moral, involves an individual determination, yet one that is at the very same time a communal one. For judgments of taste carry a determination that is public as well as private and hence possess social significance. Ferguson’s emendation of the Kantian universal so that it can accommodate fundamental social and cultural diversity is important and necessary. Yet significant as this is, to ground it on Kant’s appeal to a sensus communis elevates a hypothetical construction to axiomatic status on a doubly weak underpinning. Kant’s common sense is not an empirical truth; it is a metaphysical principle given logical
status that is dictated by the necessity for universality by basing judgment on concepts and not feeling.\textsuperscript{17}

A significant consideration in political theory Is thus grounded on aesthetics but at the cost of accepting the Kantian fiction of a \textit{sensus communis}. Such an appeal to aesthetics in political theory gets its credibility from Kant but its aesthetic import is wholly casual. Is there something less assumptive than postulating a \textit{sensus communis} that can bring aesthetic judgment to a common focus?\textsuperscript{18}

\textbf{Chytry on the aesthetic state}

The most extensive and intensive examination of the significance of aesthetics in cultural and social thought is undoubtedly Josef Chytry’s 1968 study, \textit{The Aesthetic State}.\textsuperscript{19} Focusing on the aesthetic impact on German thought from the mid-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth, Chytry finds its origins in Greek culture, particularly in the Homeric model of aesthetic judgment exemplified in the Judgment of Paris and the Athenian polis. He regards the Greek amalgam of poetry and politics in rhetoric and persuasion as the theatricalizing of political life. Chytry sees this aestheticism as the guiding ideal of a tradition that runs through Florentine poetic humanism, with its courtly aestheticism and its model of the artist-magician-scientist, to the mid-eighteenth century
in England and the Third Earl of Shaftesbury, who formalized aesthetics for modern thought.20

The main body of this extensive survey pursues the political ideal of the polis through a series of major German thinkers, from Winckelmann and Schiller to Heidegger and Marcuse. Chytry's careful scholarship is unnecessarily recondite, and it is further hampered by a style that layers classical, mythological, and historical allusions in language whose obscurity of expression magnifies its complexity. Nonetheless his study is a major effort to articulate the significance of the aesthetic in human moral and social life. For Chytry the aesthetic state is no simple condition but an expressive life that joins persuasion, loveliness, and fairness.21 This amalgam of the moral, the social, and the aesthetic, rooted in classical thought, is a powerful ideal. It is a vision that achieves universality, he believes, in the tradition of the Kantian subjective universal of the Third Critique.

Chytry's notion of the aesthetic thus fuses Homeric poetry, the "tragedy" of Troy, and the theatricality of politicians' persuasive rhetoric in the Greek aesthetic state with the courtly splendor of the late Renaissance and early Baroque. And with these he joins Shaftesbury's endorsement of that Greek ideal, along with his elevation of the
enjoyment of beauty as the highest good.\textsuperscript{22} All this Chytry transmutes into the ideal of an aesthetic state as the manifestation of beauty.\textsuperscript{23}

In this way Chytry boldly amasses the cultural forces of the lengthy Western tradition in the fulfillment of a vision that is both beautiful and noble. At the same time he is bound by the dimensions of that tradition. While synthesizing the greatest and best of its humanistic understanding, his boundaries retain the Kantian frame of the subjectivity of freedom in a universe of rational objectivity, and his model remains the Athenian polis with its theatrical rhetoric of persuasion. Politically, too, he is tied to the Western tradition that preserves its faith in liberal individualism, a tradition epitomizing so much of the Western understanding of freedom. Chytry’s aesthetic state thus possesses the warmth of the humanizing ideal without its creative illumination.

**Rancière and the politics of sensibility**

In recent political theory the most forthright use of the aesthetic in its etymological meaning as sense perception has undoubtedly been made by Jacques Rancière, principally in *The Politics of Aesthetics (Le partage du sensible: Esthétique et politique)*.\textsuperscript{24} His identification of the aesthetic with perceptual experience is both distinctive and highly important. Raincière is one of the few since Schiller to recognize the political significance of the perceptual basis of the aesthetic. He sees the
revolutionary significance of Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* in placing thought and sensibility on an equal plane. For Schiller, Rancière holds, aesthetic education must develop the capacity to live in a sensible world of free play and appearance, and this capacity is the pre-condition of a free political community.25

Rancière makes the political implications of the aesthetic explicit from the outset: “I call the distribution of the sensible the system of self-evident facts of sense perception that simultaneously discloses the existence of something in common and the delimitations that define the respective parts and positions within it.”26 Explicating what is meant by *le commun*, Gabriel Rockhill, the translator, suggests “something in common” or “what is common to the community,” which is “strictly speaking what makes or produces a community and not simply an attribute shared by all of its members.”27

Rancière is at pains to distinguish this aesthetics from art and its domination of political thought. He reverts to the Kantian sense of the aesthetic, following Foucault’s interpretation, as “the system of *a priori* forms determining what presents itself to sense experience. It is a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience….It is on the basis of this primary aesthetics that it is possible
to raise the question of ‘aesthetic practices’ as I understand them, that is forms of visibility that disclose artistic practices, the place they occupy, what they ‘do’ or ‘make’ from the standpoint of what is common to the community.”

This last has special significance, for “The important thing is that the question of the relationship between aesthetics and politics be raised at this level, the level of the sensible delimitation of what is common to the community, the forms of its visibility and of its organization.” The common sensible is the context the arts serve, and they do so within what Rancière calls certain ‘regimes’: the regime of images, the poetic regime, and the aesthetic regime. This last refers to art that is based, not on ways of doing and making, but on a mode of thought, a regime of the sensible through which the artist renders sensible what has not been codified as knowledge. It is in this sense that art acquires its autonomy, operating independently of ordinary meanings and associations and fuelled by a form of thought that has not yet become knowledge. Here is where Schiller’s idea of aesthetic education has its place, leading people to recognize the sensible world in order to live in a free political community. “It is this paradigm of aesthetic autonomy that became the new paradigm for revolution…” At the same time, art becomes the paradigm for work, re-shaping “the landscape of the visible” and re-structuring “the relationship between doing, making, being, seeing, and saying.”
The political implications of this redistribution of the sensible are momentous. They are a consequence of the ability of artists to recast the perceptual forms that have been received and accepted as commonplace. “The dream of a suitable political work of art is in fact the dream of disrupting the relationship between the visible, the sayable, and the thinkable” directly through perceptual means. “It is the dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations.” As Slavoj Žižek explains, Rancière asserts that “the aesthetic dimension [is] INHERENT in any radical emancipatory politics.”

The perceptual commons and an aesthetic politics

The interest in aesthetics by political theorists is a signal development in philosophy. It is hardly an innovation, but its emphatic recurrence in contemporary thought has far-reaching significance. It can mean several things. One is a desperate turn to the arts as a way of rejuvenating political theory, whose re-working of old ground has yielded meager results in tired reaffirmations of liberal democratic theory for an age so different from its Classical origins and eighteenth century revival. We might view the recourse to aesthetics as a way of bolstering that same ideology, for the recent theorists I have discussed, with the exception of Rancière, espouse what is essentially the same agenda. This apologetic use of philosophy has a long history, a history shaken at its
foundations by Marx and Nietzsche but not displaced. Let us consider where we now stand with the aesthetic.

The association of aesthetics with the social and the political is, as we have seen, neither far-fetched nor casual. We found in our review of aesthetic politics that Rancière’s treatment of the sensible is distinctive in recognizing the political potential in the literal meaning of the aesthetic. He is not alone in following this usage: Wolfgang Welsch has made effective use of the force of *aisthēsis* as an instrument of cultural criticism.37

The implications for social and political philosophy of this transformation of the aesthetic are profound, for when the sensible is followed through on its own terms, the results are indeed metamorphic. I want to claim, further, that it fulfills part of what is implicit in the very meaning of perception. But to my knowledge there has not been any attempt to carry through the transformative potential of *aisthēsis*. Transformative politically, transformative culturally, transformative metaphysically. The groundwork for accomplishing this has occupied the previous chapters of this book. What remains is to pursue its social implications and political consequences.

The history of philosophical explanation notwithstanding, there is no ontology
*a priori.* Ontology is itself a social as well as a philosophical construct. Can we begin, then, with the life-world, “that province of reality which the wide-awake and normal adult simply takes for granted in the attitude of common sense”? The life-world can indeed be a sobering point of reference, for it situates us in the world we actually inhabit. At the same time, that world is the repository of all the effects of those processes by which humans come to consciousness. And so, together with philosophy, one of its products, it is heavily layered.

The idea of a “perceptual commons” offers a direction in groping through the many conceptual layers that form experience in the shape of a human world. Indeed, we may call the perceptual commons the most inclusive environmental condition of human life. By the simple fact of living we are embedded in a perceptual sphere, and it is from here that we must proceed in order to function in that world. This is the point from which we must endeavor to understand the conditions that precede all those acts of conceptual separation that divide the human world.

The perceptual commons is not private nor is it public. It is common. It is present with direct access, and any effort to constrain contact is a deviation from that condition – indeed, an imposition. This carries a heavy baggage of consequences. Environmental ones are obvious. Everyone has a claim to the free and ready
enjoyment of pure air, and uses of air that load it with pollutants or smells, that affect its temperature, poison its character or quality, set it in violent motion or prevent its movement must compensate for those aberrances by restoring its neutrality. The same can be said about visual perception. Everyone has a stake in the visual environment, and this places a heavy social interest on architectural and urban design. It is appalling to recognize how freely and widely industries, groups, and individual people simply appropriate large portions of the perceptual commons for their private interests, entirely ignoring the social effects of their actions.

This raises the question of the relation of the social and the individual, one of the great themes in Western political theory. Indeed, from the vantage point of the perceptual commons, stating the issue as an opposition of the individual and the social rests on a presumptive and vastly misleading social ontology. The perceptual commons is neither social nor individual. One could liken it to a reservoir, except that it is not a reserve but the very substance of experience. And it is a key point at which the widespread oppositional contrast between individual and society displays its error. That idea is itself a social construct so deeply embedded in cultural consciousness in the West and for so long that it is difficult to recognize its social origins. As we have seen, a similar fate befalls the concept of subjectivity. Yet habit does not make ideas true, and hoary falsehoods are all the more pernicious for being sanctified.
It is revealing to consider how we might understand the human world from an ontology of continuity instead of division, separation, and opposition. Indeed, the perceptual commons is inherently undifferentiated and, from the standpoint of perceptual experience, continuity is its most salient characteristic. Things are not perceptually discrete even though some might appear distinct, but differences are nonetheless distinguishable. Aristotle’s recognition of the difference between a distinction and a separation provides an underlying insight. Every object in the human world, however it be distinguished in different contexts, has its history and associations in relation to human uses. Often this history is perceptually apparent if we are attentive to its signs: from worn stone steps to social practices of congregation and worship, from land and stone conformations on the earth’s surface to geological processes, from human physiognomy to diet and health.

It would be fascinating to sketch the outlines of a human civilization based on the recognition of the continuities that draw things together. That would signify true civilization, that is, people living civilly, living in civil society, where the prevailing patterns of relations exemplify mutuality, support, and assistance, all the forms of enabling that promote human life and fulfillment. These are markedly in contrast with social relations based on opposition: competition, personal aggrandizement, conflict,
power relations, subordination, subjugation, oppression, force, war – all of the many modes of conflictual interaction common to the world we humans have fashioned.

The political implications of an aesthetics based on recognizing humans’ claim to the perceptual commons and to its equal enjoyment are world-shattering, for the perceptual commons can be construed as the basis for natural justice: it is an organic claim asserted and applied equally. The social values that would be embodied are humane and positive. Their fulfillment would serve the goals of the many existing social institutions and forces that have been striving, under oppressive circumstances, to create the conditions in which humans can achieve most fully their individual and collective potential.

Political forms need to be devised to reflect this transformation of social ontology, and social forms and institutions need to be developed to further those positive ends. These cannot be projected *a priori* but have to be fashioned as more humane conditions develop. Certainly they would be most unlike the hierarchical and oppositional political and social forms that prevail in the present world and that structurally preserve the framework of conflict: public vs. private, individual vs. state, right vs. left. Consider how the forms through which communication takes place and decisions are made embody opposition: debate, dialectic, criticism, argument. In contrast, open, fair, and equal
discussion rarely occurs without being quickly pre-empted by conflictual patterns. In fact, the very concepts of morality itself embody oppositional structure: good vs. evil, guilt and innocence, and in economics, scarcity vs. abundance.

As part of the moral rehabilitation of social life it is also necessary to expose the many myths that obstruct humane goals: self-justifying beliefs that block changes with barriers of negativity and drape humanity in a dark pall. Among the most pervasive and insidious are myths of human nature that ascribe inadequacies and failures to inherent defects in human being, such as original sin and ineradicable self-interest and selfishness. Other such myths include supernaturalistic superstitions that place human fate in the hands of inscrutable forces. These are part of a culture of negativity that delights in defaming all generous human motives by generalizing those that are self-gratifying. But there are others: there is sympathy as well as selfishness, generosity as well as greed, help and support as well as domination and exploitation. None of these traits and patterns is fixed, and a positive, humane world would encourage enabling traits and behaviors instead of preaching and ingraining the negative and oppositional. It will be difficult to displace this debilitating yet powerful tradition, yet intellectual maturity consists in seeing through the myths with which we all are clothed to the naked reality beneath. It is a process of divestment that we can only hope it is not too late to begin.
ENDNOTES


4 F.C.S. Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. Reginald Snell (New York: Ungar 1965). See here especially the “Twentieth Letter,” pp. 97-99. It should be clear that I am not presuming to offer a full historical account of the social aesthetic, which goes back at least to Plato, but the initial and continuing influence of Schiller’s *Letters* places them at the head of this recent trend.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 138. The full passage is, “The dynamic state can only make society possible, by curbing Nature through Nature; the ethical State can only make it (morally) necessary, by subjecting the individual to the general will; the aesthetic State alone can
make it actual, since it carries out the will of the whole through the nature of the individual. Though need may drive Man into society, and Reason implant social principles in him, Beauty alone can confer on him a social character. Taste alone brings harmony into society, because it establishes harmony in the individual."


8 Here, in various translations, are passages from the Seventeenth and Twenty-seventh Letters that express these ideas: "‘The aesthetic life’ will invariably restore [each specialized person] to himself as a rational-sensuous harmonic whole. Finally, by promoting empathy and awareness of others, aesthetic sensibility gives rise to the development of a society and state in which the individual becomes, as it were, the state itself."

“The aesthetic state alone can make it real, because it carries out the will of all through the nature of the individual. If necessity alone forces man to enter into society, and if his reason engraves on his soul social principles, it is beauty only that can give him a social character; taste alone brings harmony into society, because it creates harmony in the individual.”
"The beautiful world [is] the happiest symbol of how the moral should be, and each beautiful natural being [Naturwesen] outside of me [is] a happy citizen who calls out to me: 'Be free like me.'"


18 Maryvonne Saison notes the central place Mikel Dufrenne gives the *sensus communis* as the ground of an "aesthetic sociability." See “The People Are Missing,” *Contemporary Aesthetics*, Vol. 6 (2008), §1.


23 “Men and women who have one so far as to make her [love’s] presence criteria to their communal life know no sharp distinction between, at one end, her political manifestation as the voice, the chant and music, of persuasion, of those sweet winning
words that beguile all to enjoy mutual toil and a mutual reward in the art of living
together and creating things of beauty, and, at the other, a marveling at the reality of the
universe as something wonderously fair, a veritable cosmos—to, at least, those ‘in
Love.’ “Ibid., p. 496.

Continuum, 2004). References will be to the English edition with the corresponding
page number in the French edition in parentheses.


29 *Op. cit.*, p.18 (24). Maryvonne Saison identifies “the ambiguities of the ideal of
aesthetic sociability in classical aesthetics” and their persistence in Rancière in “The
People Are Missing,” *op. cit.*, Sect. 1.


34 “The Lesson of Rancière,” Afterword to The Politics of Aesthetics, p. 76.

35 An aesthetic politics can be traced back at least to Kant and Hegel, not to mention classical Greece. See Josef Chytry, Cytherica: Aesthetic-Political Essays in an Aphrodisian Key (New York et al: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 122 ff. This is traced out in some detail in Crispin Sartwell, Political Aesthetics; Introduction to the Discipline, unpublished, Ch. 1.


38 Alfred Schutz and Thomas Luckmann, *The Structures of the Life-World* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 3. “In the natural attitude, I always find myself in a world which is for me taken for granted as self-evidently “real.” I was born into it and I assume that it existed before me. It is the unexamined ground of everything given in my experience, as it were, the taken-for-granted frame in which all the problems which I must overcome are placed.” p.4