Aesthetic Freedom

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**Active Passivity: On the Aesthetic Variant of Freedom**

“Being with oneself in the other” is a well-known formula that Hegel uses to characterize the basic relation of subjective freedom. This phrase points to the fact that subjects can only come to themselves if they remain capable of going beyond themselves. This motif also plays a significant role in Hegel’s philosophy of art.¹ I intend to further develop this motif by exploring the extent to which this polarity of selfhood and otherhood is also characteristic for states of aesthetic freedom. I will not be offering an exegesis of Hegel’s writings, but will attempt to remain as close as possible to the spirit of Hegel’s philosophy – with some help from Kant and Adorno. I will present my observations in the form of theses followed by additional commentaries. I begin with some key terms on the general state of subjective freedom (1-3) in order to distinguish it from the particular role of aesthetic freedom (4-7) and then finally, drawing on Hegel, to work out the sense in which aesthetic freedom represents an important variant of freedom (8-10).

1. *Only those who are able to lose themselves in other persons and things can come to themselves.*

This might seem an exaggeration, but in fact it is a trivial claim, at least with regard to Hegel’s thinking. There can be no self-gain without engaging in practices such as work, education, love, play, science or other arts – i.e., without getting involved in an object or another person through which we realize where we stand with ourselves. This we cannot do in relation to a single object or person, but only in relation to several and perhaps to many. This kind of selfhood cannot be attained once and for all, but must constantly be put at risk.

No self-gain without self-loss – though we must not forget that self-loss can also happen without self-gain. To no longer know where we stand with ourselves, to no longer be familiar with our own life, and thus to hardly to know our way around – this would be the sign of a pathological self-relationship. The reason for such a pathology often lies in a striving for false forms of self-possession, often due to false ideals of self-certainty and self-determination. Whoever seeks to cope with oneself must resist such temptations. A personal loss of self is often enough the result of an inability to lose ourselves in a way that is crucial for our ability to come to ourselves.

This rough sketch is only intended as a way of foreshadowing an essential dimension of aesthetic freedom: the actualization of those forms of self-loss that foster a free personal self-relation. In his book on the ontology of film, Stanley Cavell remarks: “Apart from the wish for selfhood (hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of art.”

2. Human actors can only become independent by being dependent on other persons and things.

This merely complements the first thesis, once more recalling a central motif in Hegel’s philosophy. After all, both his theory of self-consciousness and his social philosophy – far beyond the relevant passages in *Phenomenology of Spirit* – revolve around a dialectic of dependence and independence, which is crucial for humans’ capacity for personal independence. The virtue of impartiality represents a good example. Anybody who can think and act independently is determined in various ways before he or she even lifts a finger – biologically, biographically, by family background, language, appearance, etc. So how are we

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supposed to judge and act impartially? We can, as long as we do not let ourselves be
determined in a one-sided fashion. The impartial not only succumb to certain influences, they
are able to pit the many influences they are subject to against each other. Therefore, it is
crucial that we commit to those aims and passions that are most important to us – whereby it
is useful to let ourselves be carried and driven by those attachments that we cannot avoid
anyway. It is impossible to not be attached to anything and still find meaning in life; that is
contrary to the very nature of culture. It is possible to be attached primarily to one person or
thing, but it is neither easy nor healthy; it destroys any chance we have of getting a free view
of the world. Whoever is not partial in many matters cannot be impartial.

These complex attachments also and especially concern humans’ theoretical activity. In The
Claim of Reason, Stanley Cavell draws on a whole series of examples to make clear that
claims to knowledge are always context-dependent. What we claim to know and present to
others as our own insights largely depends upon the context in which we believe we have
recognized something and reveal it to others. Typically these opportunities can never fully be
grasped and understood. Even the best criteria for the use of concepts and the justification of
statements underlie conditions that are not themselves subject to certain criteria. Every
determinateness of our self and the world is necessarily accompanied by indeterminateness,
which is why the idea of a final determinateness – be it of our own thoughts, external objects,
or what goes through other people’s minds – lacks all substance. Human knowledge is by its
very nature limited and thus incomplete; it remains fragile even if our habitual experience
shows we can rely upon it. However, it would be just as wrong to subscribe to a kind of
skepticism in which we must abandon all hope of certainty as it would be to advocate a kind
of fundamentalism that refuses to recognize the constitutive indeterminateness in the
determinateness of knowledge.
Yet that is only one – relatively harmless – part of Cavell’s argument. The radical conclusion he draws is that our theoretical stance towards the world relies on practical activity; or, to be more precise, it is based on our involvement in intersubjective practices. We cannot recognize anything if we do not recognize ourselves in others and others in ourselves – i.e., if we do not grasp ourselves as participants in forms of life in which we seek to maintain and develop together these constantly threatened cultures. Here Cavell largely draws on the work of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. According to Cavell, both thinkers agree that “what I have called the truth of skepticism, or what I might call the moral of skepticism, namely, that the human creature’s basis in the world as a whole, its relation to the world as such, is not that of knowing, anyway not what we think of as knowing.” Cavell thereby points out that what we call “knowledge” is the effect of our attitudes toward each other. We can only claim toward others to have relevant and reliable knowledge if we develop the ability to perceive ourselves as persons among others. Therefore, social recognition represents the key to an adequate theory of the range and limitations of knowledge – especially since we can always be mistaken both with regard to ourselves and others. And these risks are precisely what Cavell is interested in – without them, there would be neither more nor less knowledge, but no knowledge at all. For Cavell, the task of philosophy consists in explaining the precarious involvement of individuals in the context of an historical culture.

3. The core of human freedom lies in the capacity to let oneself be determined – to let oneself be determined and to let oneself be determined.

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This is an understanding of freedom I have developed in more detail elsewhere with relation to Kant, Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, among others. This relation between “determining” and “being determined”, as Fichte terms it, is relevant when it comes to shaping and reshaping our epistemic and practical orientations. A responsible commitment to beliefs and intentions, both small and large, demands that we be willing and able to let our thoughts and actions be affected and even upset by perceptions, concepts, reasons, persons, institutions, traditions, rituals, atmospheres, landscapes, cultures and, not least, the dramas of politics and other arts. This type of responsiveness is constitutive of free action which follows our own initiative and considerations. This “ownness” [Eigene], which asserts itself in self-determined acts, is necessarily and largely related to what is more or less alien; and these relations are what the self-relation of autonomous individuals thrives on from beginning to end.

A brief reflection on the basic stance of human action makes this point more clear. Because both our ability to act and our understanding of action are tied to a language of action developed in history and culture, our actions have no reality outside of this context of meaning. But words and sentences, explanations and narratives are meaningless taken in isolation; they only take on meaning once they are differentiated from each other – without there being a border beyond which everything becomes clear or unclear. The relationships between words, between words and the world, and between those who make use of words in the world – in other words, the relationships that must be understood if we are to understand

6 The following passage has partially been taken out of my book “Theorien” (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer 2009, 184-189; see Martin Seel, “Teilnahme und Beobachtung: Zu den Grundlagen der Freiheit” in Paradoxien der Erfüllung (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 2006), 130-156.
anything at all – do not run on *ad infinitum*, but merely *ad indefinitum*. They give the units of speaking and thinking a certain content by forming a context of signifiers that can neither be grasped nor determined in its entirety. Because we are dealing with a communicative praxis in which statements and beliefs are infused with a certain content, the extent of their determinateness ultimately proves to be a practical question. After all, it is never entirely certain to what extent we must share or comprehend the beliefs of others in order to understand what they say. The point up to which we can follow and understand each other (or want to understand each other) can and must remain open. Instead of reaching into infinity, the interconnections that make up thinking are articulated into indeterminateness. Our thoughts have a certain content against the background of an indeterminately far-reaching connection with other thoughts and with the thoughts of others. Everything we say and think extends beyond what we are capable of saying and thinking, even though this extension is merely a further effect of the culture of our thinking and speaking. This fact, which upon closer inspection is just as unsettling as it is comforting, is what makes all our individual and shared beliefs and aspirations interesting in the first place – and it is what enables a life in freedom at all.

In other words, we must not search for the indeterminateness of human spirit in the wrong place. The freedom of our thoughts and actions does not lie in the fact that they are not causally determined, but in the indeterminateness of our being determined by reasons. Because there is no way around the comprehensibility of our thoughts and intentions, no detour that could inform us about these thoughts apart from their own labyrinthine paths, and because every production of determinateness is at the same time the production of indeterminateness, the world of action remains in crucial respects one that is both

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7 Kant employs this distinction when solving the antimonies of theoretical reason. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 525ff. (B 547ff. / A 518ff.).
undetermined and indeterminable. That is what culture is all about: Finding a determination in the indeterminate, one that produces new indeterminateness, which in turn leads to new determinateness, and so on – ad infinitum.

4. The field of aesthetics is a special arena for the exercise of the capacity for self-determination – and therefore a special arena of freedom.

This thesis emphasizes the close relationship between the concept of aesthetic freedom and a general concept of personal freedom. In order to localize the specific difference between the two, we therefore need to recognize the unity between aesthetic freedom and other types of freedom – and thus to clarify the extent to which aesthetic freedom represents a characteristic variant of freedom.

5. Aesthetic practice constitutes one of the arenas of human freedom because it constitutes an arena for the play of human freedom.

This thesis reformulates a central concept in Kant’s aesthetic theory. For Kant, aesthetic perception is a distinguished manner of exercising freedom. It enables humans to actualize the potential of theoretical determination and practical self-determination – a potential that can be experienced and lived out here in a special way. As Kant describes at the beginning of his Critique of the Power of Judgment, when we enter the aesthetic state we are free from the compulsion of determining ourselves and the world. But there is a positive side to this negative freedom: In the play of aesthetic perception, we are free to experience the determinability of ourselves and the world. Kant, therefore, regards the experience of beauty (and the sublime) as a way of exercising humans’ most noble capacities. The wealth of the real opened up by aesthetic intuition is experienced as the relished confirmation of our ability
to determine this wealth, as well as the ability of this wealth to determine us in manifold ways.

It is important to remember that the concept of “play” in the work of Kant also plays a role when it comes to characterizing the objects of aesthetic experience. In §14 of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant remarks, “All form of the objects of the senses (of the outer as well as, mediately, the inner) is either *shape* or *play*: in the latter case, either play of shapes (in space, mime, and dance), or mere play of sensations (in time). The *charm* of colors or of the agreeable tones of instruments can be added, but *drawing* in the former and composition in the latter constitute the proper object of the pure judgment of taste.”

We should add by way of criticism, however, that even “drawing”, through its specific composition and dynamic, generates a specific “play of shapes”, though it might differ from the so-called “arts of time”. Kant’s more prominent use of the notion of play, however, is related to his characterization of the subject of aesthetic experience, for example: “In the judging of a free beauty (according to mere form) the judgment of taste is pure. No concept of any end for which the manifold should serve the given object and thus which the latter should represent is presupposed, by which the imagination, which is as it were at play in the observation of the shape, would merely be restricted.” Here Kant develops a basic (and thus minimal) concept of aesthetic examination, not yet taking into account the specific characteristics of encounters with works of art. This type of examination represents a way in which we synesthetically follow the simultaneous and successive play of appearances in the objects at hand, without any further intention of making use of these objects.

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9 Ibid, p. 114 (B 49f. / A49)
The “imagination at play” of which Kant speaks in §16 of *Critique of the Power of Judgment* should not be understood as an idle state of our cognitive powers just because it is not aimed at controlling their object theoretically or in practice. Instead, it opens up a paradigmatic – paradigmatically desirous – human *activity*, i.e. one of being-there-with and going-along-with, and thus of a realization of an abundance of forms and symbolic relations that we usually fail to recognize in our other forms of relating to the world. Kant’s description of this elementary form of aesthetic praxis places a particular emphasis on its self-sufficient character: “*We linger* over the consideration of the beautiful because this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself, which is analogous to (yet not identical with) the way in which we linger when a charm in the representation of the object repeatedly attracts attention, where the mind is passive.”\(^{11}\) When we perceive aesthetically, therefore, we are not merely touched in a receptive manner, but dwell in the objects of our perception in such a way that we are capable of following their variations in a varying fashion. When we perceive aesthetically, we take time for the moment – both for the momentary appearing of the objects of perception and for an involuntary encounter with ourselves.

We can therefore also say that the loss of the capacity for aesthetic attentiveness would not so much mean that we would miss *something*, but that we would miss *ourselves*. We would no longer be capable of assuring ourselves of the possibilities within in the realities of our life and within ourselves. We would therefore fail to experience that gain in an intensified feeling of being alive [*Lebensgefühl*] that comes along with taking pleasure in beauty – a feeling, as Kant puts it in §1 of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, in which we are free from the constraints of cognitive and practical success or failure.\(^{12}\) In a famous passage in a letter to

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\(^{11}\) Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 107 (BA 37)

\(^{12}\) “*Spirit*, in an aesthetic significance, means the animating principle in the mind. That, however, by which this principle animates the soul, the material which it uses for this purpose, is that which purposively sets the mental powers into motion, i.e., into a play that is self-maintaining and even strengthens the powers to that end.” Ibid, p. 192 (B 192 / A 190).
Markus Herz on July 9, 1771, Kant described the reason for this pleasure as follows: “Beauty is different from what is agreeable or useful. Usefulness gives but a mediate feeling of pleasure, while that of beauty is immediate. Beautiful things show [zeigen an] that man is at home in the world [dass der Mensch in die Welt passe] and that his view of things accords with the laws of his viewing.”\(^{13}\) The kind of fitting into the world that Kant has in mind here is primarily cognitive and instrumental, but at the same time it is linked to the possibility of rationally organizing the social and political world, because the subjects who receive this indication are assured of an essential condition of possibility of practical self-determination.

However, the experience of fitting into the world is – for Kant as well – not the sole trademark of aesthetic consciousness. After all, the experience of the sublime is characterized by the feeling of *not* merely being at home in the world, but of being *challenged* and *overwhelmed*, even if this feeling can be transformed into a “feeling that we have pure self-sufficient reason” (§27) and into the certainty of the “humanity in our person” (§28).\(^{14}\) Here it is humans’ potential for both theoretical *and* moral reason that enables a positive transformation of “displeasure” in the face of an overwhelming scenery. If we put these elements together – which, though it is not done in *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, is in fact necessary\(^{15}\) – then it follows that aesthetic experience proceeds by way of a liberation from the constraints of cognitive and practical commitment; it takes place in a *playful back-and-forth* between consonance and dissonance in our relation to the world and to ourselves.

That is precisely what makes aesthetic perception a both liberating and confounding, moving


\(^{14}\) Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 142 (B 99 / A 98), 145 (B 105 / A 104).

\(^{15}\) A separation of the aesthetic of “beauty” from that of “the sublime” fails to recognize what belongs together (in various ways and to various extents) within most aesthetic domains: the affirmation of what is alien *and* of what is familiar about aesthetic objects, as well as possible confusion through both; the comprehensibility and incomprehensibility of aesthetic objects; the movement beyond ourselves and back to ourselves that they incite. Aesthetic pleasure does not consist in experiencing the world either in apparent proportion or in apparent disproportion to our own possibilities, but rather in experiencing what is accommodating in what resists and what is resistant in what is accommodating, in experiencing dissonance in what is consonant and consonance in what is dissonant.
and entertaining *form of play* in human praxis, whose significance Kant emphasizes in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.\(^{16}\)

6. The practice of aesthetic perception and production culminates in states of “active passivity”.

Adorno, influenced by authors such as Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Valéry and modern art, radicalized Kant’s theory of aesthetic freedom. Like Kant, Adorno maintains that aesthetic freedom essentially consists in living out our otherwise hidden or distorted potential for perceiving and understanding. Inspiring works of art in particular succeed in giving their object a form that compels the reader, observer or listener to engage in a form of sensing awareness that is at once captivating and liberating – a celebration of receptiveness and spontaneity, of impressibility and sensitivity paired with imagination and the ability to understand. And all of this happens in a way that our normal thinking is simply incapable of achieving.

In his lecture on aesthetics during the winter semester of 1958/59, Adorno gives a rather emphatic description of this phenomenon with reference to music: “If, for instance, you truly listen to a complex symphonic movement in a way that connects all sensual aspects contained there; if you truly hear them and sensually perceive them in their unity and mediation; if you thus not only hear that which you hear as it appears to you now, but also hear it in its relation to what has already occurred in the work, and to what you are still to encounter, and finally to the whole, then that is certainly the highest possible measure of precise, sensual experience.”\(^{17}\) This highest possible form of sensual perception, however, also demands highly intellectual powers of comprehension, as we must follow the web of relations in such a

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way that every passage of the work appears in these relations. Therefore, Adorno is somewhat suspicious of the term “artistic enjoyment” [Kunstgenuss]. Especially in his twelfth lecture on January 8, 1959, which (once again) is dedicated to “the problem of the concept of beauty”, Adorno argues that the vitality and intensity of the experience of significant works of art must not be understood as a kind of self-confident consumption:

“Thus I would say that aesthetic experience essentially consists in taking part in an activity of comprehending a work of art by being in the work of art, by living in it, as it is often expressed in simple terms.”18 The metaphor of “living” here indicates above all the fact that – and just how much – subjects of artistic perception are moved by what they perceive. They experience themselves as part of an occurrence to which they are subjected, despite their active participation. Thus Adorno continues by saying that “enjoyment [Genuss] has no place here, because the type of experience I am trying to define for you in a certain sense represents a path away from the subject, whereas enjoyment is necessarily something that the subject gets something out of.”19 This not only represents a rejection of a culinary instrumentalization of aesthetic experience, but of every effort to derive some utility or result from the process of aesthetic experience. Thus Adorno says in the same lecture: “Not what a work of art ‘gives’ to us, but what we give to the work of art is important – i.e., the fact that we, in a certain kind of active passivity, of an exerted ‘giving of ourselves to the thing’, give to the thing that which it expects on its part.”20

“Active passivity” is the crucial term here. An encounter with works of art demands that we be willing and able to attend to them in a way that allows them to unfold their own processual nature, in a way that draws the listener, observer or reader into this process. The latter determine themselves actively in giving themselves over to a passive state of being.

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18 Ibid, p. 188.
19 Ibid.
In light of this, it is rather irrelevant whether this takes place, as Adorno puts it, in a mode of “exerted” [angestrengten] participation or, as Benjamin has it in his essay on the work of art with reference to cinema, in a mode of “distraction”. In either case, what is important is that we give ourselves over to the play of powers of the objects at hand. In either case, what is needed is a “reflective following” [relflektierender Mitvollzug] of the respective work. The “precise, sensual experience” of art implies a remembering and anticipating, a differentiating and combining, and thus implicitly or explicitly interpreting attentiveness.

Adorno’s description of aesthetic perception is one of willing devotion. When it comes to aesthetic freedom, we are not freed from some “thing”, but we give freedom to something – and thereby become free ourselves. Adorno also joins this ethic of aesthetic “giving” to a profound concept of happiness – which we achieve not only, but also through encounters with objects of art. After Adorno goes into more detail about the ecstatic dimension of the experience of art and its “liberating or uplifting” and “transcendending” character, he immediately turns to its hedonistic dimension: "These moments are certainly the most sublime and the most decisive moments of which artistic experience is capable. And it is certainly possible that these moments represent the origin of the notion that works of art can be enjoyed, as they truly are marked by a kind of pleasure [Beglückung] that, though it might not put all other moments of happiness to shame, can measure up to the highest moments of happiness there are, which have the same force [Gewalt] as do the most real moments we...

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21 There is an astounding correspondence between Adorno’s strong emphasis on the aspect of passivity – not only here, but also in his subversive utopian fantasy in aphorism #100 in Minima Moralia – and a passage in Friedrich Schlegel’s Lucinde, in which he writes: “Industry and utility are the angels of death who, with fiery swords, prevent man’s return to Paradise. Only calmly and gently, in the sacred tranquility of true passivity, can one remember one’s whole ego and contemplate the world and life. How does any thinking and writing of poetry take place, if not by complete dedication and submission to some guardian genius? And yet talking and ordering are only secondary matters in all the arts and sciences: the essence is thinking and imagining, and these are possible only in passivity. To be sure, it’s an intentional, arbitrary, and one-sided passivity, but it’s still passivity.” (Friedrich Schlegel, Lucinde (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 65f.
22 Ibid.
23 Adorno, Ästhetik, pp. 195, 196.
know.”\textsuperscript{24} The term “force” indicates the key moment of being drawn in by a work of art because of our own involvement in it. Just as in normal life, in the face of profound works of art we cannot “make” ourselves happy at our own command, we can only accept it an unreduced presence of mind.

Although for Adorno the intense experience of art in no way proves that humans fit into the world as it is, it does show that – and how – they could be at home there theoretically and in practice.\textsuperscript{25} Thus he writes: “The reality of works of art bears witness to the possibility of what is possible.”\textsuperscript{26} At a completely different place in his work – in a report on his scientific experiences in the USA from 1968 – Adorno formulates this point in a way that should certainly surprise his orthodox readers. After a serious critique of the scientific ideals of American scientists, Adorno speaks of the “potential of true humanity” and the “experience of the substance of democratic forms” he saw in everyday American life: “Although America is no longer the land of endless opportunity, there is still a feeling that everything is possible.”\textsuperscript{27} Ironically enough, Adorno here sees a positive side to the concept of conformity or adjustment, along with a remarkable theory of subjectivity. Adorno admits that “European intellectuals such as myself often tend to regard the concept of adjustment as a negative thing, as the extinguishing of spontaneity, of the autonomy of the individual.” Alluding to Goethe’s and Hegel’s critique of the “beautiful soul”, he then writes: “Both Goethe and Hegel denounced the illusion that the process of becoming human and acquiring culture is necessarily a development that moves from within to without. It is a process that takes place, as Hegel put it, also and especially through ‘alienation’. We do not become free by realizing

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{24} Ibid, 196f.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{25} At this point – and at many others – in his work, the experience of art subtly becomes a model of success interaction \textit{in general} – between subject and object no less than between subject and subject. The cognitive, ethical and aesthetic “freedom to the object”, as Adorno says in line with Hegel, both enables and depends on just such a “freedom to the subject.”}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{26} Theodor W. Adorno, \textit{Ästhetische Theorie} (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 200.}
ourselves as individuals – as the horrible phrase goes – but by going outside of ourselves, entering into relationships with others and giving ourselves over to them in a certain way. It is only then that we determine ourselves as individuals – not by watering ourselves as one would a small plant in order to become perfectly educated personalities.”\textsuperscript{28} In other words, heteronomy must be an essential dimension of autonomy, if the latter is not to decay and become egocentric isolation and alienation.

7. Processes of aesthetic perception and production are self-sufficient.

In the interpretation that I have given of Kant’s and Adorno’s theories of aesthetics, it is obvious why the capacity for aesthetic perception is anything but a marginal variety of freedom. It awakens the potential of human determinateness – active and passive – in a unique fashion. This is especially true of the entirety of aesthetic praxis, given the role played by beautiful and sublime nature in the works of Kant and Adorno. Furthermore, this is not only true of the kind of aesthetic experience I have focused on here, but of all creative processes of aesthetic production. Adorno placed special emphasis on this fact in the case of artistic production. But the decisive thought can already be found in Kant’s thesis of the productive indeterminateness of the productions of artistic “genius”.\textsuperscript{29} Even the activity of the artist, as much as it might differ from that of the viewer, mostly draws its energy from letting itself be determined by the object of its creation in the process of its creation. According to Adorno, from the perspective of artists the important thing is to make things of which they “do not know what they are”.\textsuperscript{30} This not only represents a liberation from previous conventions of artistic construction, both our own and that of others, but also the freedom to

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 146.

\textsuperscript{29} Kant, \textit{Critique of the Power of Judgment}, §49, p. 191 (B 192f. / A 190); Adorno, \textit{Ästhetische Theorie}, pp. 244ff.

let something happen in the exploration of the material at hand, something that opens up a space for self-encounter that cannot be anticipated.

Whoever takes part in processes of aesthetic production or perception participates in varieties of this kind of freedom. They involve themselves in acts that in a special way represent ends in themselves. What they do is good for many other things, because in the first instance they are worth it per se. It is the occurrence of aesthetic attentiveness itself that brings with it a more intense sense of human existence – regardless of what this attentiveness might also bring about in terms of insights, changes of attitude, a broadening of perspective, education and personal development. The playgrounds of aesthetic openness are not a mere training camp in which special skills are learned. They are opportunities for encountering what is indeterminate in what is theoretically and practically determinate.

8. The central virtue of aesthetic sensibility consists in the capacity for finding oneself through detachment from oneself.

This thesis accentuates the inner connection between aesthetics and ethics, which has often been emphasized, though with heterogeneous interpretations. We can only get a proper understanding of this connection, however, if we understand “ethics” as the fragile art of living a life. A well-lived life cannot but be caught up in a never-ending back and forth between knowing and not knowing, between taking care of oneself and being considerate towards others; it thus represents the risky attempt to do justice to oneself and others. This demands constantly putting our self-image to the test, in both a theoretical and practical sense. A life lived in self-respect and self-determination depends on our willingness to at least hypothetically alter our own beliefs, attachments, affinities and obsessions. As much as

31 This is something that Hegel was clearly aware of in his discussion of the “purpose” of art in his writings on aesthetics: “The aim of poetry is imagery and speech, not the thing talked about or its existence in practice. Poetry began when man undertook to express himself; for poetry, what is there is only spoken to be an expression.” Hegel, Lectures on Aesthetics, vol. II, p. 974.
this willingness might often represent a difficult and sometimes nearly unbearable demand, in the sphere of aesthetics it becomes a particular source of genuine pleasure.

Viewed in this way, the virtue of aesthetic sensibility proves to be a rather cardinal virtue. It is related to, though in no way synonymous with, virtues such as the ability to converse and love, humor, self-detachment, impartiality, sympathy, attentiveness, caution, imagination, curiosity, serenity and many others. Just like these and other virtues, aesthetic sensibility is tied to a potential to transcend and alienate ourselves. Like all virtues, it is marked by an internal ambivalence. No virtue is ever secure from its neighboring vices. There are cases in which all virtues can lead to harmful and even disgraceful behavior, just as there lies a potential for individual and social good in most real and supposed vices. We should thus do everything to avoid a crude moralization of aesthetic sensibility. It is precisely in the arts that our most important normative beliefs and attitudes – even and especially those that we took and take to be our best – are put into question. The experimental examination of these virtues is thus an indispensable part of the openness of artistic self-exploration, which mustn’t be closed off within the field of the aesthetic. But if aesthetic attentiveness replaces moral attentiveness, then it has crossed a line. Both have their time and place, though it is not always the same. The decisive gain that we can derive from aesthetic sensibility – especially compared to moral sensibility – consists in the capacity for the unregulated balancing and re-balancing of our trust and mistrust in the world, of self-certainty and self-doubt, loss of self and gain of self. That is what makes up the ethic of the aesthetic.

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9. The meaning of aesthetic praxis and the associated attitudes lies in becoming accustomed to becoming unaccustomed.

In his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, in the chapter on anthropology in the section on “subjective spirit”, Hegel gives a subtle analysis of the power of habit.\(^{33}\) Hegel views habit – more so than in the corresponding passages of his *Philosophy of Right*\(^{34}\) – as both an essential support and a structural hindrance to free human activity. It gives material form to the spiritual by forming physical and mental routines, which equip individuals with a second nature that make the conscious acquisition of skills and knowledge both unnecessary and impossible. It thus keeps the existence of the individual open “to be otherwise occupied and engaged – say with feeling and with mental consciousness in general”.\(^{35}\) Hegel gives a rather drastic description of the ambivalence of this operation in §410 of the *Encyclopedia*:

“And it is true that the form of habit, like any other, is open to anything we chance to put into it; and it is habit of living which brings on death, or, if quite abstract, is death itself: and yet habit is indispensable for the existence of all intellectual life in the individual, enabling the subject to be a concrete immediacy, an ‘ideality’ of soul – enabling the matter of consciousness, religious, moral, etc., to be his as this self, this soul, and no other, and be neither a mere latent possibility, nor a transient emotion or idea, nor an abstract inwardness, cut off from action and reality, but part and parcel of his being.”\(^{36}\) In other words, if the subject is to find itself, it must forget many of the views and skills it has acquired; it must forget the way it has become accustomed to attitudes that make up its character as a person.

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\(^{35}\) Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §401.

\(^{36}\) Ibid, §410.
Otherwise, it would run the risk of going “insane”. In this “liberation” of individuals from their merely “natural” character also lies the danger of becoming “indifferent” to their own aims in life. In the “self-gain” enabled by habit, there is also a seed of self-loss. In the extreme case Hegel has in mind, this can lead to death within lifetime, to a disappearance of our independence and individuality within corporeal and spiritual automatisms. We would then be so absorbed by mental and social conventions (Heidegger’s “Das Man”), by a kind of conformity and continuity lacking all difference and distance, that we would the ability to live our lives in a self-determined fashion. We lose the existential balance founded on webs of habits. The consequence is – or would be – intellectual and social decay: excessive conformity to the pre-determined paths of one’s own surroundings, which ultimately robs us of the air we need to breathe.

Of course, for Hegel, the world of objective spirit and ethical life, in which the institutions of right, the family and the organization of civil society are embedded, provide a significant amount of protection against this inner threat to subjective spirit. But within the Romantic aesthetic, and even in the works of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, early Lukács or Victor Shklovsky, just as it can also be found in the works of Valéry, Heidegger and Adorno, we find the idea that the power of aesthetic experience derives from a repeated withdrawal from that which to we have become accustomed – and thus from a breach with a power that lames us. Viewed in this way, aesthetic praxis enables a permanent process of accustoming ourselves to what we are unaccustomed to. The aesthetic stance in its many facets can be understood as a habitus aimed at continually thawing out petrified theoretical and practical attachments.

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37 Ibid, esp. §§ 402 and 406.
38 Ibid, §409.
Recalling my first thesis, we could say that in order to avoid going under, the subject must repeatedly go under. We must lose ourselves so that we do not lose ourselves. Of course, this rather emphatic formulation only makes sense if we distinguish between two forms of “going under”. On the one hand, there is a kind of self-loss in which the subject capitulates before its everyday understandings and roles, without any resistance or detachment; on the other hand, there is a kind of self-loss that enables the subject to give itself over to an uninhibited self-experimentation through non-functional acts of aesthetic experience.\(^{39}\) In the first case, the subject is in danger of losing itself in the “prose of life”, as Hegel terms it, and in the second case, it constantly finds occasion to revive itself in a “poeticizing” fashion, as Romanticists would say. Picking up on Benjamin and Cavell, however, we must add that an aesthetic holiday not only works against the force of habit, but attempts to preserve the liberating aspects of habit without succumbing to its constraining and oppressive aspects.\(^{40}\) The point here is not to strive for an illusionary re-enchantment of the modern forms if life, but to practice a conscious – sensual and imaginative – re-assurance of their hidden relations.\(^{41}\)

\section*{10. Aesthetic freedom is a constitutive dimension of freedom}

This thesis merely summarizes the tenor of the previous theses. It is crucial, however, that we not blur the distinction between aesthetic freedom and other kinds of freedom. There are, after all, numerous other practices for which the dialectic of losing and finding oneself is

\(^{39}\) This dual nature of self-loss is a central theme in Thomas Bernhard, \textit{Der Untergeher} (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1983).


\(^{41}\) Hegel makes at least a similar point when he remarks in a remarkable passage in his \textit{Lectures on Aesthetics}: “But the genuine ideal does not stop at the indeterminate and the purely inward; on the contrary; it must also go out in its totality into a specific contemplation of the external world in all its aspects. For, the human being, the entire centre of the ideal, \textit{lives}; he is essentially now and here, he is the present, he is individual infinity, and to life there belongs the opposition of an environment of external nature in general, and therefore a connection with it and an activity in it.” (\textit{Hegel’s Lectures on Aesthetics}, p. 245.)
characteristic. Here we might think of love, care, devotion, or the kind of going against the current we find within philosophy, of which Wittgenstein says: “When you are philosophizing you have to descend into primeval chaos and feel at home there.”42 And it is not only typical of artistic production, but for all kinds of creative work that we must give ourselves over to their challenges if we are to succeed at achieving something. The same is true for education or political activity. When it comes to all these forms of active involvement, we can therefore say that “active passivity” crucially defines the state of those involved – at least to the extent that the associated acts and experiences represent an autonomous encounter with other things and persons.

This finding, which recalls my first three theses, raises a number of questions as to the status of aesthetic freedom as a variant of human self-determination. What is special about the freedom of aesthetic praxis? To what extent is it a model, but just one model of the connection between determining and being-determined – a connection that is constitutive of freedom? And to what extent is it much more than a model, that is, a genuine form of the exercise of human freedom?

I have already given the basic answer in my fifth thesis: “Aesthetic practice constitutes one of the arenas of human freedom because it constitutes an arena for the play of human freedom.” Now we only need to repeat the implications of this thesis and those that follow it: Aesthetic perception (and production) represents a special variety of freedom because everything that follows from this activity follows from the fact that, in the first instance, nothing follows from it; because we willingly give ourselves over to everything that grabs, compels, forces, binds or unsettles us; because here all events are relieved of most of their practical consequences; because here the telos of our being involved is to not determine, but to let

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ourselves be determined and moved. For these reasons, aesthetic freedom is constitutive of the capacity for self-determination. By exercising this freedom, we play out our bodily and mental affinities – immediately activating our potential for receptivity and responsiveness, upon which we depend for all our other activities, if we seek to gain and preserve an unforced relation to ourselves.