

Aesthetic Comprehension of Abstract and Emotion Concepts: Kant's Aesthetics Renewed

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In § 49 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant puts forward a view that the feeling of pleasure in the experience of the beautiful can be stimulated not merely by perceptual properties, but by ideas and thoughts as well. The aim of this paper is to argue that aesthetic ideas fill in the emptiness that abstract and emotion concepts on their own would have without empirical intuitions. That is, aesthetic ideas make these concepts more accessible to us, by creating image schemas that allow us to think about these abstract concepts in a way linked to sensory experience, thereby imbuing them with a more substantive meaning and understanding.

I.

In § 49 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant puts forward a view that the feeling of pleasure in the beautiful can be stimulated not merely by perceptual properties, but by ideas and thoughts as well. He writes that beauty is «the expression of aesthetic ideas» (5:320, p. 197)¹. According to Kant, an aesthetic idea is a: «representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., concept, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible» (5:314, 92). He also states that an aesthetic idea is «an intuition (of the imagination) for which a concept can never be found adequate» (5:342, p. 218).

¹ References to Immanuel Kant will be given in the text to the volume and page number of the Akademie edition (Kants gesammelte Schriften, ed. Königlichen Preußischen [later Deutschen] Akademie der Wissenschaften [Berlin: Georg Reimer (later Walter De Gruyter), 1900). References are also given, after a semicolon, to the English translation of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge University Press, 2000), which includes the “First Introduction” (vol. 20 of the Akademie edition). References to *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998), are provided using the standard citations of the A and B editions (vols. 3 and 4 of the Akademie edition, respectively).

It is suggested accordingly that aesthetic ideas are concrete sensible representations of imagination (that is, images of some sort) and that these images are so rich and give rise to so much thinking that cannot be fully described by any determinate concepts.² Aesthetic ideas are thus akin to ordinary images (such as an image of a flower), but they are dissimilar to ordinary images in that no determinate concepts correspond to them (as an image of a flower corresponds to the concept of a flower). Since aesthetic ideas lack determinate concepts, they evade the possibility of cognition. That is, they cannot be cognized in an ordinary sense by connecting intuitions with determinate concepts.

According to Kant, aesthetic ideas can sensibly represent two kinds of concepts. On one hand, «invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc.» (5:314, p. 192). These ideas are: «concept[s] to which no intuition (representation of imagination) can be adequate» (5:314, p. 192). What is distinctive for them is that they can be thought, but not empirically encountered. For example, one can think of the idea of hell, but have no sensible intuition of it. On the other hand, Kant writes, aesthetic ideas can sensibly represent concepts such as «death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc.» (5:314, p. 192). These kinds of concepts can be classified as abstract and emotion concepts³. While abstract concepts refer to mental states, cognitive processes, personality traits, conditions, situation and events (for example, concepts such as time, thought, death, knowledge, truth, infinity, chaos, patriotism) that might have an indirect emotional or affective association (for example, the concept of death

² For related reading of aesthetic ideas, see A. Savile, *Aesthetic Reconstructions: The Seminal Writings of Lessing, Kant, and Schiller*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1987. He writes that aesthetic ideas are «concrete presentations of particular themes that are offered us by individual works of art» (p. 180). Robert Wicks explains aesthetic ideas similarly, calling them “meaning-rich images”. See: R. Wicks, “The Divine Inspiration for Kant’s Formalist Theory of Beauty”, *Kant Studies Online*, 2015, pp. 1-31.

³ Samantha Matherne calls such ideas “experience-oriented” aesthetic ideas. She argues, similarly as I do, that aesthetic ideas can represent not only moral and rational ideas, but also everyday kinds of ideas, concepts and feelings. See: S. Matherne, “The inclusive interpretation of Kant’s aesthetic ideas”, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 53/1, 2013, pp. 21-39). This idea has also been suggested by R. Lütke, “Kants Lehre von den ästhetischen Ideen”, *Kant-Studien*, 75, 1984, pp. 65-74. See also K. Rogerson, *Kant’s aesthetics: The roles of form and expression*, University Press of America, Lanham 1986, p. 99.

might be associated with negative emotional experiences such as fear), emotion concepts, on the other hand, refer directly to internal affective states (for example, concepts such as anger, happiness, depression, hopefulness, love, sadness, anxiety, jealousy, loneliness).⁴ Abstract and emotion concepts are similar to rational ideas in that they refer to non-physical objects but they are dissimilar to rational ideas in that their concrete instances can be experienced. For example, the abstract concept of truth is grounded in a particular situation or event, such as a child confessing to his parents, and an emotion concept such as the concept of anger is grounded in bodily experience such as behavioral signs like closing fist, grinding teeth and yelling. However, even though we can find examples of abstract and emotion concepts in ordinary experience, their full meaning extends beyond such experience. This is because the content of abstract and emotion concepts involves experiential features, emotional aspects and other introspective properties (such as beliefs, memories, intentions, goals, etc.)⁵. For example, the content of the concept “alienation” contains detailed features of the felt experience. But the felt experience or the *quality* of such a mental state cannot be adequately exhibited nor articulated through ordinary language.

We see that what is distinctive about both kinds of concepts (i.e. rational ideas and abstract/emotion concepts) is that they have no appropriate empirical intuition. In comparison to determinate concepts (such as a concept of a flower, a dog, a table, etc.) that have a direct empirical counterpart, ideas such as freedom, justice, happiness or loneliness have no particular shape, size or color, and one cannot see, touch or hear them. There is no direct perceptual experience that would correspond to such concepts. In other words, they lack a determinate schema, that is, an abstract image as to what these concepts ought to look like (in comparison to the schema of, say, a flower that makes up a flower-representation as a thing with perceptually observable

⁴ See J. Altarriba, “Expressions of emotion as mediated by context”, *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition*, 11/02, 2008, pp 165-167.

⁵ See L. W. Barsalou, K. Wiemer-Hastings, “Situating Abstract Concepts”, in D. Pecher, R. A. Zwaan (ed.), *Grounding Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 129-163; G. Vigliocco et al., “The Neural Representation of Abstract Words: The Role of Emotion,” *Cerebral Cortex*, 24/ 7, 2014, pp.1767-1777.

features such as petals, leaves and stem in a particular combination)⁶. They can therefore be classified as *indeterminate concepts*⁷.

Because aesthetic ideas are sensible representations of things that cannot be directly presented, they can be merely kind of metaphorical representations.⁸ Such representations are called *aesthetic attributes*. Kant explains the meaning of aesthetic attributes by contrasting them with logical attributes. While logical attributes «constitute the presentation of a given concept itself», aesthetic attributes, on the other hand, are «supplementary representations of the imagination [that] express only the implications connected with it [a concept] and its affinity with others» (5:315, p. 193). In other words, logical attributes refer to general representations that different objects of the same kind have in common and in virtue of which the determinate concept is applied. For example, logical attributes in the case of a concept of a flower are those attributes in virtue of which we recognize an object to be a flower (having attributes such as petals, leaves and stem). Aesthetic attributes, on the other hand, refer to secondary representations that accompany logical attributes. They are kind of associational thoughts or mental connections that hold between different concepts and objects. For

⁶ According to Kant, a schema is a sort of an image and a rule at the same time, that is, a rule for linking a set of sense data with its appropriate concept (A141/B180). A schema represents an abstract image of the essential properties and the relations that obtain between them. For example, a schema of a flower contains the essential features of a flower such as petals, leaves and stem in a certain combination. Even though there are different kinds of flowers, they all entail this rule in virtue of which they are recognized as flowers. Accordingly, a schema is necessary for us to have meaningful experiences.

⁷ On Kant's view, a concept is *determinate* if it can be adequately exemplified in sense experience. On the other hand, a concept is *indeterminate* if it does not have an adequate sensible correlate.

⁸ I qualify aesthetic ideas merely as a kind of metaphorical representations, because in this paper I leave it open as to whether aesthetic ideas can be identified with metaphors (as understood by contemporary theories of metaphors). The view that Kant's aesthetic ideas are much alike metaphors has been argued by K. Pillow, "Jupiter's Eagle and the Despot's Hand Mill: Two Views on Metaphor in Kant", *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 59/ 2, 2001, pp. 193-209 and S. Forrester, "Why Kantian Symbols Cannot Be Kantian Metaphors", *Southwest Philosophy Review*, 28/ 2, 2012, pp. 107-127. Nonetheless, there is also evidence in Kant's text that suggests a different view. See J. Forsey, "Metaphor and Symbol in the Interpretation of Art", *Symposium: Canadian Journal of Continental Philosophy/Revue canadienne de philosophie continentale*, 8/ 3, 2004, pp. 573-586). To decide this issue, a more detailed analysis of Kant's aesthetic ideas is required, but which I cannot pursue further in this paper.

example, Kant writes that Jupiter's eagle with the lightning in its claws is an aesthetic attribute of the idea of king of heaven (5:315, p. 193). Jupiter's eagle is not a logical attribute of the king of heaven, that is, it is not part of the concept of the king of heaven. When we think of the idea of a king of heaven, we do not have in mind an image of an eagle. Rather, the image of a Jupiter's eagle merely expresses certain associations and implications connected with the idea we have of the king of heaven (in terms of representing power, strength, freedom, being above the material world). Kant writes that aesthetic attributes constitute an aesthetic idea, as I will illustrate now by means of Sigalit Landau's contemporary video artwork *Dead Sea* (2005).

Landau's work features hundreds of watermelons floating on the Dead Sea, joined together by a string forming a circle. Between the watermelons, some of which are open thereby revealing the intense red color of their flesh, lies the artist's naked body. One of her arms is placed by her side, while the other one is stretched out, touching the open flesh of a watermelon. The video shows, in slow motion, how the string is pulled, thereby rotating the artist's body along with it until the circle is completely untied and out of sight. The video affords a stunning visual experience. However, there is much more to this work than its visual form being pleasing to the eye. Namely, these images work as aesthetic attributes, constituting an aesthetic idea. For example, an image of a watermelon could be an aesthetic attribute standing for a year in one's life. Watermelons are pulled by an unknown source, the image of which might stand as an aesthetic attribute for the idea of powerlessness and determinism. The naked body of the artist, pulled along by the string, brings to mind the sense of vulnerability and helplessness. Open watermelons, revealing the intense red color of their flesh, are like open wounds, symbolizing the presence of blood and pain in one's life. Watermelons are half submerged in the sea which may be an aesthetic attribute standing for the idea of life itself. Moreover, since it is the salt-saturated water of the Dead Sea, this in addition stands as an aesthetic attribute for the idea of harshness of life itself. The collection of these aesthetic attributes constitute the aesthetic idea of the work, that is, a concrete sensible representation of an idea, such as the idea of the inevitability of death or the idea of inseparability

of life, pain and struggle. Even though these ideas do not have a determinate empirical counterpart, they can nevertheless be depicted through the synthesis of aesthetic attributes (collection of associations and thoughts) that the visual form evokes. In this way we are able to think about these ideas in terms of a concrete perceptual experience.

As this example illustrates, the relationship between aesthetic ideas, aesthetic attributes and indeterminate concepts is analogous to the relationship that exists between empirical intuitions, logical attributes and determinate concepts. Just like an ordinary image (say, an image of a flower) is a concrete representation of logical attributes (set of marks thought in the concept of a flower) that constitute the determinate concept of a flower, so too an aesthetic idea appears to be a concrete representation of aesthetic attributes (set of associations) that constitute the indeterminate concept (say, of the inevitability of death). That is, both empirical intuition (flower-image) and an aesthetic idea (inevitability of death-image) are particular representations of imagination; they are both product of the synthesis of imagination⁹. But whereas empirical intuition is an external representation of imagination, aesthetic idea, Kant writes, is an «inner intuition» of imagination (5:314, p. 192). Kant does not explain what he means by an aesthetic idea being an inner intuition of imagination, but I take it to refer to a certain kind of inner picturing of thoughts and associations that occur in our mind as we reflect on the object or an artwork¹⁰. What I want to suggest is that just like an empirical intuition (say, flower-image) is a product of the imaginative synthesis of various sense impressions, so too an aesthetic idea, as an inner (mental) picture, is a product of the imaginative synthesis of

⁹ According to Kant, synthesis of the imagination is a mental activity that includes different ways of gathering and combining together the manifold of intuition. It refers to the activity of apprehension, or gathering together the manifold of intuition, and reproduction, or keeping in mind the succession of apprehended intuitions. Both activities are necessary for perceptual representation or image formation (in addition to the synthesis of recognition, or providing the necessary unity of the synthesized manifold, which is performed by the understanding). See A99-A107.

¹⁰ For a similar reading see K. Berry, “Kandinsky, Kant, and a Modern Mandala”, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 42/4, 2008, pp. 105-110. He refers to an aesthetic idea as a “mental image” or a “mind picture” (106).

various thoughts and associations (i.e. aesthetic attributes)¹¹. The difference is that in the case of an empirical intuition the synthesis of imagination is governed by a determinate concept (in order to recognize a particular object, say as a flower, the imagination must follow the rule as specified by the concept of a flower), while in the case of an aesthetic idea, the synthesis of imagination is not determined by any rule and thus it is in a free play: «the aesthetic idea can be called an inexponible representation of the imagination (in its free play)» (5:343, p. 218).

Accordingly, an aesthetic idea satisfies the conditions required for Kant's notion of the free play of imagination. Namely, an aesthetic idea is a sensible representation of indeterminate concepts (such as hopelessness, loneliness, king of heaven, etc.). Yet, one does not know what these concepts ought to look like, that is, one does not have an appropriate schema for such ideas. But if one does not have a schema for such ideas, then one does not have determinate rules in accordance with which to produce (or recognize) a manifold for such ideas. But this means that imagination and understanding are in a free play. That is, aesthetic attributes that constitutes an aesthetic idea are combined together freely, without being governed by any determinate rule as to how the combination ought to proceed. On Kant's view, it is this experience of the freedom in the play of imagination that produces our aesthetic experience of beauty and ugliness (feeling of pleasure or displeasure).

It is not, however, every combination of aesthetic attributes that affords an insight (i.e. *expresses* an aesthetic idea). Namely, an indeterminate concept is communicated by means of the combination of aesthetic attributes, that is, how set of associational thoughts induced by a perceptual image are combined together, and this is a matter of taste or aesthetic judgment. Taste is a critical capacity to experience the mental state of free harmony between imagination and understanding, that is, to experience a sense of freedom in the playful

¹¹ I take it that Chignell also understands aesthetic ideas in this way, when he writes that an aesthetic idea «involves a plurality of representations or thoughts linked together». A. Chignell, "Kant on the normativity of taste: The role of aesthetic Ideas", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 85/ 3, 2007, pp. 415-433, at p. 424.

interaction between different associational thoughts that is not predicted by any determinate rules, but which is nevertheless appropriate for the expression of an aesthetic idea. This is, in a nutshell, the idea Kant has in mind when he says that «genius really consists in the happy relation [...] of finding ideas for a given concept on the one hand and on the other hitting upon the expression for these, through which the subjective disposition of the mind that is thereby produced, as an accompaniment of a concept, can be communicated to others» (5:317, p. 194). An aesthetic idea by itself is merely a product of the free play of imagination offering a rich and novel collection of aesthetic attributes (wealth of associational thoughts). But in order for such an aesthetic idea to be intelligible, it must be combined with the understanding: «that requires a faculty for apprehending the rapidly passing play of the imagination and unifying it into a concept» (5:317, p. 195). The combination of aesthetic attributes must be internally coherent and purposive for the presentation of a given indeterminate concept¹². If aesthetic attributes were not combined together in this way, the result would be a meaningless and nonsensical representation, or what Kant calls «original nonsense» (5:308, p. 186)¹³.

It follows from this that taste or experience of free harmony between imagination (abundance of thoughts and images) and understanding (indeterminate concepts) is necessary for the expression of an aesthetic idea that makes sense to others. In order to recognize a particular aesthetic idea as representing a certain indeterminate concept, the combination of aesthetic

¹² This idea has also been pointed out by D. Crawford, “Kant’s Theory of Creative Imagination”, in P. Guyer (ed. by), *Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment: Critical Essays*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Maryland 2003, pp. 143-170; B. Sassen, “Artistic Genius and the Question of Creativity”, in P. Guyer (ed. by), *Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment: Critical Essays*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Maryland 2003, pp. 171-180; P. Lewis, “Original Nonsense: Art and Genius in Kant’s Aesthetics”, in G. M. Ross, T. McWalter (eds.), *Kant and his Influence*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York 2005, pp. 126-145; A. Nuzzo, *Kant and the Unity of Reason*, Purdue University Press, West Lafayette, Indiana 2005, p. 309.

¹³ A fine example of such a nonsensical representation is Lewis Carroll’s poem *Jabberwocky* (1871). The poem is a play of made-up words, which do not have a specific meaning and are artist’s original inventions. Even though the words themselves may be said to be a product of artist’s use of free imagination and therefore exhibit originality, their combination however carry no meaning.

attributes must be internally consistent and purposive in respect to the idea it aims to express (similarly as the combination of logical attributes in an empirical intuition must be in a certain combination in order to be recognized as representing a certain empirical concept). But, it is Kant's idea that experience of free harmony produces the feeling of pleasure and perception of the beautiful. This means that experience of the feeling of pleasure is required for the expression of an aesthetic idea and thus for the recognition of an indeterminate concept in the particular representation. That is, one must experience pleasure in order to be able to grasp the idea.

In fact, it is the feeling of pleasure itself that serves as a means of recognizing a particular aesthetic idea as representing an indeterminate concept. Namely, it is distinctive for indeterminate concepts that they lack a determinate schema as to what these concepts ought to look like. This means then that there is also no determinate way to demonstrate why an indeterminate concept and a particular aesthetic idea agree with each other. This is different in the case of a determinate concept such as the concept of a flower and its empirical intuition, the image of a flower, since in this case we can demonstrate clearly for why they are in agreement by simply pointing out some of its features, such as having leaves, petals and stem in a certain combination. While we can explicitly articulate criteria for why we would classify something as a flower, we cannot state such criteria that would identify a particular aesthetic idea as representing an indeterminate concept. For example, we cannot explicitly point out as to why the aesthetic idea stimulated by the image of watermelons floating on the sea is in harmony with the idea of the inevitability of death. Nonetheless, we can still recognize that they are in harmony, the difference being only that this harmony is recognized through the feeling of pleasure. It is the feeling of pleasure that guides us to determine which association is the appropriate one for the expression of an idea. For instance, it feels right to associate the images of open watermelons with wounds and pain, rather than with something else, say with the summer time of my youth. Grasping the meaning of the work is a slow process of testing which association in combination with another one feels appropriate in capturing the concluding idea.

Accordingly, the feeling of pleasure substitutes for the role of determinate concepts in an ordinary cognition. That is, we come to recognize a particular aesthetic idea as representing an indeterminate concept in the same way as we come to recognize a particular object being of a certain determinate kind (say, being a flower). The difference is that in the case of an aesthetic idea this recognition proceeds by means of the feeling of pleasure and in making an aesthetic judgment, while in the case of recognizing an object being of a particular kind no pleasure is produced and the judgment is cognitive. The feeling of pleasure in the beautiful has a cognitive function, namely a recognitional role (as determinate concepts have in ordinary cognition). The feeling of pleasure is the way one recognizes a particular sensible manifold as representing those concepts that go beyond sensory experience and which are difficult or impossible to describe in all details by using literal language. Such a view nicely explains the phenomenology of our experience of beauty as being not merely pleasing, but also deeply moving and immensely satisfying. Namely, beauty (as an expression of aesthetic ideas) bridges the gap that indeterminate concepts on their own would leave without empirical intuitions.

II.

In the previous section I examined the relationship between aesthetic ideas and beauty (aesthetic pleasure). I argued that the feeling of pleasure can serve as a means of recognizing a particular aesthetic idea as representing an indeterminate concept. My aim in the following is to take a longer look at cognitive value of aesthetic ideas and to explain what Kant means by referring to the presentation of artworks as “kinds of cognition” (5:305, p. 184).

To begin with, Kant seems to hold the view that aesthetic ideas are valuable because they give us an insight into the world of ideas and state of affairs that lie beyond sensory experience. Furthermore, he believes that aesthetic ideas are able to do that by making these ideas and state of affairs (i.e. indeterminate concepts) “sensible” (5:314, 192). This would suggest that on Kant’s view, indeterminate concepts, such as freedom, hopelessness,

loneliness, etc., too have to be connected in some way to empirical intuition, that is, they must refer to something that we can actually experience, if they are to be truly meaningful. Consider, for example, one's experience of hopelessness. While we may experience our own state of hopelessness, there are limits to the degree of understanding of the idea of hopelessness itself that is available only from our own states. Through expression of an aesthetic idea, however, we can gain a different perspective on this idea, for example, what the state of hopelessness might look like, which can consequently contribute to a richer understanding of this idea. That is, aesthetic ideas make these indeterminate concepts more accessible to us, by creating image schemas that allow us to think about these concepts in a way linked to sensory experience, thereby imbuing them with a more substantive meaning and understanding.

Such a view is implied in Kant's claim that concepts without intuition are empty (A51/B75). He refers to empirical concepts which need to be connected to empirical intuition in order to make sense of experience. Without empirical intuition, empirical concepts are mere words, without any substantive meaning. But if knowledge requires both, a concept and an empirical intuition, then the question is how we can truly have understanding of indeterminate concepts considering that they do not have an adequate empirical intuition?

That our understanding of indeterminate concepts is indeed limited is evident from our feelings of insecurity and struggle that we experience each time we try to explain the meaning of concepts such as freedom, love, hopelessness or vulnerability. Ralph Ellis nicely describes this experience as following: «When we begin to say what we mean by 'in love,' most of us find ourselves struggling, questioning and revising what we think we mean by it [...]. There was an unsureness, a hesitance, a fear of saying what we did not mean, or not being able to say what we did mean»¹⁴. However, we do not

¹⁴ R. Ellis, *Questioning Consciousness: The Interplay of Imagery, Cognition, and Emotion in the Human Brain*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam/Philadelphia 1995, 73.

experience any difficulty in grasping the meaning of empirical concepts. The meaning of the concept, say, of the flower is quickly available to us in terms of a specific set of physical properties that can be sensory perceived. Ellis writes that our attempts in explaining the meaning of empirical concepts are accompanied by the feeling of confidence «that we *could* call up certain images, but normally without actually calling them up in order to prove to ourselves that we can do it»¹⁵. Our understanding of concepts is ultimately dependent on our ability to explain their meanings in imaginable terms: «The stronger this feeling of confidence that we could ultimately explicate the relevant ostensive (i.e., imageable) conditions, the more clearly we think we understand the concept»¹⁶. But in comparison to empirical concepts, indeterminate concepts do not have a physical, perceptual and thus imaginable referent. To the extent that such concepts lack a direct perceptual and imaginable counterpart, they are more difficult to comprehend and understand.

Such a view is in fact supported by contemporary studies in cognitive science. Numerous research studies show that abstract and emotion concepts are much more difficult to understand than concrete or determinate concepts. This difference is known as the *concreteness effect* and is commonly explained by two main theories, that is, Dual Coding Theory (DCT) and Context Availability Theory (CAT). In short, DCT claims that comprehension of concepts depends on two interconnected system, a verbal system (logogen), which is responsible for processing verbal information, and an imaginal system (imagen) responsible for processing nonverbal information and for generating mental images.¹⁷ While concrete concepts activate both verbal and imaginal system, abstract concepts activate merely verbal-linguistic system, since they lack physical–perceptual referents. According to this theory, abstract and emotion concepts are harder to understand because they lack an additional perceptual source of information that concrete concepts have. CAT, on the other hand, claims that conceptual processing depends on contextual

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷ Main advocate of DCT is A. Paivio, *Mental Representations: A Dual Coding Approach*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990.

information.¹⁸ For example, understanding the meaning of a concept chair depends not merely on knowing its physical properties, but also relevant situations in which the object is found or used for. The availability of such contextual information presumably increases conceptual processing. Abstract and emotion concepts are more difficult to understand because they have a weaker connection to contextual information.

In sum, both theories show that perceptual information plays an important role in conceptual processing. That is, in order for us to comprehend and fully understand abstract thoughts and ideas they must be in some sense connected with concrete and imaginable representations. One way to evoke imagery for abstract and emotions concepts is by means of their associations with empirical concepts. For instance, the abstract concept “religion” can evoke imagery indirectly by means of its association to the empirical concept “church”. Or, the abstract concept “justice” can evoke imagery through its association with a particular situation, such as “court trial”. Availability of such referential imagery presumably eliminates concreteness effect and produces better processing and understanding of abstract phenomena.

However, it is difficult to see how such referential imagery could grasp the meaning of abstract and emotion concepts as it is determined by our own subjective experiences. It has been argued by numerous studies in cognitive sciences that the content of abstract and emotion concepts involves not merely features that can be explicitly articulated and captured in words and propositions, but also experience-related properties.¹⁹ These experience-related properties presumably appear to be central to the content of abstract and emotion concepts. Indeed, this seems to be the case. Consider, for

¹⁸ P. J. Schwanenflugel, “Why are Abstract Concepts Hard to Understand?,” in P. Schwanenflugel (ed. by), *The Psychology of Word Meanings*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, 1991, pp. 223-250.

¹⁹ See: L.W. Barsalou, K. Wiemer-Hastings, “Situating Abstract Concepts”, in D. Pecher, R. A. Zwaan (eds), *Grounding Cognition: The Role of Perception and Action in Memory, Language, and Thinking*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, pp. 129-163; P. J. Schwanenflugel “Why are Abstract Concepts Hard to Understand?,” in P. Schwanenflugel (ed. by), *The Psychology of Word Meanings*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale, 1991, pp. 223-250; S.T. Kousta et al., “The Representation of Abstract Words: Why Emotion Matters”, *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 140/1, 2011, pp. 14-34; L. W. Barsalou, “Perceptual symbol systems”, *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 22/ 4, 1999, pp. 577-660.

example, the concept of hopelessness. One can explicitly articulate the meaning of hopelessness as being an emotion with a negative viewpoint for the future. However, this conceptual meaning does not offer and cannot give a full account of the idea of hopelessness as we experience it from the inside. Words and concepts refer to our experiences indirectly by means of general characteristics that are abstracted from our experiences, and as such they are logically incapable of grasping and communicating introspective, affective and emotional aspects associated with hopelessness. That is to say, they cannot fully capture one's experience of hopelessness – for example, the feeling of powerlessness itself or how it feels to have negative thoughts and beliefs about future, or how these feelings lead one to experience self-loathing, worthlessness, incapability, and ultimately result in self-destructive thoughts and behaviors. But how we experience hopelessness does appear to have an effect on our understanding of the concept of hopelessness itself. Mark Johnson, who argues for the qualitative dimension of meaning as part of our understanding of abstract phenomena, captures this idea accordingly: «the meaning is in what you think and feel and do, and it lies in recurring qualities, patterns, and structures of experience that are, for the most part, unconsciously and automatically shaping how you understand, how you choose, and how you express yourself»²⁰. Something similar is pointed out by Eugene Gendlin, an advocate of the theory of experienced meanings: «Every individual lives in his subjective experiencing and looks out at the world from it and through it»²¹. Accordingly, if it is true that the content of our abstract and emotion concepts entails to a large degree experience-related properties, that is, our own subjective experiences, then it would seem to follow that we cannot determine the meaning of abstract and emotion concepts until we include some of our subjective experiences as well. These experiences provide an additional source of information that is required for a more complete understanding of abstract phenomena.

²⁰ M. Johnson, *The Meaning of the Body: Aesthetics of Human Understanding*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London 2007, p. 61.

²¹ E. T. Gendlin, *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning: A Philosophical and Psychological Approach to the Subjective*, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, Illinois 1997), p. 228.

Every subjective experience expresses one's relation to the world; it is shaped by one's conscious or unconscious beliefs, thoughts, feelings, motives and desires. These introspective, emotional and affective aspects are part of our subjective experiences, and an experience has a meaning that it has in virtue of these aspects and connections that obtain between them. Thus, to understand the meaning of a subjective experience requires us to comprehend the coherence and interconnections of these aspects. Robert Solomon, an advocate of a cognitive theory of emotions, expresses this idea similarly: «emotional experience is unintelligible without understanding the background of an emotion»²².

However, while we are mostly aware of the experience itself (say, that we feel angry, lonely or hopeless), we are not fully aware of the various introspective and emotional aspects that comprise the background of experience. As Ortony nicely puts it, «Experience does not arrive in little discrete packets, but flows, leading us imperceptibly from one state to another»²³. That is, introspective and emotional aspects of an experience are often fleeting, evading and difficult to comprehend in all their details. Unlike ordinary perception of mind-independent objects, say seeing a table, whereby we can comprehend all the details of the object as long as we sufficiently long look at it, the state of our mental processes are continuously changing, which makes it difficult for us to comprehend all the passing mental processes and to grasp all the details of the experience. It is hard, if not impossible to pay attention and to describe accurately all the movements and sequences of our thoughts and feelings. When we are in a state of an intense experience, we usually do not have the capacity to concentrate and to follow all the undergoing mental processes. Besides, it is argued that self-observation itself can often disrupt the genuine character of the experience. For example, if we concentrate on analysing our experience while having it (say of anxiety, or anger), then this introspection might change or diminish the intensity of the

²² R. C. Solomon, *True to Our Feelings: What Our Emotions Are Really Telling Us*, Oxford University press, Oxford 2007, p. 241.

²³ A. Ortony, "Why Metaphors Are Necessary and Not Just Nice", *Educational Theory*, 25/1, 1975, pp. 45-53, at 46.

experience itself. This is because introspection requires focused attention and clarity of mind, but which is not something that is present in one's experience of anxiety or anger.

Accordingly, we can see that it is difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend all the introspective and emotional aspects of our experiences. But not being able to comprehend all the details of our emotional experiences makes the emotion and abstract concepts that refer to those experiences to certain extent cognitively unavailable. In what follows, I show that aesthetic ideas can help us to overcome these cognitive limitations. The gist of the argument is that aesthetic ideas make these experiential features of abstract and emotion concepts salient, thereby available for our acknowledgement and for further analysis.

In the previous section I argued that aesthetic ideas are products of the synthesis of imagination, comprised of aesthetic attributes, i.e. thoughts, associations and other mental representations instigated by the artwork. This implies that aesthetic ideas are able to capture and unify a manifold of introspective and emotional aspects of our experiences. By bringing these aspects together into one unified whole, aesthetic ideas help us grasp the connection between different aspects and thereby comprehend the meaning of an experience. Given that aesthetic ideas are products of the imaginative synthesis bringing together various mental aspects into a unity, it would be fair to say that aesthetic ideas do not merely reveal the meaning of an experience, but they provide meaning to it in the first place. That is to say, the meaning of an experience is not acquired prior to its expression in aesthetic ideas. Rather, the meaning of an experience is the subject as well as product of aesthetic ideas. Aesthetic ideas provide meanings to our experiences as well as contribute to the conscious recognition and understanding of these experiences.

Aesthetic ideas furnish the meaning of an experience by selecting, specifying and bringing together different mental aspects. Since there can be many different ways of selecting and combining aspects together, there can be many different meanings of an experience instigated by an aesthetic idea. Each expression of an aesthetic idea brings along a different meaning of an

experience and thereby a different perspective on indeterminate concepts. To see exactly how aesthetic ideas can reveal and give a meaning to indeterminate concepts, let us consider Michael Haneke movie *The Seventh Continent* (1989).

The movie is an agonizing story of a well-situated Austrian family and their attempt to escape the feeling of emotional and social isolation in the modern world by choosing to commit a suicide. The mental state of emptiness and depersonalization that accompanies everyday life of this family is represented through images that are focused on objects, rather than on subjects. We do not see characters' faces, but merely fragmented and isolated shots of their hands turning off the alarm clock, opening curtains, putting toothpaste on brush, tying shoes, making coffee. Through such a cinematic technique that emphasizes the state of imprisonment by our daily routines, Haneke managed to give a perceptible form to the feeling of the emptiness of one's existence, and thereby provided us with a rare opportunity of *recognizing* certain mental states, emotions and ideas that cannot be directly represented. We often experience such mental states, yet with a difficulty to have a clear understanding of it. Through the objectification of the idea of emotional isolation itself, we have an extraordinary opportunity to perceive this emotion in a more comprehensive way, and thus to see more clearly the underlying beliefs and attitudes that empowers existence of this mental state itself. In particular, the movie offers one of many possible ways to understand the experience of emotional emptiness and alienation. In this case, the meaning of an experience is brought forth by carefully selecting and specifying certain aspect of experience. For example, the feeling of being trapped in the life of routines as expressed by the depiction of mechanically performed daily tasks, the idea of depersonalization and loss of communication as conveyed by the narration accentuating the monotony of characters' day to day lives and their impersonal exchange of words, and how these feelings ultimately lead to the experience of despair and anger towards the world, as particularly vividly expressed by the images of characters' excessively aggressive demolition of their house and all their possessions and

finally to the decision to escape the feeling of imprisonment by choosing to commit a suicide.

Haneke's movie offers one particular form that an experience of emotional emptiness and alienation can take, but there can be many other possible ways of expressing the meaning of this experience. To give an example, Edvard Munch's painting *Evening on Karl Johan Street* (1892) conveys the idea of emotional isolation and alienation by depicting a crowd of people, detached and isolated from one another, with indistinct faces, and thus by emphasizing the experience of anonymity, isolation and loss of self-awareness that adds to yet another meaning the experience of alienation can have for us. Both, Haneke and Munch instantiated the same indeterminate concept of alienation and emotional isolation, yet they expressed a different meaning of an experience of alienation. That is to say, they expressed two different aesthetic ideas and communicated in two different ways what was previously implicit and undifferentiated. In this way, artworks that express aesthetic ideas can significantly help us in our attempts to understand experiential meanings of indeterminate concepts and, thereby, help us to obtain a more complete comprehension of these concepts.