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Alessandro Ferrara

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Alessandro Ferrara

Does Kant share Sancho's dream?

Judgment and *sensus communis*

Abstract In this paper the notion of *sensus communis*, as articulated by Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, is discussed from the vantage point of the author's project of exporting the model of exemplary universalism underlying reflective and, specifically, *aesthetic* judgment beyond the realm of aesthetics. In the first section, the relevance of such a project relative to an appraisal of the new and un superseded philosophical context opened by the Linguistic Turn is elucidated. Then the centrality of *sensus communis*, for making sense of the specific universalism inherent in reflective judgment, is highlighted. In the second section, the limitations inherent in two opposite strategies for conceptualizing *sensus communis* are discussed: namely, the hermeneutic idea of a 'horizon' and the phenomenological notion of a life-world on one hand, and the Kantian minimalist, naturalized concept of *sensus communis* on the other. The former is argued to become entangled in relativism, the latter to run against our intuitions concerning the inter-subjective constitution of the subject. In the final section, a third notion of *sensus communis* is offered, still compatible with the Kantian conception, different from the Gadamerian concept of a tradition or to the phenomenological notion of *Lebenswelt*, yet still capable of offering a plausible ground for the exemplary universalism of aesthetic judgment. Expanding on Kant's view of aesthetic pleasure, *sensus communis* is understood as consisting of a universal capacity, on the part of every human being, to sense from within a plurality of coordinates the flourishing of human life and what favours it.

Key words authenticity · exemplary universalism · identity · judgment · Linguistic Turn · *sensus communis*

In this article I would like to explore the notion of *sensus communis*, as articulated by Kant in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, from the vantage point of the philosophical project of exporting the model of

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exemplary universalism underlying reflective and, specifically, *aesthetic* judgment beyond the realm of aesthetics. This model of universalism, in fact, is fully compatible with the horizon opened by the Linguistic Turn and provides a viable alternative to the various kinds of proceduralism whose appeal is now declining and to the neo-naturalism of contemporary philosophy of mind.

My focus of interest is then on what might be reasonably expected from a conception of common sense in our own philosophical context. In turn, this reflection on the nature, philosophical function and limitations of a notion of common sense is understood as part of a more comprehensive inquiry into the relation of reason to judgment. In the first section, I will expand on the background assumptions underlying this project. In the second, some limitations inherent in Kant's own account of *sensus communis* will be highlighted. And in the final section I will outline an alternative approach which is still compatible with the Kantian framework: an 'intra-Kantian' alternative, so to speak.

The contemporary relevance of the problem of *sensus communis*

My starting point is that we live in a philosophical predicament which in at least one respect resembles the one inhabited by Kant. Kant was fascinated by Newtonian physics because physics promised to bring together two things in the philosophical world that he had inherited from the past had always been separated by an abyss – namely *certainty* and *experience*. In classical and medieval thought, certainty was associated with logic, mathematics and other formal disciplines, whereas the realm of human experience was the realm of *doxa*, of opinion and *uncertainty*. Newtonian physics, instead, had the potential for enabling us to know things related to experience with the same degree of certainty afforded by the formal disciplines – *a priori synthetic judgment* is the technical name that Kant gave to this philosophical treasure embedded in modern physics.

More than two centuries thereafter, we live in a structurally similar predicament, characterized by another abyss that seems equally unbridgeable. Ever since Wittgenstein's and Heidegger's different but converging versions of the Linguistic Turn, many of us have become convinced that it is impossible to grasp any segment of reality independently of the filter of some interpretive framework (be it a language-game, a tradition, a paradigm, a conceptual scheme, a vocabulary) and that the plurality of existing interpretive frameworks cannot be reduced to unity without some significant loss of meaning.

The philosophical world in which we live is then one traversed by a new abyss which separates the universalist aspiration without which

philosophy dissolves into mere description on one hand, and the mere surrender to the unbridgeable pluralism of interpretive schemes that hold us hostage on the other. We currently have on offer theories and conceptions – such as the theory of rational choice, game theory, computer science, analytical Marxism, utilitarianism, systems theory in social science and several others – that embed universalistic claims but poorly match our pluralistic intuitions. And on the other hand we are confronted with theories and conceptions that start from pluralistic assumptions – think of cultural anthropology, cultural studies, the sociology of culture, Rorty's ironic philosophy, the Gadamerian rehabilitation of prejudice, the communitarian emphasis on tradition – but fail to quite vindicate our urge for universalism, even if by 'universalism' just the simple requirement is meant that theories and norms exert some kind of cogency not just *within*, but somehow also *beyond*, their context and time of origin.

From this understanding of our philosophical predicament the idea can be drawn that for us aesthetics, and more specifically reflective judgment, plays potentially the same role that Newtonian physics played for Kant: namely, it offers not so much a specific doctrine, but rather a *model* of validity which, through its central notion of *exemplary validity*, allows us to reconcile universalism and pluralism. Underlying this model we find a simple idea.

The traditional modern answer to the question 'How can a theory or conception born in a "here and now" project a cogency "there and then"?' used to be: 'By virtue of a law or principle that originates from no local context – being ingrained in a cosmic order, in a disenchanted nature, in God's will, in the transcendental constitution of the subject – and under which therefore all local contexts can be subsumed'. The new answer that can be gleaned from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* replaces the normativity of a *law* or *principle* with the normativity of the *example*. What emerges from within a historical and cultural context – be it a theory, a constellation of cultural values, a political institution – can exert a cogency outside its original context by virtue of entering a relation of exceptional congruency with the subjectivity, individual or collective, that has brought it into being, an exceptional congruency for designating which I have found the term 'authenticity' particularly congenial. This congruency can be said, with Kant, to move the imagination, to generate a sense of the affirmation and furtherance of life and to be communicable to everybody.

The advantage of *exemplary* universalism is self-evident: the problem of translating across contexts (with its inherent dilemma of either trivializing difference, by postulating perfect commensuration and translatability in a neutral language, or jeopardizing universalism, by failing to reunify the plurality of local contexts) simply fades away. For the cogency of the example, differently than the cogency of a law or principle, is

entirely self-referential, immanent, and in its being apprehended *juxta propria principia* requires no translation. And yet I do not need to recall here that for Kant the reflective judgment as to the exemplarity of the example, no less than the judgment as to the beauty (to stay with Kant's perhaps dated terminology) of the work of art, cannot be reduced to a report of idiosyncratic and unquestionable preferences (like the judgment on the pleasurable) but raises a claim to the effect that everybody else *ought to agree*. Therefore normativity and universalism are definitively there in reflective judgment, in the form of an anticipation of the general consensus of those who possess the necessary expertise for assessing the matter.

Borrowing then from the vocabulary of the *Third Critique*, we could say that the exemplarity of a political institution, a constitutional essential, a social movement, consists, no less than the exemplarity of a work of art, of its ability to set the [political] imagination in motion, by virtue of an exceptional self-congruency. This kind of exemplary universalism which needs no transcontextual 'covering-laws' or transcendental principles, not even discursive or procedural principles, functions – as Paul Ricoeur once put it – as 'a *trail of fire* issuing from itself' that sets an entire forest on fire yet always by catching one tree after another, in a singular way.

If we assume that this interpretive framework makes sense, then we are still in need to investigate further the answer to be given – in a philosophical horizon that relative to the one envisaged by Kant has been reshaped by the Linguistic Turn and by the rise of an intersubjective view of subjectivity – to the same question that puzzles him in the first 40 paragraphs of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: namely, how is it possible for there to exist a universalism without a law, a principle or a norm, and how can we account for its workings without invoking shared principles or reasons? At this juncture rethinking the concept of *sensus communis* and reconstructing its basic grammar becomes important. Let me state in advance that I am in no position to offer conclusive answers, but simply to illustrate how I would go about setting such rethinking in motion.

The *Fragestellung* will remain a Kantian one: what must we share, what cannot we assume not to share, if we wish to conceive of a judgment about the exemplarity of something and we wish that the universal validity of such judgment rest neither on a factual consensus nor on the application of a principle independently shown to be valid? Our question runs the same as Kant's. But the transformation of the philosophical context since the time when Kant was writing imposes more stringent constraints on our answer than the ones to which Kant's reflection was responsive.

Two conflicting strategies for conceiving of *sensus communis*

Let me now enter the second part of my argument by recalling our central question: ‘What must we assume that we all share, if we wish to conceive of the transcontextual validity of a judgment about the exemplarity of something as resting neither on a factual consensus nor on the application of a principle?’ If we answer this question by claiming that we all share ‘a *sensus communis*’, we have simply restated the problem without solving it. For as soon as we try to spell out what it is that we share when we share a ‘*sensus communis*’, we find ourselves cornered between two alternative philosophical strategies for developing a post-Linguistic-Turn notion of *sensus communis* which are both deeply problematical, albeit for quite different reasons. On the one hand we have a strategy which I will call Kantian quasi-naturalistic minimalism. On the other hand we have the opposite strategy, which I will describe as a hermeneutic and phenomenological thickening of the concept of *sensus communis*.

I will start by recalling the main lines of the second strategy, and will do so in a cursory way because I consider this specific strategy part of the problem more than of its solution. Gadamer’s rehabilitation of *Vorurteil* as an ineliminable component of a process of understanding reinterpreted in an ontological vein, as the constitutive condition of a human subjectivity always already immersed in interpretive processes, ended up paving the way to a banalization of *sensus communis* as common sense. Common sense as understood by the humanistic tradition that Gadamer accuses Kant of ignoring acquires substance – it becomes a collection of handed-over judgments as to right and wrong, the appropriate and the out-of-place – and this substantiality, enshrined in the notion of ‘horizon’, ends up taking us back to square one. For, if a successful interpretation amounts to a fusion of horizons, and we cannot but assume the existence of a plurality of horizons, the validity of any interpretation is hostage to the ‘host-horizon’ within which it takes place. It is no accident that Gadamer’s anti-methodical stance leaves his hermeneutics by and large silent on the question of what validity in interpretation is, not to mention the question concerning the relative merit, appropriateness, sensibleness or reasonableness of one horizon with respect to another.

An equivalent trajectory is followed by the phenomenological investigations of Edmund Husserl and Alfred Schutz, where a common-sense-like *sensus communis* reappears under the heading of the *Lebenswelt*. According to the author of *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt*, in order to understand how social action and even cognition is possible we must take on an intersubjective perspective from the outset: we must

presuppose the existence of a plurality of human actors who interact in a common space. And in order for this interaction to be possible, we must also assume the existence of a world shared in common, a world inhabited together with others: 'We could not be persons for others, even not for ourselves, if we could not find with the others a common environment as the counterpart of the intentional interconnectedness of our conscious lives.'¹ *Sensus communis* is thus understood by Schutz as a shared world or a *Lebenswelt* and, in turn, such *Lebenswelt* is understood as a shared stock of tacit knowledge – a kind of knowledge whose validity is taken for granted by all the members of a society when they operate within the 'natural attitude'. These implicit cognitions, assumptions and judgments, taken all together, constitute a 'relatively natural view of the world'. The life-world is then not simply the totality of what everybody knows – for in that case it could be exhaustively reconstructed by an external observer – but the totality of 'what everybody knows that everybody knows'. It is a kind of knowledge that constitutes a public domain not only factually available to everybody, but *known* to be available to everybody.

Furthermore, crucial to the operation of the *Lebenswelt qua* common sense is the phenomenon of typification. The prohibitive multiplicity of facts and objects and actions that bear a relevance for the maintenance and reproduction of a shared form of human life must be reduced to a few essential types, on penalty of succumbing to an uncontrollable complexity. The human world is therefore a typified world, a world apprehended through *types*. If we did not make use of types or stereotypes handed over by the past generations not only would we be in no position to coordinate our actions, but we could not even discover and make sense of the uniqueness of our experiences. For Schutz, the construction and the use of types is not then a procedure for 'experts', as in the Weberian methodology based on *ideal types*, but is a broader mode of human knowing in general.

This hermeneutic and phenomenological approach to the conceptualization of *sensus communis* is haunted by two obvious limitations. First, *sensus communis* so understood becomes a kind of 'body of knowledge', more specifically an inconsistent and only partially clear body of knowledge. It is a partially clear body of knowledge because the social actor who acts in the life-world is interested more in the practical efficacy of her action than in cognition as such. As social actors we are interested in buying a certain merchandise and paying for it, not in knowing all the intricacies of production and of the circulation of money. The kind of knowledge stored in the life-world is often just superficial knowledge, knowledge by word of mouth, reinforced rumors. Furthermore, it is a knowledge that encompasses an infinite variety of domains and, given the absence of any self-conscious effort to integrate

these diverse domains, we often hardly even notice the inconsistencies between what we believe in one area (say, religion) and what we take for granted in another (say, the economy).

Second, *sensus communis* so understood is inherently incapable of transcending its own context of origin. The horizon of a life-world is substantive, bound up with beliefs, values, concrete experiences, and yet it is intranscendable. As any horizon, it moves with us. As the two most famous disciples of Schutz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, have aptly put it, to embark on a thorough critical examination of the life-world and of *sensus communis* so understood, is like trying to push the bus on which one is riding. In the end, to conceive of *sensus communis* in terms of this philosophical strategy imprisons us in a bus whose doors may never open.

The second strategy, traceable back to Kant, starts from the opposite intuition. Namely, it starts from the intuition that injecting any kind of substance (historical, ethical, cultural) into our notion of *sensus communis* – a move which certainly was not invented by phenomenology – is inevitably bound to detract something from the universalism of *sensus communis*. Consequently, *sensus communis*, according to this alternative strategy, must be understood as a *natural* faculty of the human being. The deliberate distancing of this version of the notion from the concept of common sense is signalled by the dual lexical choice adopted by Kant: he uses the term *sensus communis* (*Gemeinsinn*) in opposition to *gemeine Verstand*, common sense as understood by the British tradition of ‘common-sense’ philosophers. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* the term *sensus communis* occurs for the first time in paragraphs 20 and 21. Kant in §19 mentions the reason why in matters of taste we cannot count on the consent of all those who will examine the matter, but at most can ‘solicit’ such consent. We cannot count on such consent, continues Kant in §20, because we do not possess, as it is the case when we deal with logical reasoning, a principle which we cannot but assume to be shared universally. And yet, should these judgments be completely independent of *any* principle – as the judgments concerning the pleasurable are – the issue of their universal validity could not even be raised. Thus these judgments concerning the beautiful are located somewhere in between the entirely subjective judgments about the pleasurable and those cognitive or moral judgments which instead proceed from principles specifiable via concepts.

To be located somewhere in between means that such judgments proceed from a *subjective* principle, which determines not a concept but a feeling – the feeling of pleasure or aversion linked with the perception of certain objects – yet determines such feeling *in a universal way*, namely in a way which allows us to expect the convergence of everybody’s consent. This principle is really a *sensus communis* distinct from

sound understanding or common sense. We may perhaps call it a communal feeling or a communal sensibility, unrelated to concepts. Nonetheless such communal feeling or sensibility must have some kind of content. Henry Allison has called attention to the fact that Kant has emphasized, of his conception of common sense, that it is a *sense*. It is a 'sense (or feeling) for what is universally communicable, which can also be assumed to be universally shared. Otherwise expressed, it is a shared capacity to feel what may be universally shareable.'² Whence does this sense or feeling or *koiné aisthesis* come, and how can we make sense of the assumption that it must be present in all human beings?

We are told by Kant that such sense is connected with the 'free play of our cognitive powers', namely 'the imagination and the understanding'.³ But, again, why should we assume that such sense, feeling or capacity is present in all human beings as such? The answer can be found in §21. If we did not presuppose its presence in all human beings, Kant argues, we would thereby lose the possibility of envisaging a connection between the world of objects and our own representations: our cognitions and judgments about the external world would then just be a 'subjective' play of our mental faculties. As all skeptics in all times have maintained, cognition would then just be a rhetorical exercise. The assumption of a universal communicability is what protects the idea of a correspondence of our representations to the object and with that also a non-skeptical view of validity, including aesthetic validity.

Kant then proceeds to analyse further this assumption of a universal communicability but, as we will see, there arises the difficulty that we shall be concerned with. The operation of aesthetic judgment is reconstructed in the following way: when we make contact with an object our senses set the imagination in motion and the imagination transforms the sense-product of our entering contact with the *Mannigfaltig*, the manifold, into a representation. This creation of a representation, on the part of the imagination, in turn activates the understanding, which begins to supply concepts for the synthesis of the manifold. These concepts, however, instead of subsuming the entire object as one particular case of any of the reinstated concepts, bounce the mental materials back to the imagination. The imagination, in turn, uses these incomplete or unsuccessful 'attempts at synthesis' as materials for further refining its own representation. A virtuous mutual feedback is set under way between these two faculties – a mutual feedback which instead of being brought to closure by the intellect through the production of a definitive concept, remains unamenable to closure and indefinitely active.

Furthermore Kant mentions a 'proportion' or relation between the imagination and the understanding – a proportion which characterizes in different ways the diverse kinds of mental processes. For example, we will have different 'proportions' between the imagination and the

understanding depending on whether we are dealing with an object of cognition, with an object of moral appraisal or with an object to be assessed in terms of taste. We can easily point to one difficulty that affects this approach: how are we to choose the perspective under which an object of our representations should be assessed and thus the faculty be activated? But this is a difficulty which need not concern us here.

The crucial point is that among all these different ‘proportions’ – understood either as the prevailing of the imagination or the understanding, or, as a third possibility, their equal influence – there should be one of them which is the most adequate for the production of knowledge, and this ‘proportion’ should be universally communicable, otherwise we would not have knowledge but mere rhetorical convergence concerning the objects in the world. But then, Kant continues, also the ‘feeling of it’ must be universally communicable. And the ‘universal communicability of a feeling presupposes a common sense’, a shared sensibility.⁴

Here we touch on the limitations of Kant’s approach. Kant wishes to establish the universal communicability of a feeling on the basis of what still remains to be demonstrated – namely, the indefensibility of skepticism – rather than to rest his case for the indefensibility of skepticism on a demonstration of the full communicability of our cognitions and judgments. Furthermore, he tries to show that *sensus communis*, understood as a shared feeling, is presupposed by the idea of a communicability of the feeling of pleasure – a communicability which in turn can be considered connected with the structure and interrelation of the imagination and the understanding, arguably shared by all human beings.

This Kantian strategy of ‘naturalizing’ *sensus communis* incurs two distinct problems. First, the universality of aesthetic judgment becomes conceptually dependent on the universality of the cognitive apparatus that forms the object of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This dependency connects the ‘exemplary’ universality of aesthetic judgment with a non-intersubjective view of subjectivity which already with Hegel became the target of a devastating critique on account (1) of its denying the constitutive moment of culture and (2) of its operating on the assumption of an already constituted subject.

The second problem concerns the exact content of *sensus communis* as a ‘communicable feeling’. If we start from the anti-hermeneutic Kantian intuition that by understanding this feeling ‘in the plural’, as rooted in the sensibility of the various epochs and traditions, we condemn ourselves to fail to account for its universality, we should nonetheless provide a solution to the converse problem: can the common feeling or sensibility presupposed by aesthetic judgment be understood as a natural endowment of the human being, connected to its perceptive apparatus? In other words, should we embrace a conceptual strategy

that delivers us the universality of aesthetic judgment, and thus freedom from the prison of the traditions that host a substantively thick *sensus communis*, at the price of naturalizing the basis on which such universality rests? In the end, does this naturalization of the communicability of the feeling of pleasure not fall prey to that dream of Sancho Panza's on which Hume has written memorable pages, recently revisited by Stanley Cavell?⁵

In his essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' Hume reports the anecdote narrated by Sancho to Don Quijote: two relatives of his, famous wine connoisseurs, had been summoned to give their opinion on the supposedly excellent wine from a big barrel, to be offered during an important occasion. They both tasted the wine with gravity several times and then pronounced their verdict: yes, indeed it was an excellent wine, said the first, yet a slight leathery aftertaste could be detected. The second connoisseur agreed on the outstanding quality of the wine, but added that he could still detect a kind of iron-type aftertaste. The attendants to the tasting were happy with the response, but mocked them for what they perceived as a conceited and exaggerated sophistication of their judgment, and last but not least for their disagreement despite all their sophisticated and fine-grained tasting ability. Those who mocked them, however, in turn felt ridiculous and grossly incompetent when, much to their surprise, at the end of the party, an iron key with a leather string attached to it was found at the bottom of the empty barrel.

Sancho's dream is all too transparent. It expresses the aspiration that – without reaching the extreme of reducing aesthetic judgment to the application of concepts and principles – in the end there should be 'something in the real world' on which the validity of aesthetic judgment too, no less than that of cognitive judgment, might rest. It would be unfair to Kant to accuse him of falling prey to Sancho's dream. Nevertheless, a trace of this 'something in the real world', a philosophical equivalent of the iron key with the leather string, continues to affect Kant's theorizing on the universality of aesthetic judgment: this philosophical equivalent of the key is the idea of a spontaneous match between the perceptual apparatus, supposedly identical in all human beings, and the features of the beautiful object represented by our imagination⁶ – a spontaneous match detected by *sensus communis* and on whose existence *sensus communis* grounds its anticipation of a universal agreement. Cavell points out that the anecdote fails to report to us whether the by and large favorable judgment of the two connoisseurs in the end was indeed crowned by that famous universal consensus, which should set it apart from the pseudo-appraisal of any two people who merely pose as wine connoisseurs.

We are, however, left with the disquieting realization that, not unlike Kant, we too yearn for two things in profound tension with one another

– a tension which constitutes the most important limitation of the second strategy for conceiving of *sensus communis*. For on the one hand we wish that the aesthetic critic *not* be in a position, like the logician, to *force us* to agree with his conclusion under penalty of being legitimately accusable of irrationality, but on the other hand we also wish that the critic not be a *hostage* in the hands of the history of taste, as the ultimate validator of her judgment. We rather want the critic to be someone who *makes* the history of taste through the exceptional perspicuity of his or her judgments. The Kantian strategy of naturalizing *sensus communis* leaves us with the unfinished task of reconciling this tension.

Rethinking *sensus communis*: between nature and culture

At this juncture – and with this we enter the third and last section of this article – we can investigate a third alternative, compatible with the Kantian overall perspective, in order to articulate a notion of *sensus communis* less naturalistic and yet not reducible to the Gadamerian concept of a tradition or to the phenomenological notion of *Lebenswelt*, and which still gives us a plausible shared bedrock on which to rest the exemplary universalism of aesthetic judgment. Which options do we have?

A first possibility is to spell out *sensus communis* along merely *formal* lines. We could understand the shared feeling of the communicability of pleasure as that virtual point-like common denominator – discussed in different ways by Putnam, Williams and Davidson – which must be assumed to exist in order for us to perceive our controversies and clash of judgments concerning the beauty of objects as worth discussing and adjudicating.⁷ In my opinion, however, this strategy is also a quite weak one: we might have several pairs of controversial judgments which all pairwise share one point in common, but we would end up having a solution to each dispute yet not a universally valid solution.

More promising is another strategy, which draws on and is supported by other *loci* of Kant's text. If we interrogate the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* on the subject of the true nature of aesthetic pleasure – which after all *is* the crucial notion, given that the universality of aesthetic judgment depends on a shared way of feeling pleasure and aversion – we can find passages wherefrom an entirely different tonality emerges than the naturalization of aesthetic pleasure suggested by paragraphs 20 and 21. One of the most interesting passages in this sense is in §23, where Kant compares the pleasure connected with exposure to the beautiful and the pleasure connected with the feeling of the sublime.

Both kinds of pleasure presuppose a certain disinterestedness, both are connected with reflective and not with determinant judgment and,

furthermore, both in the case of the beautiful and in the case of the sublime, concepts do somehow enter the scene without being capable, however, of bringing judgment to a 'closure'. Finally, both the judgment about the beautiful and that about the sublime operate in close connection with the faculty of the imagination and are singular judgments which aspire to universality, albeit to a universality resting on a feeling rather than a concept. Several differences set them apart, however, and one of particular interest for us concerns the feeling of pleasure bound up with our coming into contact with the object of our judgment. While the pleasure linked with the sublime derives from the sudden release of a tension related to the bridling or reining-in of vital forces, the pleasure linked with the beautiful always affords us a sense, as Kant puts it, of promotion, affirmation or enhancement of life (*Beförderung des Lebens*).⁸

We reach here a philosophical bifurcation whence a different strategy departs, namely one according to which the pleasure connected with, and induced by, every aesthetic experience does not solely consist of the gratification derivable from the reciprocal interplay of the imagination and the understanding, cannot be reduced to being a by-product of a sort of preestablished harmony between nature and the physiology of the human perceptive apparatus, but unfolds on the different plane of a reflection on the human – the peculiarly human as that which can neither be reduced to the plasticity of culture nor be anchored in a naturalistically understood facticity.

Every human being is mortal, has a body, lives in a context which provides her or him with the symbolic means for articulating her or his own intentionality, rich or limited, traditional or innovative as this might be, depending on the constraints of the context and the human actor's own creative capacities. One's own life is for each human being a temporal lapse within which he or she may make use, at least in the 'embodied' mode, of the capacity to create meaning endowed with which we enter the world. In shaping, to a greater or lesser extent, the circumstances of life and infusing meaning in actions, each human being cannot but experience directly – no matter the historical and cultural coordinates within which she or he lives – what it means for her or his own life as a whole, with the entire web of projects and meanings that constitute it, to be affirmed or enhanced or, on the contrary, to be mortified, frustrated, what it means for it to flourish or to stagnate. Moving further along the line of this third strategy for reconstructing *sensus communis*, it could be said that what Kant used to call the feeling of the 'promotion of life' can be understood in terms of *self-realization* or *progress in self-realization* or progress towards an *authentic* relation with oneself, where the expression 'authentic relation of the self with itself' designates an optimal congruence of an identity with itself. Considered

from this vantage point, the well-formed work of art arouses a pleasure of which we can expect that it be universally shareable insofar as it evokes the flourishing of a human life: the beauty of the work of art is experienced and ‘understood’ on the basis of our shared intuitive feeling, not reducible to a checklist of concepts or features, that a human life is flourishing.

Let us return to *sensus communis*. The sought-for notion of *sensus communis*, alternative to both the Kantian official ‘naturalistic’ version of *sensus communis* and the hermeneutic thickening of *sensus communis* as a common sense equated to tradition and life-world, consists of this universal capacity to sense the flourishing of human life and what favors it. Such notion is then consistent with other 20th-century accounts of the nexus of pleasure and aesthetic experience – for example, Heidegger’s idea of world-disclosure, Dewey’s concept of experience, Danto’s notion of the ‘transfiguration of the commonplace’.

Sensus communis revisited is then this wisdom concerning the flourishing of human life, a wisdom that can be further spelled out in terms of a series of dimensions of the realization or flourishing of an identity and which draws on a vocabulary located somehow ‘before’ or ‘underneath’ the differentiation of cultures. My project is not to reconstruct an ontological doctrine with an anthropological coloring, it is rather the effort to reconstruct intuitions located in a space equi-accessible to the plurality of cultures, a space whose existence cannot be taken for granted but, on the contrary, must be proven by exploring it tentatively, as though probing around with a cane.

An example of the kind of the pre-cultural, yet non-natural, intuitions that I have in mind comes from a mental experiment devised by Nozick.⁹ Imagine two life-courses A and B, hypothetically characterized by an equal amount of happiness, whatever our definition of happiness might be. Let the only relevant difference be the temporal distribution of this equal amount of happiness. Within life-course A the amount of happiness we are destined to enjoy is concentrated by and large within the first quarter of our life, then a small amount is concentrated in the following quarter, and the tiny amount left is distributed across the rest of life, with a long final segment lived in total absence of happiness. Within life-course B, instead, the same amount of happiness is evenly distributed across the whole life-cycle, with a modest increase towards the end. Which of these two life-courses would we rather choose? If we have few doubts in choosing the second alternative, this indicates that we possess intuitions concerning what is good for a human life and the nature of our flourishing, which are independent of the culture within which we are immersed, even though we could not even begin to *articulate* these intuitions without drawing on some linguistically and historically situated cultural heritage.

Elsewhere I have tried to reconstruct, on the basis of an extensive revisitation of psychoanalytic theory, the dimension which plays a constitutive role for our notion of a fulfilled identity.¹⁰ Although the psychoanalytic vocabulary is not the only one that we can draw on for the purpose of spelling out what it might mean for an individual human being to flourish or attain authenticity, it is certainly one of the richest and differentiated vocabularies available to us for this purpose. It suggests the salience of four dimensions of the authenticity, well-being or fulfilment of an individual identity: *coherence*, *vitality*, *depth* and *maturity*. On these dimensions a significant convergence can be found on the part of many authors who for the rest openly and deeply disagree on many essential aspects of their approaches.

Coherence includes moments of cohesion, continuity and demarcation. No human life, in any culture, can be understood as flourishing if it does not have a modicum of cohesion around a theme, a recognizable project, even if it were the postmodern project of pure nomadism, if it does not have a minimal continuity, understood as narratability of its constitutive episodes, and without a, however minimal, demarcation from what is other.

Vitality includes more specific aspects, such as the perception of one's own self as *worthy of love and esteem*, the *capacity to enjoy life* and to develop an *emotional interest* in it, at the opposite of which we find attitudes of apathy and detachment. *Vitality* includes also an immediate sense of *self-presence*, whose polar opposite is constituted by a sense of futility and of being 'out of place', and finally includes as well a perception of one's own self as spontaneous and real, as opposed to conceited or false. There is no human life that we can perceive as flourishing if our self-representation is accompanied by a sense of *indignity or shame* and we perceive our self as *phony* and *empty*.

In its most general sense the dimension of *depth* designates a person's capacity to have access to her or his own psychic dynamisms and to reflect such awareness in the construction of her or his identity. We can conceive of it in cognitive terms, as *self-knowledge* or *self-reflection*, or in a practical vein, as *autonomy*. The intuition captured by this dimension is that no human life can be considered to be flourishing if the person fails to show a modicum of self-awareness or if the commitments it enters are not autonomously posited.¹¹

Finally, a person who lives a fulfilled life possesses to some extent a quality of *maturity* understood, in general, as the ability and willingness to come to terms with the facticity of the natural and social world, as well as of the internal world, without thereby compromising one's coherence and vitality – without becoming another. More specifically, maturity can be understood as the capacity to distinguish between one's own representations, projections or wishes and reality 'as it is' or, better

said, as it appears to those who interact with us and to unconcerned third parties; as the capacity to tame one's own fantasies of omnipotence, to tolerate the inevitable ambivalence of human motives, to exert flexibility in carrying out one's designs in the world, and to come to terms emotionally with the fact of one's finiteness. Also in this case, the basic intuition, located at a topographical point where culture has not yet set in but we have left the immediacy of nature, is that no fulfilled human life is possible unless we develop a solid sense of the distinction between the external world and one's own fantasies, wishes and volitions in general.

To the extent that we consider it plausible that at least some among these intuitions may not be inconsistent with cultures other than our own, we can make sense of how a judgment which does not rely on principles or concepts, and communicates something about the conduciveness of an object, an action, a symbolic whole to enhance and further our life, could possibly claim universality. It may legitimately claim universality by appealing to a layer of intuitions which we have reason to consider accessible from a plurality of perspectives, insofar as these intuitions are linked with the universal human experience, along with mortality and embodiment, of the flourishing or stagnating of one's own life. It is the task of a philosophical theory of *sensus communis* to reconstruct these intuitions as completely as possible.

This reformulation, denaturalized but not culturally thickened, of the notion of *sensus communis* is perfectly compatible with the framework underlying the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and finds indirect confirmation in several *loci* inside it. For example, in §49 Kant contrasts the truly beautiful works of art, animated by genius and capable of arousing an aesthetic experience in us, and those other artworks which he calls *without spirit* or *geistlos*, which neither engage us nor enthuse us, even though 'one finds nothing in them to criticize as far as taste is concerned'.¹² It is hard to understand how, from the standpoint of his 'official theory' of *sensus communis*, as developed in paragraphs 20, 21 and 40, an object could exist – in this case a work of art – whose representation satisfies the requirement of spontaneously matching with our cognitive faculties ('one finds nothing in them to criticize', from an aesthetic angle) and yet fails to arouse that feeling of the *Beförderung des Lebens* with which aesthetic pleasure is by definition equated. In order to make sense of this case we need to move to a more complex and differentiated picture than the one constituted by a naturalization of *sensus communis qua* anticipation of a match between perception and world. We need to understand *sensus communis* as the capacity to mentally anticipate the potential, inherent in an object, to enrich, enhance or otherwise make the life of human beings flourish, in order for us to make sense of how 'works of art without spirit' could possibly

exist. This is the general direction in which a reconstruction of the Kantian notion of *sensus communis* in the light of a philosophical agenda rooted in our own time could go.

Università di Roma 'Tor Vergata', Rome, Italy

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Notes

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- 1 A. Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, ed. H. Wagner (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 164–5. See also A. Schutz, *The Phenomenology of the Social World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967) and A. Schutz and Th. Luckmann, *The Structure of the Life-World* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1989).
- 2 H. E. Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 149.
- 3 I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. P. Guyer, trans. P. Guyer and E. Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), §20, p. 122.
- 4 *ibid.*, §21, p. 123.
- 5 Cf. S. Cavell, 'Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy', in R. Beiner and J. Nedelsky (eds) *Judgment, Imagination and Politics: Themes from Kant and Arendt* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p. 38.
- 6 Kant returns to his account of the 'communicability of a sensation' in §39, where he states that the feeling of pleasure, which aesthetic judgment anticipates to be universally shareable by all those who come in contact with a beautiful object, 'must necessarily rest on the same conditions in everyone, since they are subjective conditions of the possibility of a cognition in general, and the proportion of these cognitive faculties that is required for taste is also requisite for the common and healthy understanding that one may presuppose in everyone'; Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §39, p. 173.
- 7 See B. Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), pp. 174–5; D. Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Schema' (1974), in D. Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 184–98; and H. Putnam, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3, *Realism and Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 191–7, 234–8.
- 8 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §23, p. 128.
- 9 See R. Nozick, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 100.

- 10 See A. Ferrara, *Reflective Authenticity: Rethinking the Project of Modernity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 70–107.
- 11 For a very interesting non-reflective notion of authenticity, see Ch. Larmore, *Les Pratiques du moi* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004).
- 12 I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, §49, p. 191.