

DISINTEREST RECONSIDERED: THEORIES
AND PRACTICES, PRESENT AND PAST

doi: 10.54103/2039-9251/29697

THE AGENTIAL DIMENSION OF DISINTERESTEDNESS

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ABSTRACT

The notion of disinterestedness is still central to the aesthetic debate today, as it has taken on very different and even ambiguous features throughout history. By tracing the roots of this concept, my aim is to read disinterestedness in the light of a perspective that is gaining ground in contemporary aesthetics, which sees the *agential dimension* as central. Kant's interpretation is of particular interest because while it retains some of the passive traits from previous formulations, presenting the aesthetic judgments as a *response*, at the same time introducing some initial practical aspects. The ambiguity of Kantian disinterestedness allows us to argue, drawing from a more contemporary reflection such as that of Alcaraz León (2019), for the importance of recognizing a practical dimension inherent in taste. It contends that disinterested attention, far from being detached or inert, allows for a space of novelty, openness, and aesthetic exemplarity. This reframing positions taste not as a mere passive response but as a situated, normative practice that participates in the formation of shared meaning through example rather than rule.

Keywords: Agency, Disinterestedness, Taste, Universal Agreement

LA DIMENSIONE AGENZIALE DEL DISINTERESSE

Il concetto di disinteresse è ancora oggi centrale nel dibattito estetico, poiché nel corso della storia ha assunto caratteristiche molto diverse e persino ambigue. Ripercorrendo le origini di questo concetto, il mio obiettivo è quello di interpretare il disinteresse alla luce di una prospettiva che sta guadagnando terreno nell'estetica contemporanea, che considera centrale la *dimensione agenziale*. L'interpretazione di Kant è di particolare interesse perché, pur conservando alcuni tratti passivi delle formulazioni precedenti, presenta i giudizi estetici come una *risposta*, introducendo al contempo alcuni aspetti pratici iniziali. L'ambiguità del disinteresse kantiano ci permette di sostenere, attingendo a una riflessione più contemporanea come quella di Alcaraz León (2019), l'importanza di riconoscere una dimensione pratica inerente al gusto. Essa sostiene che l'attenzione disinteressata, lungi dall'essere distaccata o inerte, consente uno spazio di novità, apertura ed esemplarità estetica. Questa riformulazione posi-



ziona il gusto non come una semplice risposta passiva, ma come una pratica situata e normativa che partecipa alla formazione di un significato condiviso attraverso l'esempio piuttosto che la regola.

Parole chiave: Agenzia, Disinteresse, Gusto, Accordo universale

1. THE ORIGIN OF DISINTERESTEDNESS

If one looks at the roots of disinterestedness, as reconstructed by Stolnitz¹, one discovers that it did not originate as properly aesthetic concept, but it was rather linked to religious and ethical domains. The earliest definitions can be traced back to Lord Shaftesbury's theory at the beginning of the 18th century. For Shaftesbury, if interest identifies the motive for achieving good and individual well-being – thus carrying a 'selfish' connotation – disinterestedness initially takes on a privative meaning to define actions «not motivated by self-concern»². It can therefore be said that interest and disinterest have at a very early stage a *practical* meaning related to actions: interest is linked to motivated actions, whereas disinterest pertains to actions free from possible motives or consequences. Soon, however, the initial *practical* meaning gives way to a *perceptual* one, where disinterest comes to signify «barely seeing and admiring»³, and the virtuous man – still maintaining a strong ethical connotation – becomes «a spectator, devoted to the very survey and contemplation»⁴. This last one represents a more passive and contemplative connotation, whereas with this article I would like to suggest an agential and practical dimension of disinterest, drawing also from contemporary aesthetics theories.

Traces of this same contemplative perspective can be found in Alison at the end of the century (1790). In his *Essays*, Alison employs the concept of disinterestedness as a *way of organizing attention* – a sort of mental state or aesthetic attitude. Specifically, disinterestedness is that state in which attention is not occupied by any individual or private thought and is therefore free to receive the impressions that objects produce on us. Alison emphasizes that this kind of state is, in a sense, passive and not actively engaged, and it is precisely «upon the vacant and unemployed, accordingly, that the objects of taste make the strongest impression»⁵.

In light of this brief history of disinterestedness, it must be acknowledged that it is later with Kant that the link between disinterestedness and aesthetics is concretely established — which, as we shall see, also contributes to the ambiguity surrounding the concept. In Kant, disinterestedness is presented as a requirement for the «representation of the existence of the object»⁶, which he assigns to the judgment of taste. The judgment of taste is for Kant *aesthetic*, meaning that the judgment of beauty is a «response of pleasure or displeasure»⁷. From the outset, we note that Kant attributes to taste the character of a *response*. This response of pleasure in the case of aesthetic judgement takes on the characteristics of a disinterested pleasure that is not a response to the object itself but rather to its representation. Disinterestedness distinguishes

¹ J. Stolnitz, *On the Origins of "Aesthetic Disinterestedness"* in "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism", Vol. 20, No. 2, 1961, pp. 131-143.

² J. Stolnitz, *On the Origins of "Aesthetic Disinterestedness"*, cit., p. 132.

³ *Ivi*, p. 133.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ivi*, p. 137.

⁶ S. Velotti, *Making Sense: Disinterestedness and Control*, in L. Berger (ed. by) *Disinterested Pleasure and Beauty: Perspectives from Kantian and Contemporary Aesthetics*, De Gruyter, Berlin Boston 2023, p. 103.

⁷ N. Zangwill, *Disinterestedness: Analysis and Partial Defense*, in L. Berger (ed. by) *Disinterested Pleasure and Beauty: Perspectives from Kantian and Contemporary Aesthetics*, De Gruyter, Boston 2023, p. 60.

aesthetic pleasure from other pleasures: whereas these latter always involve some form of desire and interest – thus being interested pleasures – this is not the case with aesthetic pleasure, which does not arise from any desire and is therefore disinterested. The term disinterested should be therefore understood exclusively in this sense, as neither a cause nor a product of any desire, and not in an overly modern interpretation.

Based on these definitions, one must be careful not to draw hasty conclusions. As Guyer argues, it would be absurd to claim that the beauty of an object cannot give rise to elements of desire and interest for the object itself. «Rather, we all assume that the beauty of an object is one of the best reasons we could have for taking an interest in it, and we justify a wide range of desires and activities simply by reference to the beauty of objects»⁸. If interpreted in this way, one cannot help but reject Kant's aesthetic theory outright as it would conflict with our most everyday experiences. But this is not what Kant meant by disinterestedness, which is primarily a principle of determination, a principle of possibility for the existence of an aesthetic response. It does not deny that the experience of beauty may naturally generate certain desires related to beautiful objects, but it must rule out the possibility of such desires directly influencing the response and the judgment. In other words: «when I judge something aesthetically, my judgment may be accompanied by all the interests in the world (political, economic, personal, gastronomic, etc.), but the principle by which I judge it aesthetically must not be identified with any of these interests»⁹. Disinterestedness thus becomes for Kant a *principle of possibility* for judgment – a transcendental principle.

2. THE AMBIGUOUS NATURE OF DISINTERESTEDNESS

Despite subsequent interpretations attributing an overly literal and modern reading to Kantian disinterestedness – such as Bullough's concept of *psychical distance* – it is essential to confront the true nature of this concept. This article argues that Kantian aesthetic judgment, along with its two connected principles – *disinterestedness* and *universal agreement* – has an ambiguous nature in which both practical and static moments coexist at a certain level. In Kant's definition the practical moment is present and hinted at, but at the end the responsive nature of judgment ultimately prevails. This responsive dimension, however dominant, never devolves into literal detachment, passive contemplation, or an inert state before the beautiful object.

Referring to the concept of attention might be a useful tool to understand the practical side involved in disinterestedness. This seems a paradoxical strategy since attention is often grounded on interest: Stolniz in his discussion of the origin of disinterestedness defines interestedness as *practical* because it refers to actions directed toward an anticipated goal. Moreover, when Shaftesbury uses “disinterested” privatively, to describe those who do not act morally or worship God with an eye to future reward, the reference of the term is still to actions and the motives to actions. But when he describes morality and religion as the «love for its own sake»¹⁰ the term no longer has to do with choice and action but with a *mode of attention* and concern. A reference made also by Alison when he defines disinterest as a way of organizing attention but only to characterize it as passive.

Attention again seems to be inevitably linked to interest, since the former is typically described as a way of control and monitor of experience through filtering and selection (a selective mode of attention); where-

⁸ P. Guyer, *Disinterestedness and Desire in Kant's Aesthetics*, in “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, Summer, Vol. 36, No. 4, 1978, p. 450.

⁹ S. Velotti, *La scelta di Danto*, in “Rivista di estetica”, 35, 2007, p. 17.

¹⁰ J. Stolnitz, *On the Origins of “Aesthetic Disinterestedness”*, cit., p. 170.

as the latter is identified as a sort of distance, detachment and passive contemplation. However, against this traditional link, Mole thinks that «It is easy to generate counterexamples to this proposal. If we consider tired or distracted thinkers we can find cognitive activities that are prompted by interest but that are not attentive. We can also find activities that are not prompted by interest but that are attentive»¹¹. The aim is to investigate the possibility of a *space* not strictly task-related but still practical, a space that can be found in the aesthetic experience. The *disinterested attention* can represent this *space* prior the interested selection, «within which the richness of varied and contingent material can emerge, along with the possibility of a suspension of habitual norms and pathways»¹².

But how can one pay attention while distancing oneself? According to Francesca Natale

if the extractive model is characterized by the figure/ground pair through which the distributive and functional dynamic of attention is articulated, then floating attention moves on a different plane. The aim is to highlight the importance of attention's blind spots, of what remains excluded from filtering and selection mechanisms and from the mapping of experience. The concept of disinterested attention, therefore, seems extendable to include floating attention as a "residual" dimension¹³.

The disinterested gaze can open a *space* in which attention does not only organize experience but rather allow for novelty to emerge.

To reevaluate the idea of disinterestedness means, then, to challenge the assumption that a form of pleasure derived from what is often seen as a passive or detached contemplative gaze, has nothing to do with practice. This view misinterprets the notion of what is "practical" by reducing it to actions taken solely for specific, specialized purposes. One can conceive of a form of contemplation (similarly to autotelic experiences)¹⁴ that is not detached from agentivity.

The Kantian disinterestedness has indeed this kind of practical implication since its contemplative dimension never «indicate a lasting state of static inactivity, but rather the fruitful result of an active process and the stimulating starting point for further developments»¹⁵. According to Pareyson, Kant's aesthetics is not merely one of *contemplation* but also and above all one of *production*. A productive and a contemplative moment coexist, corresponding to a movement of inquiry on one hand and discovery on the other. In this sense, contemplation «presents itself as the culmination of the interpreter's effort and therefore cannot simply be described [...] as inert stasis»¹⁶.

For instance, in § 12 of the *Analytic of the Beautiful*, Kant says that «we dwell on the contemplation of the beautiful because this contemplation strengthens and reproduces itself. The case is analogous (but analogous only) to the way we linger on a charm in the representation of an object which keeps arresting

¹¹ C. Mole, *Attention Is Cognitive Unison*, in "An Essay in Philosophical Psychology", Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 47-48.

¹² F. Natale, *Attenzione e disinteresse nell'esperienza estetica e artistica*, Università degli Studi di Roma La Sapienza 2023, p. 100.

¹³ F. Natale, *Attenzione e disinteresse nell'esperienza estetica e artistica*, cit., p. 138 (my trans.).

¹⁴ Nicola Baumann, in an article on the autotelic personality, defines it as a "conjunction of receptive [...] and active qualities [...]". The openness to detect and become interested in new challenges is receptive yet not entirely passive. It also involves active engagement and persistence in highly challenging activities. However, the engagement is not meant to a specific goal. [...] The term *disinterested* emphasized a focus on a task-inherent as opposed to purpose-related incentives as well as an orientation towards mastery as opposed to performance". N. Baumann, *Autotelic Personality*, in S. Engeser (ed. by) *Advances in Flow Research*, Springer, 2012, p. 167.

¹⁵ F. Russo, *Contemplazione e interpretazione. L'estetica kantiana nell'analisi di Luigi Pareyson*, in "Acta Philosophica", vol. 4, fasc. 1, 1995, p. 106.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 108.

the attention, the mind all the while remaining passive»¹⁷. Lingering is presented as a way of sustaining a mental representation and keeping the cognitive faculties engaged, without pursuing any specific goal. This kind of mental activity is not passive – as it would be in the charm case – it is rather a form of active engagement that differs from goal-oriented practical faculties. In the case of beauty, we linger because the act of contemplating beauty naturally renews and sustains itself. This is possible because the act is rooted in an open-ended relationship with the object, one without a defined aim, except that of linger and explore. This repeated and reenacted focus of our *attention* towards the object is taken by Natale as a sign that «the subject is not passive, but rather actively involved in investigating and examining the qualities of the object being observed»¹⁸.

There is thus a reframing of the idea of disinterest as a way of organizing attention as proposed by Alison, who saw in this very feature its condition of passivity. In contrast, the focus on attention challenges not so much the active aspect of such disinterest as its proper connection to action in terms of goals and productivity – and, as we have seen, these two elements are not necessarily linked. As Natale argues once again, disinterested attention, specifically aesthetic, does not translate into contemplation understood as a «space of non-action»¹⁹; rather, it should be understood as a theoretical notion that simultaneously offers an alternative to selective attention and «emphasizes the fluidity of the boundary between activity and passivity, a boundary often framed as an insurmountable polarity»²⁰.

Moreover, when Kant in § 2 of the *Analytic of the Beautiful* claims that «in order to say that the object is beautiful, and to show that I have taste, everything turns on the meaning which I can give to this representation, and not on any factor which makes me dependent on the real existence of the object»²¹, the thing he is referring to, as Natale once again suggests, has indeed the form of a practice²².

Despite these practical aspects, the *responsive dimension* attributed to aesthetic judgment remains Kant's main legacy to aesthetics, likely derived from earlier interpretations that, as we have seen, associate disinterest with a passive nature. This is precisely what Alcaraz León has recently argued, claiming that Kantian theory is emphasizing an overly responsive dimension in aesthetic judgment, thereby overshadowing its agential dimension that remains an essential and fundamental aspect of taste. According to Alcaraz León, two factors underpin the idea of taste as a response: the idea that aesthetic judgment derives from disinterested pleasure combined with the a-conceptual nature of such a response²³.

The aim of this analysis is not to reject Kant's aesthetics outright to assign taste a unilateral agential dimension, but rather to highlight the fundamental agency at play in aesthetic judgment by countering its responsive interpretation, while at the same time acknowledging that this co-presence of moments was already present *in nuce* in the Kantian conception of disinterestedness – hence the ambiguity of this concept – though not enough developed. It should be mentioned that in the contemporary debate, Alcaraz

¹⁷ I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, J.C. Meredith (transl. by), Oxford University, New York, 2007, §12.

¹⁸ F. Natale, *Attenzione e disinteresse nell'esperienza estetica e artistica*, cit., p. 195 (my trans.).

¹⁹ F. Natale, *Attenzione e disinteresse nell'esperienza estetica e artistica*, cit., p. 11 (my trans.).

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 18 (my trans.).

²¹ I. Kant, *Analytic of the Beautiful*, cit., §2.

²² In the edition edited by Garroni and Hohenegger, the “practical” reference is more evident: «in order to say that an object is beautiful and to demonstrate that I have taste, it is immediately clear that what matters is what I *do* within myself with this representation, and not the extent to which I depend on the existence of the object» (emphasis added, my trans.). I. Kant, *Critica della facoltà di giudizio*, ed. by E. Garroni, H. Hohenegger, Einaudi, Torino 2022, §2.

²³ M. J. Alcaraz León, *Beauty and the Agential Dimension of the Judgment of Taste* in W. Huemer, I.V. Ferran (ed. by) *Beauty: New Essays in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Book*, Philosophia, 2019, p. 124.

León's position is not the only approach possible; on the contrary, we find theories that have adopted a diametrically opposite interpretation. In this category, we find not only theories that explicitly address taste as passive, relying on the traditional association of aesthetics «not to action but to appreciation»²⁴, but also more recent approaches such as Serena Feloj's idea of normative agreement as a «mere subjective need of our reason»²⁵.

In the first part, I will argue for the possibility that both active and passive dimensions can coexist and are, in fact, indispensable for aesthetic judgment to take place. The assumption is often that these positions are irreconcilable, mutually exclusive, forcing one to make a choice. However, upon closer inspection, these supposed contradictions actually coexist without conflict within taste, due to a specific characteristic – namely, its nature as a *practice*. Taste, often relegated to a passive dimension as perception or sensitivity to aesthetic values, is instead «more a praxis – something that we do – than a receptive disposition»²⁶. Thus, taste is not a mere response to an object but rather a practice of active engagement and interaction with the world. Once the coexistence of active and passive nature in aesthetic judgment is demonstrated, a second fundamental concept will be addressed: Kant, in fact, links taste to another equally important category – namely, *universal agreement* – towards which we can aspire thanks to the disinterested nature of our response. Universal validity is indeed directly tied to disinterest: when aesthetic pleasure for an object is free from interest, that is, when such pleasure is not reducible to any condition, then it can be extended to all. More specifically, one could say that

since the delight is not grounded on any inclination of the subject (nor on any other considered interest), but rather the judging subject feels himself completely free with respect to the delight that he directs to the object, he can find no private conditions, to which his own subject alone might be party, as ground for his delight, and consequently must regard it as grounded in that which he may presuppose in everyone... accordingly he will speak of the beautiful as if beauty were a property of the object²⁷.

The second part of the article will therefore be aimed at demonstrating that, given the link between taste and the agential dimension – supported also by the idea of *disinterested attention* – it is possible to reconsider the universal agreement that Kant attributes to aesthetic judgment through *exemplarity*. Both these concepts indeed involve the idea of a (residual) space for the new.

3. THE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE DIMENSIONS

The first step to address taste as a practice is to delve deeper in its agential dimension, this allows to move beyond a polarized perspective on the issue challenging the traditional idea of a rigid division – not only of the pair subject and object but also of the traditionally assigned roles active and passive.

When we live, experience, and navigate reality, we are never merely a subject acting on a passive object; rather, we find ourselves embedded in a broader *agency net* involving the environment and the objects

²⁴ K. Gorodeisky, *Aesthetic Agency*, In L. Ferrero (ed. by) *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Agency*, Routledge, New York 2022, p. 456.

²⁵ S. Feloj, *Aesthetic Normativity in Kant's Account: A Regulative Model*, in "Con-Textos Kantianos. International Journal of Philosophy", 12, 2020, p. 119.

²⁶ M. J. Alcaraz León. *Beauty and the Agential Dimension of the Judgment of Taste*, cit., p. 128.

²⁷ P. Guyer, *Disinterestedness and Desire in Kant's Aesthetics*, cit., p. 451.

themselves²⁸. The dynamic that this agency framework establishes is a dynamic of *active passivity* in which interactions unfold as a continuous interplay of roles²⁹. Every experience is both a *receptive undergoing* and an *active doing*³⁰, both moments are coexistent without contradiction. The use of *agency* in the study of taste thus allows for an initial disentanglement of taste from the notion of an *aesthetic response*.

Among the several reasons for this passive conceptualization of taste, the main one is that we often equate action with will, control, and intention, and only if these characteristics are present, we suggest a rational and active nature. Therefore, seeing that taste lacks these traits leads automatically to identify it as being merely contemplative (in the passive sense). However, the absence of a strong control or will in aesthetic judgments and taste does not entail that a rational agency is not involved. Perceiving taste as something that happens to us, passively, rather than something we do, as a visceral expression of what we like or dislike, an immediate response over which we have no control or will, leads to neglecting its agential and rational aspects: the scope of action does not end with will or control and this is true also for taste³¹. In taste, therefore, both dimensions, rational agency and «the kind of receptivity that characterizes our emotions»³² coexist.

The second reason is the tendency to equate the intuitive, the immediate and the unpredictable, with the responsive sphere. Anything experienced as immediate, meaning literally without mediation by (rational) reasoning, is frequently labeled as a pure emotional response. However, characteristics such as immediacy, unpredictability, intuition, and sensitivity do not establish a passive foundation for taste. Instead, they reflect the distinctive traits of our daily, spontaneous, and improvised way of living in which both passive and active traits are involved³³.

This idea of coexistence of opposite poles – active and passive – we have seen how it was already present, albeit to a minimal extent, in Kantian disinterestedness. This has another important consequence for the contemporary aesthetic debate: in Kant, in fact, we find a partially positive characterization of passivity, as we can see in Pareyson's interpretation, which attributes to Kant an idea of contemplation that is not static but almost productive, a concept that normally assumes a negative role as mere non-action or stasis. In the aesthetic field, although passivity has often assumed a negative significance of non-action, it has been reassessed more recently by Bertram, not only as a necessary counterpart to the active pole but also as a «willingness to be guided by the dynamic structure of the work»³⁴. Thus, it is not merely a matter of passive observation, as it might have been for Shaftesbury, but rather an «active discovery of internal relations and the tracing of the formal and semantic configuration of the work»³⁵.

²⁸ Cfr. B. Latour, *On Interobjectivity*, in *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, in "An International Journal Translation", 1996; A. Gell, *Art and Agency*, in "Clarendon Press", Oxford, 1998; C. Knappett & L. Malafouris, *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*, Springer Science, 2007.

²⁹ A. Bertinetto, *Formatività ricorsiva e costruzione della normatività nell'improvvisazione*, in A. Sbordoni (ed. by) *Improvvisazione Oggi*, libreria musicale italiana, 2014; A. Bertinetto, *Valore e autonomia dell'improvvisazione. Tra arti e pratiche*, vol.3, Mimesis, Milano 2018; G. Bertram, *L'arte come prassi umana. Un'estetica*, Cortina, Milano 2014.

³⁰ Cfr. J. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, New York Minton Balch & Co, 1934.

³¹ Against the claims of the "practical approach" that identifies agency with the capacity for intentional action and voluntary control, taste "is not merely a matter of deciding to respond in a particular way – there is something related to the exercise of one's rational and judgmental capacities involved in the practice and refinement of taste". M. J. Alcaraz León. *Beauty and the Agential Dimension of the Judgment of Taste*, cit., p. 127.

³² K. Gorodeisky, *Aesthetic Agency*, cit., p. 470.

³³ Cfr. A. Bertinetto, G. Bertram, *We Make Up the Rules as We Go Along: Improvisation as an Essential Aspect of Human Practices?*, in "Open Philosophy", 3(1), 2020.

³⁴ F. Focosi, *Being Tied to What, and Why? On the Objective Side of (Bertram's Notion of) Aesthetic Experience*, in "Comparative Studies in Modernism", n. 6, 2015, p. 76.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 77.

4. THE AESTHETIC NORMATIVITY

Once the importance of an agential perspective within taste is understood, it is necessary to delve into the second key concept in Kant: universal agreement. Once again, rediscovering its essential agential aspect will allow us to redefine the concept of disinterestedness accordingly. To address the issue of taste and of universal agreement, especially from an agential perspective, it is crucial to delve into the matter of normativity. «The recognition of the existence of a genuine kind of aesthetic agency depends on the acknowledgment of an intimate connection between agency and normativity in our practices»³⁶. Taste is not confined within subjectivity; rather, it is an open, ever-transforming practice. Its plasticity allows personal taste to touch and shape aesthetic normativity and its demanded objectivity.

To use Hannah Ginsborg's words³⁷, is there such a thing as an appropriate or inappropriate aesthetic response to an object, and if so how is that possible? The issue here is that while our aesthetic judgments claim universal agreement, making thus a normative claim³⁸, they are not objective since the aesthetic field lacks criteria or justifications to support this kind of claim: in the end what kind of normativity could there be? To address this issue, Ginsborg appeals to a particular type of normativity, more *primitive*, an intuitive commitment to the appropriateness not of some objective feature that others fail to recognize but of the way and manner of our engagement. This allows, according to Ginsborg, for the aesthetic response to be appropriate and thus normative without requiring justification.

Analyzing taste as an *appropriate response* allows us to untie normativity from veridicality, from the idea of correctness or incorrectness which would be impossible to establish in the case of taste. «We can perceive or feel something to be appropriate without it being a property (of an action or an object) to be inferred from a set of already existing norms or rules or standards»³⁹. Appropriateness involves more than awareness, it is strictly linked with interaction, agency, and the subject-world relationship. It cannot be adequately explained relying on subjective abilities or objects' specific properties alone. The development of taste, aesthetic normativity, and the sense of appropriateness results from an «*active grappling with the environment*»⁴⁰. Taste, as a practice rooted in exercise and interaction, does not imply a sort of fixed reactions established and mastered through repetition, but it once again transcends *passive response* dimension, asserting itself as dynamic, interactive, and inherently active: «not something to be grasped, but something to be exercised, and not something to be exercised solipsistically, but essentially relationally»⁴¹. If one limits the understanding of normativity to norms and their function, one misses the vital importance of normativity's openness, creativity, and adaptability, and, most importantly, how personal judgment and a more objective sense of appropriateness mutually reinforce each other.

Norms are the result of specific adaptations and applications in different cases guided by and tailored to one's sense of what the situation requires, what is appropriate, which in turn is constantly defined by

³⁶ L. Ferrero, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Agency*, in L. Ferrero (ed. by), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Agency*, Routledge, New York 2022, p. 15.

³⁷ Cfr. H. Ginsborg, *Primitive Normativity and Skepticism about Rules*, in "The Journal of Philosophy", Vol. 108, No. 5, 2011.

³⁸ Here the normative claim is not about the object having a certain property, but it refers to the relationship between the subject and the object, and how the subject sees it. And this *way* is what is expected to be demanded of all human beings, to be shared universally.

³⁹ M. Del Mar, *Two Models of Normativity*, in "SSRN", 2019, p. 2.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 5. [emphasis mine].

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 3.

this aesthetic normativity. The articulation of taste and its normativity is then a never-ending process of active attentiveness, responsiveness and active engagement with the environment. «This commitment nurtures an attunement with the social-natural environment, fostering active and creative engagement in the normativity of practices. Norms are learned, absorbed as habits, and collectively articulated by individuals according to the opportunities/appropriateness of concrete situations»⁴².

5. THE UNIVERSAL AGREEMENT

This conclusions on the aesthetic normativity can have some repercussions on the idea of universal agreement implied in the aesthetic normativity discourse by Kant.

I suggest first moving beyond the idea of subjective aesthetic judgment as «internally caused»⁴³, which repositions taste as a passive response once again. Kant explains the necessity of universal validity through the idea that aesthetic judgment «is based on an internal feeling of disinterested pleasure» so that we are «justified in claiming that others ought to agree because the pleasure is in turn based upon something we can presuppose in all cognitive beings»⁴⁴. However, while it is true that judgments are in a sense subjective, I believe we should disentangle this term (which in itself carries several issues) from an internalist framework and instead conceive it as tied to an understanding of the subject that is not isolated but actively constructed through relationships with others and the environment.

This stance repositions objectivity and universality within taste as well. As previously mentioned, there is a claim to universal validity at a fundamental level – such as the *primitive normativity* described by Ginsborg, without which mutual recognition among individuals would be impossible. This basic normativity ensures the possibility of exchange, relationship, and interaction, without which the subject would be condemned to solipsism. However, this universal validity and thus aesthetic normativity are not subjective needs of our reason, as Serena Feloj claims; rather, they are once again the result of an agentive dimension of taste. Aesthetic agreement, according to Feloj, is explained as the expectation that others have the same psychological capacity to establish the same connection between pleasure and the representation of the object through aesthetic judgment. On the contrary, I believe that this claim to objectivity is not merely a psychological necessity but rather arises from a more practical moment of constitution of the subject as an agent in the world.

This moment of agreement cannot rely on any principle or rule but can find its force in the power of *exemplarity*, as sustained by Ferrara⁴⁵. The power of example is presented in *The Force of the Example* (2008) as the third world-shaping force – alongside the force of what exists and of what ought to be – that is, the force of *what is as it ought to be*. Exemplary validity makes it possible to reconcile universalism and pluralism, allowing us to find the universal within the particular, as required by aesthetic judgment. However, exemplarity does not provide like in the case of schemata something to which the present case must be assimilated; rather, it enables a form of normativity that can be exercised outside of its original context.

⁴² A. Bertinetto, *Habits, Aesthetics and Normativity*, in “Aisthesis” 17(1), 2024, p. 252.

⁴³ M.R. Solomon, D.J. Pruitt, C.A. Insko, *Taste Versus Fashion: the inferred Objectivity of Aesthetic Judgments*, in “Empirical Studies of the Arts”, Vol 2(2), 1984, p. 115.

⁴⁴ L. Maitland, *Two Senses of Necessity in Kant's Theory of Aesthetic*, in “The British Journal of Aesthetics”, Vol. 16, Issue 4, 1976, p. 348.

⁴⁵ I want to thank the anonymous reviewer of *Itinera* for this important suggestion.

Exemplary validity creates the example rather than applying it, « the force of examples transcends local boundaries more easily than the force of laws or principles because they tap intuitions that run deeper, in the constitution of our subjectivity, than the level that requires translations»⁴⁶. The power of example thus lies in offering «outstanding instances of authentic congruency that are capable of educating our discernment by way of exposing us to selective instances of that special pleasure called by Kant the feeling of “the promotion of life”»⁴⁷. Once again, this is neither a shared horizon of common knowledge nor a common perceptual faculty, but rather a (still shared) capacity to let ourselves be carried by⁴⁸ the feeling of pleasure evoked by an object toward considering that object as an exemplary representation of itself. This allows for a universality of examples without principles, thanks to which examples have the power to introduce a space between *what exists* and of *what ought to be*, an *extra*⁴⁹, a *space of the new*.

Here we can finally connect the space that disinterested attention creates in contrast with the selective attention, and the space for the new that exemplarity seems to involve. Indeed, the contemplative gaze, understood not as a passive absorption, find in experience something that “spills over,” never entirely determinable. The disinterested attention do not reduce, as the selective one, experience as something manageable and homogeneous, but rather identifies in it «an “overabundance” that cannot be pinned down through concepts. In everyday experience, as often repeated, we pay attention to objects according to predetermined parameters; the contemplative gaze, by contrast, seems tasked with reactivating all these concepts»⁵⁰.

Aesthetic exemplarity begins with a singularity that strikes us. This singularity is not exemplary in the sense of corresponding to a known ideal, but it is exemplary precisely because it generates new thoughts and concepts, it does not presuppose them. This kind of exemplary validity is at work in aesthetic judgment when, for example, I see something beautiful and judge it to be so not because I am applying a previously acquired ideal of beauty, but because I recognize in it a harmony, a unique tension that I didn’t even know I was capable of perceiving. It is shown to us without telling us what it is. In the example, we are given the particular for which we must seek the universal in the absence of any rule or principle. «We are then typically left with the “particular” in our hands while our eyes scan the horizon in search of an adequate principle in light of which to assess it and under which to bring it. With a token in our hands, we look for a type that we have never separately experienced»⁵¹. The example thus creates space for novelty, a space that can be explored through a type of attention that does not selectively filter experience in the name of productive or economic ends, but rather recognizes a space of emergence and re-signification, in which the example is not reducible to being merely an example *of* something else, but is instead an elevation of the act, the gesture, or the work in its particularity, beyond its context, as something universally recognizable in its “appropriateness”.

This becomes possible in a *residual*, unselected *space* – where disinterestedness itself seems to reside – that allows for heterogeneity to emerge, loosening the tight bond between action, interest, and attention.

⁴⁶ A. Ferrara, *The Force of the Example. Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment*, Columbia University Press, New York 2008, p. 61.

⁴⁷ A. Ferrara, *The Force of the Example. Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment*, cit., p. 22.

⁴⁸ Here it recalls the idea of *active passivity* as formulated by Bertram.

⁴⁹ *Extra* is the same term Hannah Arendt uses to describe the *sensus communis* (strictly linked by Kant with universal agreement): “an extra sense that fits us into a community” going beyond the passivity and incommunicability of mere reception. H. Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, R. Beiner (ed. by), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1989, p. 72.

⁵⁰ F. Natale, *Attenzione e disinteresse nell’esperienza estetica e artistica*, cit., p. 17 (my trans.).

⁵¹ A. Ferrara, *The Force of the Example. Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment*, cit., p. 20.

Disinterest itself is described in a residual sense as what remains after all other types of pleasures – those that are interest-driven – have been analyzed, though these are not actually excluded from concrete, effective judgment. Similarly, residual is the kind of attention Natale associates with disinterest, an attention that loosens the natural bond between interest and attention, recovering «what is left»⁵². What is evoked here is not a coherent and evenly distributed scanning of experience, but rather «a turning toward the blind spots of attention»⁵³, toward what is excluded by a purely extractive, selective, and productive mechanism.

This, in a certain sense, confines the discussion to the aesthetic domain, since in the moral sphere, where a similar type of exemplarity can be found, we are dealing with mechanisms that are excluded here. Attention to the work, in the moral case, is oriented toward action, interest, and the integration of the singular into operational schemes: exemplarity thus takes on the form of being an example *of* something, an example as the embodiment of a model already linked to shared or shareable norms and concepts⁵⁴. The moral example refers to something already intelligible: a person is exemplary in the name of a shared moral norm, such as altruism, compassion, or generosity. The moral example illustrates the norm, whereas the exemplarity connected to aesthetic judgment – and thus to disinterestedness – is properly a-conceptual⁵⁵; it precedes the concept.

Ferrara himself identifies two types of exemplarity – a distinction that seems particularly fitting here. «Sometimes what is exemplary embeds and reflects a normativity of which we are fully aware: we already know of what the example is an example»⁵⁶. This includes examples of virtuous conduct, military valor, or parental love.

At other times, however, the exemplariness of the example is so pure and innovative that we first vaguely sense it by drawing on the analogy with past experiences and only subsequently do we succeed in identifying the normative moment so forcefully reflected in the object or action at hand. Fully grasping exemplarity in this case requires that we formulate ad hoc the principle of which it constitutes an instantiation. [...] groundbreaking works of art are often of this kind⁵⁷.

6. CONCLUSION

In the first part of the article I have approached the concept of disinterestedness through the lens of attention, in light of references already present at the origin of the concept and later taken up by Kant, in whose work we find the most extensive conceptualization of disinterestedness. The connection with attention, and in particular the contrast between a possible *disinterested attention* and a selective one, highlights the possibility of characterizing disinterestedness as active and practical, while detaching such characterizations from purposes and actions that do not belong to the aesthetic sphere.

The space in which disinterestedness operates, along with the attention associated with it, is not one that is fixed once and for all; it is not shaped by recognition patterns. Rather, it is a space of novelty and

⁵² F. Natale, *Attenzione e disinteresse nell'esperienza estetica e artistica*, cit., p. 17 (my trans.).

⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 96.

⁵⁴ Cfr. T. Toracca, *Towards Exemplarity*, in “Exemplarity and its Normativity”, *Law and Literature*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2018.

⁵⁵ A-conceptuality is part of Kant's proposal for the aesthetic judgement. According to Kant the judgement of beauty is not made by use of concepts and the same goes for its validity.

⁵⁶ A. Ferrara, *The Force of the Example. Explorations in the Paradigm of Judgment*, cit., p. 3.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

sensuous abundance, in which aesthetic normativity itself also moves. Aesthetic normativity, in fact, lacks pre-established rules, but unfolds against a background of appropriateness, as well described by Ginsborg, and draws its strength from exemplary validity. The example – as a space between what is and what ought to be – gains its force precisely through an a-conceptual disinterestedness, which is able to grasp the example as *particular* and not as a mere embodiment of the universal.

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