

## The Concept of Philosophical Experience

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*Abstract:*

We often speak about religious experience, and sometimes we speak about metaphysical experience. Yet we seldom hear about philosophical experience. Is philosophy purely a matter of theories and theses, or does it have an experiential aspect? In this paper, I shall argue for the following three claims. First, there is something we might call philosophical experience, and there is nothing mystical about it. Second, philosophical experiences are expressed in something quite similar to what Kant called aesthetic judgements. Third, philosophical experiences are expressed by using words in what Wittgenstein called secondary sense. Finally, I try to show the educational significance of pursuing philosophical experiences. Through articulating them one might find one's ground, and through articulating them in a less private and more universal form one might raise oneself to universality. Thus, in expressing philosophical experiences one aspires to speak in a universal voice.

Keywords: aesthetic judgement, Kant, philosophical experience, secondary sense, universality, Wittgenstein

### **Introduction**

We often hear the echo of Aristotle's saying that philosophy begins in wonder. Yet there are other ways in which philosophy may enter our lives, other ways in which philosophy, even in its academic guise, is connected to the stuff our lives are made of. Socrates, we do well to

remember, did not only ask questions; he also claimed to have received philosophical insight through a kind of *experience*, the perception of ideas. Perhaps philosophy still has an experiential aspect, though one that is often forgotten or repressed in professional philosophy, to the detriment not only of philosophy but also of our culture in general.

Is there something we might call philosophical experience, analogous to the way in which we speak of religious experience? I think there is. It is the purpose of the present essay to outline a concept of philosophical experience and thus make possible an investigation into its significance. After some examples, the main body of the essay will consist in giving content to the following composite claim: philosophical experiences are expressed in aesthetic judgements, understood in a vaguely Kantian manner, and by using words in a way similar to what Wittgenstein calls “secondary sense.” Building on the Kantian notion of subjective universality, I then go on to argue that the educational significance of philosophy is in part to be found in how such experiences might be, as it were, raised to universality.

### **1. Some Examples**

I assume every philosopher has sometimes thought, at least to himself, that some central philosophical question is rather pointless, even empty. Take scepticism. Does it really make a difference whether we accept the sceptical conclusion?<sup>i</sup> For instance, when Barry Stroud says that if scepticism is true then the best we can have is “very strongly-held beliefs,” we might wonder whether the expression “very strongly-held beliefs” would simply play the role that “knowledge” does today so that nothing has really changed (Stroud 1984, 31). Stroud, though, would disagree. He thinks the consequences of accepting scepticism are disastrous and that we would be in a dramatic predicament if scepticism were true. Scepticism implies, he says, that we are “confined” to ideas, “imprisoned” within them; that there is a “barrier between ourselves and the world,” a “veil” in front of us that we cannot “penetrate,” or a “screen” we

cannot look “beyond”; that we are permanently “sealed off” from the world, unable to “reach” or make “contact” with it; that we are stuck in a “prison” from which we can never escape; that the world is “lost” (ibid., 31-34).

Now to lose the world does indeed sound disastrous. Yet though the influence of Wittgenstein is apparent throughout Stroud’s book, his lack of bemusement at pictures like these is quite un-Wittgensteinian. If we cannot, if it is not at all possible, to know anything about what is “beyond” our mind, what does “beyond” mean here? And what do we mean by speaking about “veils” and “prisons”? If we do not share this sense of imprisonment in the first place, it is easy to feel bewildered by these images. Nonetheless, if someone really had the sense that they were behind a veil they could not penetrate or inside a prison they could not escape, then something more or else than scepticism as a theory or thesis would be at stake. Such a sense can be had independently of sceptical arguments, but it can also be a cause or effect of them. Thus, my bewilderment at Stroud’s images was more a result of the way those words, “We are in a prison from which we cannot escape,” was used as a *thesis*, as though it stated a super-fact about the structure of our mind and world, shocking perhaps, but fairly obvious in its *meaning*. However, those very same words may also be used as an expression of one’s experience of the world: “It is though we are all inside a prison from which we cannot escape.” Certainly, that would still be an extraordinary thing to say, but extraordinariness is no proof of emptiness.

Stanley Cavell seems to suggest that scepticism begins with or originates in a kind of experience. The sceptical conclusion is already present in the form of an experience at the outset of the argument, namely, the sense of “being sealed off from the world, enclosed within my own endless succession of experiences” (Cavell 1979, 144). This is an experience that “takes hold” of us, so that it may be opposed to what we know or believe as a theory or thesis: “I know well enough, intellectually as it were, that these suppositions may be nonsense

... [But] then the attempt to prove intellectually that they have no sense is apt to weaken one's faith in intellectuality" (ibid., 143).

The distinction between a theory, thesis, or belief, on the one hand, and a sense, feeling, or experience, on the other, comes out most clearly in the not unusual case where, first, the very same words are used to express an experience as are used to state a thesis, and, second, the thesis and the experience are felt to be in conflict. There is a fine example in Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, where Briony, 13 years old, is brooding over the problem of other minds:

[Was] everyone else really as alive as she was? ... did her sister really matter to herself, was she as valuable to herself as Briony was? Was being Cecilia just as vivid an affair as being Briony? ... If the answer was yes, then the world, the social world, was unbearably complicated, with two billion voices, and everyone's thoughts striving in equal importance and everyone's claim on life as intense, and everyone thinking they were unique, when no one was. One could drown in irrelevance. But if the answer was no, then Briony was surrounded by machines, intelligent and pleasant enough on the outside, but lacking the bright and private *inside* feeling she had (McEwan 2002, 35-36).

What is revealed in this puzzlement is a gap between, we might say, knowledge (or belief) and experience (or feeling): "She *knew* [that everyone else had thoughts like hers], but only in a rather arid way; she didn't really *feel* it" (ibid., 36). At this point, though, a crucial thing happens. Briony looks out of the window and notices her older sister with her childhood friend Robbie down by the water fountain. Suddenly, her sister undresses and jumps into the fountain. After climbing out again, she disappears into the house, without exchanging words with Robbie. Briony is confused. And this confusion becomes a sort of revelation to her. Precisely the fact that she does not understand forces her to acknowledge the separateness of other minds: much of what people say and do does not conform to our expectations of what

life is or should be. This mismatch between one's own mind and other people is what their "otherness" consists in. Now Briony feels the truth of what she formerly just knew as a proposition: she not only *knows* that other people have their own minds, she *sees* it. The very same words that previously seemed to her empty knowledge, "Other people have minds like me," are now used as an expression of experience. She will now say those words in a new tone of voice.

The crucial distinction here may be expressed in numerous ways but often as a contrast between belief and perception: "I have always believed that the universe is inherently meaningless, but now I *see* it." Prior to her experience, Briony formulates it as a distinction between knowing and feeling: "I know that other people have minds like me, but I am not able to *feel* it." It may also be captured in a distinction between (just) words and (genuine) knowledge: "It is one thing to talk about freedom, quite another to *know* what it is." Accordingly, one might describe it as a matter of making the word "freedom" one's *own*, realizing what it really means: "Now first do I know what freedom means". Putting the key words above in italics mirrors how speakers may stress certain words to express how there is now an extra dimension to their knowledge. Indeed, the intensification of already existing knowledge is often only detected in other people from *how* they say their words, not from the words themselves.

Perhaps that is one reason why such experiences are often found in literature. In Proust's *Combray*, for example, there are striking expressions of an experience that one may sense at certain locations in the history of philosophy:

[Suddenly] a roof, a gleam of sunlight reflected from a stone, the smell of a road would make me stop still, to enjoy the special pleasure that each of them gave me, and also because they appeared to be concealing, beneath what my eyes could see, something which they invited me to approach and seize from them, but which, despite all my efforts,

I never managed to discover. As I felt that the mysterious object was to be found in them, I would stand there in front of them, motionless, gazing, breathing, endeavouring to penetrate with my mind beyond the thing seen or smelt (Proust 1934, 138)

In ascertaining and noting the shape [of the spires of the twin steeples of Martinville], the changes of aspect, the sunny warmth of their surfaces, I felt that I was not penetrating to the full depth of my impression, that something more lay behind that mobility, that luminosity, something which they seemed at once to contain and to conceal (ibid., 140).

Marcel is here struck by how each thing has an imponderable core that the mind can at best only glimpse. Adorno, whose lectures on Kant are one of the few places where philosophical experiences are thematized, found a similar experience in or underneath the doctrine of *Das Ding-an-sich*. It is what Nietzsche pointed to when he termed Kant a *Hinterweltler*, “someone who supposes that behind the world of our experience there lies a second world even though we know nothing whatever of this second, other world” (Adorno 2001, 109). Adorno specifies it as an experience of a *block*, the sense of “an entirely undefined, obscure and, if you like, demonic world as a world ‘behind’ our own world, even though we have no way of knowing how it relates to the world of experience that we inhabit” (ibid.).

## **2. Aesthetic Claims**

Whether the examples above involve a vague sense of something, an attitude to things coming one’s way, or an outright vision, they are all instances of what we may classify as “experiences.” Now experiences may vary in clarity, duration, intensity, and level of articulation, and might therefore be said to form a continuum, from vague, inarticulate senses to occurrences close to perceptions. Furthermore, just as there is a continuum within the concept of experience, there is also a continuum from the theoretical to the aesthetic or

experiential. For instance, it is not easy to distinguish sharply between being inclined to hold a theory and having a vague sense of something. That there is a continuum, however, does not mean that there are no differences.

Before we go on to more specific features of philosophical experiences, let us note some general but rough differences between expressing an experience and stating a thesis. To agree with a thesis is to agree with what it says about the world; to agree with the expression of an experience is to have the same experience. To understand a thesis is to know how the world would be if it were true; to understand the expression of an experience is to know the experience it expresses, either by having had the experience oneself or by being able to imagine oneself having it. To doubt a thesis does not normally mean to doubt that one believes it, though one can doubt that as well, but to doubt the expression of an experience is to doubt whether it *is* one's experience, which often means to doubt whether one has found the right words to express the experience. With regard to theses, one tries to find better evidence and reasons for them; with regard to expressions, one tries to find better ways of articulating them.

Building on these rough suggestions, I shall now argue that expressions of philosophical experiences are like aesthetic judgements, in Kant's sense of the term. To see what characterizes aesthetic judgements, and thereby expressions of philosophical experiences, we can compare them to objective and subjective judgements respectively. (The following account is meant to be neither complete nor controversial. I simply want to distinguish between different kinds of judgements, not on basis of their relation to reality, but on the basis of how we treat them, that is, how they operate in our "language-games." It is only roughly based on Kant's account. As will become clear, the aim is to extract a concept of judgement that is of wider application than Kant himself puts it to).

A paradigmatic objective judgement is about something that *can* be perceived but which is not perceived as the judgement is made, for instance, “The key is in the drawer,” said when the drawer is shut. Essential to the objectivity of that judgement is the possibility of evidence that will settle the matter. *If* we had the thing in front of us, we would know, and disagreement would then be extraordinary. The kind of conclusiveness that characterizes objective judgements backs up their second essential feature: they are said to be right or wrong, true or false. If I say that the key is there and you say it is not, then I think you are wrong. I am not content to treat the disagreement as a mere *difference* between us. The third essential feature of objective judgements is that they can be made *second-hand*. I may claim that the key is in the drawer on the basis of someone else’s claim, and it would be the same claim. Thus an objective judgement may be made on the basis of the experience of others.

Subjective judgements, on the other hand, do not admit of proof. One cannot imagine a crucial piece of evidence, some key, to come forth and settle whether olives really are good or not. Furthermore, there is no such thing as being right or wrong in matters of subjective taste. Disagreement is accepted, though perhaps not always expected. Even though we may discuss the matter for a (little) while, we soon reach a point where there is nothing more to say, except conclude that we are different. Lastly, subjective judgements cannot be made second-hand. Only those who have tasted olives themselves can make the subjective judgement “Olives are good.” When I say, “Olives are good,” I mean that *I* like them, but I do not pretend to speak on behalf of everyone else.

Kant’s great achievement in his third *Critique*, an insight of far wider application than what is normally called “aesthetics,” was to show how there is a third class of judgements, different from both subjective and objective judgements.

In a famous passage, Hume utilizes a story told by Sancho in *Don Quixote*, in which two men are able to detect tastes of iron and leather in a wine, coming from an old key with a



leathern thong at the bottom of the cask (Hume 1998, 141). Hume uses the example to illustrate the delicacy of taste necessary to a good critic of art. As an example of aesthetic discourse, though, it is misleading. As Cavell notes, “the taste may have been present and the object not, or the object present and the taste not” (Cavell 1969, 87). Did the finding of the key *verify* what they said? If they had not found a key at the bottom, would their judgements have been *false*? If the answer is yes, then their judgements were *not* aesthetic, though the delicacy of their taste may nonetheless help them along as connoisseurs. In aesthetic disagreements there is no conclusive evidence to pop up and settle the matter; what can be proved and disproved in the way imagined by Hume is not an aesthetic claim. In aesthetics, the experience is itself the key. Likewise, there is no evidence to come forth to confirm a philosophical experience; if we are to say that they are “confirmed,” it is rather our experiences that confirm each other.

Like subjective but unlike objective judgements, aesthetic judgements cannot be made second hand but must be the expression of one’s own experience. Does that mean that the aesthetic judgement is really only about me and not about, say, the artwork? Well, the important thing is to note that our inclinations vacillate between the two and take that as an important feature of the “grammar” of aesthetic claims. The same goes for judgements recording philosophical experiences. Regarding such judgements, it is often difficult to decide whether it is the judge or the world that is in question, that is, whether the judgement tells us most about the person making it or about the world.

Nonetheless, we do speak of right and wrong in aesthetic contexts. Difference of opinion is interpreted as disagreement, not mere difference. If I say the work is good and you say it is bad, our claims are treated as in *conflict*, as in need of reconciliation. I do not shrug off our disagreement by saying, cheerfully or indifferently, “Well, who can argue with taste?” or if I do, I am not treating the judgement as an aesthetic judgement. Rather, I am slightly or

considerably *disappointed* by the disagreement, and the depth of disappointment varies with the depth of my connection to the work or the other judge. It matters to me that she shares my aesthetic experience of art (and my philosophical experience of the world) in a way it does not matter to me whether she shares my taste in olives.

Kant puts it like this: in making an aesthetic judgement, I demand, impute, or require the agreement of others. I am not content with speaking for myself only; I claim to be speaking for others, too. If someone responds to my judgement by saying, “To you, that is,” then I shall feel misunderstood: they are not taking the claim seriously – *I* am not taken seriously. I make a claim *on them*, and if they treat it as a purely subjective judgement, then they are, as it were, fleeing from it, or from me. Equally, if my aesthetic claim makes a claim on others, theirs make a claim on me. The other’s judgement demands a certain experience from me, and I shall be held to account if I do not see things the same way, even though my experiences are to an extent out of my control. In treating their judgements as only about them, I refuse, for some reason I have to investigate myself, to be *touched* by what they say. I have, as it were, encapsulated myself.

Yet an aesthetic judgement, whether it records an experience of art or a philosophical experience, is still an expression of *my* experience, so that in claiming universal agreement I am in effect claiming the universality of my experience. Is this an illusion? I do not *expect* agreement. Yet I keep on demanding it. That I do so in vain does not stop me from speaking, or aspiring to speak, in a universal voice.

However, even *actual* universal agreement does not mean that the claim *is* universally valid, because an actual agreement might have been accidental, just a passing congruence in privacy. What Kant terms the *necessity* of an aesthetic judgement, that others *should* agree, implies that it pretends to speak for *any* human being, for any *possible* human being. Thus, an aesthetic judgement is not automatically valid even if every living being were to agree to it.

Nonetheless, Kant does say that an aesthetic judgement looks “for confirmation, not from concepts, but from the concurrence of others” (Kant 2005, 36). What does that mean? It means that the lack of actual agreement can make us feel that the aesthetic judgement as such, with its implicit pretension to universality, is an illusion. Disagreement introduces doubt, because it proves that *something* is wrong. Either I doubt myself: perhaps I have not managed to look away from private matters, perhaps my claim is subjective, after all. Do I know myself as well as I thought I did? Or I doubt others: they are not able to rise above private matters; their view is clouded by their background or who and what they want to be. Or I doubt the possibility of a universal voice as such. Conversely, just as disagreement instils doubt, agreement instils hope. Agreement seems to vindicate the claim to be speaking in a universal voice; it can make me believe in a community of experience – “deep down we are fundamentally alike, after all.”

Yet agreement, even with the entire world, does not make my claim more probable, due to the moment of necessity of an aesthetic judgement. Since the notion of “any possible human being” is an infinite concept, we cannot even say that the agreement of all human beings makes the judgement more *probable*. This rather obscure-sounding point about infinity is in fact crucial, for it implies that agreement with a single person may be as confirming as agreement with the entire country, depending upon who that one is. If I consider her representative of humanity, more so than the rest of the population, which is possible, though it would signal my estrangement from my culture, agreement with her might give me more confidence in a community of experience than agreement with others. In such cases, one particular person is a symbol of humanity, and one particular agreement is a symbol of the universal community of experience.

The tripartite distinction between objective, subjective, and aesthetic is one between judgements, not objects, though each has its paradigmatic field of operation and though it

may be hard to imagine some kinds of claims made about some kinds of things, such as objective claims about the taste of food. Furthermore, it is crucial to note that by “aesthetic” I simply mean the kind of judgement exhibiting the structure sketched above. So by calling expressions of philosophical experience “aesthetic,” I do not want to suggest that they are arbitrary, private, or merely subjective. Quite the opposite, as we shall see.

There is another close analogy between philosophical and aesthetic experiences. Even if the insight that seems to be revealed in the experience is weaved inextricably into a concrete situation, it is formulated *generally*. Marcel’s philosophical experience is not expressed as an insight into the nature of a certain stone or country road; his peculiar perception of a particular thing represents rather an insight into the nature of *all* things. Such a unity between the concrete and the abstract, the individual and the general, may be established in two different ways. In the first, the object of a philosophical experience is treated and expressed as an *embodiment* of some general insight. Marcel’s experience is typical: some concrete object, seen under a certain aspect, becomes a symbol of the world as a whole (or of some region of the world, say, our culture). In the second, we perceive not a concrete object, but have a sense of the world as a whole, which we then express by referring to a concrete object or interrelated set of such objects. An example is the prison-experience of scepticism. One has a sense of the human being’s place in the world and then expresses that sense through relations between the terms “prison,” “walls,” “escape,” and so on. The first type begins with the experience of a concrete object and expresses it as an insight into the world as a whole, whereas in the second type it is the other way around: one begins with a sense of the world as a whole and expresses it by reference to a concrete object, say, a prison.

### **3. Secondary Sense**

In Part II of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein makes a distinction between primary and secondary sense (Wittgenstein 2003, 183). He notes that he is inclined to say that Wednesday is fat and Tuesday lean. Are “fat” and “lean” here used in their ordinary sense? Well, they are used differently, but one can only explain their meaning in this context by referring to their ordinary use, and it is just these words, with their familiar meaning, that he wants to use. Thus transferring words with their ordinary sense into radically different contexts he calls using words in a “secondary sense.” (Wittgenstein’s term, “secondary sense,” is perhaps somewhat misleading, as it gives the impression that words used in a secondary sense are used in another sense than usual. A more adequate term is “secondary expressions”).

The expression of philosophical experience typically handles words in a similar way. Most experiences, say, physical or mental pain, are expressed conventionally. We have learned to express how we feel; the expression is made as part of a shared practise one has been initiated into. Typical of secondary expressions, however, is that, though they presuppose familiarity with the background of primary sense, they transcend that background by projecting words into contexts that do *not* follow naturally from their entrenched use. One feels compelled to employ a word belonging to one context in order to express an experience in a very different context, such as using “black dog” to describe psychological pain, like Churchill did, or using the word “prison” to express philosophical pain, like in scepticism.

Metaphors are also constituted by using words in new ways.<sup>ii</sup> Nevertheless, a metaphor is based on analogies or similarities that themselves are based on objective properties of that which the metaphor is about. Therefore, a certain ability to explain the metaphor is a condition of understanding it: if you cannot see the analogies that the metaphor is based on, you cannot grasp the meaning of the metaphor either. A secondary expression, though, is not based on anything but our experience, and that experience is perhaps only articulable by using just that secondary expression, so that the transposition of words it

involves is not explainable. To understand a secondary expression is merely to recognize the expression as one that one may have been inclined to utter oneself. Our shared understanding here does not rest on anything deeper; it is, as it were, its own ground.

Some may fear that to let this animal loose in philosophy will annihilate its rationality, as it appears to make genuine disagreement impossible. Disagreement normally presupposes understanding, yet in order to understand the expression of a philosophical experience that employs words in a secondary sense, you must have had the experience yourself, in which case you would not disagree. The worry, though, is groundless, for the rationality of philosophical theory and argument is left intact. The point is that expressing a philosophical experience is different from stating a philosophical theory or thesis. To disagree with a philosophical experience is to confess that you do not understand, whereas to agree is to agree *in* experience. Contrarily, no special experience is normally needed to understand philosophical theories or theses, and you must understand a theory to agree with it but not the other way around.

The connection between secondary sense and philosophical experience is obvious in Wittgenstein's "A Lecture on Ethics" (1993, 36-44). Here he makes a distinction between two different uses of normative words like "right," "important," and "value." They can either be used in a relative sense, with reference to some goal or standard, or they can be used absolutely, without any such reference. Relative judgements of value describe facts and can therefore be expressed in assertions. Absolute judgements, on the other hand, do not describe facts, but the attempt to express them in assertions makes them *seem* like facts, which results in nonsense. It does not make sense to speak about right or value without reference to some goal or standard that it is right or valuable in relation to. According to Cora Diamond, such absolute judgements use "right" and "value" in a secondary sense: I can only express what I want by departing from how these words function in ordinary language-games (1991, 235).

One could argue that the absolute sense of "right" and "value" is not, at least not any longer, a genuinely secondary sense, because it is now just one of the ordinary, primary senses of those words, and the ways of judging, thinking, and seeing that they belong to are now an entrenched part of our lives. At any rate, later in the lecture we find more obvious examples of secondary expressions than those Diamond highlights, when Wittgenstein goes on to illuminate absolute judgements by mentioning certain experiences:

I will describe this experience in order, if possible, to make you recall the same or similar experiences, so that we may have a common ground for our investigation. I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it I wonder at the existence of the world. And I am then inclined to use such phrases as "how extraordinary that anything should exist" or "how extraordinary that the world should exist." I will mention another experience straight away which I also know and which others of you might be acquainted with: it is, what one might call, the experience of feeling absolutely safe. I mean the state of mind in which one is inclined to say "I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens" (Wittgenstein 1993, 41).

What Wittgenstein directs us towards here is a widespread phenomenon of the human mind: applying words in radically new ways to express experiences of fundamental importance, without being able to explain or justify the projection.

Wittgenstein indicates that such a use of language to express philosophical experiences is a case of what he later calls secondary sense, as his argumentation is exactly the same as in the *Investigations*. These expressions, he says, seem to be "just similes," but they are not, because similes refer to underlying similarities that again refer to underlying facts, whereas there is no fact behind a secondary expression. "And so, what at first appeared to be a simile now seems to be mere nonsense" (ibid., 43). Wondering at the existence of something presupposes that we can imagine its non-existence, but we cannot imagine the non-

existence of everything. That such expressions are nonsensical, though, is also their very point, according to Wittgenstein. They are not nonsensical because we have not yet found a better way to say what we want to say. A proposition can only state facts, and that is exactly what we do not want. What we want is "just to go beyond the world and that is to say beyond significant language," which is a "tendency in the human mind" Wittgenstein cannot help "respecting deeply" (ibid., 44). Why he doesn't say.

We do not have to follow Wittgenstein in his early assumption that language can only describe facts. It seems to leave us with only two options: either these experiences are simply nothing, like illusions, or they point towards something other than what they seem to say, something unspeakable. Both these alternatives are unsatisfactory. We should rather insist on the following simple but difficult truth: when I say, as the expression of an experience, "The world is a prison" (or "How extraordinary that the world should exist"), then that is *exactly what I mean*. Idiosyncratic, yes, perhaps even nonsense compared to the primary uses of the words, but that does not imply that something *else* must be meant. Regarding metaphors it might be said that we gesture towards something else than what is literally said, but regarding secondary sense there is no "something else." It says what it says.

Wittgenstein indicates that the way to understand another's philosophical experience is to have had "the same or similar" experience, and that is what makes their communication precarious. If I said, "It is as though everything is unreal, that all is but a game," then it will seem dangerously close to an absurdity for many people. Nonetheless, it is not very different from expressions that do not at first sight seem idiosyncratic at all, such as "There is a veil in front of us that we cannot penetrate," an experience that professional philosophy has anaesthetized into a thesis and that we have become unable to recognize as deeply peculiar. The task of a philosophical teacher is to aestheticize such expressions, rediscover their strangeness and significance.



It has been said that metaphors can create "intimacy" between people (Cohen 1979). Yet secondary expressions do that even more so, inasmuch as a shared understanding of them does not rest on anything else than agreement in sensibility. Perhaps all communication presupposes a *sensus communis*, but in the secondary field that is all we have, and sometimes it is enough. In the aftermath of those happy moments where idiosyncratic experiences coincide, we may feel that we are not alone after all. Yet such a shared sense is not like a Kantian *sensus communis* that only angels are excluded from and that has to exist in order for knowledge *überhaupt* to be possible. There is no metaphysical or transcendental guarantee of a universal agreement in philosophical experience. It does not even look probable. We all know the way in which what we want to say, what we find to be the only possible expression of an experience of fundamental importance, does not reverberate in others at all.

Most philosophy moves within shared frameworks. We share a rough sense of what the problems are and of what arguments and answers are worthy of our attention. Yet most philosophers are also acquainted with encounters where that agreement cannot be taken for granted. Some get frustrated by such encounters, feeling perhaps that nothing meaningfully can be said in such a vacuum. Others will feel that this is the moment of true philosophy – all theory and all standards of argumentation are put in question. When the shared framework is lost, we have no ground underneath, which is to say that we are *on* the ground. Then we have to find out what that ground is and whether it is *common* ground. We do that by expressing our world the best we can, without relying on anything but our expressive inclinations. Thus there is a sense in which every word said on the ground is said in a secondary sense.

#### **4. The Cultivation of Philosophical Experience**

What kind of educational journey might the recognition of philosophical experience take us on? The first step, which is the most important but also the most difficult, is to *articulate*

one's philosophical experience. It is easy to forget that this has to be learned and also that it can be practised. Indeed, most people's philosophical experiences stay inarticulate and unacknowledged. The second step is to get clear about the *significance* of the experience. The most important kind of importance a philosophical experience might come to have is to become part of one's ground. However, it is not the same kind of ground that Descartes rebuilt his mind's house on. Whereas an *epistemological* ground consists of theories or beliefs, which might be replaced for others as soon as we find some more certain or evident, an *aesthetic* ground consists of sense and experience, or a set of such, which, for better or for worse, contributes to who I am. The latter is not chosen because I have found it to be the most reliable or most evident; rather, I have to accept it because there is no way around it for me, whether I like it or not: here I stand; I can do no other (cf. Weber 1978, 224).

Yet if we left it at this, we would still remain within the private or individual sphere. In fact, we might then seem to champion a conception of philosophy approximating that of the logical positivist's idea of metaphysics as expression. In the words of Carnap: "The metaphysician believes that he travels in territory in which truth and falsehood are at stake. In reality, however, he has not asserted anything, but only expressed something, like an artist" (Carnap 1996, 79). Yet this is a bad understanding of aesthetics and, by implication, a bad understanding of the aesthetic aspect of philosophy. What is wrong with Carnap's view is not the claim that the philosopher sometimes expresses himself but the implication that expression cannot be part of the serious business of philosophy because it is a purely private or subjective activity.

As I have argued for an analogy between aesthetic judgements and certain philosophical judgements, it will come as no surprise that I will propose an analogy between aesthetic education and philosophical education. Just as the critic should be doing more than merely expressing *his* impression of the work of art, so the philosopher should be doing more

than merely expressing *his* impression of the world. There is *work* involved in criticism, which is analogous to the philosopher's work on his experience: the work of transforming private experiences into (more) universal experiences, through articulating them in such a way that others may recognize themselves in them. That effort, that ascent, is what makes the cultivation of philosophical experience into a matter of philosophical education instead of mere personal development.

Yet some would perhaps feel that the use of Kant's aesthetics is not very promising in this respect. The basis for the claim to subjective universality is, after all, disinterestedness, which seems to imply a form of contemplation that excludes just the personal importance that philosophical experiences are felt to have. The problem that this poses for my account runs parallel to an internal problem in Kant's aesthetic.

Kant vacillates between a narrow and a wide view of disinterestedness. Consider, for instance, the much-discussed inference at the beginning of §6 in *Critique of Judgment*. The first formulation of this argument utilizes a narrow view of disinterestedness:

For where any one is conscious that his delight in an object is with him independent of interest, it is inevitable that he should look on the object as one containing a ground of delight for all men (Kant 2005, 36).

As many have pointed out, this inference does not look valid. It does not seem to deliver adequate justification for the claim to universality implicit in the aesthetic judgement, as there seem to be many private factors other than interest that may hinder universality: aesthetic pleasure "might be ... based on some other kind of merely private condition" (Guyer 1997, 132). I may, for instance, like a work of art because it reminds me of my own childhood, in which case no *interest* is involved but where the aesthetic experience will still not be universal. On the other hand, as this example demonstrates, the narrow view of

disinterestedness does not require us to exclude *all* personal elements from aesthetic appreciation, only interests. So on the narrow view we rescue personal importance at the cost of making the inference invalid, which seems to remove the ground for claiming universality for aesthetic judgements or, in the present context, expressions of philosophical experience.

The wide view of disinterestedness is in play in the second formulation of Kant's inference from disinterestedness to universality at the beginning of §6:

[He] can find as reason for his delight no personal conditions to which his own subjective self might alone be party. Hence he must regard it as resting on what he may also presuppose in every other person; and therefore he must believe that he has reason for demanding a similar delight from every one (Kant 2005, 36).

Considered as an inference, this looks more promising, as it excludes *any* personal condition from a truly disinterested experience. Regrettably, by apparently excluding any personal element from aesthetic (or philosophical) experience, it also threatens the personal importance that art (and philosophy) is felt to have. Accordingly, we face a dilemma: either disinterestedness only means "without private interest," in which case the inference is not valid since there may be other private elements blocking universality, or disinterestedness means "without any private element at all," in which case it seems to exclude what we feel is the *personal* importance of aesthetic and philosophical experience.

Nevertheless, regarding philosophical experience and its cultivation I find a wide concept of disinterestedness most relevant: the disinterestedness necessary to articulate a universally valid philosophical experience demands that we look away from *all* private features. Only in that case can we regard it as stemming from what we may presuppose in every other person, that is, as resting on a universal aspect of ourselves. Accordingly, the cultivation of philosophical experience is a cultivation of disinterestedness: it is to aspire

towards a universal voice, an expression of one's philosophical experience that is independent of private features. Such a process of rising out of the private sphere is truly a process of education.

Yet what then about the *personal* importance of such experiences? To solve this problem we need to drive a wedge between the private and the personal. That wedge is provided by the concept of exemplarity: "The problem of the critic, as of the artist, is not to discount his subjectivity, but to include it; not to overcome it in agreement, but to master it in exemplary ways" (Cavell 1969, 94).

First of all, disinterestedness does not imply that we have to be cold, detached, or dispassionate, both because there may be universal passions and because we may be passionately concerned about something universal. Moreover, we do not know *in advance* what is private or idiosyncratic and what is public or universal. The fact that something arises out of my background, for instance, is not sufficient to dismiss it as "merely private." There are no rules governing what is private or universal, so that we do not know what is shared before we express it, which is easily forgotten if we only have in mind age-old philosophical theories like realism and idealism but easily recognized when we set our minds on *new* expressions. There is a first time for everything; that "all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" was probably a quite peculiar idea at first. So what seems the most private, personal, or idiosyncratic may in fact be or become more universal than what is hailed as universal. Emerson records this aspiration in "The American Scholar":

He then learns, that in going down into the secrets of his own mind, he has descended into the secrets of all minds ... The poet, in utter solitude remembering his spontaneous thoughts and recording them, is found to have recorded that, which men in crowded cities find true for them also. The orator distrusts at first the fitness of his frank confessions,— his want of knowledge of the persons he addresses,— until he finds that he is the

complement of his hearers; that they drink his words because he fulfils for them their own nature; the deeper he dives into his privatest, secretest presentiment, to his wonder he finds, this is the most acceptable, most public, and universally true. The people delight in it; the better part of every man feels, This is my music; this is myself (Emerson 2003, 238).

Some people, call them (good) critics, have the knack for expressing their aesthetic experience in such a way that we think, “Yes, that is how the work is, that is how I saw it, too.” And some people, some of them are philosophers, others are writers, have the knack for expressing their philosophical experience in such a way that we think, “Yes, that is how the world is, that is how I see it, too.” Both have the ability to speak for others: they express their own experience but so that others will recognize themselves in it. Accordingly, to look away from private factors does not mean to deny them their undeniable influence. It means, rather, to *articulate* one’s experience so that its validity is not dependent on any private matters. It must be possible for people who do not share the particulars of my background to recognize themselves in my experience. Attaining universality does not mean to conform one’s experience to that of others but to articulate it so that that very experience is seen to be others’ as well. Thus, universality does not compel us to compromise. If it is felt as a compromise, we have simply not achieved subjective universality. And if we do succeed, we do that by finding the right words, words in which one’s experience takes on a universal form.

The wide reading of disinterestedness, though, seems to make Kant’s inference at the beginning of §6 worth almost nothing as a justification for the claim to universality. If the only way to know whether the claim is independent of private elements is from the fact of agreement, then the (presumed) absence of private elements cannot be used as a justification for a claim to universal validity. How, then, can we explain what Kant is doing at the beginning of §6? In my view, Kant does not mean this inference as a justification for the

claim to universality. It is more like a description of the phenomenology of the aesthetic claim, of how we think when we make such claims. Henry Allison seems to say the same: "Rather than speaking simply of a logical inference from disinterestedness to universality, Kant seems to be making a psychological claim" (Allison 2001, 100). This is important, because it indicates that the claim to universality cannot be justified *in a particular case*. Or rather, it can only be justified by the response of others.

Universal agreement is surely a utopian aspiration. Nevertheless, universality is a regulative idea of aesthetic discourse and also of the communication of philosophical experience. In practise, that aspiration manifests itself in the search for agreement, in the concrete work of shaping one's expression so that it takes on a less private form. However, that work will at the same time help me to develop a sense for what *is*, after all, merely a function of my individuality. Yet one will not discover what is merely private about oneself as long as one automatically treats everything about oneself as merely private, as merely about me. Thus, the cultivation of philosophical experience is to come to see one's own life as expressive of the human condition.

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<sup>i</sup> Naturally, the aim of these sections is not to illuminate scepticism as such, much less to solve the problem of scepticism, but to exemplify the concept of philosophical experience.

<sup>ii</sup> It does not matter here whether secondary expressions are classified as a kind of metaphor or not, as long as we get the relevant features clear in view.

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