

## 6. Aesthetics: Appreciating the Appearances

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### *Appreciating as a Mode of Cognition*

In chapter one we told how the morphologist and the wrong-minded student met and clashed. The student mentioned his enthusiasm for Goethe's attempt to approach science by keeping to direct experience and was judged a mere nature appreciator, not a productive scientist. There was no way to reconcile that rift. Looking back at the event, the student became aware that, because he cherished gaining experience through the senses he had been found guilty as a sinner bent on enjoying sensual pleasure. But he opted against giving in to the stern commandments of academia; Goethe's insistence that science could be based on direct sensible experience had convinced him that sense experience did not require one to indulge in subjective pleasures. He foresaw its becoming a path to deep reality. The morphologist, on the other hand, presumably remained unaware of such a choice when he took on the path of abstraction.

As indicated at the end of the last chapter, aesthetics as it was established and developed from 1735 on by Baumgarten was an alternative to logic. Logic is cognition based on thoughts, on ideas, on theory. Baumgarten characterized aesthetics, by contrast, as the mode of knowledge dedicated to the individual appearance itself, the *aesthetician* being an individual who finds the utmost truth in the specific experience and the less significant truth in generally applicable, fundamental concepts and theoretical constructions.

In this chapter we will consider how to *appreciate the specific appearance* in an attempt to practice aesthetics in Baumgarten's sense. In his time logic was seen as the true path to objective knowledge. It still is. And, to be sure, this path is positively "anaesthetic"—devoid of sense experience. It is taken as a matter of course in the guild. It leads to knowledge in terms of principles that in turn must be compatible with the basic beliefs of the time. These are seldom voiced explicitly, but they comprise, all the more, the current ideology.

## *How Logic Works*

It is a peculiar undertaking indeed to question the application of logic in cognition and thus, as it seems, in reasoning. As the standard of clearheaded thinking or reasoning, logic cannot be put in doubt. But another trait of logical reasoning is its distance from the wealth of original sense experience: logic draws conclusions from *general ideas* which have been either inherited from tradition or set up hypothetically for the time being.

An eminent example of logical reasoning is the syllogism, which combines a general sentence with a more specific one and leads to a corresponding conclusion. Here is a classic syllogism:

All human beings are mortal.  
Socrates is a human being.  
Therefore Socrates is mortal.

Clearly, the concept of the human being connects the first two sentences and leads to the conclusion, into which it does not enter explicitly. Note that the full meaning—the firsthand experience of mortality—remains in the background; it is not part of the reasoning process. We could just as well have said “two-legged” instead of “mortal” and the same logical relationships would be on display. If we remind ourselves that the conclusion of the syllogism is about the death of an individual, this is our own business and is not required to appreciate the strictly logical aspects of the reasoning.

Logical inference must follow rules that at first sight are just common sense. But these rules have been scrutinized since antiquity with the result that they have been refined more and more and given the rigor of mathematical operations. Steps in valid reasoning must work like steps in mathematical proofs.

So logic as the opposite of aesthetics follows the example practiced in the establishment of mathematics. For geometry Euclid built a methodical edifice which, in principle, is still valid in its structure. How does it work? A set of geometrical objects is given through definition—points, straight lines, planes, and so on. These are ideal: the plane has no thickness, the line has no breadth, and the point has no extension. Then an appropriate set of axioms is chosen to specify how these objects may interrelate. For example, in a plane, two lines must intersect at a mutual point. (Euclid did not yet envisage that point going to infinity as the lines become parallel.) Once

we have laid this foundation for geometry, our next step is to deduce the theorems that allow geometry to be applied in practice. For example, we can prove the theorems governing the geometry of triangles and then can put them to work in surveying. The surveyor establishes geometrical relations between points fixed in the topography. In this way a spiderweb of abstract geometrical relations is cast over the rich diversity of a landscape.

Logical inference in natural science must begin with clear-cut concepts suitable for mathematical reasoning. Experience, on the other hand, tends to be too complicated to be represented by a simple formula. For example, when leaves fall they come down to earth, as do other bodies. Treating this problem logically, we could begin with the fundamental law of nature that all bodies dropped in a vacuum fall in the same manner, gaining speed according to the specific local constant of acceleration. However leaves don't fall like stones do; they float through the air, so that this approach is obviously insufficient. We are required to find an alternative law befitting the fact that, lacking the stone's acceleration, leaves fall with a constant mean downward velocity. We find such behavior in the sinking motion of a body in a viscous liquid. Further steps in the construction of an artificial formulation will be inevitable.

What have we been up to? First, we substituted the empirical phenomenon of falling leaves by a first law. It was a success as far as it fitted the mere fact that leaves come down. But then it turned out to be inadequate in relation even to a mean velocity in downward motion. So we were in need of a better substitute, which, as we know, is still by no means satisfactory. But we were at work, modeling idealized objects. And only such idealized behavior may be admitted into our mathematical reasoning.

In the last chapter, the physics student was told he could solve problems in physics by logical inference. Physics was opposite to an empirical science, such as chemistry. The haphazard movement often shown by a leaf floating through the air is perhaps a paradigm for empirical events. Every time it gains speed in falling, it tends to rise in its flight, but only to stall, and so on. If you try to catch such a lively leaf, you may fall down yourself, so surprising are its movements. What is more, it will not repeat its flight if you give yourself and the leaf a second chance. You might say, a little whimsically, that full understanding of the falling leaf implies a consistent ability to catch it as it floats down to earth. Perhaps some things on earth are just not predetermined; they cannot be wholly captured by reasoning. And perhaps these are the important ones.

Instead of inferring the particular object or event from a general law, we can attempt what is often considered to be the opposite approach. That is, we can attempt the *induction* of a general law from empirical evidence. Does smoking cause cancer? A field study on this question would proceed in the following way.

In a general population two possibly overlapping sub-populations can be distinguished: smokers and people afflicted with lung cancer. We must first count the individuals belonging to each sub-population, and also those belonging to both. Depending on the statistical frequency of smokers with cancer, we may conclude, with more or less confidence, that cancer is correlated to smoking habits. The statistical results establish a certain probability for the relation set forth in the hypothesis.

Two requirements must be met in order to proceed with the inductive method: first, before the field study takes place a specific hypothesis needs to be formulated, and second, we need a number of repetitions of the events we are considering (for example, smoking and getting cancer) in order to obtain the necessary statistical data. The problem is that experience never exactly repeats itself; no two individual lives are identical. One person who smokes and gets cancer leads a different life and has a different history compared to another person who also smokes and gets cancer. So the events we are counting are never the same; we are counting apples and oranges. In induction we do not examine events in all their particularity. Rather, we remain within fixed categories not modifiable according to individual character. We restrict our understanding to objects and relationships of a general nature. Here, as with the Euclidean sort of logical inference, the path of logic leads from above downward—from a basic general principle (“cancer correlates with smoking”) to an abstract criterion (“those who desist from smoking have less chance of getting cancer”) that can then be applied to experience.

In the logical mode of cognition, general concepts in the form of a theory are treasured as the basic knowledge of any science. We try to understand individual events by interpreting them in terms of underlying general concepts. Then the individual event appears to be a conclusion of reasoning that deduces it from abstract principles. So, logic, in the sense in which Baumgarten was referring to it, is a line of thought that begins with a theory and works out special applications that follow from it. If this can be done convincingly, the event in question is held to be in agreement with generally accepted knowledge. If not, the experience will likely be cast in doubt—or, perhaps, if enough nonconforming experience is eventually found, some new fundamental concept may be framed as a hypothesis.

While seeming to be supported by the authority of universally accepted principles, conclusions from general concepts are devoid of the individual, unique, and existential character that authentic sense perceptions have. This was what Baumgarten had in mind when he suggested that a kind of cognition must be possible that is prepared to deal with what is singular in the appearances we meet. In logical terms we could conclude: aesthetics is complementary to logic.

*Aesthetics: A Mode of Cognition Complementary to Logic.*

“In trying to get the highest truth which he is able to see, the aesthetician will . . . prefer the more definite, less general, less abstract, to the general, the abstract and extensive truths, and again prefer the individual as far as possible to the general” (Baumgarten, *Aesthetica*, §439). When we take a logical approach to cognition, we rely on knowledge of a general nature, trusting that it will have the power to *explain* individual and particular experience.

Of course, in experiencing everyday life we are all aestheticians. This becomes all the more true as soon as we leave the artificial conditions of our technical civilization. Out in nature we are exposed, for example, to the ever changing weather. We get wet when it rains, and the smooth stones on the mountain path we are following downhill become dangerously slippery. The problem worsens as dusk sets in. But the sun breaks through clouds on the western horizon, bathing the now-sparkling trees in the evening’s last golden light. Turning back, we are rewarded by a magnificent rainbow contrasting with the anthracite darkness through which it is drawn.

Perhaps these few hints will suggest how we enter the world of the particular. Not one of the events cited above stands outside the net of general scientific concepts. We may certainly recognize them as events of this or that general sort. Recognition will put the specific event inside the context of conceptualized past experience; then an abstract concept occupies our mind, and this concept may obscure special traits of the current appearance.

Presence gives us a chance to observe and participate—not only to judge and to explain. We tend to forget that those phenomena could not come to appearance except through our own “being here.” Thus we may give them attention and factual significance as events in our lives. They become a part of our biography. *It is our appreciation that makes the world specific.*

In logic we meet a hierarchy in which the most general concepts have supremacy over less general ones, and these in turn reign over specific objects or events. This preference for universally applicable concepts has been handed down to the present from ancient Greek philosophy: knowledge was understood as the answer to the question, “To what common group of objects does the individual one belong?” Thus the species depends on the genus, while the genus is independent of the species. In that mode of cognition, knowledge of the genus seems to be the necessary requirement for an understanding of a species – but not vice versa.

For aesthetics Baumgarten explicitly asserts the very opposite scale of values (*Aesthetica*, §440): “The concept of the genus means an idea of a great truth, the truth of the species the idea of a greater, the truth of the individual or the singular means the idea for the highest conceivable

truth.”

### ***Skilled Expression of the Truth***

But aesthetics would be ever so dull and stupid if were true that individual appearances are just given, that they fall into our lap. Rather, they demand appropriate forms of cognitive activity. For Baumgarten, aesthetics was a process in which two elements unite: perception goes hand in hand with representation of the perceived in an artistic process; we perceive meaningfully by giving perception artistic form. The cognitive activity he demanded of the aesthetician called for *skilled expression*. Since Baumgarten had been a poet from the time of his youth, he illustrated this expressive element by quoting examples from ancient Roman poetry.

Artistic handiwork and the culture of its consumption were taken to be the meaning of aesthetics in the times that followed. Its originally intended scope as the form of cognition appropriate to real life has hardly been noticed. Taking aesthetics in the very broad sense in which it was originally conceived, we remain confronted by the question: Is skillful expression in itself the suitable method to establish and intensify the appreciation of sense experience? Can it increase our attention to authentic experience so that the experience becomes clearer, more conscious, more fully felt, and the occasion for stronger commitment?

In Baumgarten’s writings “aesthetic thinking” or “beauteous thinking” is often alluded to, but never clearly specified. Above all, he referred to aesthetics as “sensual cognition.” So we must find out for ourselves what he may have meant. The track I would like to follow takes us to his comments about remaining true to our own experience in the face of the temptations that beset us when we are trying to convince someone (*Aesthetica*, §558 – 559). He puts the temptation this way:

While deeming that one is in the pursuit of truth, one will above all try hard to achieve perfect clarity, distinction, certainty, hopefully moving and forcing consent. One would like to rouse delight and an affection that must follow with necessity.

We are being warned that our objective can easily change from appreciating experience to being successful as an author in reporting on it. And a report will be all the more acceptable the more it remains within the bounds of general understanding. Therefore, as Baumgarten explicitly stressed, those bent on such success will tend to *ignore*:

- whatever is too abundant in content to fit into the perfect picture they have already made;
- whatever has a scope and importance that outruns their current understanding;
- whatever cannot be proved true or false based on what is already known;
- whatever cannot easily be clarified and isn't necessary for the distinctions they want to make;
- whatever suggests the contrary of what they are trying to point out, could hinder its being agreed to, or perhaps even give rise to disgust.

Reading a journalist's rendering of an event in which we ourselves were involved, we often find it crude and oversimplified, missing those intricate points about which we really ought to have a longer conversation. But the journalist's art has a lot to do with simplifying, with practical abstraction.

We, too, are inclined to simplify, even while perceiving. We are bored and just don't bother to look if we find that seemingly similar appearances are recurring. We shrink away from becoming involved in events that do not fit into our habitual way of life, or our worldview. Anyway, we prefer familiar and comfortable topics that don't demand much of our attention. And, of course, we are very suspicious when things come up that run contrary to our beliefs. Likewise, we cringe from exposing ourselves to what we are afraid of experiencing.

But if, in the spirit of aesthetics, we want to appreciate the specific and unique appearances we meet, then we must overcome favor, prejudice, and impatience. We must honor individual appearances by taking responsibility for them. aesthetics is, finally, about personal integrity. We will touch upon this dimension in later chapters.

### ***Aesthetic Cognition Happens During Perception***

Our prejudices may work both when percepts appear and again when we report them. But at what stage are the percepts ignored? Do we ignore them after initially having attended to them? Is Baumgarten merely writing about previously grasped experience being suppressed? Or is he warning us about the danger of losing the percepts before we even notice them, due to inattention?

While most of us may assume that a skillful expression can only be produced *after* the impression it refers to, *this is not necessarily so*. It has been a central aim of this book to elucidate the intentional activity a perceiver necessarily must contribute *while* an appearance is

becoming conscious. The skill in expression Baumgarten talks about is the ability to direct an appropriate intention to the world so as to bring this world to awareness.

Baumgarten warned that our grasp of the perceptual situation is limited by our personal prejudices. When we should be perceiving in the present, our minds stick to familiar judgments made in the past. Earlier in this book it became apparent that we *see as much by our understanding as by our eyes*. In the process of intentional activity, we are not *explaining* an appearance; we are not suggesting a general concept, but are using our ability to express, that is, to describe, in order to let the appearance appear. In describing we make the appearance increasingly specific. This skill is the key to wealthy experience. For such understanding in the present we suggest the term “aesthetic thinking.”

In the chapter on “Intentionality” a host of examples for this process was produced. We may remind ourselves of the granite column, Kanizsa’s patterns, or “What frightened John was looking at Mary,” and particularly the cow hidden in the picture. In the case of the cow, no abstract concept of a species was recognized, but rather a specific image was organized and acknowledged. Clearly, we often, if not usually, intend habitually without noticing how we intend. And this sometimes leads us to a double take, where we more easily notice the second try. This renewed intentional activity is prerequisite to the appearance becoming coherent and satisfactory. As Baumgarten held, aesthetic cognition comes to existence when impression and expressive intention *unite*.

Such aesthetic union can come true on different levels.

### ***Levels of Intentional Activity***

A lot of our cognizing activity is in fact *describing*. We constructed the invisible triangle and saw it as a whiter area. In the case of another Kanizsa pattern, we learned to “flip” it intentionally, following the suggestion to look for a background seen through circular holes. We had first seen, that is expressed it, in another way, following a habit we had formed in looking at the preceding examples. In everyday life, *description* as the *first level* of aesthetic cognition is permanently at work, yielding the apparent world of the senses. Parallel to such image-forming activity are aesthetically uncalled-for logical judgments that tend to cut off our attention, hindering us from forming more specific appearances.

Of course, our initial ability to see the cow depends on our previous experience of creatures with ears, nostrils, and eyes. Then a larger picture opens up into which we can actively integrate



further details, still derived from past experience. For example, we can now see much of the picture as the cow's body, and even the fence beside its head falls into place. But in pointing out all these elements of recognition, we can still miss significant content of the picture.

Do we explicitly take into account that turn of the neck the cow makes in order to look at us? That would be an ingredient of skillful description, but it leads us beyond description. We learn that we may be of interest to the cow. This learning is more than just noticing that the cow has turned its neck; it is becoming aware of an emotional atmosphere to which our own presence contributes. But we may have difficulty articulating this feeling appropriately, while it's easy to report, "The cow turned its neck." A *second level* of aesthetic cognition opens up as we immerse ourselves in the whole present scene and experience its unique expressive aspects.

Moreover, we often find it important to *sustain our attention* in order to remain present and involved in developing events. A word that seems to be appropriate to such continued attention is "accompanying," which I will propose as a *third level* of aesthetic cognition.

### ***First Level: Orientation in the Physical Surroundings***

On the first level, that of description, our intentional activity is biased by *past* experience. It often works almost automatically, as if it were installed in us as instinct. Mere recognition leads to the feeling that we are passive observers of external objects alien to ourselves. Experience on this level comes to us in bits and pieces. But in attending to a scene, patiently describing it to ourselves, we can *acquire new knowledge*. Let us look into two examples.

*The rainbow.* If asked to describe a rainbow from memory, quite a few people will give vague answers. Rainbows happen. There are situations in which the appearance can be expected. Say, in the late afternoon dark clouds coming from the west have brought rain, which is now lessening as the sun begins to shine. If you look at the still blurred landscape to the east, where the receding clouds darken the sky, you will see a brightly colored arc, or parts of one. How are those colors arranged? To answer this, it is worthwhile to look for more of the phenomenon that is developing. It may strike you that the rain in the area inside the arc tends to glisten while immediately outside it looks darker in comparison. In the arc itself, red touches that darkness directly, the qualities contrasting with each other. Inside the red layer follow the other colors—say, brighter yellow, green, blue, and violet, which is innermost and touches the glistening area just mentioned. The trouble is, additional colored arcs may appear between the violet and that glistening, and these may differ from one occasion to the next. That question cannot be taken up

without comparing different rainbows appearing in different rainfalls, so we must shelve it at present. But still, on the whole, the brightness of the violet does not contrast with the glistening as much as the red contrasts with the dark on the outside of the arc. I think it is for this reason that the warmer colors of the spectrum seem to predominate in intensity. If our rainbow happens to be very bright, maybe a second, fainter and broader, outer arc will become visible, inside which the colors are in the opposite order. It will form the outer boundary of the dark area already described, which then turns out to be an arc itself.

In describing, we give the phenomenon and ourselves a chance to make its appearance singular, which is the very opposite to vague. We bring the appearance into a state of marked presence. If, in recollection, previous rainbows seem to have been more magnificent, maybe they were not as carefully observed within the given whole situation at the time. For example, isn't it striking that the rainbow appears when rain and sunshine, two "conflicting" processes, come to coexist? By the way, that circumstance was already touched on implicitly in the descriptions given above. As we will see, such integration of details in one picture is the task of a second level of aesthetic cognition.

*Shimmering views.* A vertical stripe of turbulence in which the details of the landscape seem to shimmer might arouse our interest, since unexpected movement always provides a strong incentive to attend. Turbulence in the visual field is well worth studying as a phenomenon in its own right. We can notice that the undulating stripe is found under the horizon and most likely ends there. Why is this so? The question stimulates us to look at the turbulent image more carefully. Then it becomes apparent that the phenomenon can only be seen where the landscape offers us a pattern made up of contrasting details. These details flicker. The horizon typically subdivides the scene into an upper, less sharply detailed part (the sky) and a finely structured part on the ground. And, looking more attentively, we see this finer structure undergoing rapidly changing distortion. The shimmering, we discover, becomes more vivid when the background scene that is being modified by the effect exhibits strong contrasts.

This effect may also be observed on occasion directly over a fire. If the blaze is intense and the material dry, so that no smoke rises, the fine details may even be completely blurred. So, step by step, we can learn something new through this and many similar instances. The wavelets in the surface of a pond will show up where the reflected image is rich in contrast. Thus, an appearance (for example, the reflected image) can lose its own clarity while promoting the appearance of others (the wavelets).

In this way, by describing a phenomenon in terms we already possess, we can make new observations. For this we must observe how various details interconnect. Having become familiar with such a phenomenon—its modifications as well as the conditions under which it

occurs—we extend the store of experience from which we can recognize things in the future. From this mode of description, we should move on to a next mode of aesthetic appreciation, in which a whole situation may be integrated and appreciated as one image.

***Second Level: Meeting an Expressive Whole.***

Aesthetic thinking strives to be as inclusive as possible in forming a mental picture of the given situation. Goethe offered a good example of this. As an old man he reported to his secretary, Eckermann, the advice he had given the painter Friedrich Preller. It is an explicit example of aesthetic thinking:

I have seen many of his studies from nature. They were excellent, and executed with great energy and life; but they were all isolated objects, of which little can be made when it comes to individual inventions. I have advised him never in future to delineate an isolated object—such as single trees, single heaps of stones, or single cottages—but always to add a background and some surrounding objects.

And for the following reasons: In nature we never see anything isolated; everything is in connection with something else which is before it, beside it, under it and over it. A single object may strike us as particularly picturesque; it is not, however, the object alone which produces this effect; it is the connection in which we see it, with that which is beside, behind and above it—all of which contribute to that effect. Thus during a walk I may see an oak, the picturesque effect of which surprises me. But if I represent it alone, it will perhaps no longer appear as it did, for want of that which contributed to and enhanced the picturesque effect in nature. Thus, too, a wood may appear beautiful through the influence of one particular sky, one particular light, and one particular situation of the sun; but, if I omit all these in my drawing, it will perhaps appear without force, as something indifferent, missing all magical quality.

Further; there is in nature nothing beautiful which is not produced as *true* in conformity with the laws of nature. In order that that truth of nature may also appear as the truth of the picture, it must be accounted for by the introduction of the influential circumstances.

I find by a brook well formed stones, the parts of which exposed to the air are picturesquely covered with green moss. Now it is not alone moisture which has caused this formation; but perhaps also a northerly aspect, or the shade of trees and bushes, have

cooperated. If I omit these influential causes in my picture, it will be without truth and without the proper convincing power.

(Modified and abridged excerpt from Eckermann 1930, conversation of June 5, 1826.)

Goethe is convinced that the *workings* of nature are comprehensive and holistic. So its scenes are naturally composed to perfection. And for this reason we find its appearances beautiful.

There is some danger of misunderstanding what is meant if you take all this as referring only to the successful production of purely naturalistic works of art. Drawing or painting is not the main concern. Goethe is pointing out that the *relationships* between the details of natural appearances are the conceptual elements necessary for understanding the appearances.

Let us remind ourselves that we perceive not only with our eyes, but also expressively, through new forms of insight. We find this expressive and aesthetic thinking at work in Goethe's examples. These reckon with the picturesque effect, the magical quality that a scene may have as a whole. One senses integrating principles. As such, they cannot be verbalized, being sensed as an atmosphere pervading a whole situation. Through such imaginal relationships, aesthetic thinking perceives a lawfulness and consistency underlying the beauty of a natural scene.

It is worth noticing the seemingly pedantic enumeration—"which is before it, beside it, under it and over it"—in Goethe's advice. It can remind us of the *abundance* that is so hard for us to tolerate, but that is wealth for aesthetics, as Baumgarten noted.

### ***The Vegetation Configures Itself in Harmony with the Whole Situation***

Goethe cited two particular fields of experience: illumination as an example of the fleeting nature of lawfulness in the inorganic realm, and living vegetation as an example of interrelated life processes. We will look at the latter in more detail.

Shade is part of the atmosphere in which moss can grow on rocks in a stream. It grows in a manner expressing the overall character of the site, including its illumination. The shade that supports the growth of moss is not only present in the moment; it can be understood as an enduring quality of the site evident on the surface of the rocks in the stream. In representing a scene, we can do justice to this enduring quality by depicting the circumstances that impart it. In his suggestions to Preller, Goethe stressed that a northerly aspect, or trees and bushes producing shade, should also appear in the picture.

It is impressive that here Goethe already takes explicitly into account an ecological context—which has since gained such importance. In the time since Goethe gave his advice, botany has taken up the concept of plant communities (plant sociology): in a natural habitat certain plants necessarily coexist. Thus, for example, in August you can expect to find the blossoms of the famous but rare *edelweiss* in the Alps in certain typical sites. At these sites there is little soil between the rocks, and you will be reminded to watch for *edelweiss* by the conspicuous violet petals of the aster, which it tends to accompany. Such sites get a lot of sunlight from above while offering an extremely infertile ground, so this vegetation conveys a feeling of being lean and able to persevere.

Living beings depend on the integrity of their organization. Their bodies unite the activities and potentials of the specialized organs they possess, which cooperate in such a way that each one depends on others for its existence. Similarly, entire organisms and communities of organisms live in mutual dependence on each other. Life unites a choir of voices collaborating to achieve the communal task. Living beings function as integral parts of the whole sphere of life, which reciprocally supports its members. This whole takes on a particular character in every unique setting, and this character is what Goethe was hinting at when he spoke of the mutually cooperating conditions that can produce a mood or overall expressive quality. And we can participate in this expressive quality, which is why we occasionally speak of the special “atmosphere” of a situation.

### *Awareness of States of Health*

How is it that we can participate in the world on this second level? It seems that the felt condition of my own organism expresses qualities of the scene. This feeling is what integrates the details Goethe told Preller to take into account.

Goethe spoke of a magical quality in the experience of a healthy whole. And in the same context he spoke of the beauty that is linked to truth in the appearances of nature. We somehow sense a person’s health, vigor, and vitality, as if vitality could be perceived directly. On the other hand, when perceiving signs of disorder or injury, we may notice an uneasy feeling that intensifies to a sense of being unwell, to nausea, or even to a fainting spell. This makes more understandable the general opinion that beauty is what pleases, whereas ugliness is felt as uncomfortable, irritating, and displeasing. *We feel healthier in surroundings that are manifestly healthy in themselves.* We are inclined to surround ourselves with beings or things that please us.

People of different tastes have different requirements, and they seek percepts fitting their present needs. Nature and art have great scope as “dietary” agents. One can experience the appearance of fresh green leaves of deciduous trees sprouting in the spring as directly invigorating.

Just as we can feel ourselves limp and listless, so also we can experience the limp leaves of a pumpkin that are wilting after a long hot day in the sunshine, or of many plants in a drought. Our own intrinsic *sense for states of health or wholeness* is the basis for our *sense for situations*. This sense relies on our ability to participate in phenomena. Once we have experienced waxing or waning life, the harmony or dissonance of situations, the variety of atmospheres from inanimate nature all the way to the human social realm, the serious question will arise: in what way are we going to deal with things that don’t look at all nice?

In this case we find the harmony of the picture marred. It appears ugly, and gives rise to disgust. The aesthetic effect is negative. Habitually, we tend to shield ourselves from experience of this kind. And we may remember that Baumgarten explicitly pointed out the bad habit of ignoring what we are afraid will sicken us.

We might one day visit the site of the brook with the mossy stones, which had been so beautiful. To our surprise, the brook is dry, the trees that had given shade are gone, the moss is still there, but its green looks less deep, perhaps even a little yellowish, and its texture has changed as if it had been pressed down slightly. The whole place appears in a pitiful state. We are disappointed and in pain over our loss. We are surprised to notice that we have become involved in a relationship by participating in something that is developing in the course of time.

### ***Third Level: Accompanying***

Aesthetic participation changes in quality as we find ourselves involved in what is developing. This happens when we become attached to a person, to a group of people, to an animal, even to a developing plant, or to a certain landscape as it undergoes natural or human-made change. In all these different cases we assume responsibility for sustaining a relationship that has come alive. A good way to characterize continued attention is to say that we are *accompanying*, or being accompanied by, a friend, a living being, or even a place that has become important or meaningful to us. In the introduction to his *Theory of Color* Goethe pointed out the possible revelations of such attention:

We cannot express the essence of a thing. We only observe effects. But the complete history of the observable effects of the thing does in fact encompass its essence. So, while we cannot adequately characterize a human being in an abstract sense, we can bring together his actions and deeds, and through these we encounter an image of his character. [paraphrased]

A mode of aesthetic cognition is here alluded to that differs from the second level described above. There, various details were integrated into a whole picture, and in the picture's entire extent a single situation held sway. That is, a certain consistency permeated the scene. Thus, for example, each of the plants in the scene appeared in the appropriate stage of its annual development and in harmony with the others. The scene appeared at one single time.

But now, in the mode of accompanying, we take a further step and get to know a "thing" as it may appear differently in the course of time. A big question arises here: what do we mean in alluding to the "same" thing when in fact the appearance we witness has changed? In Goethe's remark cited above, it is called the "essence," and what is meant is something that only reveals itself in the sequence of its states. Therefore it cannot be identified with any one of those states alone.

A classical example for such sequential becoming is the life of a plant. To illustrate this, several stages in the development of the new shoot of a linden tree in spring are depicted here.



Drawing by Mathias Buess.

During the previous year a bud had formed on the tip of a twig. As spring set in, the bud expanded, opened, and the shoot developed. It took only four days from the opening of the bud to reach the next stage in which three leaves had unfolded. Two weeks later, the new shoot had developed all its leaves and was already showing its blossoms. When the tree is in full flower, it will be humming with bees. From then on it will no longer entertain us with new spectacular transformations, so we may have little incentive to sustain our attention. But after months, the foliage will become noticeably coarser, and in a short time the leaves will turn yellow and drop, leaving the shoot ready for wintertime, as depicted in the last phase. On the very left end of the new twig you can discern a thicker part; it had been the tip of the twig that carried the bud. A vestige of the flight apparatus for the seeds remains attached to the twig. Three seeds are also shown.

In summer, as in winter, there are long phases in the life of the tree that, in comparison, seem eventless. As its would-be escorts, we need to redouble our attention during such phases; we are in danger of forgetting our commitment.



Every spring, the foliage on the circumference of a deciduous tree develops from ever so many shoots, a process that repeats itself every year. A linden tree has the potential to outlive those of us who accompany it, continually repeating its cycle year by year. Our individual perspectives of it may vary with time and personal circumstances. For example, the person who sowed the seed and watched the cotyledons unfold may have been concerned to take care of it until it could be planted at a prominent place. A very different perspective opens up as the linden tree grows old and valuable, and perhaps a tree surgeon will have to be called in to save it from breaking apart.

When regarding the seed, one is still ignorant of the specific developments to follow. But one may well decide to support the plant's progress toward becoming a proper tree. In this sense "accompanying" entails setting up a relationship that carries the promise of future experience.

In the quote above, Goethe uses the character of a human being as an example of what we can learn by attending to the actions and deeds flowing from the essence of a being. In the German original "essence" and "being" are two meanings of the same word. When we accompany a process, we take on a project, the project of keeping up awareness over the course of *time* while the object of our awareness is prone to change. This is quite different from the usual meaning of "accompanying," which is to remain near an object or being that *moves in space but does not change*.

In this third mode of aesthetic cognition, experience never leads to an ultimate result. When relating to a friend, we *care* about what we experience together with him or her. This continued caring is the central intentional activity that keeps up the bond. And just as we must open ourselves to new appearances in our human relations, so in all quests for knowledge and understanding we must take active interest and exercise initiative. Moreover, concepts that are open to modification in keeping with this ongoing process of understanding cannot finally be defined in the way logic insists on doing.

### ***Three Senses Mediate Aesthetic Cognition***

In our passage through three levels of aesthetic cognition we have actually distinguished three "senses":

In describing, we use our sense for facts. A sense for the way a being participates in the whole environment becomes apparent on the second level of aesthetic cognition. In accompanying we are sensing the interests and needs of another being, its concerns. Involvement

in aesthetic cognition turns out to be one and the same as committed perception. Rudolf Steiner (1995/1923) introduced these three senses as our realization of the three traditional transcendentals: truth, beauty, and goodness. As perception and cognition coincide, individual human participation takes place; aesthetic involvement becomes serious, it establishes biographical reality.

In going from description of bits and pieces to the second level of aesthetic cognition where we experience an expressive whole, we step into experience that can become new. We needed our past experience initially, just as we needed to recognize the cow before we could read its gesture. That gesture itself cannot be received passively; it is as if we must *act out internally* what we seem to be meeting outside ourselves. Through this participation, we give the present situation a specific content according to our current capacities. Ours is not the only possible appreciation that could have taken place, but it is what really has occurred. We have made a kind of judgment.

In accompanying a subject, we continue to learn and our judgments develop. This is a matter of course in human relations. Our previous experiences of an individual always threaten to burden our future experiences with preconceptions. As we move from one judgment to a later one, we must allow them to be contradictory! Baumgarten's criterion of truth becomes crucial as we confront the individual essence of what we are accompanying. On this third level we are furthest away both from preconception and from the logical mode of cognition. We must accept the development that occurs while at the same time participating in and accepting our share of responsibility for it. The being we accompany is becoming part of our lives.