Dissertation Abstract: Aesthetic Ideation and the Artistic Mind

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My dissertation develops an account of a distinctive type of conscious mental process, which I call aesthetic ideation. When the mind is engaged in this mental process, ideas are—to use a prefatory and metaphorical expression—appealingly entangled, where this is an instance neither of mere association (“free association”) nor of rational thought. It is distinct from both because it realizes an aesthetic value, which I call vitality.

The account of aesthetic ideation can be used to address central issues in the philosophy of creativity. It can be used to answer such questions as the following two, both of which the dissertation pursues: What is it for an artist to recognize she has an idea for a work worth trying to create? What is the experience of inspiration? More centrally, the account of aesthetic ideation contributes to our understanding of the sort of ability we exercise when we exercise creativity, and so bears on the issue of what creativity is. The account has its basis in claims Kant makes in the Critique of the Power of Judgment. I interpret and develop those claims by reflecting closely on the things artists say about their own minds creatively at work.

The dissertation is divided into four chapters. In chapter 1, I give an interpretation of Kant’s notion of an aesthetic idea, which Kant introduces in his discussion of genius in the third Critique. An aesthetic idea, on my interpretation, is a complex array of representations that does not cohere into a determinate mental content—no single, settled object or thing is present to the artist’s mind as the content of her mental state. Rather, what is salient to the artist when she has an aesthetic idea is the mental process of having it: entertaining the various images that compose the idea. It is this mental process that I call aesthetic ideation.

I also argue in chapter 1 that, according to Kant, when an artist reflects on her aesthetic ideation, she experiences aesthetic pleasure, and, by virtue of that pleasure, ascribes aesthetic value to her ideation—this the value that I call vitality. In other words, when an artist reflects on her ideation, she makes a judgment of vitality about it. I argue that, in making such a judgment, the artist’s cognitive faculties are related to each other in same way they are when she judges that an object is beautiful, i.e., when she makes what Kant calls a judgment of taste. Her cognitive faculties are, as Kant puts it, in harmonious free play. I argue that this means the judgment of vitality will in share features with—will in some way resemble, in a sense the dissertation explores—the judgment of taste.

In chapter 2, therefore, I turn to Kant’s account of judgments of taste, which Kant develops in the Analytic of the Beautiful. I develop an interpretation of key features of that judgment. On the basis of that interpretation, I go on, in chapter 3, to propose an account of judgments of vitality.

Chapter 3 is framed by the question of what it is for an artist to judge she has something in mind worth trying to create—judging she may be on to something.
After criticizing two ways of answering that question, I argue the artists should be understood as making a judgment of vitality. To make this argument, I develop an account of that judgment, and I do so in the following way. I work through a kind of transposition, from judgments of taste to judgments of vitality: for each key feature of the judgment of taste I identify in chapter 2, I propose a counterpart feature for the judgment of vitality. And along the way, as I work through the transposition, I argue the developing account fits with what artists themselves say about judging they may be on to something. On the account of judgments of vitality that results, artists take disinterested pleasure in their aesthetic ideation, and the ideation’s form is what seems to explain that pleasure—much as the form of an object of beauty seems to explain the pleasure we take in it. This means, roughly speaking, that the images that compose the artist’s ideation display an appealing but inexplicable coherence.

Finally, in chapter 4, I put the account of aesthetic ideation to use in explaining the experience of inspiration. I take the experience of inspiration to be that the sense, which artists often report, that they are not the real source of their work, that something else is. I argue that this is best understood as a claim about a distinctive kind of self-consciousness, one that artists enjoy when they are having an aesthetic idea. I so argue on the basis of some of the claims Kant makes, not in the third Critique, but in the first— the Critique of Pure Reason—concerning the relationship between self-consciousness and the activity of thinking. I develop the following contrast. While, according to Kant, rationally structured mental activity supports one kind of self-consciousness—consciousness of our thinking being; this is what Kant analyzes in the first Critique—aesthetically structured mental activity, i.e., aesthetic ideation, supports another kind of self-consciousness, one capable of specifying the experience of inspiration. Exploring this other type of self-consciousness is the aim of chapter 4.

Beyond providing answers to the relatively focused questions of the chapters, my account of aesthetic ideation improves our understanding of the creative process. That account specifies a personal-level, conscious part of a phase of the creative process—the so-called illumination or inspiration phase—that is often taken to be entirely subpersonal and unconscious. For this reason, the account of aesthetic ideation offers new ways of understanding the creative process, e.g., the sense in which its study can be distinctively philosophical, or its connection with fundamental structures of mental life, in the process enlarging and enriching our view of what exercises of creativity can be.