Artists often say they can’t force their ideas. They can’t have them on command or at will. This is the theme of Lewis Hyde’s *The Gift*: among artists, it’s a common thought that ideas for the basic material of their new work must be received rather than willed or otherwise actively produced; and, in that sense, according to Hyde, having them bears the essential character of receiving a gift.¹

Some philosophers, though, say very similar things about all thinking, including rational thought. Galen Strawson, for example, says that thinking is not willed in much the way that, according to the artists, having ideas for new work is not. Thinking, according to Strawson, is “involuntary, not due to conscious volition.”² Is there any real difference between the kind of control artists can exercise over their artistic ideas, and the kind of control we can exercise over our rational thoughts?

Kant would have said there is. In §46 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, he argues that a special talent, a distinctive disposition of the artist’s mental faculties that he calls genius, is required for creating beautiful art. The conclusion of Kant’s argument, very roughly speaking, is that artists can’t “think up” the ideas to guide them in the creation of beautiful art (5:307). This suggests Kant would have agreed that there is a distinction between the kind of control artists exercise over their having ideas for new work and the kind of control we exercise over our thinking; why the appeal to genius, otherwise? Presumably, there are things we can think up, but an idea for a work of beautiful art is not among them.

Many interpreters have not found Kant’s argument convincing, and, even if it were, it might seem to have a fairly limited scope, applying specifically to beautiful art. I want to argue, though, that it contains valuable insights about what distinguishes artists’ having ideas for new work from our having rational thoughts. As part of a broader argument in support of that distinction, then, I will be working through, and working to vindicate, Kant’s argument.

I start, in section 1, by explaining the basic contours Kant’s genius argument in the 3rd *Critique*. In section 2, I develop my own argument for the claim that having ideas for works of art—what I will be calling, following Nick Zangwill, *aesthetic insights*—does not satisfy a necessary condition on exercises of mental agency.³ I then suggest, in 3, that this argument can be seen as a rendition of Kant’s, a version of that argument that is not precisely Kant’s own, but which is very close to it, and which to that extent helps vindicate it. In section 4, I then further refine the argument in 3 by showing how it bears on, and helps clarify, the issue of what is

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¹ Hyde 2007.
² Strawson 2003, 229.
³ Zangwill 2007.
and what is not intentional in the artistic process, an issue that has preoccupied philosophers of artistic creativity.

To argue this much is to argue there a distinction between control over having aesthetic insights and control over thinking, but that distinction is one that will appeal primarily to those who believe that thinking does count as an exercise of mental agency. It will not appeal in the same way to those, like Strawson, who believe that thinking does not. So I go on, in section 5, to explain a difference between artists’ control over aesthetic insights and our control over thinking that remains even on the assumption that neither is an exercise of mental agency. Even on that assumption, both can be facilitated, in a sense I explain; but the nature of the facilitation differs between the two cases. So arguing foregrounds what is, I suggest, a crucial question about what it is to have aesthetic insights, one that remains even after taking it as settled that having them is not an exercise of mental agency. The paper ends having brought this question into the focus.

1 A Sketch of Kant’s Genius Argument

Kant introduces genius in §46 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* as “the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art” (5:307). It’s in this section that he argues that “beautiful arts must necessarily be considered arts of genius” (5:307). The argument, as Kant presents it, is as follows:

1. “[E]very art presupposes rules which first lay the foundation by means of which a product that is to be called artistic is first represented as possible.”
2. “The concept of beautiful art, however, does not allow the judgment concerning the beauty of its product to be derived from any sort of rule that […] has as its ground a concept of how it is possible.”
3. “Thus beautiful art cannot itself think up the rule in accordance with which it is to bring its product into being.”
4. “[S]ince without a preceding rule a product can never be called art, nature in the subject (and by means of the disposition of its faculties) must give the rule to art.”

(1) tells us that art needs “rules.” These rules may be, for example, the rules of perspective, or the rules of voice-leading, each of which helps define the particular artistic practices in which particular works of art are “first represented as possible.”

In (2) Kant repeats one of the core claims from his analysis of judgments of taste, which he develops in the Analytic of the Beautiful. Some pleasures we take in things depend on our applying concepts to them. In such cases, however, the pleasure we take in them is pleasure in their *goodness*, rather than their *beauty*. Think, for example, about taking pleasure in something’s instrumental goodness, applying the concept ‘table’ to it and finding it good for holding drinks. Any judgment about something’s beauty, then, in Kant’s view, will be independent of the activity of applying concepts. From this claim, Kant then infers that artists can’t “think up the rule” for beautiful art, as they might, for example, be able to think up the rule for achieving a certain kind of perspective in a painting. However, there
must be a rule, something that accounts for the unity of the these particular features and not some others in the artifact—“without a preceding rule a product can never be called art.” To explain this unity, though, we need to appeal to genius, the “talent for producing that for which no determinate rule can be given” (5:307). Artists themselves, those who create beautiful art, can’t think up or give the rule. So “nature in the subject (and by means of the disposition if its faculties) must give the rule to art.”

There are questions about terminology that I want to set aside for now—what is a “rule,” in Kant’s sense?—because many of the argument’s putative problems are apparent without answering them. The most glaring problem, according to many of Kant’s interpreters, is the argument’s central inference. Why should the conditions of our finding something beautiful constrain at all what it is to produce something beautiful? Henry Allison calls this a non sequitur: “nothing about the source of the rule that must underlie a work of fine art (as a condition of its being art) seems to be entailed by the negative requirement that the judgment regarding this work cannot be based on a concept (presumably this very rule).”

Bradley Murray develops the same basic worry in a more pointed way. He construes the conclusion of Kant’s argument as the claim that producing beautiful art can’t be a rule-governed, mechanical activity. Murray points out, though, that this claim is just false. He notes, first, that “[c]ertain ways of copying pre-existing beautiful objects ought […] to be considered by Kant to be ways of producing new beautiful objects.” I might create a copy of a beautiful work of art, and, if the copy is sufficiently like the original, it will be beautiful, too. The copy need not even be a perfect forgery; it just needs to be beautiful. And for the process to count as rule-governed and mechanical, it just needs to be the case that I can make such beautiful, imperfect copies on a regular basis. If this is possible, which it seems to be, then producing objects of beauty does not, strictly speaking, require genius: “given that copying a beautiful painting cannot be said to require the employment of a faculty of genius (for it can be done mechanically and according to known rules), we must conclude that the employment of a faculty of genius is not strictly speaking required to produce a new beautiful object.”

Of course, Murray’s conclusion isn’t very strong (and it doesn’t seem like Murray intends it to be). Maybe genius isn’t required for producing unoriginal new beauties, but what about original ones? Maybe genius is required for producing those.

But here, too, there are problems. Imagine that an artist has what Nick Zangwill calls an aesthetic insight: she comes to believe that certain aesthetic properties would be realized by certain nonaesthetic ones—for example, that playfulness and balance, and so beauty, would be realized by some simple red and yellow circles

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5 Murray 2007, 207.
6 Ibid.
7 Murray 2007, 208. Murray argues that Kant didn’t really mean to argue that genius was necessary for the creation of beautiful art.
on a canvas.\textsuperscript{8} Once the artist has the insight, she can go about painting those simple circles, mechanically and according to known rules, getting her paints and brushes and setting about her work. In this way, plausibly, the artist will have produced not only a new beautiful object, but an original new beautiful object, all without the help of genius.

Someone sympathetic to Kant’s argument will have a response. Genius is not required to explain how an artist produces the work once she has her insight; it is required to explain the artist’s \textit{having} the insight in the first place. It’s the insight that the artist can’t think up. That’s what genius explains. To which Kant’s critic might respond: This may be so, but why? And what relation does this claim have to the genius argument? How could constraints on having an aesthetic insight follow from claims about the nature of judgments of beauty? In the next section, I want to develop an argument that can answer these questions.

\section*{2 A Condition on Exercising Mental Agency}

Imagine you are trying to get a friend to understand simple disjunctive syllogisms. You ask her to think about this: either the moon is invisible or it’s time to sleep, and the moon is visible. Your friend correctly infers that it’s time to sleep. Her having this thought satisfies a key constraint, probably many of them, on an event’s being an exercise of mental agency. That constraint concerns the possibility of error. It was possible for your friend to infer incorrectly, and, were it otherwise—were it impossible for your friend to infer other than according to disjunctive syllogism—we would say that her so inferring was not an exercise of mental agency.

The thought in the background here is roughly this: exercises of agency require being subject to, or guided by, principles; and being subject to, or guided by, principles requires that it be possible to violate those principles.\textsuperscript{9} For some principles, it is impossible to violate them. It is impossible to violate the following principle, for example: Do \textit{A} or don’t do \textit{A}.\textsuperscript{10} Because it is not possible to violate such principles, it is not possible to be guided by them, and so the principle plays no role in explaining why \textit{A}-ing (or not \textit{A}-ing) is an exercise of agency. If \textit{A}-ing (or not) is to be an exercise of agency, there needs to be another principle with respect to which the agent could go wrong.

Now consider how the thought applies to a case of having an aesthetic insight. Imagine a sculptor has something in mind worth trying to create, realizing that some aesthetic properties would be realized by some nonaesthetic ones. Is there a principle here, one with which the sculptor’s artistic thinking does conform, but might not have? Some might think the answer is no. Maybe the situation is like my thinking about my grandmother when I see a miniature schnauzer. There isn’t a principle at work guiding my thoughts. There is something more like an association,

\textsuperscript{8} Zangwill 2007, 26.
\textsuperscript{9} Lavin 2004.
\textsuperscript{10} Lavin 2004, 426.
Thoughts about my grandmother have often been associated with thoughts about miniature schnauzers; as long as I’ve known her, it’s the only kind of dog she’s owned. Thoughts about one lead to thoughts about the other by virtue of this association, but not by virtue of any principle or rule. Another way to put this is that there is an explanatory reason for thinking about my grandmother, but there is no normative reason for doing so. There is no sense in which I ought to think about my grandmother when I see the dog. By contrast, there is a reason your friend ought to think it’s time to sleep when presented with the syllogism; the principle of disjunctive syllogism backs this reason. (Notice that the principle “Do A or don’t do A” backs no such reason. This is because, according to the line of thought here, we cannot be guided by, or subject to, this principle.)

And the sculptor? I suggest there is a normative reason for her having her insight, a sense in which she ought to come to think it. There are different ways for thinking about why this is so. I will offer just one. The sculptor recognizes that, were she to make a work that corresponds roughly to what she has in mind (where the “look” of the thing she creates will have the “look” of the thing she has in mind), a certain aesthetic value would be realized. The sculpture she would create, she believes, would be playful. The normative reason for the sculptor’s having her idea, then, derives from this connection with aesthetic value. There is a sense in which she ought to have ideas about what will realize aesthetic value. There is even the appearance of a rule or principle here: have thoughts about what will realize aesthetic value. There are other rules of this general kind—epistemic rules, for instance: form true beliefs; do not form beliefs the negation of which is entailed by beliefs you already have.

Despite appearances, however, this purported aesthetic rule is not in fact a rule in the relevant sense; it is not capable of providing guidance of the relevant kind, in the way epistemic rules do, or in the way rules of inference do. The explanation for this lies in the nature of aesthetic value. Aesthetic evaluation—and in particular the evaluation of aesthetic value realized by nonaesthetic properties—is plausibly particularistic: there are no general rules linking nonaesthetic properties of objects and aesthetic values, no general rules linking the descriptive and the aesthetic. Consider, for contrast, that there might be a rule stating that any object made of material \( m \) of size \( s \) is heavy. If I believe that \( O \) is \( m \) and \( s \), then I will judge it is heavy. There are no rules of this kind, though, where aesthetic value is concerned. There is, for example, no rule stating that any object with properties \( p_1 \), \( p_2 \), and \( p_3 \) is beautiful, or playful. It’s for this reason that, in defending aesthetic judgments, there can only be what Frank Sibley calls a kind of “perceptual proof.”

Perceptual proof is a matter of getting someone to see something the way you do, as having some aesthetic properties or other, not a matter of getting them to accept an

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11 See Sibley 1974; McKeever and Ridge 2011. I make the qualification in the text because plausibly there is a difference between (a) evaluating the aesthetic values a work has by virtue of having other aesthetic values, and (b) evaluating the aesthetic values a work has by virtue of having nonaesthetic properties. The latter are context sensitive in a way the former are not. A painting’s being graceful justifies further claims about aesthetic value in a way that the painting’s featuring red circles in primary colors does not.

12 Sibley 1965, 143.
argument of some kind. Kant himself makes this point in §8 of the Analytic of the Beautiful.¹³

I will say, then, that aesthetic insights like the sculptor’s display a certain kind of normative appropriateness, or correctness. I will say, more specifically, that they display singular correctness, where this is in contrast with two concepts of Hannah Ginsborg’s: primitive and derivative correctness.¹⁴ When something is correct, it ought to be the way it is; there is a reason for its being that way. A thing is derivatively correct when it is correct by virtue of antecedently-formulated standards, rules, or principles. Your friend’s coming to believe it’s time to sleep is derivatively correct, for example, since it is correct by virtue of the rule of disjunctive syllogism. By contrast, when something is as it ought to be, primitively, it is as it ought to be, but not by virtue of antecedently-formulated standards, rules, or principles.¹⁵

According to Ginsborg, something’s being correct primitively makes it possible for other things to be correct derivatively.¹⁶ What is primitively correct serves as a model or founding instance of a type or kind. Ginsborg gives several examples. Haydn’s first composition in sonata form, which exemplified that form, was as it ought to be, primitively.¹⁷ And this made it possible for other compositions in sonata form to be as they ought to be, derivatively. Haydn founded the kind.

What distinguishes my concept of singular correctness from Ginsborg’s concept of primitive correctness, then, is that something’s being singularly correct does not make possible rules for judging that other things are correct, derivatively—as something’s being primitively correct does. Something’s being singularly correct does not give rise to a type or kind.¹⁸ And this is the case for our aesthetic evaluations. When we find that something is correct aesthetically, there are no rules according to which we so judge, and our so judging does not give rise to other rules for judging. This is an implication of my claim that aesthetic evaluation is particularistic. And it applies, too, to the artist’s having her aesthetic insight. Her having that insight is correct, by virtue of the insight’s connection with aesthetic value, but its being correct does not depend on antecedently formulated rules, and it does not give rise to them, either. The artist’s having her insight is singularly correct.

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¹³ Kant says “there can also be no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled to acknowledge something as beautiful” (5:215).
¹⁴ Ginsborg 1997.
¹⁶ “The primitive judgment [that something exemplifies a rule] is thus primitive in the sense that, unlike the derivative judgment, it does not presuppose determinate rules governing how its object ought to be, but rather makes such rules possible to begin with” (Ginsborg 1997, 64, my emphasis).
¹⁸ Ginsborg does not distinguish between singular and primitive correctness, but it is obvious she is aware of the difference. She says: “To perceive an object as beautiful, on this suggestion, is to take my imagination to function as it ought to function with respect to the object, yet without either having in mind an antecedent concept of how it ought to function, nor arriving at such a concept through the activity itself.” (Ginsborg 1997, 70). Here Ginsborg seems to claim singular, not primitive, correctness for the functioning of her imagination, though she doesn’t distinguish the two.
Now notice that the possibility of derivative correctness and the possibility of error go together. The former is a necessary condition of the latter. If there is the possibility of error in forming some belief, for example, then whatever correctness the belief has will be derivative, rather than singular or primitive. If agency requires the possibility of error, though, and this requires the possibility of derivative correctness, then there can be no agency with respect to aesthetic insights—because there is no possibility of derivative correctness, so no possibility of error. That is, letting A be our artist I be the idea for her sculpture:

5. If A’s having I is an exercise of mental agency, then I is derivatively correct.
6. I is not derivatively correct; it is singularly correct.
7. A’s having I is not an exercise of mental agency.

To make the import of the argument more vivid, consider an additional premise linking responsibility and mental agency:

8. If A is responsible (praiseworthy or blameworthy) for having I, then her having it is an exercise of mental agency.
9. A is not responsible for having I.

According to this argument, the artist is not praiseworthy for whatever merits attend having ideas for aesthetically valuable works of art.

3 A Rendition of Kant’s Genius Argument

This argument comes very close to functioning as an interpretation of Kant’s genius argument. Kant’s conclusion, again, is that artists can’t “think up” the rule for beautiful works of art. I suggest we think of the “rule” Kant has in mind here as the artist’s aesthetic insight, the insight that certain aesthetic properties would be realized by certain nonaesthetic properties. This insight—this “rule”—is what accounts for the unity of the particular features the artist’s work possesses. And, according to my argument, the artist can’t “think up” that rule in the sense that her having the insight is not an exercise of mental agency. This comes very close to Kant’s thought. It is hard to know whether Kant had mental agency in mind with his claim about what the artist can or cannot “think up,” but understanding his expression in terms of mental agency is a reasonable, plausible way of specifying its meaning.

The premises of my argument, too, come close to Kant’s own; even if they are not his entirely, they follow from other claims he makes. My first premise concerned mental agency and derivative correctness. Though Kant doesn’t formulate the issue in this way, it seems clear enough that Kant accepted a connection between agency and the possibility of conforming with rules or principles.19 My second premise claimed singular correctness for the artist’s aesthetic insight. Kant doesn’t talk in any straightforward way about how beauty figures in the ideas the genius has, other than talking about the capacity to give the

19 See, for example, Korsgaard 2008.
“rule” to beautiful art. But—provided he would accept the claim I make about the content of the artist’s aesthetic insight—he would have accepted my second premise. He would have done so for the very same reason he thought there were no general rules for being compelled to find something beautiful (5:215). That there are no such general rules would mean, in Kant’s view, that beauty is particularistic in the sense I explained above.

My argument also helps show that the crucial inference in Kant’s argument is not obviously defective. It helps show, that is, that there is no non sequitur in inferring that the genius can’t think up the rule for beautiful art from the claim that finding something beautiful doesn’t depend on applying concepts to the object of beauty.

To explain, let me draw out a more general consequence of my argument, and that is: Any event of grasping a nonaesthetic-aesthetic dependence will not be an exercise of mental agency. For any such event, provided there are no rules linking the nonaesthetic (the descriptive) to the aesthetic, there will be no possibility of derivative correctness, so no possibility of mental agency. This is true for having an aesthetic insight, in which an artist grasps a nonaesthetic-aesthetic dependence. It is also true for making an aesthetic judgment.

This second point should be handled carefully, however. When we judge that something is beautiful, in Kant’s view, we take disinterested pleasure in it (5:204). This distinctive type of pleasure depends on more than our merely sensing its object; we also have to reflect on the object in some way. That pleasure also does not depend on our applying concepts to the object (as I explained above). If this is so, then forming the judgment “that is beautiful” will likely admit of derivative correctness. There is an apparent principle here: call “beautiful” whatever elicits pleasure of that kind. And so there is the possibility of error, as when I judge that something is beautiful in the absence of that kind of pleasure.

Plausibly, though, experiencing this pleasure depends on our grasping various nonaesthetic-aesthetic dependencies that some object displays. We grasp the dependence of the work’s playfulness and balance, for example, on its particular colored circles, arranged in just this particular way on the canvas. But coming to grasp this will not be an exercise of mental agency. It will be something that happens to us. This will not be an especially surprising feature of aesthetic appreciation, given, e.g., Sibley’s notion of perceptual proof. It is not an usual thought in aesthetics, more generally, either, that a work’s aesthetic value must strike us.

20 Later in the discussion of genius, Kant introduces the concept of an aesthetic idea (§49). This offers some guidance for thinking about how beauty figures in the ideas the genius has, but it does not settle the matter. I discuss Kant’s theory of aesthetic ideas elsewhere, and I set it aside here. 21 I am trying to work around the issue of whether the judgment is in some way based on consciously recognizing the disinterested quality of the pleasure, in Kant’s view, or whether taking the pleasure just is judging that the object is beautiful. This is a delicate issue in understanding Kant’s text, and I want not to take a stand on it. 22 Cf. James Shelley, citing Hutcheson approvingly: “In the passage in question, Hutcheson argues that because the pleasure of beauty is immediate, it must be classified as sensible as opposed to
Now I acknowledge that this way of understanding aesthetic judgment isn’t exactly Kant’s yet. Kant doesn’t talk about grasping nonaesthetic-aesthetic dependencies, though I would argue it is plausible that aesthetic reflection, in Kant’s sense, leads to grasping such dependences in an object. However, this way of understanding aesthetic judgment does show that Kant was right to think that a feature of aesthetic appreciation implies something about aesthetic creation. Both turn on the same general kind of insight. In aesthetic appreciation, we don’t, like the artist, have a creator’s aesthetic insight that certain aesthetic properties would be realized by certain nonaesthetic ones. But we do have an appreciator’s aesthetic insight that certain aesthetic properties are realized by certain nonaesthetic ones. Insights of both kinds, when they are correct, are singularly correct. Having insights of both kinds, therefore, are not exercises of mental agency. An artist’s ideas must strike her for the same reason and an object’s beauty must strike us. Neither can just be thought up.

My argument in section 2, then, I suggest, makes good sense of Kant’s genius argument. It offers a way of understanding Kant’s conclusion that artists can’t think up the rule for beautiful art. Its premises, if not precisely Kant’s own, rest on essentially Kantian considerations. And it clarifies the central inference in Kant’s genius argument. His inference from a claim about the nature of judgments about beauty to a claim about what it is for artists to have ideas for new, beautiful works of art. If this does not amount to an interpretation of Kant’s argument, strictly speaking, let me call it something else—a “rendition” of that argument. But the rendition shows the sense in which Kant’s argument contains valuable insights about what it is for artists to have ideas for new work, as well as the sense in which the argument is not as manifestly problematic as Kant’s interpreters have taken it to be.

4 What is Intentional in the Artistic Process?

My argument in section 2 also helps sharpen the related issue of what is, and what is not, intentional in the artistic process. This issue has preoccupied philosophers of art and creativity. Richard Wollheim, for example, has discussed it. “If we wanted to say something about art that we could be quite certain was true,” he says, “we might settle for the assertion that art is intentional.” He explains:

And by this we would mean that art is something we do, that works of art are things that human beings make. And the truth of this assertion is in no way challenged – though some preferred analyses may be put in doubt – by such discoveries, some long known, others freshly brought to light, as that we cannot produce a work of art to order, that improvisation has its place in the making of a work of art, that the artist is not rational. His point is that we do not reason our way to the experience of beauty ‘from any knowledge of principles, proportions, causes or of the usefulness of the object’, but that that experience, rather, strikes us, and so is sensible as opposed to rational” (Shelley 2003, 376).

23 Wollheim 1974, 112.
necessarily the best interpreter of his work, that the spectator too has a legitimate role to play in the organization of what he sees.24

Wollheim tries not to put too fine a point on what he means by “doing.” He seems to think that the things we do are the activities in which we engage, and he is permissive about what this covers. 25

My argument in the previous section sharpens Wollheim’s thought. I take it that agency is required for intentional action. If an event isn’t an exercise of mental agency, then it isn’t an intentional action. In that case, an artist’s having an aesthetic insight isn’t an intentional action, because, as I argued, it isn’t an exercise of mental agency. The rest of the artist’s creative activity may very well be intentional, of course. After having an aesthetic insight, the artist may draw up plan and work intentionally to realize it. Nonetheless, there is something in the process that is not, as a matter of principle, intentional.

The issue of what is and is not intentional in the artistic process has also preoccupied Paisley Livingston, and I suggest that my argument also helps sharpen what he has to say. At the same time, what he has to say might also seem to challenge the conclusion of my argument, and addressing this apparent challenge affords me the opportunity to refine my own argument in a useful way.

In Art and Intention, Livingston tries to reconcile two views of artistic creativity, the anti-intentionalist and the intentionalist. According to the first, which Livingston also calls the “Kubla Kahn model of creativity,” “the creation of great works of art is largely if not entirely a matter of ‘inspiration’, a mysterious process whereby ideas simply ‘pop’ into someone's mind.”26 On the second, intentionalist type of view, “creation is the rational application of a method or technique. The talented artist is then conceived of as someone who can deliberate over the sort of work to be made, lucidly make a decision, draw up a plan, and then skillfully execute it.”27 According to the second kind of view, intentions and plans are essential to the creation of art, maybe all there is to it, whatever that would mean.

Livingston’s goal is to find a way to accommodate the idea that moments of spontaneous inspiration are a part of creating art, while holding onto the idea that intentions and plans play an important role in the creative process.28 He takes this as far as suggesting that having ideas for works of art is intentional, at least in some attenuated sense. Even “if these unconscious and relatively uncontrolled moments of creativity are to contribute to the realization of a work of art,” Livingston says,
“they must be prepared for and informed by intentions and actions resulting from reasoning or deliberation.”29 For this reason, the spontaneous appearance of an idea should not be seen as “wholly external to the voluntary and deliberate dimensions of creative work.”30 And if the spontaneous appearance of an idea is not wholly external to the intentional dimensions of creative work, then it does not wholly fail to be an exercise of agency, as my argument in the previous section would have it.

Livingston’s crucial claim, at bottom, is that the content of an artist’s insight is shaped by her intentions, by her reasoning or deliberation about what kind of work she wants to create. And this does seem true. It is no accident that our sculptor, for example, has ideas for sculptures and not sonnets. However, the truth of this claim does not does not entail that our sculptor’s having her aesthetic insight is an exercise of mental agency.

I acknowledge, to begin with, that there may be some such rule as “have ideas for sculptures,” and, with respect to this rule, our sculptor can succeed or fail. With respect to this rule, that is, there is the possibility of error, and so the possibility of mental agency. But this claim, I will now argue, is independent of the one I made above, that there is no such possibility for error, so no possibility of mental agency, with respect to aesthetic insight.

Think again about the sculptor’s aesthetic insight I. Distinguish two sets of properties the insight (or its content, more strictly speaking) has. One set contains those properties by virtue of which I is an idea for a sculpture, rather than (say) a painting; call this S. Another set comprises those properties by virtue of which I is an aesthetic insight, rather an idea for some mundane work; call this AI. And notice that these sets are not identical. The properties by virtue of which the idea is of a sculpture includes determinable properties, like being extended in space. Plausibly, though, the properties by virtue of which the idea is an aesthetic insight are different. They are more determinate, possibly some one or more the idea’s fully determinate properties—the property of having some fully determinate shape, for instance, not just the property of being extended in space.

Now there is a reason for the sculptor to have I—it is right that she does so—both because it is an idea for a sculpture and because it is an aesthetic insight. It is safe to assume that she wants to have ideas for sculptures, and she wants to have aesthetic insights. However, there are two distinct forms of correctness here. Insofar as I is an idea for a sculpture, the sculptor’s having I is correct derivatively. It is derivatively correct that I has the properties in S, to put it that way. Its having those properties conforms with an antecedently-formulated rule concerning when something is, and when it is not, an idea for a sculpture (rather than an idea for a painting). By virtue of I’s having those properties, then, the sculptor’s having I does not fail to satisfy our condition on exercises of mental agency.

By contrast, insofar as I is an aesthetic insight, the sculptor’s having it is correct singularly. It is singularly correct that I has the properties in AI. Its having those properties does not conform with an antecedently-formulated rule concerning when

29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
something is, and when it is not, an aesthetic insight. In fact, there are no such rules, as I argued above. By virtue of I’s having those properties, then, the sculptor’s having I does fail to satisfy our condition on mental agency. And that is so even though the properties in S and in AI are all properties of one and the same idea, I.

I approach the point it in a slightly different way. Notice that I’s having the properties in S can be explained by the artist’s being guided by some such rule as “have ideas for sculptures.” And with respect to this rule there is the possibility of error. But nothing about her being guided by some such a rule explains why I has the properties in AI—those by virtue of which it is an aesthetic insight (rather than an idea for some mundane work). And, crucially, despite appearances, there is no relevant rule such as “have ideas about what would realize aesthetic value,” guidance by which would explain why I has the properties in AI. This, again, was my argument in the previous section. The thought, then, is that the sculptor’s having an idea for a sculpture might be an exercise of mental agency (in the sense not fail to satisfy a necessary condition on such exercises), while her having an aesthetic insight is not. And this is so even though it is one and the same idea, an idea for a sculpture and an aesthetic insight.

I can illustrate with a crude analogy. Imagine I’m chopping into a tree with an axe, and each time I make good contact I cut off a small chip of wood. On the surface of some of these chips is a satisfyingly complex pattern. I recognize it when I see it, but I can’t explain what the instances have in common; and so I don’t know what about my chopping produces (or fails to produce) the pattern. Here there appears to be nothing about each chip’s coming off the tree that fails to be an exercise of my agency. I am an excellent candidate for explaining the event of each chip’s coming off. But the same does not go for some chip’s having the satisfying pattern when it does. Its having the pattern does fail to be an exercise of agency; I am not a good candidate for explaining why it’s there. For some chip that has the pattern, that is, its coming off the tree doesn’t fail to be an exercise of agency, while its having the pattern does. And roughly the same goes, is my thought, for the sculptor’s aesthetic insight. Its being an idea for a sculpture does not fail to be an exercise of mental agency, while its being an aesthetic insight does.

This makes it possible to see more clearly how Livingston’s claim both does and does not bear on my argument. He says, remember, that the spontaneous appearance of ideas is not “wholly external” to the artist’s intentional activity. My argument over the last few paragraphs helps us formulate the claim more sharply, eliminating the “wholly.” Some properties of the idea are not external to the artist’s intentional activity. By virtue of the idea’s having them, the artist’s having the idea does not fail to satisfy a necessary condition on exercises of mental agency, and so a necessary condition on intentional action. Some properties of the idea are external to the artist’s intentional activity, though. By virtue of the idea’s having them, the artist’s having the idea does fail to satisfy a necessary condition on exercises of mental agency, and so a necessary condition on intentional action.

These considerations do not weaken the strength, or the basic sense, of the conclusion for which I argued in section 2. I assume that when we talk about artists’ having ideas for works—sculptors having ideas for sculptures, for example—we
are talking about aesthetic insights, not just something that is an idea for a sculpture merely in the descriptive sense. To claim that an artist’s having aesthetic insights fails to be an exercise of agency, then, is to claim that artists’ having ideas for their work, what we mean colloquially when talk about being inspired, is not an exercise of mental agency, so something for which they are not responsible. And the argument shows that this is so as a matter of principle, rather than as a matter of observation and generalization.

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If having an aesthetic insight is not an exercise of mental agency, though, what is it? An expression of our passive nature, is one answer; but that doesn’t seem like enough. It doesn’t seem like there is the right kind of brute mechanism, the kind of law-like relationship between input and output, which characterizes other instances of simple passivity, such as the functioning of associative or reproductive imagination, or, maybe even more mechanically, perception. At the same time, while having an aesthetic insight certainly does seem to require or constitute a special use of the imagination, whatever this comes to, it shouldn’t be taken to mean *agential* uses of imagination—deliberate, effortful, goal-directed imagining. This is so both for commonsense reasons (the imagining can’t be goal directed in any simple way because in it something new comes to mind; goal-directedness is ruled out), and for reasons I have been giving. It is not obvious how to classify the capacity responsible for artists’ aesthetic insights.

The way Kant talks about genius suggests that he was sensitive to this problem of classification. It’s striking that he describes genius as nature working through the subject, or the nature of the subject’s faculties. Kant thought of humans as in part embedded in nature and subject to natural laws. This “empirical” aspect of us makes an appearance in both Kant’s theoretical and practical philosophy; we are objects of inner sense, and we are subject to the whims of our pathological motives. Kant does not appeal to either of these in explaining the talent for beautiful art, however. Genius isn’t nature in that sense. And of course it isn’t to be placed in the same category as our thinking or rational capacities, either. It is not a kind of spontaneity or freedom, in that sense.

I do not have a solution, but I do have a suggestion. Consider again what makes having an aesthetic insight distinct from other, more mechanical ways in which the imagination can function. One distinguishing feature is that having an aesthetic insight is *more chancy* than enjoying one or another of the more mundane outputs of, e.g., associative imagination. I might regularly think of my grandmother when I see a miniature schnauzer, but an artist does not regularly have aesthetic insights. Another thing that distinguishes having an aesthetic insight from having an associated image come to mind is that an aesthetic insight is *more significant* than such images. An aesthetic insight concerns what will realize aesthetic value.

If this is along the right lines, and if we can acknowledge that having an aesthetic insight is something that artists do not control, then one thing to say about
having an aesthetic insight is that it is a matter of luck.\textsuperscript{31} Having an aesthetic insight is chancy but significant, and it is out of the artist’s control. If that’s so, to put it another way, the capacity to have aesthetic insights—what Kant called genius—is really a form of luck. Of course, this doesn’t help us very much in understanding the cause or source of aesthetic insights; it even seems to suggest that not much understanding will be possible. This shouldn’t be discouraging, however. Interesting and important questions remain, even setting the issue of source aside.

5 Facilitation

My argument over the previous two sections does show there is a difference between the kind of control artists exercise over their aesthetic insights, and the kind of control we exercise over our thoughts. Having the former, but not having the latter, fails to satisfy an important condition on exercises of mental agency.

This will be a satisfying conclusion—will amount to illustrating a real contrast—for those who believe that having thoughts is an exercise of mental agency. But for those, like Galen Strawson, who think it is not, the conclusion will be less satisfying. There is another contrast to draw, however, even for those who believe that having thoughts is not an exercise of mental agency. There is another difference between having thoughts and having aesthetic insights, that is, one that even philosophers like Strawson can accept. In this final section, I want to explain what that is. I will approach the explanation by reflecting on the intentional structure of artistic activity. This will lead me to examine, more narrowly, the idea that artists can intentionally facilitate their aesthetic insights. Doing this will foreground a crucial question about aesthetic insights that remains even setting aside the question of their source.

Most of our activities are structured as “dense” hierarchies. Any particular action can be decomposed into others, which are means to, or just parts of, the larger action. In the typical case, this process of decomposition can continue on until we reach basic actions—things we just do, not by doing anything else. Or, moving in the other direction, we can show that some particular action is part of some larger, encompassing one, where the encompassing action shows the point of encompassed; the latter is a means to or a part of the former. “I’m going to buy some coffee.” Why are you doing that? “Because I just got off the red eye from Los Angeles and I need some caffeine.” How will you get the coffee? “I’ll go to gas station.” And how will you do that? “I’ll take the bus.” Then what? “Once I get to the store, I’ll fine the coffee machines and the cups.” Then what? … Etc.

In artistic activity, however, where this is aimed at aesthetic insight, the intentional structure isn’t similarly dense. A poet might sit down to write, for example, but not know what will come of the activity. “I’m going to write a poem.” How will you do that? “With a pen, on paper.” No, I mean what will you write? “I don’t know yet.” Well, what are you going to do? How are you going to write the

\textsuperscript{31} I have in mind the sense of luck in Levy 2013. According to Levy, luck “is a function of three factors: chanciness, significance and absence of control” (Levy 2013, 394).
poem? “Sit down and lock the door.” Then what? “Grab some paper.” Then what? “Wait for it. I don’t know. See what comes.” At a certain point in the structure of parts and wholes—the part that is having the aesthetic insight itself—there is empty space, a hole, into which the insight will fit. Artistic activity, where this aims at aesthetic insight, is in a sense open-ended; it is “holey,” rather than dense.32

These things the poet does—getting a pencil, sitting down, locking the door—are aimed at something, of course: They are aimed at facilitating aesthetic insight. Their purpose is to open up or create space in which an aesthetic insight will appear. And it’s plausible, I suggest, that these activities, like all actions, have something that could count as a primitive unit. It is not basic action in the usual sense, though, something we do without doing anything else, but rather something more anticipatory, something open, which sets up the “space.” This facilitative mental act (or “facilitative act” for short) is aimed at helping along the emergence into the conscious of mind of what is unconscious, tacit, subpersonal, otherworldly, whatever. It is a mental act that sets up the artist to be moved in certain ways—to have aesthetic insights.

Galen Strawson describes something very much like this in arguing for the claim that all thinking is involuntary. He imagines trying to figure out how to fill out an argument. “Sometimes one has a clear sense that there is a relevant consideration that is not in play, although one doesn’t know what it is. One initiates a kind of actively receptive blanking of the mind in order to give any missing elements a chance to arise. This too can be a matter of action, a curious weighted intentional holding open of the field of thought.”33 This “weighted intentional holding open” is what I have in mind in describing the facilitative act that is the primitive unit in the structure of artistic activity.

While Strawson’s description makes sense, the idea wants elaboration. Is there anything else to say about facilitation of this kind? Pursuing this question will lead us to a crucial question about aesthetic insights, which is unrelated to questions about their source.

There is more to say about facilitative mental acts. Consider a type of facilitative mental act that will be familiar to most, namely that of intentionally directing attention, which facilitates to perception or perceptual experience. For example, we intentionally look at things or listen to them. We also look out for and listen for things that aren’t presently in our field of possible experience—as when I listen for the sound of a duck you say you heard, listening for when the duck quacks again.

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32 Other activities might be holey in this sense. You might sit down to think something through, intending to develop an argument in support of some conclusion, but you don’t know completely yet what form the argument will take. Here you’re constructing an argument (compare with “writing a poem”), even though you don’t know exactly what the argument will be. The difference between the cases lies in the way in which the hole is to be filled. In the cases of thinking, at least for those who believe that thinking is an exercise of mental agency, the hole is filled by doing something: thinking. In cases of having an aesthetic insight, the same does apply.

33 Strawson 2003, 232.
Strawson’s case is different, of course. What he describes is a case in which what’s sought is not an object of perceptual experience, but rather a thought. While this is plausibly also a familiar type of facilitative mental act, it is less easily understood than the perceptual activities above, looking and listening. As a first step, we might want to say that in cases like Strawson’s, the relevant sense modality is *inner sense*—where I use this expression in something like the way, though not in precisely the same way, Kant did. We have a way of noticing thoughts and images, the random and various contents we find ourselves entertaining, that arise in our minds in an uncontrolled way. These are the objects of inner sense, as I use that expression. The facilitative act Strawson describes then would be a kind of *inner perceptual activity*, by contrast with the outer perceptual activities of looking and listening. When we engage in inner perceptual activity, we direct attention inward, but in such a way that nothing in particular is sought out, thereby leaving room for whatever arises. The rough analogue here is with looking into a clear blue sky for *something*, for *anything*.

What about having aesthetic insights? It may be tempting to think there is nothing distinctive about this case. Whatever there is to say about Strawson’s case—facilitating considerations that will figure in an argument—can and should be said about facilitating aesthetic insights. There is inner perceptual activity in Strawson’s case, and the same inner perceptual activity when an artist facilitates an aesthetic insight; case closed. But things are not this straightforward, I suggest.

To see why, consider that in cases of both inner and outer perceptual activities, the facilitative mental act affects one of our epistemic channels, one of our routes to grasping something. In the case of looking and listening, it is our route to grasping what’s going on in the world outside our minds—in the case of inner perceptual activity, our route to grasping what’s going on in our own minds. In the latter case, more than in the former, the facilitative act seems to *open up or free* the relevant epistemic channel, leaving room for what will be grasped to appear in it. Focus on this latter case.

The nature of the inner perceptual activity here will be constrained by what it is to grasp the thing being facilitated. The inner perceptual activity in which a reasoner engages is one aimed at facilitating *thoughts*, or *attitudes*, grasp of something that will figure as a consideration in an argument. These thoughts or attitudes are grasped in a particular way. Imagine I am thinking about the conditions under which we are responsible for our actions. In performing my inner perceptual activity, maybe I suddenly find myself imagining a case in which someone is responsible for an act she didn’t intend to perform; or I simply find myself thinking a thought with this content: “We can be responsible for acts we don’t intend to perform.” Without giving an account of what it is for us to self-ascribe mental contents like this, it is possible to say a few broad things. In both cases, the self-ascription does not require that any particular *feeling* ground it; it is in that sense affect-free. And, in both cases, the content self-ascribed has an *all-at-once* character. This is reflected, in part, in the fact that it is relatively easy to explain the content to someone else, to put into words what I imagine or come to think in the course of refining my argument.
Are aesthetic insights self-ascribed in the same way? Does an artist’s grasp of them, in other words, share the same basic nature as our grasp of thoughts, or attitudes, or considerations? If not, the nature of the relevant inner perceptual activity will be different.

And there is a reason to think not. Plausibly, some part of an artist’s grasping she is having an aesthetic insight will be feeling. Grasping aesthetic value in an object is often thought to depend on having some kind of affective or emotional response the object. Why should recognizing that some aesthetic properties will be realized by some nonaesthetic ones be so different? Plausibly, it will also turn on the artist’s having some affective or emotional response to whatever’s imagined. If this is so, then facilitating an aesthetic insight will require a way of creating inner space that is different from that required when facilitating considerations that will figure in an argument. In the former case, whatever else is required, the facilitative act will create space for feeling. And it’s in this sense that the kind of control artists exercise over their having aesthetic insights will differ from the kind we exercise over our thinking. This will be so even for those, like Strawson, who believe thinking is involuntary.34

These thoughts are roughly sketched, of course, but even so they foreground an important question: What is it for an artist to grasp an aesthetic insight—and here I mean as an aesthetic insight; what is it for an artist to recognize that that’s what she has in mind? This question remains even after setting aside questions about the source of the insight. And note it is really a question about the nature of inspiration. An artist is inspired, after all, not just when she has an idea for a new work, as a matter of fact, but when she knows or recognizes as much. Her knowing or recognizing as much is part of the event of being inspired. Questions about the nature of inspiration, then—this central feature of our folk psychology of artistic creativity—are not exhausted by questions about its cause or source.

34 The situation becomes even more complicated if we think that aesthetic insights can be understood, in some part, in terms of Kant’s notion of aesthetic ideas. For Kant, ideas for works of art—what he called aesthetic ideas—are a special kind of intuition, one for which no concept is adequate, so for which, consequently, language is inadequate (5:314) If something like this is true of aesthetic insights, then grasping those insights will be even less like grasping considerations to figure in an argument. The relevant facilitative mental act required for the former, then, will resemble that required for the latter even less.
References


