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Mimesis versus Mimesis: A Pseudo-Kantian Meditation on the Limits of Artificial Intelligence

Abstract: The relationship between natural and artificial intelligence is defined (or definable) by the classical concept of mimesis. The entire cybernetic revolution starts from the premise of the artificial replication of biologically defined neural processes. The present essay redefines mimesis, transferring it from a relationship of the mind with reality, to a relationship between minds and, further on, to a relationship between different faculties of the mind, between the areas of our cognitive apparatus (e.g. intellection and affectivity, abstraction and symbolization). This form of internal replication is likely to provide an argument for the absolute limit of the other replication – of natural intelligence through artificial intelligence. The exploration of this intra-personal mimesis is premised on an interpretation (and, in a certain measure, a speculative extrapolation) of a couple of seminal passages from Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgement*.

Keywords: Kantian Aesthetics; Intra-Personal Mimesis; Free Play of Faculties; Horizontal Integration; Self-Preservation.

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The question that seems dominant in what we could call the "canon of problems of the contemporary humanities" regards the nature of artificial intelligence. The focus is on the main asset of this technology – its huge capacity of processing immense quantity of data, rooted in astonishingly fast algorithmic processes. With respect to this undeniable fact, there are two major lines of concern. On the one hand, it is esteemed that this apparent apotheosis of linear-computational algorithmic thought will fire back on the plural structure of human intelligence and will affect it beyond repair. On the other hand, there is the anxiety that AI could, at some point, emulate, and therefore replace natural intelligence in all its plural attributes and manifestations. In the following essay, we will address this second fount of ethical and ontological angst.

The main line of argumentative attack coming from the humanities has to do with identifying the areas of the functioning of the human mind that are irreplicable by and irreducible to manufactured thought. The present essay will try to approach this matter starting from a somewhat radical

premises. It will not attempt to identify a certain segment or subsystem of the general cognitive process that could count as aesthetic or symbolic, and posit it as exempt from the emulative pressures of AI. The perspective we will attempt to open should reveal aesthetic thinking not as a functional part of a cognitive whole, but as a whole to itself, not as a species, but as a regnum of thinking. According to this hypothesis, aesthetic thinking preserves intricate patterns of interaction of the human faculties that have been marginalized by rationalized social organization, but at the same time it adapts and transforms these patterns in response to the challenges it has to face precisely from the said integrative megatrends. This mode of thinking, encompassing both the production and reception of aesthetic objects (or events) is not individualistic in the sense of explicitly assuming an ethos that could be qualified as such, but in the sense that it becomes manifest, and lends itself to analysis, exclusively within the confines of an autonomous individual subject.

This doesn't mean that we cannot identify numerous aesthetic systems or codes that represent clear instances of intensive and extensive socialization, or that could be seen as instrumental to the above-mentioned integrative social processes. But while this assertion may be true with respect to the corpus of norms generated around creative and interpretative practices, it may not hold water when retrieved to the practices themselves. Or, to be more precise, to the free play of faculties that are of the essence of these practices. Let us now hasten to elevate the formulation "free play of faculties" from the rhetorical to the conceptual level, and to specify that we are alluding to one of the central tenets of Kantian aesthetics. We will follow the brilliant intuition of the intra-personal mimetic nature of aesthetic thinking, as expressed in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) intended as a closure of the philosophical inquiry that Kant previously undertook through the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) and *the Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). Since Kantian concepts, in spite of their intended austerity and rigor, lend themselves to divergent interpretation, and, consequently, Kantian hermeneutics is vast, we will follow the manner in which the influential Kantian expert Paul Gruyer reads the vision of aesthetic cognition that is at the heart of the *Third Critique*[1].

The reader should be warned that, from this point on, and until the final remarks of the present inquiry, there will not be any other mentions of artificial intelligence as such. Yet, it is important to preserve artificial intelligence as an implicit reference for the irreducibly different mode of cognition that we are going to explore. Actually, in the pursuit thereof, we will attempt to go beyond the Kantian vision per se, toward the intuition of a distinct form of thinking that is not *contained to*, but rather *revealed through* aesthetic experience.

Vertical vs. Horizontal Integration of Faculties

If we consider the civilizations that reached at least the "hydraulic"[2] or "literate agrarian"[3] level, that is, which are based on a broad instrumentalization and an institutionalized of cognitive capacities, we can presume that the pleasure of overcoming or suspending conceptual drills, of

altering or relativizing cognitive patterns can be justified by the attraction of the forbidden. With consequences for at least two walks of social behaviour: on the one hand, it can nurture a culture of privilege for which associative freedom or oblique connections between faculties and cognitive categories becomes the privilege of an elite (be it creative or just leisurely); on the other hand, this transversal connectivity, made possible by the co-exercise and co-articulation of faculties, can feed, on the contrary, a "counterculture", a culture of subversion, dissidence, programmatic disengagement.

Such impulses of elitist or subversive secession are almost inevitable where the formalization and extensive institutionalization of forms of cooperation exercise a pressure toward a clear distinction, and actual or potential separation of mental faculties. Such a trend is manifest and counts as highly distinctive especially in modern or modernizing societies. Conceptual thought in particular is instrumentalized and institutionalized: its homogenization and regularization necessarily represent a consensus, a collective effort, codified and coordinated, supported by practices, protocols, transmission conduits, monitoring mechanisms. This intensive specialization of abstract thought also attracts the separation and distinct education of the other faculties. Hence the emergence of the impulse, at the same time compensatory and "dissident", of their reunion, of their "natural" and "spontaneous" co-exertion.

This assertion encourages the hypothesis that the hierarchical model of faculties, with conceptual thinking at the apex and empirical faculties at the base, represents a form of ordering that is reached not in a spontaneous, "natural" manner, but only through vast social processes. Only a collective coordinated effort can lead to the creation and maintenance of an analytical and hierarchical representation of the paradigm of faculties. In this description, personal autonomy is both asserted and measured through the capacity to functionally "recombine" the mental faculties.

The dominant representation is that the faculties can work together naturally, spontaneously, based on their natural division. The presupposition of a functional hierarchy, reflecting a natural and cosmic order, inspires similar tables of faculties, be it in the Greek-Roman tradition[4], in their Christian evolutions and adaptations, be they Latin[5] or Greek-Byzantine[6], in Hindu systems of philosophy[7], or in Chinese classical wisdom[8].

However, the techniques for training these faculties presuppose their exercise in conditions of relative isolation. The separation of functions does not occur by itself, but as the outcome of an extended pedagogical apparatus, based on a vision of the way in which consciousness can be subdivided. Physical perceptions, attention, memory, will, concentration, intuition, empathy, abstract thought, or extended reasoning – all these are faculties whose progress seems possible only if detached from their natural conglomeration. Any form of training, any technique of developing a faculty presupposes its "experimental" isolation. This fact is all the more evident when we refer to the field, mapped and styled in a more often than not hierarchical plurality in all complex cultures, of the physical senses, generally dominated by the sight.

However, as the Taoist sages, the Greco-Latin Stoics, and the optimistic sceptics of the Enlightenment assumed, it is

impossible for the human beings, as part of a universal whole, necessarily self-sufficient and balanced, not to entail from the very beginning everything needed for their auspicious perpetuation. Modern cybernetics itself is based on the presumption that the world represents a functional plenitude, and that the entire constellation of senses, together with the mental devices meant for processing the data they provide, reflects the principle of this holistic consonance[9]. If the training of an isolated mental function calls into question this original balance, it is to be assumed the balance will not be spontaneously restored at the level of an individual human existence. The human group, as a system, is the one that administers these faculties. In order to place them in an "optimal" relationship of dynamic adaptation, educational techniques must work for the fission of the core of intricate adaptive resources of the natural individual.

The Kantian Model of the Judgment of Taste

The Kantian theory of taste can be summoned in this context because, by extension, it can express exactly the compensatory impulse in relation to the process of fission and specialization described above. In the *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment* (1790), Kant posits a model of autonomy of thought based on the possibility of producing satisfactory forms of coherence that evade the established structures of "vertical integration" of the human psyche[10]. Kant was actually attempting to solve the conflict between the naturalist and the rationalist positions on the problem of beauty and its related or subsumable categories. On the one hand, the empiricists of the Scottish Enlightenment were of the opinion that beauty and aesthetic pleasure represented an instinctual reaction that we shared with the animal world. Lord Kames, referring to the substratum of the manners in which we experience beauty, intimated that "we have a sense or conviction of a common nature, not only in our own species, but in every species… This common nature is conceived to be a model or standard for each individual that belongs to the kind"[11]. As for the physical nature of aesthetic emotion, we find it stated by Edmund Burke in his famous *Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Idea of the Sublime and the Beautiful*. A beautiful object "acts by relaxing the solids of the whole system… and relaxation somewhat below the natural tone seems to me to be the cause of all positive pleasures"[12].

Let's turn now to the rationalist position, summarized by Paul Gruyer:

> As Kant suggested, the rationalists certainly did explain our response to the beautiful as a confused perception of the good. Building on Descartes's classification of knowledge by the senses as clear but confused rather than distinct knowledge, the rationalist thinkers from Leibniz on treated aesthetic response as either a special case of sensory knowledge or - in the case of Baumgarten, who treated the aesthetic as the "perfection of sensitive cognition" - as the paradigmatic case of such knowledge, and thus analyzed it as a clear but confused knowledge of the same things that the intellect could, at least ideally, represent clearly and distinctly[13].

The two types of understanding separated, in different forms but with similar effects, the action of human faculties in the aesthetic response. For naturalists, beauty presupposed a kind of universal reflex, which had as its basis in a common human, even animal, nature. But, more than that, beauty was seen as originating and evolving exclusively in the sphere of the sensory or appetitive faculties. For their part, rationalists linked beauty not only to the exercise of the senses, but to sensitive knowledge, which they integrated into the realm of rational knowledge, but on an inferior and subordinate level. The above-mentioned formulation of Descartes regarding the action of the senses as "clear but confused knowledge" is relevant for the condescending attitude rationalism adopts towards aesthetic experiences.

By the way, Descartes did not simply coin a baroque oxymoron, because "confused" did not mean "unclear", but designated the product of a (con)fusion. In other words, the functioning of the senses produces images of the world we live in that are sufficiently adequate, i.e. "clear", for enabling us to orient ourselves in it, but these images are the expression not of a superior, discerning superior capability, but of the spontaneous congregation of our perceptual endowments. Given that aesthetics is the domain of the senses (the notion is directly linked, for the philosophers of the 18th century, to its etymological meaning, the Greek *aisthanomai*, which is the first-person singular of the verb "to feel", "to perceive"), its cognitive value is perfectly coextensive with that of knowledge through the senses. And the latter is nothing more than a primitive, if not degraded, form of rational knowledge. In *Considerations on Shaftesbury*, Leibniz concludes: "taste as distinguished from understanding consists of confused perceptions for which one cannot give any adequate reason"[14].

In this bi-partisan conceptual field, Kant will introduce a revolutionary hypothesis, the consequences of which have not been fully explored to this day. In order to understand our relationship with aesthetic objects, at all levels, from the primary/spontaneous reaction, to the "genial" impulse of creation, to the attempt to evaluate it consciously (art criticism), or, finally, to that of explaining the foundations of all these reactions (transcendental criticism), it is necessary to construct representations that bring together, in their nature and exercise, faculties that we generally consider as belonging to separate spheres of consciousness. The essence of the Kantian position is formulated by Paul Guyer in the following hermeneutical fragment:

> Kant is maintaining that the faculty of reflective judgment can inaugurate a comparison of apprehended form with our general ability to connect intuitions and concepts – a comparison in some sense "unintentional" – and so produce a harmony between imagination and understanding which causes a feeling of pleasure, and the existence of which this pleasure expresses[15].

In other words, it is a "comparison" between the perception of forms, on the one hand, and the formal capacity of the human intellect of constructing concepts and connecting them rationally, that is, of establishing relations of logical necessity between them, on the other hand. The nature of this comparison is as interesting

as it is intriguing: not only the commentator, but the philosopher himself insists on its "unintentional" (*unabsichtlich*) character. Which means that the very use of the term "comparison" has the character of an approximation – at least at this stage of the Kantian critique of the faculty of judgement. But, beyond all these possible developments, what interests us particularly is the way in which Kant himself translates the "comparison" that he assumes to be involved in reflective judgment through the formula "free play of the faculties". This play should not be imagined as frenetic, but rather as expressing a "gallant" order, a kind of dance in which the partners approach and touch each other within the limits of the fullest civility. Such a representation would be in accordance with Rüdiger Safranski's image of Kant as elevating the gratuities of the rococo spirit in the most abstruse philosophy[16]. What interests us here, however, is only the vision of a relationship between faculties that calls into question the hierarchical constitution and the vertical models of interaction with which we generally associate, in the eighteenth century as well as today, the organization of the human mind.

By relativizing the hierarchy of faculties and problematizing the way in which they interact or relate to each other, Kant opens the possibility of considering taste not as complementary, or even ancillary, to the pure and the practical reason, but rather as a specific form of knowledge, as a condition in itself of the functioning of human intellection. In all evidence, Kant does not intend to sabotage the classical architecture of knowledge that privileges the capacity to categorize over the data of the senses. We must state with all clarity that we are taking up the Kantian idea of the interaction of the faculties not in its letter, but in its spirit. Obviously, Kant develops his theory only to account for a certain category of mental processes, judgments in general, judgments of taste in particular, which he sees harmoniously integrated in his description of the general architecture of reason. The thesis we develop here is that imagining a "rewiring" of the human faculties, on a pattern significantly distinct form the one of their vertical integration, opens the possibility of an alternative form of cognitive – and also moral – autonomy that Kant does not necessarily take into account.

With respect to the central tenet of the free play of faculties, there are two basic question that necessarily come to mind. Firstly, which are the actual faculties involved in the interplay imagined by Kant, and how are we supposed to delimit them? And, secondly, what is the nature of their interaction, how and with what consequences does it actually happen? Regarding the faculties involved, for Kant the situation seems very clear. In the interpretation, again, of Paul Guyer:

> /…/ an object is subjectively or formally purposive because by producing free play between the imagination and the understanding it produces pleasure; the free play of the cognitive faculties must somehow be the requirement of the reflective judgement, conformity to which constitutes an object's finality[17].

Therefore, the model is a binary one – imagination and "understanding" or "comprehension" respond to each other in this

concert. Actually, beyond the interrelation between two faculties, this view suggests a form of chemistry developed between two cognitive spheres: on the one hand, that of sensitive knowledge, of the natural senses that nurture the imagination; on the other hand, that of abstract knowledge, which presupposes logical articulations.

For the second question, regarding the "how" or the modes of co-involvement of the faculties or groups of faculties essential for the emergence as well as for the understanding of what he calls "taste", Kant provides several answers. One of them, probably the best known, is to call the interacting process "harmony". The notion that was current in the aesthetic debates of the era was "harmony of the senses"[18], but Kant transmutes it, in a highly significant way, into "harmony of the faculties". An idea which also appears in the eighth part of the *First Introduction*:

> /…/ Kant says that the feeling of pleasure which is the 'ground of determination' for an aesthetic judgement of reflection is 'effected [bewirkt] in the subject' by the 'harmonious play of judgement's two faculties of cognition, imagination and understanding', and this state is defined as that in which 'in a given representation the former's power of apprehension and the latter's power of presentation are mutually assisting each other [einander wechselseitig beförderlich sind]'[19].

To "harmony" and "mutual support" we should add the "free play" of the faculties, and the concept of "comparison" between apprehension and representation that we already encountered. Obviously, for Kant the co-exercise of cognitive faculties presupposes a whole phenomenology of contact, it presupposes synchronization and interference, but also indeterminacy, suspension/short-circuiting of differences, "elective affinity" or mutual "estrangement".

Free Play as Comparison and Contamination

Kant's idea is that cognitive forces (*Erkenntnißkräfte*) are in a state of free play (textually: *freier Spiel*), because there is no concept that imposes a "definitive" hierarchical order on them[20]. "Play" can of course have many connotations, even if for Kant the term is not important and does not require a definition or the introduction of conceptual distinctions. However, the *freier Spiel* inevitably carries a conceptual weight, since it denotes a process of analogic interference at the level of the articulation and of the action of perceptual and conceptual faculties.

This presupposes two movements. On the one hand, a tendency to refine perceptions to a state akin to and confoundable with the abstraction of the concept. Significant here is the positing of a certain autonomy of perceptions, the fact that they behave *as if* (to use a logical operator that is Kantian by definition) they represented a kind of secondary brain. The possibility of experiencing an intensification of perceptions, and consequently of the differences between them, produce a form of lucid self-awareness that asymptotically approximates a state of cerebral concentration. On the other hand, the movement can be conceived/experienced from within abstract thought: a refinement and subtlety, for example, of the capacity to discern,

which becomes perceptible, almost like a set of corporeal affectations and affects. Therefore it can be interpreted as a sensorialization, and, further on, as a sensualization of abstract thought. The merit of the Kantian notion of "free play of the faculties" is precisely that it makes us think of an interference not so much of the senses and ideas, but of the faculty of feeling and the faculty of thinking.

It is true that for the Enlightenment philosopher this relation does not work in both directions, but only from the sensitive intuition towards conceptual thinking. The "conceptless" integration of the multitude of intuitions means, as we have already seen, an undertaking of the *als ob* type: intuition proceeds as if it were conceptual intelligence. Kant does not pose the problem (or excludes it from the beginning, as meaningless) of an equivalent emulation of the action of the senses by the "higher" faculties of conceptual thinking. In positing this possibility, i.e. in imagining abstract thinking experimenting the takeover of the functions of empathy, emotional tension, perceptual awareness and delight, we obviously move beyond the Kantian theory. This enlargement of vision offers intelligence the opportunity to revel in its own power to discriminate and distinguish. To carry, in other words, the nuance to the threshold of sensorial vibration, therefore to the point where it imposes itself on consciousness with the acuity and quality of physical perceptions. In this way, to the conceptless totalization posited by Kant with regard to the arts, a "dissipative" conceptuality is added, capable of reacting (and thereby completing the structure of strategic redundancies of the instinct of preservation) as if it were a sensitive faculty.

The Intra-Personal Mimesis

This is where our argument intersects the concept of mimesis, and turns back to our preliminary topic: the bracketing of a form of thought, connected but not restricted to the sphere of aesthetic experience, that offers a new angle on the ontological divide between natural and artificial intelligence. Mimesis has been generally understood against the backdrop of the object-subject polarisation. The founding versions of the theory converge on this. In the Platonic and especially neo-Platonic view, mimesis is to be premised on the proliferation of really-existing abstract patterns, transmental objects of sorts, over the base level of empirical reality[21]. In the tradition of the Aristotelian *Poetics*, mimesis is mainly linked to imitating actions, also seen as ideal patterns that underlie the apparent disorder of psycho-social life[22]. But in both cases, there is a connection between the inner world of the subject and an over-there. While this kind of ratio is reproduced through different phases of the Western culture[23], it is at some point flanked by what we could call *interpersonal* mimesis. This stretches from Dionysus of Halicarnassus, who commands the imitation of the texts of classical authors as an indirect way of emulating their moral stature, to Thomas à Kempis' 15th century manual for the imitation of Christ[24], further on through Renaissance, to the Goethean and the Romantic strategy of mimesis[25], and up to René Girard's tenets on the imitation of the desire of the Other[26].

All these different conceptual lineages do not seem to cross the Kantian nexus. At least not from the perspective of the *intra*-personal process of mimesis suggested by our interpretation of the free play of

faculties. In their thorough exploration of German idealism, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy seem to touch on the possibility of the intra-personal, while also mentioning Kant in this context, though not with reference to the theory of faculties, but to his understanding of the concept of "genius". Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy notice only "a mimesis, in sum, of auto-production which is moreover the extreme limit of mimesis (or its most secret core), a bit like Kant's statement on the education of the genius, explaining that one genius does not imitate another but goes to his sources"[27]. Following Paul Gruyer, we intimated a different vision of what could be the "most secret core" of Kantian mimesis – the locus where, through the agency of aesthetic experience, the entire mimetic economy of our cognitive subjectivity is rendered manifest. And it is precisely this manner in which abstractive and sentient faculties interact (reduplicate, imitate and emulate each other in the aesthetic process) that brings the evidence of a little perceived and poorly understood difference – *radical* difference, for that matter – between humans and machines.

To state in plainly, from the Kantian theory of "free play" and the "comparison" between higher and lower faculties, we can distil a vision of mimesis as an inner, intra-personal process. This might bring us close to the intuition of the tendency of the human mind, or psyche, to build a system of cautionary reduplications, founded on the premise that different registers of adaptive cognition can take over each other's tasks. All in all, this inner-mimetic system of mutually supportive safety valves, of alternate modes of regenerating an ideal wholesomeness of consciousness, stands for a distinctively human self-preservation "wisdom" that cannot be paralleled, to this date, by any mechanical mimesis of linear algorithmic thinking.

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Notes

1. See Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste***,** Cambridge etc., Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997, especially chapter 3, "The Harmony of the Faculties," p. 60-105.
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7. Piotr Balczerowicz, "The Philodophy of Mind of Kundakunda and Umāsvāti", in Jonardon Ganeri (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Indian Philosophy*, Oxford etc., Oxford University Press, 2017, p. 190-208.
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10. Simon Hampton, *Essential Evolutionary Psychology*, Los Angeles etc., SAGE, 2009, p. 27.
11. As quotes in Guyer, *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, p. 5.
12. *Ibidem.*
13. *Ibidem.*
14. *Ibidem.*
15. Guyer, *op. cit.,* p. 69.
16. Rüdiger Safranski, *Schopenhauer and the Wild Years of Philosophy*, translated from German by Ewald Osers, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 1991, p. 105.
17. Guyer, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
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19. Guyer, *op.cit.*, p. 77.
20. AA V, *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, p. 217, § 9 Untersuchung der Frage: ob im Geschmacksurtheile das Gefühl der Lust vor der Beurtheilung des Gegenstandes, oder diese vor jener vorhergehe, Zeilen 21-34. See https://korpora.org/kant/aa05/216.html, accessed 14.10.25.
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