THE POETS OF OUR LIVES*

Recent years have witnessed a reinvigoration of interest in heady ideas about the aesthetic dimensions of life. Thus we find many excellent studies of the aesthetic dimensions of character, agency, and freedom; the practical implications of our aesthetic opinions; the possibility of aesthetic obligation and aesthetic duty; and the uses of aesthetic objects in sustaining a flourishing community.[1] This article is part of that genre, but it considers a different and to my mind slightly more far-reaching possibility—that our aesthetic capacities may play an indispensable role in picking up the slack left over by practical reason.

My concern is with those moments when practical reason seems to give out, when it fails to yield a judgment about what to do in the face of a choice we cannot avoid. I will argue that these impasses require agents to create, but that not just any creativity will do. We cannot consider a response to one of these problems to be arbitrary or capricious, not if we want to act on it. We must instead regard that response as justified by the problem itself. I suggest that this combination of creativity and normativity can be found in what Kant calls the "free lawfulness" of aesthetic judgment, and this makes

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[1] Among many examples, see Berys Gaut, "Questions of Character," in his *Art, Ethics and Emotion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), pp. 85–89; C. Thi Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020); Anthony Cross, "Art Criticism as Practical Reasoning," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, LVII, 3 (2017): 299–317; Samantha Matherne and Nick Riggle, "Schiller on Freedom and Aesthetic Value," in two parts: *British Journal of Aesthetics*, LX, 4 (2020): 375–402 and LXI, 1 (2021): 17–40; Roger Scruton, "In Search of the Aesthetic," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, XLVII, 3 (2007): 232–50; Richard Moran, "Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty," reprinted in his *The Philosophical Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); Robbie Kubala, "Grounding Aesthetic Obligations," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, LVIII, 3 (2018): 271–85; Anthony Cross, "Aesthetic Commitment and Aesthetic Obligation," *Ergo*, VIII, 38 (2022): 402–22; Dominic McIver Lopes, *Being for Beauty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); and Nick Riggle, "Toward a Communitarian Theory of Aesthetic Value," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, LXXX, 1 (2022): 16–30.

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these judgments a promising place to turn when practical reason gives out.

This paper has five sections. In the first section, I explain what I mean by practical reason giving out. In the second and third, I discuss two other proposals about how to cope with these events. In the fourth, I explain how Kant's theory of aesthetic judgment offers a synthesis of the promising elements of these proposals while leaving behind some of their troubles. In the last section, I tell a story about how I envision aesthetic judgment doing the job.

I. QUANDARIES

Corinne is a college senior deciding what to do after graduation. She could take a job at Blood & Stone, the nation's premier consulting firm, or start graduate school in Scots-Yiddish literature. This is a momentous choice. Naturally, she could quit a consulting job or drop out of graduate school if she becomes miserable, but she recognizes that the tenebrous forces of preference adaptation and inertia make a total about-face unlikely. She has good reasons for both choices. She loves Scots-Yiddish literature, but she cannot deny that she would relish the comforts of a more lucrative career. She is very good at Scots-Yiddish, but no one can be certain of success in academia. On the other hand, she is not sure what success in consulting would involve, exactly, and whether it would make for a very rewarding life. Corinne sits down in her room and tries to tally up the pros and cons of each option, but even this is difficult. Is the fact that she could afford a nice car if she went into consulting a reason for that option (because she would enjoy it) or against it (because it would make her lazy)? The exercise ends in despair.

Hortense is a precocious tuba student who has recently become smitten with Tubby. Hortense thinks she might love Tubby, but their romance has been a whirlwind and she cannot be certain. Unfortunately, Tubby is in Starfleet and will soon be stationed on Betazed for a three-year tour of duty. (This example is from the future.) Hortense and Tubby agree that a long-distance relationship is impossible, and Tubby has no choice but to take up his post. Hortense could go with him, but, because there are no tubists on Betazed, this would mean abandoning her studies. Hortense has always thought of herself as a tubist above all else, and until now giving up her dream of being the Roger Bobo of the twenty-fourth century was unthinkable. On the other hand, she could fall short of this goal in any case. She is very talented, but one cannot take anything for granted in the cutthroat world of the tuba. And even if she could be sure of tuba stardom, she is not sure that she wants to be the sort of person who sacrifices

true love for professional success. Hortense's deliberations also end in failure.

These dilemmas share two characteristics. First, they are *normatively underdetermined*. By this I mean that (i) there is no rule or principle that Corinne or Hortense can apply to decide how to proceed. There are principles that may speak in favor of or against their options to some extent, but none suffices to show that they ought to take one path or the other. I also mean that (ii) the weight of their reasons does not favor one option over the other. We can try to list reasons pro and con the different options, but these reasons will be tentative and, in aggregate, less than decisive. So we cannot say that Corinne has more or less reason to go into consulting than to graduate school, or that the weight of Hortense's reasons support her going with Tubby or staying with her tuba. These are cases where the considerations that practical reason relies on seem to give out—where there seems to be inadequate material to justify proceeding in one way rather than the other.[2]

Second, these choices are *normative* in the sense that they require a normative judgment about which option should be selected. To make her choice correctly, Hortense cannot just "pick or plump" to go with Tubby. In other words, she cannot choose without thinking that the option she is choosing is correct—that it is appropriate, fitting, or called-for. This is a feature of the structure of the choice. A selection without such a judgment is a choice ill-made by the standards of the problem she faces.[3]

There are a few reasons to believe these choices are normative. First, standard doctrines about practical reason should make this our default assumption. To see why, imagine a simpler choice. A few months before meeting Tubby, Hortense got hooked on cooking shows. As a result, she entertained the possibility of leaving the tuba to go to culinary school. A few minutes of deliberation about the comparative longevity of her interests, the time she had invested in the tuba, and the special joy it offers would lead her to abandon this notion. But Hortense makes her choice differently, in a way that does not involve judging one option superior to the other. She flips a coin. And this, I suggest, is a choice ill-made, one that it is defective accord-

[2] I want to remain neutral on the question of what explains this feature, but for a survey of possible answers see Ruth Chang, "Hard Choices," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, III, 1 (2017): 1–21.

[3] On the terms "pick" and "plump," see Chang, "Are Hard Choices Cases of Incomparability?," *Philosophical Issues*, XXII (2012): 106–26; and Edna Ullmann-Margalit and Sidney Morgenbesser, "Picking and Choosing," reprinted in Ullmann-Margalit's *Normal Rationality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

ing to the standards of the problem. The decision calls for a judgment about what Hortense should do, and a coin flip does not amount to a judgment.

We should say the same thing about Hortense's choice concerning Tubby. After all, what could distinguish the two cases such that flipping a coin is appropriate in one and not in the other? Only that one is harder. But this is an excuse, not a reason to think that the demands of the choice are fundamentally different. We are saying that if Hortense struggled with her dilemma for long enough before flipping a coin, we should not blame her because we cannot reasonably expect her to do any better. But that suggests that there really is something amiss with Hortense's coin-flipping.

A second argument can be extracted from the structure of intentional action. Suppose that Hortense stays home because she wrings her hands endlessly, because she forgets to make a decision, or because she is so stoned she cannot even entertain the possibility of leaving. In these cases, Hortense chooses to stay in only the most anemic sense of the word. Insofar as her choice is unaccompanied by a judgment that that choice is correct, it seems to lack the rational endorsement that defines full-blooded agency. In these cases it is better to say that Hortense was moved by some part of herself, buffeted by an external force, or simply drifted into a decision. This thought allows us to locate the normativity of these choices in the structure of action more generally: the choices are normative because normative judgment is a condition on action writ large.[4]

Of course, not all choices are normative. A choice between two identical bowls of porridge does not demand a comparative judgment. Here we should just pick. And there are cases involving nonidentical options that also seem non-normative. If I am deciding between waffles and pancakes or two similar umbrellas, it may be appropriate to simply pick, because the deliberation required to yield a judgment is not commensurate with the stakes. Importantly, these cases have identifiable characteristics that make the choice nonnormative, characteristics like symmetry and low stakes. I will not venture an account of these characteristics, nor will I try to explain why such characteristics exempt these choices from the normativity characteristic of other choices. Instead, I merely note that the choices

[4] A lot has been written on the connection between normative endorsement and free choice. See, for example, Gary Watson, "Free Agency," reprinted in his *Agency and Answerability* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 13–32; and Sarah Buss, "What Practical Reasoning Must Be if We Act for Our Own Reasons," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, LXXVII, 3 (1999): 399–421.

faced by Corinne and Hortense lack these characteristics. The goods at stake are not symmetrical, and the stakes are high enough that significant deliberation is called for if it can yield the right answer. We should assume, then, that the choice is indeed normative.

These are a handful of reasons for thinking that my vignettes involve choices that are both normatively underdetermined and normative. I will call these difficult choices *quandaries*. It matters little whether one agrees that the examples I offered are quandaries, nor exactly how we draw a line around the class, as long as we agree that there are such things. The question I consider going forward is how we are to choose in the face of quandaries. Insofar as these choices are normative, they require us to judge that one option is correct, but insofar as they are normatively underdetermined, the considerations that would ordinarily support such a judgment fall short. We are at an impasse.

Before coming to my own answer to this question, I want to consider two other proposals, as both foils and stepping stones. They contain important insights into the problem but ultimately fall short of a solution. The first has it that quandaries call on us to create or invent. The second has it that they call for an exercise of what some call practical vision.

II. CREATION

I have portrayed quandaries as exceptional cases where the necessary conditions of choice are imperiled. But one could also insist that quandaries are the purest choices we face because they call on a capacity for self-creation that is the essence of our agency. This seems to be Sartre's position. In his own famous example, a young man is torn between joining the Free French forces or caring for his ailing mother. This represents a choice between two rather different sorts of values: distal and political, versus proximate and personal. The young man searches for grounds on which to choose, a search Sartre understands as an attempt to find something to decide for him. But of course, the search is in vain. The young man faces a quandary.

Now, Sartre does not think that this man should choose based on any specific considerations. Yet it would be unfair to say that he would have us choose in the arbitrary, coin-flipping way that we might when faced with two identical bowls of porridge. Sartre writes, "He knew what advice I should give him, and I had but one reply to make. You are free, therefore, to choose—that is to say, invent."[5] For Sartre, this

[5] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in Walter Kaufmann, ed., *Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), pp. 287–311, at p. 297.

crucial act of invention is not like picking a bowl of porridge because we do not represent it as arbitrary. On the contrary, we *endorse our selection through choosing it*—not because of any considerations that we could say, before the choice, give us most reason to so choose, but proleptically, in relation to the values of the self we create through the selection.

Ruth Chang has recently developed an especially rigorous version of this idea. She proposes that in cases like Corinne's and Hortense's, the "given" reasons—reasons grounded in the normative facts about the choices they face—are on par with each other, and this is why these reasons fail to determine a unique choice. But Chang goes on to suggest that there is a second kind of reason, which is created by an agent's own activity. These "will-based" reasons are products of our commitments, which are themselves an exercise of our "normative powers."

> You have normative powers in so far as your act of will can be *that in virtue of which* something is a reason for you, that is, the *source* of a reason's normativity or, equivalently, what *makes* some consideration have the normativity of a reason.[6]

These will-based reasons can then help us resolve our quandaries by breaking the deadlock between our given reasons.

> When your given reasons are on a par, you have the normative power to create new will-based reasons for one option over another by putting your agency behind some feature of one of the options. By putting your will behind a feature of an option—by standing for it—you can be that in virtue of which something is a will-based reason for choosing that option. Thus, in hard choices you need not be stuck. You have the normative power to create for yourself a new will-based reason to pursue one option over the other. And you may now have most all-things-considered reasons—that is, taking into account both given and will-based reasons—to choose one option over the other.[7]

I think the common core of Chang's and Sartre's proposals is exactly right. We must *invent* our way out of quandaries. But I worry that the way they understand this invention—as "an act of will"—passes the explanatory buck. I have two concerns.

The first can be put in the form of a dilemma. Hortense faces a choice between Tubby and the tuba. If she proceeds as Chang ad-

[6] Ruth Chang, "Commitments, Reasons, and the Will," in Russ Shafer-Landau, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, vol. 8 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 73–113, at p. 101.

[7] Chang, "Hard Choices," *op. cit.*, pp. 16–17.

vises, she should exercise her normative powers to create a will-based reason favoring one option or the other. But which option? She now faces a question not about whether to choose Tubby or the tuba, but whether to *commit to* Tubby or the tuba. Either this choice is normative or it is not. If it is normative, then it is also a quandary, for much the same reason that the original choice was. So we have substituted one quandary for another. On the other hand, maybe the choice is not normative. Maybe it is like deciding to take this bowl of porridge rather than that, a case where it is appropriate to just pick. But if the choice between a commitment to Tubby and a commitment to the tuba is non-normative, then shouldn't the original choice—between Tubby and the tuba—be likewise?

Chang wants to slip through the horns of this dilemma by saying that commitment is neither determined by "given" reasons nor arbitrary. But whether there could be an agential power fitting this description was our original problem. Her proposal therefore invites some obvious questions. What is this special power of commitment that does such important work for us? How do we come to have it? How do we exercise it? Why should we believe that it is anything more than the dormitive virtue solution to quandaries? If we make the exercise of our normative powers too volitional, too much like overt choice, then it seems likely to recreate our original problems. But if we deny this, then I wonder how we can justify the claim that the commitment is not arbitrary.

My second concern is about the efficacy of will-based reasons. Suppose Hortense commits herself to going with Tubby, as Chang suggests she can. While planning her trip, however, the glamour of the tuba strikes her once more. She might answer this temptation by reminding herself that, with her commitment made and a will-based reason in place, she now has *most reason* to go with Tubby. But a second's further reflection reminds her that this reason was created by an act of her own will. And if that is the case, why can't that reason be nullified by an equal and opposite act of will, by a commitment to the tuba? This question leads Hortense back into her original quandary.

Here Chang might respond that I am underestimating the normative bond created by our commitment. Commitment is a normative power on par with promising. Once made it cannot be canceled willy-nilly by a temptation to reconsider the issue. In general, I agree. The power to commit oneself to a course of action so as to avoid reopening deliberation is an important agential technology.[8] But the power

[8] Richard Holton, *Willing, Wanting, Waiting* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

of this commitment is and ought to be limited. When the stakes are low, we have good reasons to avoid additional deliberations. But when the stakes are high, these reasons can be outweighed by the potential benefits of "getting it right," and in these cases it seems rational to release ourselves from a commitment.

The larger point of this example is that it will be difficult to act on will-based reasons while recognizing them as such. Doing so seems to require explaining one's action with a semi-transparent bluff: "I am going to *A* instead of *B*. Why? Because I *committed* to *A*-ing instead of *B*-ing. . . . And why did I do that? For no reason." It is hard for me to accept that this kind of self-understanding provides a genuine endorsement of *A* over *B*. This is a problem because if we are unable to act on will-based reasons while appreciating their provenance, we should wonder whether they are real.

These are my misgivings about the existentialist approach we find in Sartre and Chang. But I want to dig slightly deeper and venture a guess about the origin of the mistake I am charging them with. Later in his essay, Sartre suggests an analogy between self-invention and the creation of the artist: "Let us say that the moral choice is comparable to the construction of a work of art. . . there is this in common between art and morality, that in both we have to do with creation and invention."[9] This is a good analogy. Corinne's and Hortense's predicaments may not suggest the artist before a blank canvas or the novelist before a typewriter, but structurally their problems are not so different. A painter has reasons to create their painting in one way rather than another, but if an audience could appreciate every feature of the work as a response to a particular consideration, it would probably be a bad painting. It would be dull and predictable, a kind of "paint by numbers." On the other hand, a work of art would also be a disaster if its crucial features appeared wholly arbitrary, if we thought the painter chose certain contours and colors at random. The artist must therefore navigate much the same dilemma as Corinne and Hortense. They must create in a way that is neither arbitrary nor wholly determined by the weight of reasons.

Given all this, I sympathize with Sartre's analogy, but I also worry that he is attracted to it for the wrong reasons. He seems to think of artistic production as a kind *ex nihilo* invention:

> Does anyone reproach an artist, when he paints a picture, for not following rules established *a priori*? Does one ever ask what is the picture that he ought to paint? As everyone knows, there is no pre-defined picture

[9] Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," *op. cit.*, p. 305.

> for him to make; the artist applies himself to the composition of a picture, and the picture that ought to be made is precisely that which he will have made.[10]

Sartre is right, of course, that there is no "pre-defined picture" that motivates artists. But he is wrong if he thinks that artistic production is spontaneous in a way that sunders it from the typical forms of agential control. Artistic production is seldom an anomalous moment in an artist's life, and in nearly all cases it involves roughly the same kinds of regulation and reflection that characterize intentional action generally. In particular, artistic production seems to be regulated by the artist's aesthetic judgments about artistic possibilities in roughly the same way that a person's ordinary behavior is regulated by their evaluations of different options. Sartre's figure suggests a romantic caricature—an artist channeling divine inspiration into a final product without any oversight from their own aesthetic sensibilities. But little art is produced like this. It is not "a free swing of the mental powers" but an ongoing struggle toward a vaguely recognized ideal.[11]

Why do Sartre's ideas about art matter for us? The existentialist's proposal that we must create our way out of quandaries enjoys significant corroboration from the analogy with artistic creation. The trouble is that the mistaken conception of artistic creativity gets taken up into the existentialist's general conception of choice, so both end up looking like a kind of *ex nihilo* spontaneity. And that is the ultimate source of the problems with the view I have identified.

But we might find our way to a solution if we could develop a better model of artistic creation and adapt it to a conception of how to create in response to quandaries. That is what I shall try to do. What we need, I suggest, is a conception of artistic creativity that captures the indispensable role of the artist's judgment in artistic production. In the next section I turn to a rather different proposal about quandaries that gives center stage to just that power.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] Compare Berys Gaut, "Creativity and Imagination," in Berys Gaut and Paisley Livingston, eds., *The Creation of Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Berys Gaut, "The Philosophy of Creativity," *Philosophy Compass*, v, 12 (2010): 1034–46; and Elliot Samuel Paul and Dustin Stokes, "Attributing Creativity," in Berys Gaut and Matthew Kieran, eds., *Creativity and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2018). The "free swing" quote is from Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5:312. All references to Kant use the standard academy pagination.

III. VISION

My characterization of quandaries rests on a particular understanding of reasons. I said that there is no rule that allows us to choose in the face of quandaries, and that we could not claim that the weight of individual reasons favors one option over the other. A natural response to quandaries so described is to reject this restriction in favor of a more *unruly* conception of practical reason—a conception on which practical reason does not proceed by applying general principles, and reasons are not atomic units whose force can be weighed in isolation from their context. If we liberalize our conception of reason in this way, we might find that reason is capable of more than I gave it credit for.

As it happens, both liberalizing claims reflect familiar doctrines. The first is a form of particularism about practical reason, the view that practical reason need not always proceed by the application of general principles. The second is holism about reasons, the view that reasons only have normative force in the context of a larger organic unit.[12] Now, these doctrines do not tell us how to reason, much less how to overcome quandaries. For that, we need to add a frequent companion to holism and particularism: a perceptual conception of practical reason. According to the perceptual conception, rational action depends on unruly judgments—that is, judgments not based on the application of rules or the toting up of atomic reasons. These judgments instead issue from a quasi-perceptual power of "discernment" or "vision." Deciding what would be prudent, just, or simply called-for is not a matter of picking out certain "objective" characteristics in an imagined act and applying a general rule or weighting algorithm. It means *seeing* the prudence, justice, or aptness of a certain action by attending to the scenario in all its wholeness and individuality.[13]

What does this conception of practical reason have to offer those facing a quandary? Just as our standard perceptual capacities can be improved through practice, so can our power of practical vision. This forms the essence of the vision theorist's advice: keep looking, look

[12] Both doctrines enjoy their most sustained defense in Jonathan Dancy, *Ethics without Principles* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[13] Leading examples include Iris Murdoch, "Vision and Choice in Morality," "The Sublime and the Good," both reprinted in Peter Conradi, ed., *Existentialists and Mystics* (New York: Penguin, 1998), and the essays reprinted as *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge, 1971); as well as Martha Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," reprinted in her *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) and chapters 2 and 3 of *The Fragility of Goodness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

harder, hone your vision. At first blush, this advice sounds cruel or fatuous. If we thought that more lucubration would make a meaningful difference, then we would not be facing a quandary. Hortense is not going to learn some piece of trivia about the climate that makes her choice easy, and Corinne is not going to make up her mind when she learns that Blood & Stone's offices are in the Woolworth Building. Quandaries are not cases where our choosing is hamstrung by ignorance of the facts.[14] They are cases where we know the facts—or enough of them anyway—and cannot transform them into a decision. Insofar as a new heap of facts is all that superior looking seems to offer, we should doubt that improving our discernment is going to bring about a revelation.

Vision theorists have a ready reply to this objection. Our worries are premised on an overly feeble notion of perception. Understanding the possibilities laid out before Corinne and Hortense is not a matter of knowing a set of facts. It is, to use Iris Murdoch's language, the extremely difficult task of *really seeing* persons, things, and situations in all their depth and particularity. What we get by cultivating this vision is not access to additional trivia, but the ability to overcome certain natural distortions of understanding, and with that the ability to see the world as it really is.[15]

This suggestion may seem too esoteric to be useful, but it looks more plausible when offered alongside some observations about aesthetic experience. (And indeed, this is how vision theorists proceed.[16]) We can spend hours struggling with a poem and getting nowhere only to be struck by an interpretive hunch that causes everything to come into focus. At this point we might feel, at long last, that we *really see* the poem. Such experiences suggest a few features of aesthetic appreciation. First, it is unruly. We do not come to appreciate the poem by applying critical rules or identifying discrete reasons to react in one way or another. Instead, we make a judgment that treats the poem as a unique and organic whole. Only when we see the poem aright can we make any progress at all. Second, aesthetic appreciation can require exceptional effort and self-improvement. It involves not just the integration of new facts but a reconfiguration of our outlook,

[14] Compare Chang, "Hard Choices," *op. cit.*, pp. 3–5.

[15] See Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," *op. cit.*, p. 216; and Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, *op. cit.*, pp. 33ff. For an interpretation of what Murdoch means, see Kieran Setiya, "Murdoch on the Sovereignty of Good," *Philosophers' Imprint*, XIII, 9 (2013): 1–21.

[16] The comparisons are ubiquitous in Murdoch and Nussbaum—for example, Murdoch, "The Sublime and the Good," *op. cit.*, pp. 214–15; Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, *op. cit.*, pp. 84–85; and Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, pp. 125–219, *passim*.

and that may require significant time, energy, and education. Third, the process is cognitive. There is a sense in this experience of having discovered aesthetic qualities that were there all along, simply waiting to be seen by superior eyes. Aesthetic examples like this are invaluable companions for the vision theorist. For if we think that practical vision is like aesthetic appreciation, then we can insist that the resolution of a quandary will be rather like the bolt of lightning that suddenly allows us to appreciate a work of art.

It is crucial to the vision approach that our judgment involve the apprehension of some already existing quality, something "real," and not, as for Chang and Sartre, an act of invention.[17] This is why the third claim about aesthetic revelation is important: we feel like we have discovered something about a work of art that was there all along. But this observation comes with an important caveat. Just because we have discovered something does not mean that that discovery is independent of our own activities. In fact, in the aesthetic case, it is usually quite the opposite. Our discovery's status as an *aesthetic* quality—as something significant for us rather than an inert curiosity—depends on what we do with it. It depends on our interaction with the aesthetic object.

We can see this by fleshing out my experience with the poem. Suppose random numbers and letters are sprinkled throughout the poem, and I do not know how to make head or tail of them. But it occurs to me that these little insertions may allude to Bible verses, so I develop a reading centered around this hunch. I find some promising thematic correspondences and, as a result, I feel I better understand what the poem is up to. We should not overstate this "discovery." What I have discovered is nothing but a certain fit between the elements of the poem and an interpretive strategy. By itself, this is no more interesting than the solution to a crossword puzzle. Its aesthetic importance only emerges in what it enables me to do. If it allows me to sink my fingers into the poem in ways I could not before—by asking focused questions, making intelligent comparisons, imagining possible connections—then it is an interesting discovery.

These activities, rather than the interpretive hunch, are what make my insight an aesthetic one. But they are also creative activities, and in performing them, I am not just acting out a reflex, mimicking someone else, following a rule, or even discovering some hidden quality. I am creating an aesthetic experience in reaction to the poem. This

[17] See Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, *op. cit.*, p. 65 and p. 88; as well as Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.

suggests an important proviso to our third observation. It is true that I sometimes feel like I have suddenly grasped an aesthetic quality that was there all along. But in many cases what I have actually grasped is a fact that enables me to imbue the object with aesthetic significance through my creative engagement with it.[18]

This should give us pause about the vision approach's cognitivism. If *looking harder and better* at the choices in a quandary is not a hopeless strategy, it is not necessarily because we can expect to grasp some heretofore uncomprehended quality of intrinsic practical significance. That is not what happens in the aesthetic case, so we have little reason to expect it in the practical case. Instead, we should expect something like what happens with art, where looking harder can make a difference because it might lead us to *do something*—to invent something, to imagine something, to connect something. But if that is the case, then the vision approach loses one of its defining characteristics.

The vision approach is distinguished by the idea that choice requires discernment rather than creation. But our best reason for thinking that quandaries could be overcome by improved vision—the analogy with aesthetic experience—does not actually suggest that conclusion. It suggests that creativity is very important, even in moments of apparent revelation. And with that, our initial skepticism about vision's prospects should return. We simply have no reason to believe that improving our discernment will afford us cognitive access to some quandary-busting insight. We need, just as the existentialists say, to invent something.

IV. THE FREE LAWFULNESS OF AESTHETIC JUDGMENT

In the preceding two sections I have described two approaches to quandaries, both of which offer important insights. The existentialist approach understands that we must create in response to quandaries, while the vision approach recognizes the importance of an unruly form of judgment in this endeavor. Both approaches develop these insights by way of analogies with the aesthetic. Sartre talks about the artist's creation, while Murdoch and Nussbaum talk about the audience's perception. I think that both views get much of their intuitive plausibility from these analogies. But both analogies go awry by fail-

[18] One can find statements of this venerable view in, for example, G. E. Lessing, *Laocoön: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, ed. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), especially sections II–III; Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, *op. cit.*, 5:314–17; and, with amendments, R. G. Collingwood, *Principles of Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938), pp. 151–53.

ing to appreciate the insights of their opposite number. Sartre takes artistic creation to be a kind of radical, *ex nihilo* creation. In doing this, he fails to appreciate the ways in which artistic creation is regulated by judgment and vision. On the other hand, the vision theorists recognize the holism and unruliness of aesthetic judgment, but they fail to appreciate the creativity on which these judgments depend. These mistakes, I have suggested, ultimately explain the shortcomings of both proposals. The kind of creativity the existentialist recommends is too arbitrary to support rational action, and the kind of judgment the vision theorist recommends is too passive to create what we need.

There is a certain irony in the way these approaches separate creativity and unruliness. For we find these two properties joined at the hip in Kant's influential theory of aesthetic judgment.[19] Kant thinks that aesthetic judgments are unruly:

> There can be no rule in accordance with which someone could be compelled to acknowledge something as beautiful. Whether a garment, a house, a flower is beautiful: no one allows himself to be talked into his judgment about that by means of any grounds or fundamental principles.

He also insists on the indispensability of perception: to make an aesthetic judgment, a viewer must "submit the object to his own eyes."[20] But he also thinks that aesthetic judgment depends on the aesthetic subject's creativity. Everything about aesthetic judgment "flows from the concept of taste as a faculty for judging an object in relation to the *free lawfulness* of the imagination." That is, aesthetic judgment depends on a kind of imagination that is not merely "reproductive" and "subjected to the laws of association" but a kind of imagination that is "productive and self-active," and the "authoress of voluntary forms of possible intuitions."[21] This propensity explains why some objects are aesthetically interesting: because they are "an impetus to think more, although in an undeveloped way, than can be comprehended in a concept" and because they give "the imagination cause to spread itself over a multitude of related representations."[22]

[19] I focus on Kant's development of these ideas, but the key features of his theory are hardly unique to him.

[20] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, *op. cit.*, 5:215–16.

[21] *Ibid.*, 5:240.

[22] *Ibid.*, 5:315. Here I am eliding some interpretive controversies in Kant for the sake of easy exposition. For readings of Kant that emphasize the creative dimensions of aesthetic experience, see Anthony Savile, *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press, 1993); and Jane Kneller, *Kant and the Power of Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

For Kant, aesthetic engagement is a creative activity, but this does not mean it is arbitrary or capricious. Aesthetic experiences are not created out of whole cloth because they are experiences *of an object* and so substantively constrained by that object. If our engagement with an object is going well, then we take the particular activities that make up our aesthetic contemplation—questioning, associating, imagining, conjecturing—to be justified by particular features of the object. This allows us to defend our response in the ways characteristic of art criticism even while acknowledging that our response was a manifestation of our own creative powers. We can deny, for example, that the poem *necessitated* a certain response in us (in the way that, for example, a cow's spots necessitate a certain judgment involving the concept <cow>), while still maintaining that the poem *justifies* that response.

Unruliness and creativity are closely related for Kant because he sees a close connection between aesthetic judgment and aesthetic experience.[23] Judgments about whether something is an amoeba or a cow are made by subsuming its characteristic "marks" under a conceptual rule. But aesthetic judgments are not made this way. There are no "marks" that suffice for something's beauty. Hence the unruliness. But this is not the end of the story. We must figure out how to respond to the object given this underdetermination; we need something else to pick up the slack. And that something else is the creative power of the productive imagination. Thus on Kant's picture, the unruliness of aesthetic judgment is explained by a certain underdetermination, while the creativity of those judgments reflects our attempts to overcome that same underdetermination.

Such is Kant's theory as I understand it, but how does it help our problems? Earlier I suggested that if we could find a better conception of aesthetic experience, then it might lead us to a better way of thinking about quandaries. I think Kant's is the theory we are looking for. There are three reasons why. First, aesthetic judgment is a paradigm of unruliness: it is a normative judgment that does not depend on the application of rules or the weighing of independent reasons. Second, if Kant is right, then we know that our aesthetic faculties can overcome one kind of underdetermination (of beauty by concepts) to yield a normative judgment (that something is beautiful). So we should be encouraged that it may help us overcome the analogous form of underdetermination found in quandaries. Third, and most importantly, Kant's account seems capable of avoiding the problems

[23] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, *op. cit.*, 5:217.

that beset our other two approaches. We need a form of judgment that is not just a reflection of arbitrary willing, but we do not want one entailing that the solution to a quandary involves no creation—that the right answer is just there waiting to be discovered by someone with good enough vision.

The object-constrained creativity we find in aesthetic engagement offers exactly this combination. It allows us to insist that our judgment about a poem or a painting is not necessitated by features of that poem or painting; such a judgment depends essentially on the creative activity of the subject. But the judgment is nonetheless normative because we can legitimately take the creative activity that grounds it to be a justified response to the object. We should like to say much the same thing about the resolution of quandaries. These are choices where no option is necessitated by what Chang calls "given" reasons, so we must create something in response to them. But we do not want that creation to be arbitrary or capricious because then we could not endorse it in the right ways. We want it to be justified in light of the options. Aesthetic judgment, as Kant conceives of it, offers exactly that.

V. THE AESTHETIC APPRECIATION OF A LIFE

The argument in the previous section is circumstantial. Aesthetic judgment *à la* Kant has the right formal characteristics to be useful in resolving quandaries. To make good on this claim, I now need to tell a halfway plausible story about how this capacity can do the job. And that is what I shall attempt in this final section.

I want to begin, however, by offering what I think is a tempting but ultimately wrongheaded version of such a story. It goes like this. At first, an agent's reasons are on par with each other, and they face a quandary. But their aesthetic experience of their options—their finding one beautiful and one drab, for instance—can produce additional non-given reasons that tip the balance and make it possible to endorse one option as best. (This follows the basic outlines of Chang's proposal.) The problem with this approach is that it is not clear that a novel, aesthetically grounded reason will actually break the deadlock. Indeed, it may exacerbate it. Hortense began with a quandary between reasons of ambition and love, but it is not at all obvious that adding reasons of beauty to one side of the ledger will tip the balance. After all, we can easily imagine Hortense antecedently judging that one life is more beautiful than the other and *still* finding herself locked in a quandary.[24]

[24] Compare Chang, "The Possibility of Parity," *Ethics*, CXII, 4 (2002): 659–88, on arguments from small improvements. Thanks to an anonymous referee for suggesting the problems with this story and urging me to distinguish my own.

This concern suggests that aesthetic judgment should play a rather different role in justifying our choice. It should not amount to an additional reason that "tips the balance," but something more synoptic. The alternative I want to put forward goes like this. An aesthetic judgment can encompass the considerations that Hortense has already grasped in her deliberations and shape them into a distinctive form. In doing this it can affect their normative force. What I mean by "encompass" and "shape" can be illustrated by a case involving art. Say that I am looking to buy one of two paintings. To make my decision, I examine the paintings and find many discrete things that each does well and poorly. The muse's robe in Painting A is magnificently diaphanous. Painting B has spectacular shadow work. The nymph's smile in Painting A is devilishly wry. After noting all these merits (and some flaws), I take my reasons for favoring each painting to be on a par. And so I am in a quandary. Seeing my frustration, a friend suggests I consider which painting is more beautiful, a question I had somehow hitherto forgotten. So I stand back and take in both paintings. In doing this I note all the same merits and demerits I have already enumerated, but I try to orient them within a larger assessment of each painting's overall beauty—an exercise that naturally requires significant imagination. Eventually I decide that A is the more beautiful and buy it.

Here it would be wrong to say that beauty broke the tie between the reasons favoring A and the reasons favoring B. That would suggest that beauty was a discrete merit, like the diaphanousness of the robe or the wryness of the smirk. But the beauty of A encompasses those properties—it is grounded in them—and the normative support beauty lends to the choice of A likewise encompasses the reasons provided by them.[25] In this way, the judgment about beauty does not give us a new and independent reason for favoring a painting. It shapes or organizes other reasons: it transforms them from a less than fully determinate collection of normative content into something more articulate and better tailored to the question we face. Insofar as the judgment of beauty reflects our own creative capacities, this organization will too.[26]

[25] Compare the "layered cake" picture of aesthetic qualities suggested by Nick Zangwill in "The Beautiful, the Dainty, and the Dumpy," reprinted in his *The Metaphysics of Beauty* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004); as well as Frank Sibley's discussion of the relationship between aesthetic judgment and the particular qualities of objects in "Aesthetic and Non-Aesthetic," reprinted in his *Approaches to Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

[26] Jonathan Dancy uses the language of "shape" in his recent *Practical Shape: A Theory of Practical Reasoning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

We should note two contrasts between this story and the views I described earlier. Whereas Chang suggests that the will enables us to "make some consideration have the normativity of a reason," I am attributing a more subtle normative power to our aesthetic capacities—the power to shape the collective normative significance of a class of reasons through the formation of aesthetic judgments. And whereas the vision theorists might say that we *see* or *discern* these "shapes" in the painting—a phrase that suggests that they are "there anyway"—I am insisting that they depend on the creative powers of an agent.[27]

On the proposal I am recommending, Hortense should approach the possible lives that would follow from each of her options as she might approach a work of art—as something whose constituent parts can be arranged into a normatively significant shape by our creative powers. Hortense should not do this as a way of producing or discovering a new balance-tipping reason. She should do it as a way of creatively reengaging with the reasons that led her into a quandary in the first place. She should do it in the hope that this reengagement, this inventive vision, might produce a way of appreciating those reasons' collective force. Seeing a life as beautiful, austere, or dreary is not just a reason for or against a life but a way of constituting the collective force of the considerations that underwrite that beauty, austerity, or dreariness.[28]

To this end, Hortense could think of her enjoyment of professional success or the creative outlets the tuba affords not merely as reasons weighing in favor of one option, nor even considerations that work in concert with some general rule, but as seamless parts of a life holistically conceived—as things that give that life a distinctive shape and timbre, that infuse it with grace and vigor or add an ounce of pathos to a cold stretch, that disclose an in inner strength of character or betray a hidden foible, that confirm the life as a cliché or distinguish it as something rare and remarkable.

All this aestheticization sounds quite difficult. Fortunately, Nietzsche gives us some advice about how we might come see ourselves in this way.

> To distance oneself from things until there is much in them that one no longer sees and much that the eye must add in order to see them at all,

[27] Chang, "Commitments, Reasons, and the Will," *op. cit.*, p. 101.

[28] Compare the holistic assessments of a life suggested by C. I. Lewis, *An Analysis of Knowledge and Valuation* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1946), p. 483; and Jerrold Levinson, "Intrinsic Value and the Notion of a Life," reprinted in his *Contemplating Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006). Thanks to an anonymous referee for recommending these.

> or to see things around a corner and as if they were cut out and extracted from their context, or to place them so that each partially distorts the view one has of the others and allows only perspectival glimpses, or to look at them through colored glass or in the light of the sunset, or to give them a surface and skin that is not fully transparent: all this we should learn from artists while otherwise being wiser than they. For usually in their case this delicate power stops where art ends and life begins; we, however, want to be poets of our lives, starting with the smallest and most commonplace details.[29]

What Nietzsche calls "delicate powers" are techniques for arousing imaginative responses to an object. (A Kantian might call them ways of initiating play.) And his advice is that we extend the artist's techniques for imaginative manipulation to our lives so we can treat the events and characters that populate those lives, the moods that shade them, the minutiae that fill in their background, and the narrative forms that bind them together as sites for creative aesthetic reception.

If Hortense can appreciate her imagined life in this way, then she may be able to do what I claimed to do with the two paintings. Using her powers of imagination, she may be able to manipulate the considerations that led her into a quandary into a novel form that better answers the practical problem that the world has put to her. This is the feat that I have been insisting is the key to her quandary. She must create a new conception of the normative import of her reasons that she can regard, despite its artifice, as a fitting response to those reasons. We can do this with art, and I think that Hortense can do it with her practical self as well.

This initiative need not depend on Hortense having anything like an antecedent desire to live a life with certain aesthetic qualities. We might need to turn to a desire like this if we claim that her aesthetic judgment gives her a new reason, but, as I have emphasized, this is not my proposal. The object of my aesthetic reflections is not a far-off, alien object whose practical significance must be established from scratch. It is a life, *Hortense's life*, and what she is contemplating in these reflections are considerations relevant to whether she should live it. The reflections are therefore already dripping with practical significance for her. To put the point differently: Hortense's aesthetic assessment of a painting is an assessment of its aptness to be appreciated by her in whatever ways she can appreciate it.[30] By the same

[29] *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams, trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), section 299.

[30] Keren Gorodeisky and Eric Marcus, "Aesthetic Rationality," this JOURNAL, CXV, 3, (2018): 113–40.

token, her aesthetic assessment of a prospective life is an assessment of its aptness to be appreciated by her in the distinctive ways she is capable of. But Hortense has a very special way of appreciating her own prospective life, one available only to her. She can live it. So the aesthetic consideration of the reasons favoring one life or another *just is* a consideration of how to live.

I say Hortense "might" be capable of all this because there are no guarantees. The process I am envisioning is a creative one and there are ample opportunities for failure. I am certainly not offering a recipe for resolving quandaries. But even with these concessions, we might wonder why we should expect the *aesthetic* mode of engagement to be helpful. After all, aesthetic comparisons can seem even more difficult than practical dilemmas. Is the Hafner symphony more beautiful than the Prague symphony? Is a Rembrandt better than a Picasso? How does *Paradise Lost* stack up against *Gravity's Rainbow*? These questions do not seem any easier than Hortense's quandary.

I have two answers. The first and more flat-footed is to note that our powers of aesthetic appraisal can be improved through training and practice. This will involve both the cultivation of abilities that Hume associates with true critics ("strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice") and, equally importantly, the cultivation of our imagination.[31] Second, the goal of bringing quandaries into the aesthetic realm is not to reduce them to a more tractable problem, but to bring them before faculties that have the resources to meet their demands. It is, in particular, to put them before a more creative form of appraisal than practical reason can offer. As Kant explains: "In the use of the imagination for cognition"—for instance, in ordinary practical reasoning—"the imagination is under the constraint of the understanding." But, he continues, when employed aesthetically, "the imagination is free to provide. . . unsought extensive undeveloped material for the understanding." Thus when we abstract from the rules that characterize ordinary cognition, as we do in aesthetic contemplation, the imagination is able to indulge in freer and more radical forms of invention, and the fruits of these inventions can contribute "indirectly to cognitions."[32] This is the hope in bringing quandaries

[31] "Of the Standard of Taste," paragraph 23, reprinted in *David Hume: Moral Philosophy*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2006). On cultivating the skill of imagination, see two recent essays by Amy Kind, "What Imagination Teaches," in John Schwenkler and Enoch Lambert, eds., *Becoming Someone New: Essays on Transformative Experience, Choice, and Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020) and "Learning to Imagine," *British Journal of Aesthetics*, LXII, 1 (2022): 33–48.

[32] Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, *op. cit.*, 5:317.

before our aesthetic powers. My claim is not that aesthetic judgment can resolve quandaries in a straightforward way—by seeing an unseen reason—but that the difficult and unpredictable work we do in making aesthetic judgments is exactly the work quandaries demand of us.

VI. CONCLUSION

Officially I have been concerned with what appear to be pathological moments in our lives, moments when practical reason gives out. But I think this characterization of the problem is misleadingly narrow. There are of course times when the balance of reasons favors one course of action over another. Nonetheless, the more basic and indeed more common state faced by agents is one of substantial normative underdetermination. And for this reason I agree with Sartre that the default predicament of the agent is very much like that of the artist. We should therefore expect the aesthetically enlivened mode of practical thought I have described here to be more ubiquitous than my discussion might otherwise suggest.

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