

Aesthetic Disinterestedness from a Metaphysical Point of View

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ENG Abstract: What is the metaphysical significance of the aesthetic disinterestedness? In this paper, I address this question by examining the tension between aesthetic disinterest and intellectual—or metaphysical—interest in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. While aesthetic disinterestedness is often interpreted as a mark of the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere, I argue that this autonomy is deeply entangled with a reason's aspiration towards systematic and metaphysical unity. Against the background of contemporary readings—particularly those of Dieter Henrich—I explore how the disinterested aesthetic attitude may serve as a starting point for a renewed engagement with the metaphysical dimension of Kant's philosophy, offering a reinterpretation that resists ontologisation while highlighting the idealist orientation of Kant's critical system. **Keywords:** disinterestedness; aesthetics; metaphysics; modernity; Kant.

Summary: Introduction. 1. A Modern Philosophical Attitude. 2. The Tension Between Aesthetic Disinterest and Intellectual Interest. 3. Aesthetic Disinterestedness and the Problem of Metaphysics. 4. Conclusion. 5. References.

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Introduction

Among the most recent reflections on the question of aesthetic disinterestedness is the notable essay '*Kant, Proust, and the Appeal of Beauty*' (2012) by Richard Moran. Moran's essay explores the affinities between Kant's and Proust's views on beauty, emphasising the significance of aesthetic disinterestedness for both the German philosopher and the French novelist. Aesthetic disinterestedness, as an expression of a change in attitude on the part of the contemplating subject, or beholder, lies at the heart of Moran's reflections, which seek to identify a certain sense of convergence between the positions on the nature of beauty and the importance of adopting the correct attitude towards it, as articulated in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* and Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

In the opening lines of his essay, Moran reflects on a certain philosophical suspicion that surrounds the concept of beauty within the history of modern aesthetics. As Moran (2012, pp. 298-304) suggests, in the history of modern aesthetics, the notion of beauty, as well as the experience of aesthetic pleasure, has been the subject of scepticism regarding its own value and autonomy. Philosophical distrust of beauty and aesthetic pleasure has often been expressed through the view that beauty, in its appearance, may be illusory, lacking ontological consistency, and pointing to something external and beyond itself.

In those opening lines of Moran's essay, the American philosopher references Kant's aesthetics as a framework for analysing the appearance of beauty and the emergence of aesthetic pleasure as something that requires an external explanation, pointing to something beyond the strict realm of beauty and pleasure, namely something related to the moral sphere. Nevertheless, Moran does not choose the moral sphere as the focus of his reflection, instead emphasising the importance of the question of necessity involved in Kant's judgement of beauty, as well as its connection with the question of *sensus communis*², as Kant discusses in

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2 From Moran's perspective, Kant's thesis on aesthetic disinterestedness is closely linked to his position on the universal validity of the judgement of beauty—or the universal assent or agreement to our judgement. This universal necessity of the judgement of beauty, which is intimately connected to *sensus communis*, forms the core of Moran's interpretation of Kant's position on

the fourth moment of the judgement of taste of the *Analytic of the Beautiful* (§§18-22). Moran, indeed, seeks to address this suspicion towards beauty not by excluding, but by incorporating the possibility of understanding the autonomous dimension of aesthetic disinterestedness and disinterested attitude within the history of modern aesthetics.

This will also be the aim of the present paper: to analyse the question of aesthetic disinterestedness (and the disinterested aesthetic attitude) in connection with other philosophical dimensions, which are not strictly aesthetic, within modern aesthetics. I believe Moran is right: modern aesthetics incorporates a certain suspicion regarding the autonomous dimension of beauty and aesthetic pleasure—yet this very suspicion should not, in turn, be met with mistrust. For at the heart of this modern stance towards beauty and aesthetic pleasure lies a metaphysical interest which, in Kant's case, takes the form of a philosophical aspiration towards reconciliation and systematicity. As I shall argue, the tension between aesthetic disinterest (§§2-5) and intellectual interest (§42) defines Kant's position on beauty in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, showing that the aesthetic sphere may, in the context of modernity, serve as a pathway to a philosophical exploration of a metaphysical sense of reconciliation. I thus maintain that Kantian aesthetic disinterestedness is not confined to the realm of the beautiful but paves the way for the systematic and reconciliatory dimension of critical philosophy.

It is the articulation between aesthetic disinterest and intellectual interest that defines my inquiry, which will seek to think, with—and against—Dieter Henrich, the controversial question of metaphysics in Kant, and how this question may be interpreted in light of the theses on the disinterested subjective attitude, as developed in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Henrich maintains that freedom, rather than aesthetic experience, grounds Kantian systematicity. Against this view, I contend that it is precisely in the disinterested contemplation of nature, as an aesthetic experience, that the systematic impulse of the critical project takes shape. In such contemplation, reason, perceiving traces of consonance between nature and freedom, is moved by what I call a metaphysical interest—not ontological or dogmatic, but critical and idealistic: the interest of reason in envisaging modes of transition between the sensible and the supersensible, without positing ontological domains beyond transcendental subjectivity. While Henrich connects moral philosophy to metaphysics, my concern is with the relation between aesthetics and metaphysics.

This paper is structured as follows: in Section 1, I seek to examine the relevance of the concept of aesthetic disinterestedness in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*³, with particular attention to the contrast between aesthetics and epistemology, or between the possibility of formulating the aesthetic judgement and the possibility of formulating the epistemological judgement. In Section 2, I aim to shed light on the tension (without full resolution) between aesthetic disinterest and intellectual—or metaphysical—interest, as present in the third *Critique*, emphasising a perspective on Kantian aesthetics as a sphere that presents itself as a path to metaphysics—a metaphysics that can only be understood in light of the unity of subjectivity and reason itself, and devoid of an external, parallel ontology. In Section 3, I attempt to show how the disinterested aesthetic attitude constitutes a first step towards the modern appreciation of a sense of philosophical totality, drawing on Henrich's interpretation of the Kantian critical system as a paradigmatic instance of modern metaphysics—in this final section, I seek to challenge some of Henrich's positions, particularly the (pernicious) tendency to ontologise Kant's metaphysics, by emphasising the idealist element of Kant's critical philosophy. This essay does not engage in a strictly exegetical reading of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*; rather, it sets out to explore the philosophical scope—particularly the metaphysical and systematic determinations—of Kant's concept of aesthetic disinterestedness, approaching it as a point of departure for broader reflections on the relation between aesthetics and metaphysics in modern philosophy.

1. A Modern Philosophical Attitude

The concept of disinterestedness is one of the notions that form the distinctive conceptual apparatus of aesthetics. This concept has a long tradition in the history of aesthetics, from Shaftesbury⁴ to aforementioned essay by Richard Moran, and has been a fundamental notion of philosophical aesthetics since Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. The Kantian position regarding the feeling of disinterested aesthetic pleasure extends over three paragraphs in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (§§2-5): the aesthetic judgement, not referring to interest in the existence of the object, and thus not referring to the faculty of appetite (the judgement of beauty is not identical to the judgement of agreeable or the judgement of good), is finally described as a 'merely contemplative' judgement, that is, 'a judgment that, indifferent with regard to the existence of an object, merely connects its constitution together with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure' (KU, AA 05: 209, §5, 95).

aesthetic disinterestedness. Accordingly, Moran's analysis emphasises the necessary character of the judgement of beauty. For Proust, by contrast, the question of aesthetic disinterestedness and the adoption of a disinterested aesthetic attitude does not involve universal necessity or the agreement of others. In Proust, it is entirely a matter of cultivating an attitude of unconditional fidelity towards the beautiful object—an attitude that transcends, through unconditional love and respect for that object, the satisfaction of empirical desires. The sense of obligation towards the beautiful object, the complete and absolute devotion to it, lies at the heart of Moran's reading of aesthetic disinterestedness as it is developed by Proust in the narrative of *À la recherche*.

3 All references to Kant's works in this paper are given according to the *Akademie* edition. The translations used are those published in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

4 In *The British Aesthetic Tradition* (2013), Timothy M. Costelloe highlights the fact that the aesthetic notion of disinterestedness—related to a judgement of taste—was first outlined in the context of Shaftesbury's aesthetic theory: '(...) the attitude of "disinterestedness", an idea that also receives its first formulation in Shaftesbury long before Edmund Burke made it a condition of the sublime, Kant identified it as the *sine qua non* of aesthetic judgment' (Costelloe 2013, p. 19).

In Kantian aesthetics, disinterestedness is the key element that distinguishes the judgement of beauty from the judgement of the agreeable, marking the emergence of an eminently aesthetic subjectivity that relates to the object in a contemplative manner. Disinterestedness and contemplation are closely linked in Kant's account: the disinterested attitude enables the subject to bracket interests, needs, and desires, thereby allowing a relation to the object grounded in pure contemplation. This suspension of empirical, individual inclinations constitutes the necessary condition for the possibility of a genuine—and universally valid—aesthetic experience, as well as for the judgement of beauty.

Aesthetic subjectivity, as developed by Kant, is marked by a sense of universality that sets it apart from empirical individuality. The universal dimension of the judgement of beauty reflects the disinterested character of aesthetic subjectivity, since the notion of beauty, in Kant's view, transcends merely individual or sensuous gratification. Beauty is thus the object of a judgement grounded in a universal—rather than empirical—subjectivity. Only this universal standpoint affords the conditions of possibility for an authentic aesthetic judgement. By contrast, judgements issued from empirical individuality concern the agreeable. In this way, disinterestedness, which defines the properly aesthetic attitude, grounds the transcendental—subjective and universal—orientation of Kant's reflection on beauty in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

The notion of disinterested aesthetic pleasure should be understood as a distinctly transcendental element in Kantian aesthetic theory. Indeed, the disinterested attitude of the subject in relation to the object is the prerogative of a transcendental subjectivity—one that is neither empirical nor psychological. Correspondingly, aesthetic experience is free from empirical or psychological interests. Aesthetic judgement, conceived as the outcome of a feeling of pleasure independent of any concern for the actual existence of the object, constitutes a representation of the subject as a transcendental entity. This is precisely how Kant accounts for the subjective universality of disinterested aesthetic pleasure in the second moment of the judgement of taste of the *Analytic of the Beautiful* (§§6-9).

One of the aspects I would like to highlight about the Kantian concept of aesthetic disinterestedness is the contrast between the reflective aesthetic judgement and the determining epistemological judgement. As we know, the central object of the third *Critique* is nature, viewed not from a scientific or epistemological standpoint but from an aesthetic (and teleological) one. According to Kant, aesthetic judgement, profoundly distinct from scientific judgement, does not include any interest in the object. The cognitive purpose regarding the object is one of the elements that Kant seeks to remove from the sphere of aesthetic judgement: I would argue that it is the cognitive purpose, therefore, that draws Kant's attention—this is precisely the type of interest that Kant seeks to eliminate when outlining his aesthetic theory of contemplative disinterestedness. Scientific judgement is interested in the object since it aims at knowledge; in contrast, aesthetic judgement, free of all interest, including cognitive interest, is contemplative. The disinterested attitude of the subject towards nature therefore defines the aesthetic attitude, which is distinct from the scientific attitude. As Kant famously states: 'But this contemplation itself is also not directed to concepts; for the judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment (neither a theoretical nor a practical one), and hence it is neither grounded on concepts nor aimed at them' (KU, AA 05: 209, §5, 95).

That said, my focus will be on the distinction between aesthetic judgement—disinterested and contemplative—and scientific or epistemological judgement, which, by contrast, involves a cognitive interest. Indeed, one could argue that the Kantian conception of reflective aesthetic judgement is developed in contrast with the conception of scientific or epistemological judgement. Throughout the paragraphs of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* devoted to the definition of aesthetic judgement, epistemology appears to serve as the contrasting framework—the background against which aesthetic judgement, along with the other concepts that make up the conceptual apparatus of aesthetics, takes shape⁵. This is an element that deserves to be developed in greater detail in what follows, for this fundamental contrast can be analysed in multiple ways: reflective aesthetic judgement *versus* determining scientific judgement; contemplation *versus* cognition; aesthetic disinterest *versus* cognitive interest. In addition, the notion of the free play between the faculties of imagination and understanding allows us to consider the possibility of the suspension or neutralisation of the application of the concepts of the understanding—the epistemological faculty *par excellence*. This transcendental possibility of the emergence of a harmonious free play between the faculties—although a complex issue and the subject of considerable controversy⁶—seems to suggest a fundamental distinction between the domain of the aesthetic and that of the epistemological, conceived, therefore, as two contrasting philosophical spheres.

Indeed, Kant's critical philosophy comprises two distinct approaches to nature: the epistemological, articulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and the aesthetic-teleological, developed in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. As Pierre Hadot highlights in *Le Voile d'Isis: Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de nature* (2004), modernity cultivated two contrasting philosophical attitudes towards nature during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: on the one hand, the scientific and mechanistic attitude (Descartes, Galileo, Newton), aimed at knowledge and technical mastery; and on the other, the aesthetic and contemplative attitude (Rousseau, Burke, Goethe), which viewed nature as a beautiful object. These divergent orientations represent two modes of unveiling nature's secrets, symbolically expressed by Hadot through the mythological figure

5 Menke (1998) considers the emergence of the concept of 'aesthetic negativity' in light of Kantian aesthetics and the possibility that the aesthetic judgement, as delineated by Kant, constitutes not only an autonomous judgement (in relation to scientific or epistemological judgement) but one capable of cancelling the categorical activity of the understanding. In this sense, according to Menke, aesthetics in Kant is sovereign in relation to epistemology.

6 Henrich (1992a, pp. 40-44) explored this fundamental aspect of the third *Critique*—the free play between the faculties of imagination and understanding—emphasising its obscurity and the inadequacy of all Kant's efforts to clarify it.

of Isis. Strikingly, Kant's critical project appears to integrate both perspectives, with the first *Critique* and the third *Critique* embodying the dual vision of nature characteristic of modern thought. In fact, the first and third *Critiques* exemplify this distinctly modern dual conception of nature, with Kant's philosophy distinguishing itself by articulating both perspectives in their respective singularities and specificities⁷.

In the same vein, I would like to mention Joachim Ritter's essay '*Landschaft: zur Funktion des Ästhetischen in der modernen Gesellschaft*' (1974), a text dedicated to the aesthetic experience of nature and the aesthetic category of landscape in modernity. Starting with an analysis of Schiller's poems (especially *Der Spaziergang*) and Petrarch's writings on his ascent of Mount Ventoux, Ritter interprets the landscape (nature as landscape) as a representation of a distinctly modern way of positioning the subject in relation to nature. Following the philosophical development of modern freedom, nature, which had previously been lost or denied, was now aesthetically recovered and regained. Modernity thus developed a new way of conceiving nature, one that extended beyond the scientific approach and was rooted in aesthetic contemplation. Nature was henceforth regarded aesthetically as beauty—giving birth to the aesthetic category of landscape. According to Ritter, this aesthetic view of nature is profoundly modern; the category of landscape is, therefore, a modern aesthetic creation. As such, the aesthetic relationship of the modern subject with nature requires a shift in attitude: the abandonment of the scientific attitude in favour of the disinterested aesthetic one. This shift marks the birth of the aesthetic notion of natural beauty in the eighteenth century.

Kant's aesthetics offers an exemplary framework for understanding the scope of Hadot's and Ritter's reflections on modern aesthetic experience. Central to this is the Kantian notion of disinterestedness, which plays a pivotal role in the aesthetic attitude towards nature and is closely tied to the theory of aesthetic judgement. The disinterested—or aesthetic—attitude establishes a distinct mode of relating to nature, one that cannot be identified with, or reduced to, the scientific or epistemological standpoint. The third *Critique* seeks to reframe our view of nature and proposes an alternative way of situating the subject in relation to it: aesthetic contemplation. As previously noted, in Kant's critical philosophy, nature is approached from two perspectives: the scientific, in the first *Critique*, and the aesthetic (and teleological), in the third. Thus, in Kant, the disinterested aesthetic attitude is affirmed as a distinctly modern philosophical approach to nature.

2. The Tension Between Aesthetic Disinterest and Intellectual Interest

It is well known that it is specifically in the third *Critique* that the Kantian systematic project finds the basis for its complete development. One could say that the third *Critique* forms the systematic element of Kant's critical philosophy. In this section, I shall argue that the systematic aspiration of Kant's philosophy has its starting point in the notion of the aesthetic contemplation of nature. This disinterested attitude of the subject regarding nature is the first step towards the elaboration of a systematic philosophical proposal. In fact, Kant's philosophy illustrates that the possibility of the judgement of beauty, which stems from a disinterested attitude of the subject towards the object, can be considered a promise of reconciliation, which nevertheless cannot go beyond the limits of a critical (i.e. non-dogmatic) *metaphysics*. This proposal is articulated in the third *Critique*, Kant's defining work with respect to his aspirations for systematic philosophy, which presents and explores a transition between the aesthetic contemplation of nature and the—subjective and idealistic—determination of a systematic totality.

As Kant states in the published introduction, the third *Critique* embodies a systematic aspiration, developed through the search for continuity between the two domains of Kantian philosophy—the domain of the concept of nature as the sensible and the domain of the concept of freedom as the supersensible. Reflecting retrospectively on his own philosophy, Kant highlights the systematic purpose of the third *Critique* as the reconciling element of his system: the search for a transition that reconnects the two domains, previously separated by 'an incalculable gulf' (KU, AA 05: 175, 63).

The interpretation of the third *Critique* as an eminently systematic element of Kant's critical philosophy should, as I argue, be understood in light of the tension between aesthetic disinterestedness and 'intellectual interest in the beautiful' (§42), which I refer to as *metaphysical* interest. As Kant famously formulates:

But since it also interests reason that the ideas (for which it produces an immediate interest in the moral feeling) also have objective reality, i.e., that nature should at least show some trace or give a sign that it contains in itself some sort of ground for assuming a lawful correspondence of its products with our satisfaction that is independent of all interest (which we recognize *a priori* as a law valid for everyone, without being able to ground this on proofs), reason must take an interest in every manifestation in nature of a correspondence similar to this; consequently the mind cannot reflect on the beauty of nature without finding itself at the same time to be interested in it. Because of this affinity, however,

7 Hadot's study begins in Antiquity, with a famous—though no less enigmatic—fragment by Heraclitus: "nature loves to hide". In the context of modernity, the two principal modes of interpreting the secrets of veiled nature may be symbolically represented by two mythological figures. On the one hand, Prometheus embodies scientific and mechanistic knowledge, rooted in the mathematical and technical spirit of Renaissance magic, and extending through Galileo and Bacon to Newton and the epistemological positions of Kant's first *Critique*. On the other hand, Orpheus symbolises the poetic interpretation of nature and the emergence of its disinterested contemplation—a mode of thought associated with figures such as Rousseau and the British empiricists (Burke, for instance), developed in Kant's third *Critique*, and later echoed in Goethe. This alternative view of nature—just as modern as the scientific one—is the aesthetic view, which encompasses the poetic interpretation of nature as well as the aesthetic and disinterested experience. The modern emergence of this alternative perspective thus marks the birth of aesthetics in the eighteenth century. Indeed, modern philosophy of nature is characterised by a dual dimension: it is both epistemological and aesthetic.

this interest is moral, and he who takes such an interest in the beautiful in nature can do so only insofar as he has already firmly established his interest in the morally good. We thus have cause at least to suspect a predisposition to a good moral disposition in one who is immediately interested in the beauty of nature. (KU, AA 05: 300-301, §42, 180)

In §42, Kant outlines the well-known articulation between aesthetics and morality in light of the framework of aesthetic judgement concerning the beautiful forms of nature. In this regard, I would like to emphasise that this Kantian articulation may be interpreted through the lens of the tension between aesthetic disinterest and intellectual—or metaphysical—interest. Accordingly, it is this tension between aesthetic disinterest and metaphysical interest, initially profoundly contradictory, that allows me to understand how the concept of disinterestedness includes a development that transcends the boundaries of the aesthetic realm, emerging as a concept that leads us towards metaphysics. As such, aesthetic disinterestedness should, therefore, be analysed in its metaphysical scope.

The subjective representation of a sense of affinity between nature and subjectivity—ultimately, the possibility of feeling aesthetic pleasure in contemplating nature—represents the hallmark of the systematic philosophical aspiration, or the metaphysical philosophical interest. This interest must be understood in light of the reconciliation between the domain of the concept of nature and the domain of the concept of freedom: it is, therefore, a rational interest—reason feels compelled to interpret each *trace* (*Spur*) or *sign* (*Wink*) that nature might manifest as a form of consonance with freedom or morality. Aesthetic pleasure expresses a sense of affinity between the domain of the concept of nature and the domain of the concept of freedom, an affinity that, viewed in light of such pleasure, can only be constituted as subjective and cannot be affirmed or defended from an objective or realistic point of view.

In Kant's philosophy, the aesthetic contemplation of nature is the distinctly modern way in which the development of a systematic philosophy is fostered, bringing together and reconciling the domains of the concepts of nature and freedom. It should be noted that this contemplative-systematic view originates in the subject's shift in attitude, specifically the suspension of cognitive or epistemological interest towards nature. In fact, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, with its predominantly epistemological focus, does not offer a systematic philosophical proposal, as the scientific conception of nature prevents the development of a philosophical view that encompasses a sense of totality. It would be correct to state that the key concept, or leitmotiv, of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that of limit, rather than reconciliation or systematicity, as the realm of epistemology, as outlined in the first *Critique*, does not seem to lead us to any other philosophical domain beyond the strictly epistemological. In the context of the first *Critique*, we remain within the epistemological, without glimpsing the possibility of establishing bridges with other philosophical spheres. Therefore, it is in the third *Critique*, specifically in the sphere of aesthetic contemplation of nature, that the emergence of a systematic philosophical aspiration takes place; the aesthetic contemplation of nature is crucial to the development of a systematic view within Kantian critical philosophy.

The tension between aesthetic disinterest and metaphysical interest, as outlined in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, should be understood in light of Kant's transcendental idealism. In this regard, it is important to bear in mind that this tension—which, as I argue, enables us to grasp the metaphysical dimension of aesthetic disinterestedness—should not lead us towards objectivist postulations. This caveat ought to compel us to reject any interpretation of the relationship between aesthetics and metaphysics that fails to take into account the idealist dimension of Kant's critical system. That is, all approaches to this tension which interpret it, for example, through a Schopenhauerian lens, are mistaken. In Kant, the tension between aesthetic disinterest and metaphysical interest unfolds within the bounds of subjectivity, more precisely within the unity of subjective reason. It does not entail the positing of distinct metaphysical strata or ontological domains in which subjectivity might be inscribed during a contemplative, disinterested aesthetic experience. Contrary to Schopenhauer's philosophy—which purports to articulate a convergence of aesthetics and metaphysics⁸—the Kantian critical system refrains from positing multiple metaphysical orders or levels of being that could be traversed by aesthetic subjectivity. In this sense, it is worth emphasising that my perspective on the tension between aesthetic disinterest and metaphysical interest in Kant is developed with reference to the possible reconciliation of different modes of thinking belonging to the transcendental subject, in light of reason's unity with itself.

3. Aesthetic Disinterestedness and the Problem of Metaphysics

Kant's critical philosophy constitutes a distinctive philosophical system, and it is crucial to recognise the exceptional nature of Kantian systematic philosophy. Unlike the monistic systems of Spinoza⁹, Fichte, and Hegel—which are paradigms of systematic philosophy due to their reliance on a single foundational concept that determines the entire structure of thought (Gueroult 1953; 1979)—Kant's philosophy does not adhere to this model. Kant's philosophy, with its various dualisms (subject and object, phenomenon and thing-in-itself, nature and freedom, sensible and supersensible), diverges from the monistic approach that is typically characteristic of systematic philosophy.

8 See Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Volume 1, Book III.

9 On the rejection of monistic systematic philosophies and Kant's aversion to the rediscovery of Spinoza that took place in the late eighteenth century within the context of German philosophy, see Zammito 1992, pp. 228–260. Indeed, according to Zammito, Kant wrote the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* as a way to repudiate the monistic metaphysics that were spreading in the German context following the Pantheism Controversy.

Additionally, philosophical systems point to a complete identity between thinking and being, such that philosophical reason seems to resemble what we might understand as divine reason, or the perfect perspective on being; systematic philosophies, therefore, annul the interval—which is never recognised as an abyss—between thinking and being. Now, Kantian philosophy also fails to uphold this law of systematic philosophy, for in Kant, thinking and being are not the same, never achieving perfect identification. Furthermore, Kantian philosophy, which begins with the perspective of subjectivity and its limits, also deviates from another fundamental principle of systematic philosophy: philosophising from the standpoint of God or the Absolute. Spinoza's system is exemplary in this regard, as it starts from God or the One Substance, rather than from subjectivity, which plays no role in Spinoza's metaphysics; similarly, in the philosophies of Fichte and Hegel, where the subject is identified with the Absolute or the Whole, the starting point of philosophy is not a subjective standpoint constrained by the conditions that make knowledge possible¹⁰.

In addition, as Henrich (2003, pp. 29-56) points out, Kantian systematic philosophy did not develop its foundational concept from the outset. Henrich identifies this foundation with the concept of freedom, a notion Kant formulated in the second *Critique*. According to Henrich, freedom, the systematic concept of Kantian philosophy, does not serve as an initial or prior foundation from which the entire structure of knowledge is built. Rather, the foundation of Kantian philosophy—profoundly different from those in traditional systematic philosophies—is found halfway through the process, not at the beginning. The *Critique of Pure Reason*, the first major work of Kant's critical philosophy, presents the conceptual framework that supports this philosophy but does not offer a foundational systematic concept.

More importantly, the critical dimension of Kantian thought seems to undermine any genuine systematic philosophical aspirations. In Kant's philosophy, there exists a seemingly irreconcilable disharmony between the critical approach and the desire for a systematic structure. This disharmony, which defines Kantian thought, emphasises the exceptional nature of Kantian systematic philosophy. How can a systematic philosophy emerge from a mode of thought that is inherently critical—one that emphasises the limits of human knowledge and rejects presenting itself as a perfect, complete metaphysics?

As I shall argue, Kant's philosophy, in its systematic aspiration, constitutes a metaphysics—an interpretation that may appear contentious. In fact, the Kantian critical project integrates two seemingly contradictory positions regarding the question of metaphysics: on the one hand, Kant claims to be the one who condemns and combats metaphysics; on the other, it is Kant's philosophy itself that offers the possibility for the survival of such a discipline, particularly through its critical and transcendental configuration (Alquié 1968; Grondin 2004, pp. 205-232; Willaschek 2018; de Boer 2020; Gava 2023). The symbolic evocation of Hecuba, the defeated and ruined Trojan queen, in the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KrV, A viii-ix), is deeply illustrative of Kant's view on metaphysics. Metaphysics had once been the queen of the sciences, but in the context of the eighteenth century—the quintessential anti-metaphysical century—this discipline had lost its dignity and power¹¹. Nevertheless, metaphysics can only survive in a Kantian sense.

At this point, I follow the interpretation developed by Henrich (1987; 2003), who argues—against Habermas—that Kantian metaphysics, arising from a critical and idealist philosophy, is defined by its distinctively modern character. In this regard, it is relevant to mention the controversy between Henrich and Habermas that took place in the 1980s. During that decade, German philosophy became the stage for a dispute between Dieter Henrich and Jürgen Habermas over the very possibility of metaphysics. The debate was sparked by an essay by Habermas, published in *Merkur* in 1985—later incorporated into *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1988)—in which he accused several German thinkers, among them Henrich, of advocating an inadmissible return to metaphysics. Henrich replied in 1987 with his essay “*Was ist Metaphysik – was Moderne? Zwölf Thesen gegen Jürgen Habermas*”, in which he argued for a critical rehabilitation of metaphysics within the framework of modernity: opposing Habermas's claim that modern philosophy necessarily culminates in postmetaphysical thought, Henrich advances the possibility of a new metaphysics, faithful to the critical determination of Kant's philosophy and to its idealist and transcendental vocation.

In his article Henrich takes a stance against Habermas and his rejection of metaphysics as a legitimate modern philosophical task: as Habermas's opponent, Henrich emphasises the legitimacy of a modern, critical, and idealist metaphysics—one that acknowledges the limits of subjective knowledge within the context of modernity. This metaphysics, developed in line with the modern project, is embodied in Kant's philosophy. Henrich's article aims to challenge Habermas's position, which seeks to exclude all forms of metaphysics from the modern philosophical project, rejecting them as complete theories capable of offering an integral and comprehensive explanation of reality as a whole. For Habermas (1984), idealism, transcendentalism, and the philosophy of subjectivity are manifestations of the outdated mentalist paradigm (ranging from Descartes to Husserl) and, as such, should be rejected in favour of the concept of communicative rationality; this philosophical proposal, grounded in a linguistic and pragmatic turn, aims to establish a set of ethical and social norms that is independent of foundational metaphysical principles such as subjectivity or consciousness.

10 Such considerations regarding the conception of systematic philosophy arise from my study of the thought of Martial Gueroult, an important French philosopher—the founder of the discipline ‘Philosophy of the History of Philosophy’—, a figure regrettably neglected in the current philosophical landscape.

11 It would be pertinent to invoke Voltaire's *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne* (1756). The natural catastrophe of the Lisbon earthquake could be seen as the symbolic event that shattered the perfect metaphysical systems of the seventeenth century. Voltaire's critique of such metaphysical constructions—above all, the Leibnizian doctrine of the best of all possible worlds, but also the ‘metaphysical poetry’ of Alexander Pope, particularly as formulated in his *An Essay on Man*, with the well-known line ‘Whatever is, is right’—is deeply illustrative of the anti-metaphysical sentiment that permeated the eighteenth century.

In contrast, Henrich defends the validity of metaphysics as a critical philosophy, rejecting the linguistic turn in Habermas's thought as the sole solution for contemporary philosophy. To support this position, Henrich invokes Kantian philosophy as a legitimate form of metaphysical thought. Henrich's article, whose scope extends beyond the mere depreciation of Habermas's philosophical proposal¹², denounces the triumph of naturalism in contemporary philosophy, thereby making the need for a critical metaphysics even more urgent. For Henrich, naturalism, which is presented as the only theory capable of describing reality accurately and exhaustively, represents a new form of dogmatic metaphysics—a metaphysics of completeness. Henrich argues that the task of philosophy is to critically examine and challenge this degenerate form of dogmatic metaphysics.

How can Kant's metaphysical proposal be understood? Kant's critical philosophy becomes metaphysical precisely at the moment it becomes systematic. As Henrich (2003, pp. 46–61) contends, this transition occurs in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where Kant introduces the key or foundational concept—the *Grund*—of his philosophy: the concept of freedom, the keystone to the vault of reason, which grounds the organic and systematic construction of the totality of concepts and knowledge. According to Henrich, the discovery of the concept of freedom during the composition of the second *Critique* prompted Kant to develop a systematic metaphysics, constructed in light of this central concept. From this perspective, one might understand that, according to Henrich, the third *Critique* merely reinforces the practical and supersensible orientation of the Kantian system; aesthetics thus reaffirms the central role of moral philosophy and the concept of freedom within the framework of Kant's critical philosophy.

Unlike Henrich, I claim that Kant's critical philosophy is determined as systematic—and metaphysical—at the moment when Kant develops the conception of the aesthetic contemplation of nature, which is articulated with the philosophical inquiry into the affinities between the domain of the concept of nature and that of the concept of freedom. My focus will, therefore, be aesthetic rather than moral—consequently, my perspective on Kantian metaphysics will differ from Henrich's.

But what does 'metaphysics' mean according to Kant? In his (never completed) essay '*What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?*', Kant argues that the proper path for future metaphysics is the critical or transcendental one—following the collapse of both dogmatism and scepticism, the two erroneous extremes that transcendental philosophy seeks to correct (FM, AA 20: 264, 357)—, drawing upon a perspective previously articulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KrV, A761/B789; A855/B883)¹³. In the preface to the *Progress Essay*, Kant, invoking the mythological figure of Sisyphus—another symbolic reference following his earlier allusion to Hecuba in the *Critique of Pure Reason*—offers his definition of metaphysics:

The first and most necessary question is doubtless this: What does reason actually want with metaphysics? What purpose does it have in view in treating of the subject? For that end is the great, perhaps the greatest, indeed the one and only purpose which reason can ever look to in its speculation, since all men are more or less engaged in it, and since there is no understanding why, given the ever-apparent futility of their efforts in this field, it would still be in vain to tell them that they should at last give up rolling this stone of Sisyphus, were not the interest that reason takes in the subject the most ardent that can be entertained.

This ultimate purpose, to which the whole of metaphysics is directed, is easy to discover, and can in this respect found a definition of the subject: "It is the science of progressing by reason from knowledge of the sensible to that of the super-sensible." (FM, AA 20: 259-260, 353)

Following his reflection on the futile and frustrating—yet ineliminable—metaphysical endeavours of reason, symbolically evoked through the image of Sisyphus, Kant offers a clear definition of metaphysics as 'the science of progressing by reason from knowledge of the sensible to that of the supersensible' (FM, AA 20: 260, 353). It is this specifically Kantian conception of metaphysics that I seek to explore.

The Kantian conception of aesthetic disinterestedness allows for the development of an alternative philosophical attitude towards nature, one that leads to the elaboration of a systematic view—in contrast to the scientific or epistemological stance, which remains constrained by the limits of knowledge. Indeed, within the scope of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the transition from the domain of the sensible to that of the supersensible—invoking Kant's aforementioned definition of metaphysics—becomes profoundly problematic, resulting in invalid knowledge or, as Kant himself indicates, illusions and fictions of reason. Whereas epistemology is confined within its own boundaries, the disinterested aesthetic attitude towards nature seems to enable the passage from the sensible to the supersensible. Through the contemplation of nature, detached from cognitive aims, philosophy uncovers a mode of envisaging a relation between the domain of the concept of nature and the domain of the concept of freedom—one that is fundamentally shaped by the potential emergence of aesthetic feelings of pleasure. In this context, reason is inevitably drawn to these traces or signs, which seem to point towards a sense of reconciliation, or even the possibility of a totality, between those domains.

Aesthetic disinterestedness in relation to nature sets in motion a rational interest—an interest I designate as *metaphysical*—which may be described in terms of the systematic aspiration towards a reconciliation between the sensible and the supersensible. It is this tension between aesthetic disinterest and metaphysical

12 On the philosophical disputes between Henrich and Habermas, see Freundlieb 2003, pp. 125–165.

13 On the possibility of developing a history of philosophy in Kant—or, more precisely, a history of metaphysics according to Kant, see Reichl 2021.

interest that characterises Kant's position on beauty in the third *Critique*. Aesthetics thus presents itself as the mode of thought that enables the passage from the sensible to the supersensible, opening the way to metaphysics. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasise that the metaphysical interest outlined here is an interest of reason itself—of a reason that aspires to be internally systematic, seeking to reconcile its domains of concepts and its own internal divisions. As such, this metaphysical interest, proper to reason, should not lead us to posit a corresponding or parallel ontology. Metaphysics, according to Kant, is the discipline of transitions and bridges between the sensible and the supersensible; it does not, in any sense, constitute an opening towards an external ontology.

In this respect, I reject Henrich's readings that place the emphasis on the discovery of a fundamental ground within Kantian philosophy. The invocation of the idea of freedom as the foundational or key concept of Kant's thought—understood within a framework defined by a morally or practically oriented metaphysics—is a thesis I do not adopt. Henrich's position, which highlights the influence of Rousseau's moral philosophy on Kant—especially the fourth book of *Émile* and the *Profession of Faith of the Savoyard Vicar*—, supports the view that a 'moral image of the world' (Henrich 1992b, pp. 3-28) underpins Kant's metaphysics, thereby constituting a metaphysics with a fundamentally practical or ethical orientation. As Henrich maintains in his essay 'Freedom as the "Keystone" to the Vault of Reason':

But the justification of freedom that we can give in terms of the systematic structure of the philosophical system and of the architecture of our cognitive faculties is much more impressive. Such justification does not leave it simply as matter of choice as to whether we want to accept freedom or not. It suggests, instead, that we should accept freedom, because only if we accept it can we understand our *reason*—in the sense that covers all our cognitive activity—as a meaningful whole. And so we can get that feedback from the ontological framework to the foundation of the system that we do not get if we surrender the reality of the concept of freedom. In a similar way, we could show that freedom even explains the existence of metaphysics. We might say that freedom is an inevitable attempt of humans to arrive at the unconditional, just as does metaphysics. But metaphysical cannot at a stable result until its practical destination is found. (Henrich 2006, pp. 59-60)

This interpretation is closely tied to Henrich's claim that freedom serves as the foundational principle for all rational activity. Yet this ground, according to Henrich, is obscure, enigmatic, and ultimately mysterious, insofar as it cannot be demonstrated at the theoretical level. Indeed, it is this tone—marked by mystery—that Henrich adopts when addressing the question of the Kantian self in *Denken und Selbstsein. Vorlesungen über Subjektivität* (2007): Kant's philosophy of subjectivity is presented as enveloped in a fundamental obscurity. In *Denken und Selbstsein*, Henrich reclaims the Kantian conception of the *Ich denke* as a profoundly obscure and enigmatic centre of subjectivity, breaking with the post-Heideggerian verdict on the "death" of the subject. Against the Cartesian model of a self transparently present to itself, Henrich stresses that, for Kant, self-consciousness entails an ineradicable opacity: the 'I' knows with certainty that it exists, yet this certainty discloses nothing of what it is in itself. This self-relation, which Henrich terms 'epistemic self-relation', precedes reflection, conceptual determination, and objectification, and remains an originary, formal condition for all knowledge without itself being knowable. The *Ich denke* thus marks a point of convergence between certainty and uncertainty, finitude and transcendental determination—a limit-concept that resists the totalising claims of self-presence. For Henrich, the ontological depth of this enigma emerges most fully in the practical sphere, where the foundation of the self lies in the spontaneity of freedom. In this respect, Henrich's Kantianism is transfigured into an ontology, insofar as it treats freedom as the very ground (*Grund*) of thinking, knowing, and acting—an abyssal source that, while never transparent, sustains the possibility of reason itself.

This perspective ultimately reflects a tendency, on Henrich's part, to substantialise the problem of the Kantian self, despite Kant's explicit rejection of such an approach as articulated in the '*Paralogisms of Pure Reason*'. The opacity Henrich attributes to the Kantian *Ich denke* arises from a misreading that conflates transcendental conditions of subjectivity with unwarranted ontological claims—precisely the confusion Kant warns against in the '*Paralogisms*', especially concerning the issue of substance. Indeed, Henrich's emphasis on the foundational question of Kantian metaphysics—whether it concerns the concept of freedom or that of the self—leads him to an ontological perspective on this ground: that foundational concept is thereby rendered ontological and, equally problematic, conceived as an inscrutable and impenetrable metaphysical substratum.

In fact, Henrich's position—his defence of a form of metaphysics that ultimately tends towards the ontologisation of philosophical concepts—aligns closely with the kind of metaphysical enterprise that Habermas critiques in the context of contemporary thought. I would add that the metaphysics Henrich finds in Kant is fully compatible with the rejection articulated by Habermas, rather than offering a renewed conception of metaphysics within the framework of contemporary philosophy. In his recent book *Also a History of Philosophy* (2023-25), Habermas presents Kant's philosophy as a paradigmatic expression of postmetaphysical thinking: one might argue that it is Habermas's anti-metaphysical reading of Kant that enables an interpretation of Kant in continuity with the eighteenth century—the anti-metaphysical century *par excellence*—and that this is precisely why Habermas saw fit to pair Kant with Hume in this work, particularly in the third volume devoted to '*Rational Freedom*'. By contrast, Henrich's interpretation, which emphasises the metaphysical—and *ontological*—weight of Kant's fundamental concepts, appears to align Kant not with eighteenth-century philosophy, but rather with the philosophy of the nineteenth century, placing him in proximity to German Idealism.

In contrast to Henrich, I do not maintain that the systematic or metaphysical thrust of Kant's critical philosophy lies in the second *Critique* and in the idea of freedom as its foundation, but rather in the conception of aesthetic disinterest towards nature—a disinterest which, paradoxically, is closely linked to a rational or metaphysical interest: the interest in systematic reconciliation. As such, unlike Henrich, it is not my aim to identify a metaphysical foundation of Kantian thought, but to show that the role of metaphysics in Kant does not lead us towards an ontologisation of foundations, but rather towards a philosophical consideration of modes of transition and of bridges between domains seeking systematic reconciliation within reason itself. In Kant, metaphysics thus signifies passage and reconciliation—rather than an attempt to ontologise or substantialise foundations. This underscores the distinctly critical and idealist orientation of Kant's philosophy.

The tension between aesthetic disinterest and metaphysical interest expresses reason's capacity to relate the sensible and the supersensible, without thereby revealing or affirming any ontological depth external to reason itself. Through aesthetic disinterest, metaphysical interest emerges not as a postulation of being, but as an expression of reason's systematic aspiration to reconcile the domains of the concept of nature and the concept of freedom within its own unity. Hence, contrary to Henrich's position, aesthetics does not serve as a secondary supplement to moral philosophy, but rather as the expression of the systematic aspiration that underpins the architecture of Kant's critical philosophy.

I would argue that the tension between aesthetic disinterest and metaphysical interest—a tension that does not find resolution through the ontologisation of a foundation—exemplifies a tension inherent to reason itself. The non-resolution of this tension is consistent with the Kantian critical project and its modern inquiry into reason. In the same way, the problem of metaphysics, in the Kantian context, must be addressed in light of the internal structure of reason itself and its modes of thought, rather than through the ontologisation of domains or unifying foundations. Only thus can we remain faithful to the spirit of Kantian critical idealism, in which the sense of metaphysical totality unfolds within the architectonic structure of reason rather than in accordance with ontological unifying foundations.

Conclusion

Beauty is a promise of reconciliation: this idea, which paraphrases Stendhal's famous phrase « La beauté n'est que la promesse du bonheur »¹⁴, could be considered the central theme of this paper. The aspiration for reconciliation, in both its systematic and metaphysical dimensions, forms a crucial element of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, the final part of Kant's critical system. Indeed, in Kant, the tension between aesthetic disinterest and intellectual interest of reason expresses a promise of reconciliation between the two domains of the concepts of nature and freedom from a transcendental and idealist perspective—that is, a modern and critical viewpoint. However, this tension between aesthetic disinterest and intellectual—or metaphysical—interest must be understood in light of the internal structure of reason itself. The movement that unfolds within reason, outlining ways of passage between different modes of thought, illustrates the Kantian sense of metaphysics I have invoked in this essay: the passage from the sensible to the supersensible, rejecting the postulation of an ontology external to subjectivity itself. At this point, I reject Henrich's positions which, in my view, distort Kantian metaphysics into an ontology, thereby perniciously nullifying the critical dimension of Kant's transcendental philosophy.

The aesthetic concept of disinterestedness may be regarded as the first step towards the development of a modern metaphysics. In the context of modernity, aesthetics emerges as the philosophical discipline that enables the formulation of a new, modern, critical, and non-dogmatic metaphysics. This metaphysics is, fundamentally, a transcendental one—since it unfolds within the structure of reason itself, without postulating or affirming any external ontology corresponding to it. The connection between aesthetics and metaphysics constitutes the philosophical core of this paper, which has aimed to explore the concept of disinterestedness beyond a strictly aesthetic domain, considering its broader scope, particularly its metaphysical dimension. The modern division of philosophical disciplines might seem to undermine such an endeavour; nevertheless, the aspiration for reconciliation—carried out from a critical standpoint—is itself a demand of modernity. Yet this aspiration for reconciliation is not ontological in nature, but intrinsic to reason itself: it is reason that seeks to reconcile its own domains, concepts, and modes of thought, striving towards unity, organicity, and systematicity. As an expression of a promise of reconciliation, aesthetics may thus provide the starting point for a critical, transcendental metaphysics.

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14 See Stendhal, *De l'amour*, chapter 17 : « La beauté n'est que la promesse du bonheur. Le bonheur d'un Grec était différent du bonheur d'un Français de 1822. Voyez les yeux de la Vénus de Médicis et comparez-les aux yeux de la Madeleine de Pordenone (chez M. de Sommariva). »

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