

A Spinozist Alternative to Baumgarten's Introduction of Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. In his Aesthetica (1750), Alexander Baumgarten introduced the term “aesthetics” as the philosophical discipline concerned with the “science of sense cognition.” Yet rather than treating sensibility itself as the primary object of inquiry, Baumgarten’s project quickly centered on the “perfection” of sensibility—that is, beauty—and on its artistic realization, particularly in poetry. I describe this shift as a hijacking of aisthesis, wherein the tradition inaugurated by Baumgarten’s foundational gesture proved unable to engage corporeality, sensibility, imagination, and affectivity as such, and instead restricted aesthetics to judgments of taste and the philosophy of art. This paper argues that Spinoza offers a viable alternative understanding of these concepts, providing a framework for a redefinition of aesthetics. His account of body, imagination, and affect enables a deflationary and adjectival redefinition of the term, understood not as an evaluative domain but as a methodological orientation toward thinking through and about corporeality. I will outline Baumgarten’s formulation, present a Spinozist critique of his conception of aesthetics, and highlight key aspects of Spinoza’s metaphysics that ground the proposed redefinition of the term.

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1. Introduction

The term “aesthetics” is commonly understood to refer to the philosophical engagement with judgments of taste, especially those concerned with beauty and related evaluative categories. Such inquiry is directed toward both natural (i.e. not man-made) phenomena and, more centrally, the arts: painting, literature, music, and other artistic practices.¹ This paper proposes to interrogate the historical emergence of the term “aesthetics” as a designation for this domain, approaching the issue through the lens of Spinoza’s philosophy. My guiding hypothesis is that, just as Spinoza radically reconceives ethics, his account of the conceptual constellation of corporeality, imagination, and affectivity may allow us to redefine aesthetics. Rather than grounding it in value judgments about the artwork as the privileged object of aesthetic attention (e.g. regarding beauty, see Youpa 2010), I suggest a deflationary and adjectival understanding of “aesthetics” as a methodological orientation: a tendency of thinking through and about corporeality.

To pursue this redefinition, the broader project sketched here undertakes a quasi-genealogical examination of the dominant conception of aesthetics, beginning with Alexander Baumgarten’s introduction of the term in his *Aesthetica* (1750). This genealogy aims to reveal the metaphysical presuppositions that underwrite the modern alignment of sensibility with both taste and the philosophy of art. Within this frame, the *signifier* “aesthetics” is construed as a historical symptom of the early modern (and continuing) philosophical bewilderment towards corporeality as such, the body indeed functioning as the unthinkable otherness of thought (Nannini 2022, 104).

My problematic is therefore partially aligned with contributions such as everyday aesthetics (Saito 2008) and somaesthetics (Shusterman 1999), which seek to broaden the scope of aesthetics by respectively rectifying the exclusion of non-art, “everyday” objects, and of the “cultivation of the body” (Shusterman 1999, 301) from its remit. However, while these directions of research broaden the field of aesthetic inquiry, they also tend to preserve aesthetics

¹ Some examples: “Aesthetics may be defined narrowly as the theory of beauty, or more broadly as that together with the philosophy of art” (Slater n.d.); “[a]s the subject [of aesthetics] is now understood, it consists of two parts: the philosophy of art, and the philosophy of aesthetic experience and character of objects or phenomena that are not art” (Budd 1998, p. 59). But a glance at any aesthetics conference program or journal issue contents is, I think, convincing enough.

as a fundamentally normative and teleologically oriented discipline. By contrast, I argue that the initial conflation of sensibility with judgments of taste and with the philosophy of art is itself problematic, insofar as it marginalizes corporeality as such within aesthetic discourse. In this sense, the modern concept of aesthetics can be understood as a hijacking of sensation (*αἴσθησις*)² through its subordination to normativity and artistic discourse, beginning with Baumgarten. Spinoza, by contrast, offers a robust and systematic account of affectivity, corporeality, imagination, and sensibility that provides ample conceptual resources for a deflationary redefinition of aesthetics. Rather than merely expanding the range of aesthetic objects while remaining rooted in the problematics of traditional aesthetic theory, the aim here is a more radical rethinking of the term itself. Given the constraints of the present format, this paper will offer only a preliminary sketch: first, of Baumgarten's formulation; second, of a Spinozist critique of Baumgarten's conception of aesthetics; and finally, of key concepts essential to the construction of a Spinozist aesthetics.

2. Baumgarten's Introduction of Aesthetics

The initial naming of a discipline is as critical as any of its later theoretical developments.³ The modern concept of aesthetics is typically traced to Alexander Baumgarten's treatise that bore the same name, the *Aesthetica* of 1750.⁴ Aesthetics was conceived by Baumgarten as a theory of "sensible cognition" (i.e. of perceptions stemming from the external sense, c.f. Baumgarten's *Metaphysica* §534-556; Nuzzo 2006, p. 579-80), which was parallel and complementary to logic. A follower of Wolff, and thereby of Leibniz, Baumgarten sought to address what he regarded as a lacuna in Wolff's system: the absence of a systematic account of sense cognition. Accordingly, he attempts to construct a rationalist theory of sense cognition through the deductive method inherited by his predecessors—definitions followed by demonstrations and

² The term going back at least to Aristotle, cf. e.g. *On the soul*; or *Parva Naturalia* 436a f.

³ The emergence of aesthetics as a discrete philosophical discipline is closely linked to the sociopolitical developments of its era: urbanization, rise of the bourgeoisie, the development of the art market and the commodification of artworks, secularization, and related phenomena. While a full discussion of these factors is beyond the scope of this paper, they are essential to any thorough account of the birth and consolidation of aesthetics. Rancière offers an insightful observation regarding the emergence of the modern regime of the arts as a largely distinct field of philosophical analysis, and the concomitant modern conception of aesthetic: "The conditions of this emergence of art cannot be deduced from a general concept of art or beauty founded on a global theory of man or the world, of the subject or being. Such concepts themselves depend upon a transformation of the forms of sensible experience, of ways of perceiving and being affected" (Rancière 2013, ix).

⁴ Having first used it in his 1735 dissertation *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (*Philosophical considerations of some matters pertaining to the poem*). For an excellent summary exposition of Baumgarten's aesthetics, cf. Gregor 1983.

explications—even though the style of his work remains deeply marked by the Scholastic style of exposition. In elevating sensory cognition to a legitimate domain of epistemological inquiry, Baumgarten can be seen as critiquing the rationalist tradition’s prior neglect of sensible perception (Nuzzo 2006, p. 579). Yet in the *Aesthetica*, the investigation of sensibility as such is almost immediately redirected toward its “perfection,” namely beauty, and toward its artistic realization, especially in poetry, the preeminent art form in eighteenth-century philosophy.⁵

The *Aesthetica* is divided in short paragraphs, and in the first one Baumgarten provides his well-known succinct definition of aesthetics: “Aesthetics is the science of sense cognition” (§1).⁶ This form of cognition—like Spinoza’s imagination—⁷constitutes the lowest degree of knowledge; Baumgarten therefore describes aesthetics, in a parenthetical clarification, as lower epistemology (*gnoseologia inferior*). Although it concerns sensible cognition, aesthetics is nonetheless a *scientia*, that is, an undertaking aimed at certain knowledge. This science appears paradoxical within a rationalist context, since the senses are precisely what resists distinct cognition. How, then, can they become the object of a science? This aspiration to scientific treatment is a defining feature of Baumgarten’s new discipline. A full account would require situating his project in relation to both the rationalist tradition and competing eighteenth-century theories of taste and the arts, which cannot be undertaken here.⁸ It should be noted, however, that Baumgarten introduces an important and novel distinction between the clear and distinct discourse of logic, on the one hand, and aesthetic discourse, on the other. The latter, he argues, is characterized by ideas that are confused (i.e. not distinct) but nevertheless clear to varying degrees. Baumgarten terms this *extensive clarity*, in contrast to the intensive clarity characteristic of intellectual ideas (cf. *Metaphysica* §531). He treats this notion of extensive clarity as a criterion for artistic evaluation: ideas presented in, for example, a poem should be as clear

⁵ As already mentioned, his 1735 dissertation was devoted to the subject. Therein, Baumgarten defines the poem as a “perfect sensate discourse”, i.e. a perfect discourse involving sensate representations, that is representations received through the lower part of the cognitive faculty (*Meditationes philosophicae*, §3, 9; cf. Baumgarten’s claim about the preeminent place of poetry vis-à-vis painting, §40).

⁶ The full definition reads “Aesthetica (theoria liberalium artium, gnoseologia inferior, ars pulchre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis) est scientia cognitionis sensitivae.”

⁷ According to Spinoza, imagination is the first kind of knowledge (E2p40s2) and the only source of error (E2p41). The other two kinds of knowledge are reason and intuition. Of course, this typology resonates with the rationalist tradition to which both authors belong. For Baumgarten’s own theory of the imagination, cf. *Metaphysica* §557-571. I’m referring to the *Ethics* by “E,” utilizing the following system: the first number denotes the part of the work, the second number (p^x) denotes the proposition; furthermore, d=demonstration, s=scholium, cor=corollary, etc.). Thus, E2p40s2 = the second scholium to the 40th proposition of the second part of the *Ethics*. When necessary, I also refer to the Gebhardt edition by G, followed by Latin numeral for the volume and Arabic for the page.

⁸ For a standard account, cf. Cassirer 2009, p. 275-360.

and as rich as possible. Aesthetic truth, ideas, and discourse are therefore clear but confused; they cannot be distinct (Åhlberg 2003, p. 146). Thus, for Baumgarten, extensive clarity is proportional to poeticality: poetic clarity is the ability to fuse—indeed to *confuse*—elements into a coherent and satisfying whole (Åhlberg 2003, p. 147; cf. also Gregor 1983, p. 364). So, even though he inherits Leibniz’s typology of ideas,⁹ Baumgarten appears critical of his intellectualism, both in general and in its implications for art.¹⁰

After defining aesthetics, Baumgarten proceeds to specify its “special uses,” i.e. philology, hermeneutics, rhetoric, poetry, music, etc. (§4). These aims fall under his broader project of developing a method for producing what he calls “aestheticians”: individuals who “think beautifully.” Crucially, Baumgarten also seeks to provide practical exercises for cultivating such beautiful thinking. At the same time, as he emphasizes in the opening paragraphs, the philosopher needs to keep in mind that he is “a man among men” (§6) and that rational and sensible cognition are complementary (§7-8). Soon thereafter, however, in the first proposition of the main body of the work (following the introductory thirteen paragraphs), Baumgarten proceeds to specify the end of aesthetics: “the end of aesthetics is the perfection of sense cognition as such. This, however, is beauty” (§14). Thus, at the very dawn of aesthetics as a discipline, sense cognition is inextricably linked to its end in beauty—here defined as its perfection. In this way, Baumgarten’s conception already frames aesthetics as a teleological and value-based theory of beauty understood as perfected sensible cognition. It therefore seems reasonable to ask where this perfection is most fully realized; for Baumgarten, the paradigmatic object is the work of art. His innovation thus lies in articulating a systematic relation between three domains that were previously treated as largely autonomous: sensibility, art, and beauty (Pranchère 1988, p. 8). Yet this same gesture indeed narrowed the scope of subsequent aesthetic theory, reducing it “from the vast field of sensory cognition to the narrow compass of beauty and fine art” (Shusterman 1999, 301).

⁹ Cf. the “Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas” (1684), in Leibniz 1989, p. 23-27.

¹⁰ “And further, even the pleasures of the senses reduce to intellectual pleasures known confusedly.

Music charms us, even though its beauty consists only in the harmonies of numbers and in a calculation that we are not aware of, but which the soul nevertheless carries out, a calculation concerning the beats or vibrations of sounding bodies, which are encountered at certain intervals. The pleasures that sight finds in proportions are of the same nature, and those caused by the other senses amount to something similar, even though we might not be able to explain it so distinctly” (“Principles of Nature and Grace,” in Leibniz 1989, p. 212).

Baumgarten's aesthetics can then be summarized as the inquiry into sense perception, aimed at perfecting perceptual, sensory cognition as such—a goal he considers worth developing for its own sake. Although he acknowledges the superiority of the intellect by designating aesthetics as “inferior gnoseology,” he nevertheless stresses that it is complementary to rational (or intellectual) and sensory knowledge. This complementary relationship rests on the richness of sensible cognition: given the finitude of human cognitive existence, confusion is not merely the privation of distinctness but also a form of fusion, the inseparability of the marks and notes delivered by the senses. “Reason,” Baumgarten proclaims, “is more exact than the senses, but it is also poorer” (*Aesthetica*, §560). Yet his attempt to rehabilitate sensibility is constrained by his decision to bind aesthetics, beauty, and art together. What is important for the present inquiry is that a reevaluation of the sensible—of corporeality and affectivity—had already been performed by Spinoza, and was coupled with a relative *devaluation* of ideality, insofar as both fall under the order of necessity; hence the famous Spinozist challenge: *who knows what the Body can do* (E3p2s)?

It is, of course, impossible to do justice to Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* in the present context. His systematic treatment does indeed mark the transition from traditional poetics to the broader enterprise of modern aesthetics (Pranchère 1988, p. 9). Several of his contributions have proved indispensable: a) the systematic character of his aesthetic project, later methodologically appropriated by Kant, Hegel, and others; b) his insistence on the richness of the senses as compared to reason; c) the conceptualization of intensive and extensive clarity—extending Leibniz's typology of clear, distinct and adequate ideas—which underwrites this claim of sensory richness; d) his break with the mainstream rationalist tradition in affirming the perfection of sensory knowledge as a philosophically legitimate goal; and e) his doctrine of the complementary nature of modes of cognition, even while aesthetics remains the lower sphere of epistemology. His project is also wider in scope than many contemporary understandings of aesthetics, encompassing a practical preoccupation with philosophy as a way of life (Shusterman 1999, 299). And, in contrast to the subsequent focus on the aesthetic object that followed his introduction of the term, his relative attention to perception, sensation, and sensory cognition (Kaiser 2013, p. 10) is crucial for understanding how *aisthesis* and *aesthetics* eventually diverged. Nonetheless, the initial puzzle remains: why must a “science of sense cognition” revolve around judgments on beauty; why should the arts serve as the paradigmatic realizations of beauty understood as the perfection of sensible knowledge; and why, within the arts, is poetry accorded pride of place?

3. Towards a Spinozist Aesthetics

In the wake of Baumgarten's introduction of the term aesthetics to designate the science of sense perception as a "general theory of the beauty of thoughts" (*Aesthetica* §6), both Kant and Hegel voiced reservations. In a footnote in the "Transcendental aesthetic," Kant observes:

The Germans are the only ones who now employ the word "aesthetics" to designate that which others call the critique of taste. [...] For the putative rules or criteria are merely empirical as far as their sources are concerned, and can therefore never serve as *a priori* rules according to which our judgment of taste must be directed (Kant CPR A21).

Similarly, Hegel finds the term unsuitable for the role accorded it by Baumgarten:

These lectures are devoted to Aesthetics. Their topic is the spacious realm of the beautiful; more precisely, their province is art, or, rather, fine art.

For this topic, it is true, the word *Aesthetics*, taken literally, is not wholly satisfactory, since "Aesthetics" means, more precisely, the science of sensation, of feeling (Hegel 1988, p. 1).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine fully the reasoning behind either Kant's rejection of the possibility of a science of judgments of taste, or the tension between Hegel's understanding of the "literal meaning of aesthetics" and Baumgarten's appropriation of the term for the goals outlined above. My aim, rather, is to outline how Spinoza's thought can illuminate this apparent discrepancy.

How, then, might Spinoza prove to be useful in this context? I must stress that my goal is not to develop a philosophy of art from Spinoza¹¹ or to reconstruct his theory of beauty. As noted, Spinoza did not formulate an aesthetic theory in the modern sense, and given that Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* postdates Spinoza's death by seventy-three years, situating him directly within the history of modern aesthetics would be anachronistic. Instead, my concern is to employ his system as a critical lens for interrogating the hijacking of sensation by mainstream aesthetics, and the consequent confinement of sensibility to the epistemological pursuit of

¹¹ This is not to say that his system is not useful for a philosophy and/or an aesthetics of art; cf. indicatively Rawes 2012; Thomas 2018; Uhlmann 2011. For an overview of recent scholarship on Spinoza and aesthetics, cf. Romagni 2021.

beauty, as eminently exemplified in works of art. Moreover, Spinoza's "subjectivity without a subject" (Williams 2012) proves indispensable here: rather than aspiring to the perfection of the Baumgartian "aesthetician," a Spinozist redefinition of aesthetics points beyond the ends of human subjectivities to encompass the affective relations between all individuals (Spinoza's term for all complex bodies, cf. his digression into physics after E2p13s). For, as Spinoza notes, "all beings are, albeit to different degrees, animate" (E2p13s) and thus partake in aesthetic—that is, affective—relations. Before detailing the aspects of Spinoza's system most pertinent to this project, I will briefly outline a Spinozist critique of Baumgartian aesthetics.

3.1. A Spinozist Critique of Baumgarten's Introduction of Aesthetics

As discussed above, Baumgarten's science of sense cognition is organized around beauty as its perfection. Spinoza, however, relativizes the notions of beauty and ugliness in the appendix of the first part of the *Ethics*. He writes that numerous "prejudices have arisen concerning [...] beauty and ugliness, and other things of this kind," and men "had to form these notions, by which they explained natural things: good, evil, order, confusion, warm, cold, beauty, ugliness" (G II 78). He then clarifies that "if the motion the nerves receive from objects presented through the eyes is conducive to health, the objects by which it is caused are called beautiful; those which cause a contrary motion are called ugly" (G II 82). Crucially, such notions are "nothing but modes of imagining, by which the imagination is variously affected; and yet the ignorant consider them the chief attributes of things, because, as we have already said, they believe all things have been made for their sake, and call the nature of a thing [beautiful or ugly], as they are affected by it" (G II 82). In short, "although human bodies agree in many things, they still differ in very many. And for that reason, what seems good to one, seems bad to another; what seems ordered to one, seems confused to another; what seems pleasing to one, seems displeasing to another, and so on" (G II 82-83). If values are thus purely relational and do not correspond to intrinsic properties of objects, then aesthetics in the conventional sense can only be understood as a subjective enterprise depending on the singular imaginative and affective encounters of each individual, its scope reduced to a kind of psychological casuistry (Rice 1996, p. 478).

As these passages suggest, Spinoza's relativization of value concepts is part of his general critique of first-order normativity; "perfection," Baumgarten's technical term for beauty as the end of sensible cognition, also falls under this critique.¹² Spinoza develops this point in the preface to the fourth part of the *Ethics*, which begins with an argument of judgments of perfection. This argument doubles as a genetic account of abstract universals—"models" of man-made things—that individuals construct and then use for comparison and ranking. Objects judged to correspond more closely to such models are deemed more perfect, and these comparative judgments are subsequently projected onto natural objects and nature itself, which are thereby anthropomorphized and endowed with volitional and teleological features. Beauty and perfection are therefore, for Spinoza, abstract universal terms formed subjectively through evaluative judgments that depend entirely on an individual's preconceived notions.¹³ Although such concepts may function as convenient placeholders for describing certain states, they cannot account for their causes; they therefore yield only inadequate imaginary ideas and cannot figure in a genuinely descriptive, explanatory account.

This critique rests on what Spinoza identifies as the fundamental prejudice of teleology,¹⁴ which he locates within imaginative cognition. First, he argues, "men think themselves free, because they are conscious of their volitions and their appetite, and do not think, even in their dreams, of the causes by which they are disposed to wanting and willing, because they are ignorant of [those causes]." Second, "It follows [...] that men act always on account of an end, viz. on account of their advantage, which they want. Hence, they seek to know only the final causes of what has been done, and when they have heard them, they are satisfied, because they have no reason to doubt further." This inclination leads them to attribute ends to God—or to the gods—and to natural things, in a fundamentally anthropomorphic inversion of reality. Such a "doctrine concerning the end turns nature completely upside down" (G II 80), treating effects as if they were causes. In this sense, Baumgarten's teleological constitution of aesthetics can be anachronistically regarded as problematic from the outset, since its unquestioned appeal to teleological concepts relies on precisely this fallacious mode of explanation. Spinoza's critique

¹² Baumgarten actually defines the faculty of judgment itself as coextensive with the perception of perfection or imperfection in things (*Metaphysica* §606).

¹³ This usage clashes with the implicit definition of perfection provided in E2d6: "by reality and perfection I understand the same thing." Perfection in this sense is a genuine metaphysical property that can be rationally conceived. I cannot address here the issue of the two, seemingly contradictory senses of perfection in the *Ethics*.

¹⁴ Montag (2020, p. 415) notes the double meaning of *prejudicium*, not only as a preconception, but also in the sense of "a legal precedent, a decision that determines subsequent decisions."

therefore undermines any attempt to ground aesthetics in a correlation between a subjective feeling of beauty and an object's supposed formal purposiveness (Montag 2020, 416).¹⁵

Given the foregoing, beauty and perfection cannot function as adequate conceptual foundations for aesthetics as the “science of sense cognition,” since these notions are themselves products of the imagination, rather than components of its philosophical analysis. What is needed instead—and what Spinoza provides—is a descriptive account of sense cognition that does not in itself entail any normative dimension. I will now provide a rough outline of the basic elements of such a Spinozist aesthetics.

3.2. Outline of a Spinozist Aesthetics

In congruence with the foregoing analysis, Tom Sparrow has argued that if we understand aesthetics in an expanded sense—one that prioritizes the ubiquitous materiality of affective relations rather than the narrow conception of a philosophy of art and beauty introduced by Baumgarten—then Spinoza has much to offer (Sparrow 2011, p. 74). Sparrow identifies three main doctrines of Spinoza's system that can help redefine aesthetics beyond art and beauty: (1) Spinoza's monistic ontology, which treats bodies as modes of the unique substance—God or Nature—rather than as independent substances or autonomous subjectivities; (2) the identification of freedom with the knowledge of the necessary determinations pervading all of nature, including human beings; and (3) Spinoza's radical downplaying of “consciousness, intentionality, and interiority,” in favor of conceiving individuals as embedded in their materiality (Sparrow 2011, p. 67). Although Sparrow is certainly right to identify these features as crucial for a redefinition of aesthetics, a systematic development of this project very much remains a desideratum. Given the constraints of the present paper, I will only outline several central elements that require further elaboration.

i. Monism. Spinoza's monism is expressed in the doctrine of the existence of a unique substance (E1p10 & E1p14), namely God (E1d3 & E1d6), identified with nature (Deus sive Natura). All things depend on this substance for their existence and conception (E1p15) as well

¹⁵ Regarding the sublime, Montag claims that its rejection by Hegel has the latter as “regarding Spinoza as having refuted Kant in advance” (417).

as for their essence (E1p25); these finite things¹⁶ he calls “modes” (E1d5). Monism thus entails a system of immanent causal relations (E1p18), a legacy that subsequent philosophical tradition inherited from Spinozism, and that has been expanded into broader notions of immanence, as in the work of Gilles Deleuze. Monism and immanence provide the metaphysical groundwork for a Spinozist aesthetics, insofar as they shift attention away from the subjectivity/objectivity axis toward a plane of univocal relationality among modes.

ii. Extension as an attribute of God. A central feature of Spinoza’s system is the inclusion of extension as an attribute of God (E2p2; cf. E1p15s), which comes as a necessary consequence of his monist metaphysics. By elevating extension to the status of divine attribute, Spinoza grants materiality and corporeality a significance historically denied them. Extension and thought are the only attributes accessible to human beings, and this structure is mirrored at the level of modes: all modes of extension—in what concerns us here, bodies (E2p1)—including human individuals, correspond to ideas (E2p7), and are therefore “to different degrees, animate” (E2p13s). A Spinozist aesthetics is thus both non-subject-centred and, at the same time, cosmic in scope. Spinoza’s emphasis on corporeality is well captured by the famous passage in E3p2s: “of course, no one has yet determined what the Body can do, i.e., experience has not yet taught anyone what the Body can do from the laws of nature alone, insofar as nature is only considered to be corporeal, and what the body can do only if it is determined by the Mind.” Lastly, although each body has a corresponding idea, bodies and ideas differ in their properties; most importantly, there is no perceivable “universal” body—bodies are always apprehended as singular, as opposed to the imaginary formation of abstract universal ideas. This constitutive singularity is essential for a Spinozist aesthetics.

iii. The inherent relationality of modes. Because the modal¹⁷ expressions of the attributes of thought and extension are not “ontologically” distinct either from God or from each other, every object examined through a Spinozist framework is already embedded in a nexus of relations and interdependencies (following from E1p28). This doctrine informs Spinoza’s accounts of individuality and individuation, of relationality and relational autonomy, and of transindividuality, all grounded in his theory of corporeality in the physical digression after E2p13s. As Sparrow notes, “for Spinoza, a body is never a pure individual. It is always a

¹⁶ There also exist infinite modes (E1p21-23), but this is not the proper place to go into the details of Spinoza’s understanding of mode in general.

¹⁷ Modal in the sense of pertaining to modes, i.e. to *natura naturata*, and not in the general philosophical sense of modal relations of necessity, contingency, etc.

composite, an aggregate or ecology of bodies working together as an individual” (Sparrow 2011, p. 68). This inherent relationality is vital for a descriptive aesthetics concerned with what it means to be a body among bodies.

iv. The critique of anthropomorphism and the non-substantial nature of modes.

Closely linked to the foregoing doctrines is Spinoza’s critique of anthropomorphic conceptions of God, nature, and agency. Human beings share the same ontological plane as all other modes, and affective exchange—understood as the totality of *nexūs* of relations among conative powers—is ubiquitous. Spinoza offers a far-reaching critique of anthropomorphism that avoids collapsing into a fully flattened ontology (E1app, cf. section 3.1 here). He insists that “the being of substance does not pertain to the essence of man” (E2p10); instead, “the essence of man is constituted by certain modifications of God’s attributes” (E2p10c). This processual understanding of human beings is generalizable to all modes and underscores the non-substantial, dynamic character of individuality.

v. The dynamics of Spinoza’s theory of affectivity. For Spinoza, all modes of extension occupy positions on spectra—degrees of animatedness (E2p13s), corporeal complexity (E2p13sL7s & E2p13sP1), affective capacity (E2p13sP3 & E2p13sP6), commonality of properties (E2p39cor & E4p45s) and perceptual power of their corresponding ideas (E2p14). These spectra reflect each mode’s essential constitution, defined by its particular proportion of motion and rest that constitutes its form. More complex beings possess greater interactional capacities and share more properties with other modes than less complex ones, which, among other consequences, yields greater power. This is the basis of Spinoza’s theory of interhuman affective relations—but it is generalizable to affective relations among all modes.

vi. The relativity and singularity of affective states. Spinoza’s account of affective reality in the third part of the *Ethics* is also central to a Spinozist aesthetics. One striking feature is his insistence on the relativity and singularity of affective states. All affects, strictly speaking, are singular to their bearer (E3p57), nominal (E3p56), and unrepeatable (E3p51) with respect to their “subject,” their “object,” and their “context.” This strong nominalism effectively avoids the pitfalls of an aesthetics grounded in normative generalizations, such as Baumgarten’s notion of “beautiful thinking.”

vii. Spinoza's theory of imagination. Imagination, the first of three “kinds of knowledge” (E2p40s2), lies at the intersection of Spinoza's theories of corporeality, knowledge and affectivity, and thus forms the conceptual core of a Spinozist redefinition of aesthetics. Imagination is a general term¹⁸ encompassing the totality of ideas of bodily affections that present external things as present to us.¹⁹ These affections are called images, and their ideas are called imaginations. This is derived from E2p17: “If the human Body is affected with a mode that involves the nature of an external body, the human Mind will regard the same external body as actually existing, or as present to it, until the Body is affected by an affect that excludes the existence or presence of that body.” Imagination is a positive, productive power, but its ideas are always at least partially confused and must be supplemented by more adequate ideas. It also opens onto numerous other aspects of Spinoza's philosophy, including his theories of language and his political philosophy.

4. Conclusions

Aesthetics has always been a contested concept, though its foundational presuppositions have rarely been interrogated. Why has a term that literally denotes the philosophical investigation of sensibility—*aisthesis*—been historically narrowed to the philosophy of beauty and the arts? What became of sensibility proper—and its attendant constellation of imagination, corporeality and affectivity—once the idealist tradition restricted the meaning of aesthetics to fine art, beauty and sublimity? Why should beauty have a greater claim than any other aesthetic quality to serve as the proper object of a theory of sensibility? And, more fundamentally, why should *any* aesthetic property, in the current sense of the term, determine the field's content in the first place? If this is what “aesthetics” has come to mean, what term should we use for a philosophical discipline concerned with affective relations as such: their structures and dynamics, their metaphysical backdrop and epistemological repercussions, the types of objects they involve, and so on? This is not to suggest that all qualities, objects, and relations have equal significance, but rather that a founding arbitrariness underlies our inherited understanding of aesthetics. We

¹⁸ Imagination is not a faculty, since Spinoza wholesale rejects the concept of faculty as an abstract universal; cf. E2p48s: “these and similar faculties are either complete fictions *or* nothing but Metaphysical beings, or universal, which we are used to forming from particulars.”

¹⁹ “Next, to retain the customary words, the affections of the human Body whose ideas present external bodies as present to us, we shall call images of things, even if they do not reproduce the external figures of things. And when the Mind regards bodies in this way, we shall say that it imagines” (E2p17s).

must therefore—borrowing a turn of phrase from a work deeply aligned with the present project—take seriously the equal claim of all activities, processes, and entities that participate in affective and/or aesthetic relations to be included under the very signifier that ought to designate the branch of philosophy that studies them (Berleant 1992, 9).

Spinoza's theories of affectivity and imagination have already been taken up across a wide range of disciplines.²⁰ What unites these diverse applications is a sustained effort to *think through and about corporeality*, and their very possibility underscores the need for a Spinozist aesthetics. Consider an example from an ardent admirer of Spinoza —though not, strictly speaking, a Spinoza scholar. John Berger writes: “When the camera reproduces a painting, it destroys the uniqueness of its image. As a result its meaning changes. Or, more exactly, its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings.” (Berger 1977, p. 19). This is a quintessentially aesthetic problem, but not because it concerns fine art, judgments of beauty, or the ontology of artworks in the narrow sense. Rather, it is aesthetic because it exposes the shifting structures of feeling and differentiated distribution of the sensible (to use Rancière's expression) that emerge when we take the body seriously. Thinkers like Berleant and Berger have long advocated an aesthetics reaffirming the materiality of sensation, the ubiquity of sense, the priority of singular encounters over universal criteria, and the material dimensions of cultural, semiotic, environmental and technological entities—all while foregrounding relations among bodies-as-agents rather than the operations of free willing, intentional human subjectivities. Spinoza provides a powerful framework for articulating such an aesthetics and for overcoming the dominant idealist aesthetic tradition's (c.f. Gordon 2017) longstanding neglect of its material basis.

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²⁰ Indicatively: Antonio Damasio's work in neuroscience; Arne Naess' deep ecology and Jane Bennett's materialist ecology; Toni Negri & Michael Hardt, Étienne Balibar and Frédéric Lordon at the interface of political philosophy and political economy; Genevieve Lloyd, Moira Gatens and Hasana Sharp in (affective) feminism; Chiara Bottici and Martin Saar in the politics of social ontology.

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