

# How Immanuel Kant Undercut Classical Culture and Led to Postmodernism

## *Interview with Stephen Hicks*

Jan-Ove Tuv with Stephen R.C. Hicks

Recorded in Stavern, Norway, May 14, 2023

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaevezX2uo>

Unedited transcript

**Keywords:** Kant, art, Enlightenment, Counter-Enlightenment, reason, beauty, Sublime, subjective, *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Judgment*, representationalism, abstraction, Greenburg, Duchamp, Pollock, Van Gogh, Seurat, Aristotle

## ***Introduction***

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 00:00

Welcome to the Cave of Apelles. I would like to thank our top sponsors Børge Mo, Matthias Proy, Fergus Ryan and Diego for making this show possible.

Blissfully unaware, the art world loyally parrots the 18th-century philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

Tonight's conversation will deal with his aesthetics, but also show the negative impact of his metaphysics and epistemology on classically minded people. If we cannot know reality, then painting it becomes naive. If nothing is objective, then we cannot trust craft rules. And if nothing is universal, then we become miserably estranged from the mythic perspective.

My guest is a professor of philosophy, host of the Open College podcast, and the author of *Explaining Postmodernism*. Stephen Hicks, I'm glad to have you on the show.

**Stephen Hicks**

Thanks for the invitation.

**Jan-Ove Tuv**

*Explaining Postmodernism* was first published in 2004. Should we start from there before we dive into the main character of the evening? He's the main character of the book too, right?

## ***Is Kant's Philosophy Relevant to Postmodernism?***

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes. My claim is that, as a matter of intellectual history, postmodernism has its roots in two figures, and one of them certainly is Immanuel Kant.

Postmodernism is a sprawling intellectual movement, but it's now saturating many parts of contemporary culture as well. But that is a phenomenon of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and cultural and intellectual movements move slowly. In this case, when you trace the most important strategic moves, you end up back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and unsexy issues in metaphysics and epistemology. They're unsexy but absolutely fundamental for philosophy and for a philosophically charged enterprise like art, art at its highest. Kant is the most important philosopher to grapple with in the last two-and-a-half centuries.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 02:37

So what do you outline in your book—could you give us some bullet points or a synopsis?

## ***The Enlightenment of the 1700s***

**Stephen Hicks**

In the 18th century we are at the height of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is an extraordinarily optimistic intellectual framework. After centuries and millennia of ignorance, and poverty, and superstition, we human beings have figured out something fundamental. We can *observe* the world, we can use our powerful minds *rationally* to figure out the way the world works. We need not be bound to superstitions and authorities who came to power, in many cases, prior to human beings being rational and having any glimmer of science and naturalism.

We also have a stronger sense of what individuals can do in their own lives, if they become educated, literate, know something about mathematics. They can take charge of their own intellectual lives, their own religious lives. Many of them can become amazing engineers and scientists. And we can extend this not only to males, who first fought for it, but to males of all economic classes, and also to women, and then also to people whom we looked down on. For all of human history and basically everywhere, slavery was normalized. Instead, the Enlightenment said, even slaves should be freed and can become self-governing rational individuals.

So the Enlightenment idea is that we can learn the world, that we can be rational, that we can extend the power of individuals to govern their own lives economically, religiously, scientifically, technologically. We should then be able to live longer, solve many of the disease problems that have plagued human

beings, live more comfortably, live more adventurously, and more peacefully with each other. All of that is the Enlightenment project. To some significant extent we still are living that Enlightenment project.

## ***The Counter-Enlightenment***

But many intellectuals were unhappy with these modern developments. (I'm using *modernism* in a philosophical and historical sense—not art-historical sense—at this point; we're going back to four or five centuries of intellectual and cultural development.) The unhappy saw that the old gods and the old traditions were being destroyed or being destroyed too quickly, and they thought that without those as an underpinning the modern world will eventually—after a short burst of apparent creativity and progress—regress to some sort of new barbarism.

So there was the beginnings of a Counter-Enlightenment and an anti-Modernism that said: We need to go back to some earlier belief. Traditionalism and some forms of conservatism reasserted themselves in the face of this powerful Enlightenment movement.

There were others, though, who said we cannot go back. The cat is out of the bag, so to speak, or the genie is out of the bottle, to change metaphors. So, we need to go forward but in a non-Enlightenment direction. The Enlightenment, they believed, has been oversold: it's too optimistic, or it is fatally flawed in its fundamental assumptions about reason and our capacities as rational agents to come to understand the world.

New forms of skepticism came to prominence in the latter part of the 1800s. David Hume is a famous name here. He is the one who famously, according to Kant, woke him from his “dogmatic slumber,” in his language. Kant had complacently bought into some of the Enlightenment mythos, and then Kant realized that the skeptical challenge was much deeper and needed to be faced. So he is offered some very sophisticated and innovative arguments about human cognition and its capacity to know the world that also undercut the aspirations of the Enlightenment. So the story begins, according to my book, in the late 1700s, with a turn away from Enlightenment, objectivity, and Enlightenment optimism.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 07:34

And in the midst of that you have the reaction.

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes. The technical historical term is Counter-Enlightenment, which is itself a broad movement of people who are opposed to the Enlightenment for various reasons. The Counter-Enlightenment became increasingly more powerful in its arguments, essentially, in its negative arguments, undermining the Enlightenment

philosophically, on through the 1800s—these things take a long time, because the issues are complicated—on into the 1900s, until by the time we get to the middle part of the 20th centuries. Then a very well educated, well read, set of new intellectuals come to believe that the Enlightenment has been entirely discredited and so we have to abandon the Enlightenment and we have to abandon the modern project of transforming our cultural institutions based on the Enlightenment. They believe modernity has reached the end of its course, it has been a failure, so we need to become *post*-modern. And that's where that label comes from, self-consciously.

## ***Post-Modernism and the Counter-Enlightenment***

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 08:53

I see. Post-modernism grows organically—and directly—out of the Counter-Enlightenment. To get it visually clear, what are the main bullet points for Counter-Enlightenment?

**Stephen Hicks**

Well, the Enlightenment is broad: it says something about the nature of reality. Reality is the natural world and the physical world, first and foremost. We might have arguments that there also is a religious dimension or a transcendent dimension. But if we're going to get there, we're not going to get there through simple-minded faith or by seeking mystical insights. We're going to adopt some sort of rational scientific method and argue for the existence of a god.

So the Enlightenment starts epistemologically with nature, a physicalist of understanding of the world, which might be underpinned by a God-like figure, but the kind of godlike figure that we can argue for and provide evidence for, because we're using scientific method—a deistic God, a science-friendly God, who perhaps created the universe and formulated the natural laws that the world operates in accordance with, the cause and effect that science is discovering. But if we can't prove it, then we're not going to believe in that kind of God.

The Enlightenment also is individualistic. It's individuals who have rationality, the capacity to observe the world and use their minds to become self-governing moral agents as well as cognizing. On the issue of freedom, that people need to think for themselves, they need to be free to experiment in their lives, just as scientists do, and to do to earn the fruits of their experiments if they're successful, but also to bear the costs.

So: nature, individual freedom, individual moral dignity, and the power of developing one's rational capacity—all of those themes.

The *Counter*-Enlightenment then is an assault on all of those: Human beings are not rational. They are not fundamentally individual. They do not have agency

and autonomy, and any sort of dignity or moral capacity they have is non-individualistic, more collectivized or from some transcendent source.

By the time we intellectual work out all of those things, the Counter-Enlightenment is a thorough skepticism about the power of human reason, a dissolving of the individual into impersonal forces—sometimes impersonal natural forces but more often impersonal, collective-social forces. We stop believing in individuals, we stop believing in agency, and we stop believing this progressive idea that we can figure out the world and improve our lives individually and socially. It gets replaced by a cynicism about human relationships, and an overriding pessimism about the human condition. That has been created by the mid-20th century.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 12:34

Could it be described as a kind of indifference when it comes to living in the actual physical world?

**Stephen Hicks**

It can be an indifference, but it will be a cultivated indifference because almost all of the people who become postmodern—this starts to become biographical about them—but they are born into the modern world. And as moderns there is an inescapable sense of progressivism, right? That we are figuring out more and more about the world scientifically, that technologically we are developing tools that enhance the human condition, that we've been very successful at extending freedoms and liberties to all human beings, first, all males and then all females, and then members of other religious groups with religious tolerance and eliminating slavery in this century. So that progress is now baked into modern culture—it's an institutional, psychologically institutional, part of modern culture.

So what happens is that the people who become skeptical and jaded and cynical—they *unlearn* all of that as a result of their education. In many cases, these are extraordinarily well-read, intelligent individuals. So they will talk themselves out of or learn themselves out of Enlightenment progressivism.

And it might then be that, as a psychological self-protection mechanism, you cultivate a kind of stoicism: I thought the world was going to be this great, beautiful, wonderful place, but now all of that has been exploded. Stoicism is one way of dealing psychologically with a world that is too disappointing for you. But that is a cultivated indifference, and it is one it is one strategy.

***Against Classical Art, Clement Greenburg, Jackson Pollock***

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 14:30

Now, I want to focus specifically on the effect of Counter-Enlightenment ideas on classically minded people. I am a painter myself, but these ideas would obviously affect composers, writers, philosophers, and others.

### **Stephen Hicks**

In the art world, absolutely.

### **Jan-Ove Tuv** 14:49

And people have to be aware of the content of their minds. Otherwise, unconscious cultural principles will guide what comes out through their hand and onto the canvas.

Indeed, that is why I want to devote some time to Mr. Kant. I have studied the *Critique of Judgment* and been especially concerned with what he writes about the genius. But through reading essays on Ayn Rand, your essay “Kant at the Masked Ball” and rereading *Explaining Postmodernism* I finally realized the importance of Kant’s metaphysics and epistemology. His aesthetics is straight-on telling artists what to do and what not to do, but his metaphysics and epistemology constitute the fundament for all of this.

So, first of all, what is metaphysics and epistemology? And then what is particular about Kant?

### **Stephen Hicks**

The primary point on Kant is that self-consciously and explicitly, when you read leading philosophers of art in the 20th century, those who are reflecting on modernism and postmodernism in the arts—I’m thinking of people like Arthur Danto—and the leading art critics—like Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg—who are not only reflecting on what’s going on in the art world but actively shaping and picking the winners and the losers in the art world, in the 20th century—they are explicitly Kantian. All of them are saying you cannot understand modern art unless you understand Immanuel Kant.

One anecdote: A representative painter here would be Jackson Pollock. At the kind of the height of modernism in the 20th century, he was discovered by Clement Greenberg. Greenberg explicitly says *when I saw Pollock’s painting the effect on me was volcanic*. (that’s a Kantian piece of language right there)—*that I immediately recognized that this is the great painting of our era*. Greenberg in his art-critical works is deeply philosophical, saying that he is concerned with the artistic Sublime as the organizing concept, which for him is a purely Kantian concept, as he labels it.

## ***Kant’s Basic Philosophy***

Kant wrote three big books: *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Critique of Judgment*. He wrote them in that order, they form an integrated, almost



organic whole. One way to think about this is to say the classical philosophical project is to concern oneself with Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Those are the big three. *Critique of Pure Reason* is about the issue of truth, about goodness, and then Critique of Judgment about beauty and aesthetics. Kant reaches fundamentally negative conclusions about everything up to his generations at that point.

To plug into *Critique of Pure Reason*, the important concept there is *reason*. This is the aspirational concept for the Enlightenment—the claim that reason is competent, that reason is efficacious at objectively being able to discern facts about the world. And that as we self-reflectively figure out how our minds work, we develop more powerful reasons and more powerful tools of reason to understand the increasing complexity of the world.

Now, Kant's project is to ask: What exactly can reason know? And what can reason not know? Are there limits to reason? Now, everybody will say there are limits to reason. We cannot know an infinite number of things, we can only attend to a certain number of objects at a given time, and when we are engaging in reasoning we're going to this step and then to this step, and then to that step, and there's only so many steps that we can pay attention to at a given time. We are not gods with an infinite capacity. And reasoning has to be done carefully, step by step. We need to write things down. We need to double-check our work. It is hard work. We get tired, we get emotional, we make mistakes, and so on. So everyone recognizes that there are limits.

But what Kant is arguing is that at a fundamental level, reason is not able to know the things that philosophers and everyone want to say are the most important things about the world. He argues that what we call the world—our commonsensical factual world—is not in fact, the real world. The world of the senses, is a merely construct by a made by subconscious or unconscious structural factors of which we are unaware, which create this world for our conscious mind's attention. It is what he calls the *phenomenal* world, and it is to be distinguished from the real or *noumenal* world. And those are technical pieces of terminology.

Kant argues that in principle—not just that it's *difficult* to get from the apparent world—it is *impossible* for us to get from the sensory phenomenal world to reality as it is. Behind that conclusion is a battery of sophisticated, skeptical arguments developed by earlier philosophers, which Kant extends to say that we are cut off from reality cut off from knowing reality. He concludes that reason is a subjective capacity that knows only a subjectively created reality. We are not objective and have no capacity for knowing real reality.

Now metaphysics asks: What is the nature of reality? The philosophers' and everybody else's questions are whether there's really a God. Or a multiplicity of

gods? Are space and time real? Do we live in an eternal world? Or did the world come into existence at a certain point in time? Is the universe infinite in space? Or is it spatially bounded in some sense? Is nature cause and effect? Or are there exceptions to cause and effect—elements of chaos out there, or miracles of some sort. What really is the way the world works? We want to know reality.

Kant is saying, as a matter of principle, *we cannot know* if there is a God. We cannot know whether—he says something different about space and time—we can know that they are subjective creations, but we cannot know if reality out there is in space and time. We cannot know if reality is governed by cause and effect. Or if it's miracles or some sort of chaos. We cannot know if we have a soul that is immortal, that when we suffer bodily death whether our soul will separate from our bodies and go to another reality. We cannot know if we have free will. And free will is absolutely important for us to be moral agents: we cannot be moral agents if we don't control the choices we make. So we can't know any of these things. About reality Kant is saying we must be deeply skeptical.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 23:34

And this has an immense impact on your whole outlook on life. Ayn Rand has this idea of a “sense of life,” reflected in a painting or in literature. And if your sense of life is constituted by what you are describing, then it really is a self-defeating process. You cannot know reality, so you don't know if that book is there or not. But then you lose contact with the physical reality that you are imitating. And if there's a question of free will or interconnectedness, then that will affect the type of motifs that you paint.

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes. It might be, Kant is willing to say: I'm looking at this book that's sitting on the table, and I'm looking at you, I can “know” that there is this book and I “know” that you are there. But if you're a serious artist, you aren't doing trivial things. So if you come to believe that the book on the table is merely phenomenal—a construct in one's mind—then it loses its importance. It loses significance.

## ***Kant's Critique of Judgment after Critique of Pure Reason***

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 25:06

Which means that he introduces an indifference to what you're looking at. And his big idea in the *Critique of Judgment* is exactly the concept of aesthetical indifference. For example: the painter he would not endorse would be Rubens—all those fat women and strong men; it's too appealing to our instincts, which means you are trusting the senses ... and you get all of those “philosophical”



problems that you don't have, if you just see a beautiful fat woman and you want to paint her.

**Stephen Hicks**

So then the issue is: What is the importance of the sensory world? Going back to the Greek concept of *aesthetics*, which is, as you know, a sensory engagement with the world. If then suddenly what we are saying is that the world of the senses is *not real* in a fundamental sense, then it's also *not objective* in a fundamental sense. It then becomes *less important* in a fundamental sense.

**Jan-Ove Tuv 26:12**

It seems that Kant consistently turns concepts into their polar opposites. Aesthetics being a case in point.

**Stephen Hicks**

He takes the aesthetics out of art, is one way of putting it.

**Jan-Ove Tuv 26:28**

I see your point. He helped create the 18th century value system of fine art in direct opposition to classical values.

Indeed, the concept of "art" is another example of his inversion of terms. In the *Critique of Judgment* he says that you are only creating art when you don't know what you're doing—which means you only know things when you don't know things.

**Stephen Hicks**

Right. And that that kind of verbal play is worth exploring, and it does come out of this tradition as well.

Another way to put this is to say that, obviously in art history, there has been a long tradition of dissatisfaction with the sensory world, with the perceptual world, and with the physical world—the sense that there is a higher world that is non-sensory, non-physical—and so in some sense what the artist or the philosopher needs to do is turn off their senses, turn off their mind, disengage from their physical body, and try to disengage from the entire physical world—in order to tap into, or be revealed to by this non-sensory, non-physical, higher world. That metaphysical understanding of art has also led to a devaluation of the physical.

What Kant is doing is taking that tradition, but not putting it on a metaphysical footing. First and foremost, he's approaching it through cognition, through his epistemology, to use the philosophical term—that what we call the object of knowledge is *created* by our cognitive faculties. So what we have is a subjectively

created world that we take to be reality, and beyond that is an unknowable noumenal realm, or an unknowable real reality.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 28:36

So there we have the connection with the postmodern idea of a subjectively constructed reality?

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes. Down the road, it's going to come out in that form as well.

Also, then, if we come back to the sensory issues. If you want to say: it's important for me, as a classically trained or a representational artist, to look very carefully at the world, to become a very good observer, and to use my senses very well, and then also to start using the tools of science, measurement and perspective and understanding geometry, on the assumption that all of that is revealing real features of reality. In that conception of art, there's an integration of the rational with the empirical: I want my art to be sensorially *and* rationally correct. I'm going to use all of the tools and technologies of science, I am developing myself as a good observer, as a good mathematician, and I'm going to learn about the chemistries of paint and all of the science involved.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 29:48

—Compositional rules, for example. There are certain objective principles you can learn.

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes. I'm doing all of this objectively and rationally, and it's all integrated into a whole.

Then the Kantian move comes along to say all of that is subjective.

**Jan-Ove Tuv**

“Bah, humbug!”

**Stephen Hicks**

—That's right. Space is only an inbuilt category of your subconscious mind: whatever comes in from external reality goes through our senses, gets filtered, and gets constructed into a spatial reality. And the same thing for time. And things in cause-and-effect relations? Those are also subjective categories added to it.

So all of this rational concern was getting the spatial proportions right, in getting the temporal relations right, is again devalued: You are only becoming very good at studying this subjective, phenomenal world. But what's reality, what's really out there—you're missing all of that.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 30:49

In some way he taps into the spiritual, religious realm?

**Stephen Hicks** 30:59

It is a happy coincidence that if you start from a traditional religious perspective, Kantian skeptical conclusions will give you a shot in the arm; they will give you a real vitality. And Kant is explicit about this. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, in his Preface, there's a famous phrase where he says: "I am denying knowledge of reality [or reason is not going to get us knowledge of reality] in order to make room for faith." There is a kind of religious heritage that he wants to make space for.

And this is part of Counter-Enlightenment, because it believes the Enlightenment project is corrosive to a traditional religious worldview. The Enlightenment project says we start by observing the world, and we don't observe gods. We do science, and we rationally try to figure out the world. And maybe we do arguments to more theoretical constructs, but if those arguments get exploded or defeated, then we're not going to believe in those theoretical constructs. So from the Enlightenment perspective, if you are going to believe in God it cannot be a faith move and it can't be a just a tradition move: you have to show the evidence, show the arguments for the existence of God. So a big part of the Enlightenment was this century-long intense engagement at a highly sophisticated level about all of the arguments for and against the existence of God.

One of the things that Kant's concluding explicitly is that all of the arguments for the existence of God fail. He's adding this philosophically heavy-duty conclusion that *they have to fail*. Because if we're going to try to argue, then we're using reason about what's really ultimately out there in reality, but he is philosophically cutting reason off from all of that: we cannot *know* if there is a God out there. So if we are rational, we cannot believe in the existence of God. But that leaves open the door, as he said, to faith. If we are going to believe in God, an immortal soul, that we have a God-given, free will to become morally responsible agents—that has to be at a deep level a matter of faith. And reason cannot attack that faith because reason is limited only to its subjective, constitutional products.

That is going to open the door to a resurgent kind of religiosity in the modern world.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 33:31

If I understand you correctly, Kant is saying that we cannot know anything about whatever is metaphysical.

**Stephen Hicks**

Correct.

## **Jan-Ove Tuv**

And we cannot know anything about what is physical.

## **Stephen Hicks**

What we can do is redefine “knowledge.” What we can then say is we do have this perceptual world, that we have to understand it philosophically as a subjective construct.

## **Jan-Ove Tuv 33:58**

But he is not saying that we’re literally constructing everything in our heads? For example, in *The Devils* by Dostoyevsky, Kirillov commits suicide to eradicate the world. Kant is not in that position?

## **Stephen Hicks**

—He is not. That is what we call “solipsism.” That’s a later possibility. And many philosophers in the post-Kantian tradition are grappling with how to escape solipsism. We are constructing phenomenal reality, but it’s not our conscious minds that are doing it. It all happens at a sub-conscious level. And we can re-define. We can use the concept of knowledge and the concepts of truth and objectivity, but it all philosophically has to be nested with an understanding that ultimately we are in a subjective reality.

## **Jan-Ove Tuv 34:47**

So this is when we stop thinking about it. We start “feeling” about it.

## **Stephen Hicks**

Not for Kant. That’s going to be in the next generation. Kant is very much anti-feeling. But your hand gesture a moment ago was exactly right. Again: some generations later, the Kantian movement works out a number of variations, we start finding thinkers who will say “knowledge” and put it in quotation marks, or “truth” in quotation marks.

## **Jan-Ove Tuv 35:22**

Which makes you seem very intelligent ...

## **Stephen Hicks**

That’s right. That indicates the skeptical distancing, and that is post-Kantian.

## **Jan-Ove Tuv 35:30**

It’s interesting how this manifests in painting. For example, you have Edvard Munch once he has become so-called modern. He writes about the critics who cannot understand that *to him* the sky is green. And that is more or less a direct consequence of the epistemology of Immanuel Kant, right? Because there’s a subjectivism there.

## Stephen Hicks

Yes. I think there's a couple of moves that have to happen first. Munch is a century after Kant. So his turn, I think, is in the 1890s. Kant's writing *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 is the first edition, second edition '87. *Critique of Judgment* is a few years later, 1790. Partly, though, Kant had argued for kind of universality. So he says: Yes, it is such a subjective creation, but all human beings have the same subjective constitution.

## Jan-Ove Tuv 36:57

So there's some kind of "objectivity" ... I am doing quotation marks all the time now!

## Stephen Hicks

*Objectivity* is not quite the right word here. But he wants to say it is *universal*. So it is not objective, because objective is to say there is an object independent of me that is what it is. And I the subject am coming to know it. What Kant is of saying: No, no, it is subjective, but your subjectivity and mine and everyone else's is the same—we all have the same constitution.

## Jan-Ove Tuv

But he does have the term *subjective objectivity*?

## Stephen Hicks

Well, technically speaking, that's playing with oxymorons. If you want to say a property holds for the whole category or the whole class, the right term is *universal*. So it is subjective universalism that Kant is arguing for.

And so then he wants to say we can be "inter-subjective"—notice we're doing this [finger quote marks] again. So it's not that I'm in my own subjectivity, and you are entirely in your own subjectivity. Because we have the same universal constituting factors, we can be inter-subjective or there's a universal subjectivity.

But what happens in the next generations, though, is they ask: Well, how does Kant know that? How does he know that *your* subconscious constituting factors are doing the same thing that *my* unconscious constituting factors are? I can't jump outside of my subjectivity and into your subjectivity, or into your unconscious subjectivity to see what's really going on there. That is an assumption that Kant is making, and that assumption can be challenged. So a number of the philosophers in the next generation will start to challenge precisely that.

Now, we don't want to talk about Hegel, and Marx and Nietzsche, but they are exactly the next generations of developments in German philosophy, and all of whom challenge that assumption in various ways. So there's a relativization.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 38:57

Getting even more subjectivist?

### ***After Kant: Feelings, Relativity, and Anti-Rationalism***

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes, though they are already inside the subjectivity. But now they are abandoning the universality. And the contrast to universal is relative.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 39:11

So it's the next stage of the rocket.

**Stephen Hicks** 39:16

That's right. So we then say: Well, there are different subjectivities out there. And those subjectivities cannot be translated across. Maybe different economic classes have different subjectivities. That's the Marxist version. Maybe the subjective constituting factors evolve across generations. That's a more Hegelian evolutionary move. Subjectivism can also devolve to the individual level: maybe my subjectivity and your subjectivity are fundamentally different such that we literally create and see the world differently. That I think is closer to Munch.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 40:01

I see. It seems that Kantian epistemology and metaphysics—and the later Hegelian development— really have had a free playground within art. By way of images, modernism has groomed people to accept the notion that this is *my* understanding of reality, which is different from *your* understanding. And these ideas are reinforced through Kant's aesthetics, with the imperative of the original genius: you have to express your "personal" view.

Now, we do not have to dive into Woke, but the way I see it, the current status of culture is simply a result of the principles, activities and mentality of modern art let loose on the rest of society.

**Stephen Hicks**

Absolutely, yes. Both important to subjectivity which comes from Kant, and the relativity is added later because people argue that Kant can't maintain the universality claim.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 41:21

Right. So you cannot blame that on Kant.



## ***Rejecting Representational Art***

**Stephen Hicks**

That part, yes. Now, if we're talking about classically minded painters, what the Kantian move means, first and foremost is that *the entire representational project is suspect* at best, or *to be abandoned*. If you are doing any sort of representational art, by definition you are not a serious artist, you are only concerned with how things look, and how things can be rationally reproduced in various ways. And that is all just the phenomenal world. That is the less important world and any self-regarding artist who says I am about serious stuff is to be interested in what's really real.

So figurative art and, more broadly, representational art are relegated to a lower order of art. And then as that idea works out, they become non-art, they become trivial. The term is "kitsch" by the time we get to a century later.

**Jan-Ove Tuv 42:37**

Speaking of which, I can really recommend Mark Cheetham's book *Kant, Art and Art History*. He writes about how Kant influenced the Modern idea of art not only through his aesthetics, but through his general philosophy as well. And Cheetham clearly identifies Greenberg's attack on kitsch with Kant's burn marking of "barbarism." The latter occurs when you are emotionally gripped and like a picture because its sensual rendering—all those things that that interfere with a "pure and objective" judgment.

So let's dive deeper. Can you give us the bullet points on *Critique of Judgment*?

## ***Beauty and Sublime Contrasted***

**Stephen Hicks**

Broadly speaking, the two major concepts in art and aesthetics are Beauty and the Sublime. They represent the highest achievement in their respective domains. So significant amount of critique of judgment, is analyzing the concept of beauty and examples of beauty. All of the standard examples are going to be naturalistic, physicalistic, sensually available items. So we can talk about a beautiful landscape, or a beautiful woman, or a beautiful seascape, or whatever, a beautiful arrangements of flowers on a lovely old wooden table. And so beauty can be applied to all of those as concepts, and the issues of sensory appeal and getting the proportions and perspectives correct in a way that's harmoniously integrated and pleasing to our cognitive faculties. At that level, our senses and our reason are engaged: we like looking at these things, and we like reflecting on these things. We like admiring the skill and the craftsmanship of the artist who made all of these things. So Kant has an analysis of beauty that is sophisticated but in one sense, traditional.

The big move, though, in *Critique of Judgment* is when he says we take all of that and put it in a box: All of that is *only* about the *phenomenal* world. It has its sensory appeal and its natural purpose and its rational appeal. But what we have learned then from the earlier *Critique*, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is all of that is subjective and now lesser. If we are serious artists what we are interested in, as we would be as serious philosophers, and what we have intimations of, is what *really* is important, what *really* is real, and we're not concerned with superficial things that are merely pretty, or things that are merely an appeal to our senses, or merely appealing to our reason now—because reason has to be seen as subject to severe limitations. So I want to get the *truth*, I want to get *reality*, I wanted to get to the *most important* things I want to get to the *Sublime*.

There is a tradition of the concept of the sublime, which to some extent has been captured in art theory. But there's a broader sense of the sublime as the highest psychological experience one can have as a human being. Something might be pretty, or pleasing, or be beautiful. Those are great compliments. But to say, *That is just sublime*, is the highest experience a human being can have.

Mathematicians, for example, who've been working on some extraordinarily difficult problem, but they succeed, will say, *This solution is sublime*. It's not just a merely pretty thing—there's an elegance and they know they have unlocked with some secret of the universe, and they are experiencing that highest response.

Or when we are falling in love and fully captured by the other person—all of our being is elevated. I feel like I'm being the best person I can be, and sharing so deeply and intimately all important things with this other person—that love is sublime experience.

Then in aesthetics, the things of nature that capture us, some aspect of reality that is capable of elevating us to that kind of experience. Or when music can grip us and take us over entirely and make us feel that every fiber of our being is alive and energized and that I am really connected with something deep in the nature of the universe. That sublime experience in music.

So there has been a tradition in art of trying to figure out what is going on in the sublime and how can we understand it philosophically and artistically.

In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant makes a significant transition from his concerns with beauty to concerns with the sublime. He argues that this maps on to the earlier divide that he had developed in *Critique of Pure Reason*. To put it shortly, a bullet point: *Beauty is only about the phenomenal; Sublime concerns itself with the noumenal*. Or that beauty at most is only about the subjectively created reality. Sublime is giving us intimations or possible access to real reality.

We are left in the, at the end of the first *Critique* with the idea that, yes, we have this physical world, it's available to the senses and our reason, and we can do our science and talk with each other and so forth. But the big metaphysical questions

are: Is there really a God? Do we have free? Do we have free will? Is our soul immortal? We cannot know the answers to those. But nonetheless those are burningly important questions to us. And Kant spends much time figuring out ways in which we can operate on the assumption that God exists, that we have an immortal soul, that free will exist. But at best he says those are just regulative ideas. I can't prove that they are true or that they are real, but they are going to govern our existence. If we are so governed, we are good beings.

But I want something more, I want access to real reality, I want to know and feel it. And all humans have this sense sometimes of being in the presence of God, of being part of the infinite, I can't *know* it. But somehow we can have *intimations* of it or *semi-access* to it. What Kant is suggesting, then, is that the experience of the sublime is one possible vehicle for doing so. That opens up a huge amount of territory for post-Kantian art theory.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 50:50

So he delegates a sort of shamanic role to the artist.

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes, that's right. So one of the feeder threads for Romanticism, as a broad philosophical movement, is explicitly coming out of Kantianism. And again, the critique of judgment and his concept of the sublime. Their bullet-point version is that we cannot get to ultimate reality by our senses: It's not observable, and we can't get there by reason, by thinking and arguing our way to it. But maybe there is something special and unique about artistic and aesthetic experience.

**Jan-Ove Tuv**

We feel about it, we don't think about it.

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes, that's right. And if we are the right kind of artistic ... I don't want to use the word *sensibility*—so I'll put it in quotation marks again; we're just cheating all the time [laughs]—if I am the right kind of aesthetic person and I channel my aesthetic.

We find this in [Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph] Schelling, and we find this in some of the Romantics—that through aesthetic experience I can either go into ultimate reality, or at least I can open up a space in my psyche for communications from ultimate reality.

Or music. One more bullet point. [Arthur] Schopenhauer explicitly says it's not painting, not sculpture, because those are too tied to the sensual and too tied to the rational. They're not going to get you there. But music: you can't look at music, and you can't reason about music too much. Instead, music just seems to take over our soul, it shuts down our rational minds, it shuts down our sensory

minds, we retreat into the music and music becomes a vehicle for us to get out of the phenomenal world and into the ultimate reality.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 52:59

Okay, so there are strains from epistemology and metaphysics that come together in the *Critique of Judgment*. Now, the consequence of these points, also merging with later traditions of anti-realism, makes it so that we cannot trust any kind of craft—because that involves trusting our senses and certain objective rules. And that doesn't work because you can never get to the physical reality.

**Stephen Hicks**

To ultimate reality.

**Jan-Ove Tuv**

Okay. And it's all combined with a strong anti-sensuality, speaking of Schopenhauer.

There's a funny passage in the *Critique of Judgment*, where Kant sets up the different arts according to value. He places poetry on the top because, because letters are just abstract signs. If you write *Apple*, it's not an actual imitation of an apple, it's just abstract signs giving you the idea of an apple in your head. So that would be a perfect illustration of the Kantian idea. If you try to paint an apple, it's naive. But if you just write *Apple*, then *you* create that apple in your head. And that's a cunning thing that Kant does. He is really skilled at giving compliments, because he's says to the beholder that *you* are the one who creates beauty; and then he says to the genius that *you* are the one who decides what is right or wrong for you, in terms of what you create.

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes. One other example, jumping ahead, if you think of Magritte and the pipe: You say *This is not a pipe*. He's exactly playing with this issue of the object, the perception of the object, and verbalization of the object.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 55:08

Aesthetical indifference comes in, which is another key component in the *Critique of Judgment*.

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes.

**Jan-Ove Tuv**

Another major point is what he says about the genius—and art as such—being the opposite of craft. Because craft is something you do just to make money.

**Stephen Hicks**

He is anti-commercial.

## ***The Genius Artist***

### **Jan-Ove Tuv**

Yes, absolutely. So that artists will accept that they shall suffer and not get paid. Wow, what a positive view ...

At any rate, he undercuts all the possibilities that you have to show your skills and to actually capture physical reality.

And in doing so, Kant continues the two first *Critiques* in the idea of the genius, taking away his ability to base himself on craft and to trust his senses. In addition, Kant says *Don't be sensual, don't be sentimental, in any kind of way.*

### **Stephen Hicks**

Don't be sensual, don't be emotional, don't be rational.

### **Jan-Ove Tuv**

There's not much left.

### **Stephen Hicks**

That's right. So necessarily, the real artist—the artistic genius—is going to be irrational. And that comes out in his understanding of the genius.

### **Jan-Ove Tuv** 56:38

Right. And I think the following example is a natural consequence of the Kantian way of thinking. In Austria, there was this mass murderer called Jack Unterweger. He was imprisoned after having raped and killed several women. Then in prison he started writing poetry, and suddenly the intellectual elite and the artists got interested in it. They argued that he should be let free, and he was. And of course, he raped and killed more women before he was caught. Now, that's where I'm thinking: this is a perfect illustration of the genius. Someone who has no boundaries, who has no rules to follow, who just *is*, who just *feels* what he shall do. In the extreme case, that is the consequence of the liberated genius, not bound by any kind of physical restraints or moral rules.

### **Stephen Hicks** 57:50

The concept of *feeling* is tricky there. So again, Kant would not celebrate the feeling route, though he would celebrate the anti-rational route. Again, in his personal philosophy he is still very much anti-feeling. So it's going to be a post-Kantian maneuver to say: Well, if we are interested in the sublime, how are we going to get there? Kant has said we're not getting there by our senses, we're not getting there by craft, and we're not getting there by reason. So it has to be some anti-rational or non-rational capacity.

But what that capacity is, there are a number of candidates that post-Kantian thinkers will follow. Some might argue that it is through *religious* feeling, or through *music*, or through some sort of *revelatory faith* that comes from the other side. Those are all explicitly anti-rational, post-Kantian moves.

But there will be post Kantians who will say: Look, Kant was just a prig—to use that English word. He was very uptight, anti-feeling, you just have to follow these strict moral rules without thinking about consequences and so on. But that was just a peculiarity of Kant, and we have to perhaps resuscitate the idea that through feeling that we have another cognitive capacity—that feelings are not just subjective and not to be trusted. Perhaps feelings are the vehicle through which we ultimately access the noumenal world or have it revealed to us. So there's a rehabilitation of subjective feeling as one possible vehicle.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 59:43

So you could call this Unterweger a post-Kantian genius, because he was “sublime” in that he was fully into his emotions, just expressing himself and having no restraints at all.

## ***Expressionism and Cubism***

**Stephen Hicks**

Again, jumping ahead a century: Expressionism is consequence of that strain of post-Kantian ideas. We don't *observe* the world as the Impressionists do. And we don't *think* too much about it. Instead, we try to shut down our minds, shut down our senses, we just feel about it. We just subjectively express and whatever comes out, that's my art. Yes, absolutely, that is one possible development.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:00:28

There's also the idea that Cubism shows you the whole reality from different perspectives at once. So it's more true somehow.

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes, that's the slogan there.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:00:47

Would you say that it could be attributed directly to Kant?

**Stephen Hicks**

I would not. I would say there's another development that goes on there. Because one standard interpretation of Cubism is to say that we have a cognitive limitation with respect to our senses, that we only see things from a particular point of view in a moment of time. And that what we are trying to do this is the like, the good-news cover story version of Cubism is to be more scientific and to say that the truth is that the object is multi-dimensional, and persists across time.



So there are multiple perspectives, and to be true to our art we need to find a way to capture the persistence of the object. And the only way to do that is to break the object up and put the different perspectives on it.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:01:44

And coincidentally, that perfectly goes together with a complete destruction of the idea of craft or sensual representation.

**Stephen Hicks**

That's right, and why I say it's partly a cover story. Now there *is* an interesting issue about how you try to integrate a third dimension in painting. Also an interesting project of how you try to integrate changes across time in painting, because painting is timeless and two dimensional. The darker version then is to say what we Cubists want to do is just show the limitations of painting, like, painting really is superficial as it's only capturing 2-D. So we're going to break up the canvas also to break up your psychology as you're trying to understand the canvas. And we're not interested in any sort of harmonious integration. The Cubists are always fractured and a little bit tortured.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:02:37

Again we come back to a direct consequence of Kant: you cannot capture reality, because you cannot trust your senses. And you cannot understand reality, because of your limited reason.

**Stephen Hicks**

That's right. Where do you go from there? There's ten different options. Once you say we're not going to be sensory and we're not going to be rational, what follows from that? Well, lots of weirdness is possible.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:03:07

Indeed, there are so many things that come out of this.

Harking back to Kant's point on originality. What he effectively is doing is to sever your ties to the people you can learn from. The consequence of his dogma is a common spine reaction: "Oh, I cannot look at Rembrandt ... Oh, I cannot look at Nerdrum." So many people unconsciously think—or feel—like that. How many times have I been asked "Well, when are you going to liberate yourself from Nerdrum and become yourself?" From people who don't even know how to spell the word *philosophy*. They don't know that Kant ever lived, yet they are spitting images of that idea. So having acquired those ideas, most typically by osmosis, is extremely destructive when developing as a painter. Every time you see someone in the past who is your soul mate, you have to think: *Oh, no—I must never touch it.*

**Stephen Hicks**

There's a couple of ways of getting there immediately from explicit remarks Kant makes about originality and severing it from tradition. So there, there's an idea of continuity and an idea of progress that people are figuring things out. And you can learn from those and then add your own individuality, but in a cumulative direction. So that is also part of the Enlightenment project, which is to see the art and science as brothers or sisters in arms, so to speak. So no scientist is going to say, I just ignore everything that has gone on in the scientific tradition, and I'm just going to figure out something brand new and original, rather, it is meant to be a cumulative project of standing on the shoulders of the giants who went before.

But there's another line that's worth mentioning here right now. So that's about time. So if you are in any sense a traditionalist or learning from those who went before you're putting yourself on a time line, and, and seeing yourself as a continuance of that timeline. But then philosophically, what does he say about time, time is not an objective feature of the world, time is a subject of additional construct. So, again, if we want to get outside of the merely phenomenal world, and outside of the merely sensual world, we have to get out of time. And so the only way you can be out of time is by breaking with all tradition. So you just whatever what is going to happen, and it's got to be something completely shocking to the sensibilities of people who are still stuck in the physical, phenomenal world, and it has to be completely new. And that is going to be the marker that you are actually an artist.

**Jan-Ove Tuv 1:06:20**

That's where I still think you can tie Kant directly to Unterwiesing, because he did something that is so apart from what you would even think of doing.

**Stephen Hicks**

I don't know that particular example. Some later developments are needed to explicitly make a rapist into a criminal whom certain segments of the art community want to rehabilitate. There's at least a cultural and perhaps a political agenda that needs to be added to that.

**Jan-Ove Tuv 1:06:56**

Fair point.

So in the *Critique of Judgment*, there's anti-sensuality. Then there's anti-rationality – you shouldn't learn craft, because then you're hindering your own inner voice. And then there's the subjectivity of the genius.

But the combination of aesthetical indifference and subjectivity is highly destructive in a way people may not be aware of. The logical consequence will necessarily be that you distance yourself from the eternal perspective – because the Kantian combo does not allow for such thing as archetypal nature. At any

rate, you shouldn't try to capture it in a sensual manner. That's the irony of it. At the same time as Kant famously denies knowledge to make room for faith, he also denies the sensation of being «a part of something bigger», of belonging in an eternal context.

## ***Irrational and Inward Turns in Art***

### **Stephen Hicks**

Yes, that's right. The concept of time, the eternal, is still tricky, because in some sense, we have to say *archetypal* is some sort of universality.

There is another road we can explore. One is to say, for the post-Kantians, Kant has said, There's ultimate reality or noumenal reality out there, and in principle we cannot know it *through reason* or *through our senses*. That opens the door to those who want to say: Well, I still want to get to ultimate reality and I will explore various *non-rational* ways of doing so.

Another way, though, is another post-Kantian route. Kant has also said that what we call our subjective phenomenal reality, is a result of *unconscious* subjective forces that are universal and built into the human condition. So my project is not so much to get *out there*, but as to get deeper *into my subjectivity*. And that becomes an *inward* turn to try to figure out what are these universal unconscious structures are.

### **Jan-Ove Tuv 1:09:50**

But you find them in yourself. That's the genius.

### **Stephen Hicks**

Well, you have to start with your phenomenal world and somehow get back there to the unconscious, and Kant tries to do analytics and reduction to get there.

Again to jump a century later to thinkers like Sigmund Freud, who will say: Well, obviously, the conscious mind is just superficial and not really dealing with reality—there's a certain amount of ego construct, and the real action is in the unconscious. And so the exploration is to figure out what's going on in the unconscious. I'm totally uninterested in the perceptual world, and I'm totally uninterested in any sort of ultimate reality with gods or a transcendent being, and I'm uninterested in the scientific project to figure out what the ultimate unifying forces of the external universe are. I am totally interested in the unconscious, and or the deep subconscious or deep subjectivity. That entire inward turn is also another movement not only in psychology but in literature and the arts more broadly.

### **Jan-Ove Tuv 1:10:59**

And you see it visually clear in modern art. And that's yet another part of the tragedy. If a classical painter thinks like that—if you limit yourself to what is going on in your private person—then you lose out on what makes a work classical, which is to find the universally human. Then you can argue that there are a lot of examples in modernism of more “spiritual” painters who try to reach something universal—which could be understood as archetypal. But then the *Critique of Judgment* bans you from capturing that in a mimetic, recognizable form.

## ***Thou Shalt Make No Graven Images***

**Stephen Hicks**

There is a passage—I need to interrupt on this point. In Section 29 of *Critique of Judgment*, (I'm not sure; we can look it up) where Kant says that the most sublime passage in the Jewish Scriptures—there's the word *sublime*—”Thou shalt make no graven images.” In the text he writes that explicitly. So what he is then saying—and we know from Jewish tradition, and later in Islamic tradition, exactly on scriptural authority—is that the visual representational arts are forbidden. And Kant is reaching that same conclusion, but without basing it on Scripture, reaching it through philosophical sophistication.

So it's very interesting, then, that modernist painters and modernist sculptors and people in the modernist movement—who will obviously think of themselves as not just old Scripture-thumpers and religious true-believers—are reaching the exact same place. Scriptural fundamentalism and Modernism, which seemed like cultural opposites, both share fundamentally an attack on any sort of representationalism, figurative-ism, or naturalism in the arts.

**Jan-Ove Tuv**

The filthy, lowly body.

**Stephen Hicks**

Exactly.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:13:24

I know there are arguments to be made that an overall ban on representational images is a misunderstanding of that idea. But what you're saying is that Kant is taking it to literally mean that.

**Stephen Hicks**

The traditional idea is there's a metaphysical dualism, right? So the gods or God is purely spiritual, not to be captured physically. So it *cannot* be captured physically, just as a metaphysical point.

But also it's a *sacrilege* to try to do so because the higher world is better in this world is lower and vulgar. So you're trying to bring something higher down to something lower, and that is a bad thing to do.

Whether that's a misinterpretation or not, that's an interesting issue, but Kant takes it to mean that. And there is no tradition of visual representational arts in Judaism and Islam because that is the mainstream interpretation. So Kant is agreeing, saying that they are capturing something correct. But he wants to give a non-religious justification for that capturing.

### **Jan-Ove Tuv 1:14:44**

I see. Now, classical painters may not get caught by that part, but still unconsciously believe in these ideas. I know there are many classical painters who focus on beauty. And you have Roger Scruton writing about it, of course. But I think that is a dead end. Look at what happens if you place the concept of beauty in the ancient Greek context—they didn't have an equivalent of the 18th century term of aesthetics. Disinterested contemplation would be completely absurd for them, it was a matter of making it as living as possible. You have probably heard the story about the Aphrodite figure being defiled by this young man, there was a wet stain on her thigh the next morning. And that is the diametrical opposite of aesthetical indifference, where you judge a sculpture as an "object" in front of you, as something that absolutely does not relate to your sensuality.

So if a classical painter has this idea of beauty, there immediately comes in a «tactful" distance. That can easily lead to well-behaved and pretty paintings, because drama is perceived as uncultivated ... The whole idea of an emotional, baroque drama gets sidestepped because of a "moral" perception of it as fake, manipulative and a cheap way of tricking the audience. Ironically, the point of working classically in the first place was to create great dramas—drama being at least 50 percent of the value of a classical work. Which means that the "aesthetic" mindset unfolds at the cost of precisely drama and the eternal aspect. Ironically, what you are left with is a representational/figurative illustration of Kant's ideas! It's so interesting that we're not talking about abstract versus figurative. There's no lack of accepted figurative painters on the art scene. But the expression they promote must be one of "modern" indifference that satisfies Kant's aesthetic philosophy.

## ***Painting as Integrated versus as Dis-integrated***

### **Stephen Hicks**

That's a rich comment. The classical traditions, up to 18th century, are working toward art that is extraordinarily robust. It has a *sensory* appeal or physical appeal. But it also appeals to our *minds*: we'd like to look at it and analyze in various

ways, and we like to think about the abstract themes and what they what they mean for broader human concepts of dignity or morality or what it means to be a human being. And they're also *emotionally* engaging.

So the idea is that the human being is complex, and we have this thing that we are increasingly calling “art” that is able to interest and excite us sensually, integrated with exciting us rationally and emotionally, and in an integrated way, all at the same moment. You are fully engaged with and impressed upon by this thing that we now call the artistic experience.

So one way that of reading Kant is to say that he is explicitly recognizing that art is on this trajectory—it's about the sensory, it's about the rational, it's about the emotional at their highest level, and all of them integrated—and his project is to *dis*-integrate all of them.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:18:42

He twists it in the completely opposite direction.

**Stephen Hicks**

To use a 20<sup>th</sup>-century term, he does a deconstruction.

First, it was reason *versus* emotions—not reason *integrated* with the emotions.

Then it's reason *versus* the senses—rather than reason *working with* the senses.

And it's the senses *versus* emotions, rather than them working with each other.

So we break them all. It's a divide-and-conquer strategy. And then we say: Well, that's *merely* sensual. That's *merely* rational. And then for other reasons, it's *merely* a sentiment.

**Jan-Ove Tuv**

*Merely* is a Kantian word, if there ever was one.

**Stephen Hicks**

Exactly. And it's really irrational.

So it's first a disintegration and then destruction of each of those elements.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:19:23

And if you accept the premises, many are tricked into feeling they only have two options: Either abstract art *or* figurative—spirituality *or* materiality.

Abstract art has claimed copyright on pure spirituality since Kandinsky, and so figurative painters often react by saying “We're going to make really good images, and paint reality *exactly* how it is”—forgetting the eternal context or metaphysical content. And again, the irony is that such classical painters become “modern” since they end up illustrating aesthetical indifference.



## Stephen Hicks

That's right.

So you can say: Well, if it's all fractured, then I'm only interested in the perceptual—and there's no deeper meaning or insight, and it's not meant to be emotionally engaging.

Others will say: Well, I'm not interested in the sensual or the rational, I'm just purely all about emotionalist expression.

Yet others will say: I'm not interested so much in the sensual or the emotional, I'm interested in the hyper-rational, so I'm looking perhaps for underlying structures that can be mathematically expressed. To think of some examples. It's just about lines—but I'm just interested in cool, minimal sensory-appeal presentations of lines in geometric forms. That's all my art is about. That's a kind of reduction that is going to come later.

Or I'm only interested in basic colors, and I'm kind of making a rational point about color theory.

Or maybe I'm even being rationalist about the senses, for example that rather than my sensory experience of the world being in Van Gogh fashion—where everything is vitalistic and movement and dramatically appealing to my emotion—instead I just take a scene and reduce it to a number of dots in Seurat fashion where it's this isolated color scientifically placed next to this color, which is next to that color, all of it emotionally very cool.

### Jan-Ove Tuv 1:21:36

That's interesting. So you get tricked into separating things that were integrated before. It's a gradual transition, but this really starts becoming apparent in the late 19th century, where you now are a *portrait* painter, or a *landscape* painter or a *still life* painter—all these things that a skilled master would integrate into one whole image.

## Stephen Hicks

One is not a universal painter anymore.

### Jan-Ove Tuv 1:22:10

Right. You are tricked into believing that just being a portrait painter, just being this or that, is the way to go. You lose out on human drama and sensuality. In short, you lose out on making masterworks that encompass all aspects of human life.

## Stephen Hicks

Yes, right.

### Jan-Ove Tuv 1:22:33

Wow ... Okay, so done with Kant.

## ***The Positive Alternative?***

How do we build up something positive from here? We're talking about the general basic ideas, so what about Aristotle's epistemology and metaphysics?

### **Stephen Hicks**

Broadly speaking, I am Aristotelian in my approach. You mentioned Rand—there's a huge amount that we can learn from Rand as well. There are neo-Aristotelian, Objectivists, and others, not limited to those, who are still working on the broader project.

I'm going to speak though as a philosopher. The argument I make is that Kant is the most important philosopher of the last two centuries. And if the conversation that we have just had shows that—then what is going on in art critical theory in the decisive decades of the 20th century—with figures like Greenberg and others—is Kantianism, updated. They are evolutions: we can take the major sub-schools of modernist and later post-modernist philosophy, do the intellectual history to see them as downstream from what is ultimately a significant Kantian turn.

### **Jan-Ove Tuv 1:24:06**

Culture is downstream from Kant.

### **Stephen Hicks**

That's exactly right.

This is extraordinarily controversial in the Kantian literature, but some leading Kant scholars will say—I think this is slightly overstated—”We are all Kantians now.” Or: “We are all working in the shadow of Kant.” And when first-rate philosophers make claims like that, we need to pay attention.

What I think has to happen is we need to go back to Kant's distinctive theses in epistemology and their implications for metaphysics. He ends up anti-metaphysical for the reasons that we have talked about, and dismisses it entirely as a concern for philosophy.

And as we've talked about Kant with respect to art: If artists really are about truth, goodness, and beauty—and Kant is fundamentally negative on all of those—then he's the most important philosopher to know why the art world is the way it is. And that means the first-rate people need to go back, understand Kant, and figure out what the alternatives to him are.

[The alternative philosophy]: That we can, in fact, come to know the world. That we can, in fact, see the human being as an integrate. That we can in fact, figure

out positive answers to value questions. That both beauty and the sublime matter. And we work out that intellectual framework.

## ***The Art World Is Stuck***

The way it is right now, the challenge is also partly institutional. If we just look at the high art world—the high art world has done basically nothing for a century. It's all just variations on a theme.

### **Jan-Ove Tuv**

On aesthetical indifference.

### **Stephen Hicks**

That's right. So Duchamp in 1917 [the urinal/*Fountain*]. We're now a century past Duchamp, there has been nothing significant or fundamentally new in the art world for over a century. That should be a huge embarrassment for artists—to think that we are just recycling old tropes that are now a century old.

So there is a stagment there.

Yes. But artists can be very sensitive and very clever. I think you use the word *osmosis*: they're drawing it out of the intellectual atmosphere. But they're not necessarily art critics educated in art history at the Ph.D. level. And they're not necessarily philosophers or on the front lines of what's going on in psychology. They're very good as artists, but artists function in a broader intellectual and cultural framework.

So if we want to rescue the artists—or the artists want to rescue themselves—they need to realize that they have been put into a box, that they are allowed to play only inside that box, that they need to figure out what that box is and find a way to break out of it.

### **Jan-Ove Tuv 1:27:02**

So you start with the immediate constraints, and become aware. You have to understand what Kant is all about, so you can make a better choice concerning what direction you want your work to go in.

### **Stephen Hicks**

There's a division of labor there. The psychologists and the philosophers and the art historians and the artists all have a part of the overall package. And they need to work together.

## ***For Young Artists***

I would say, though, the most important thing for young artists: once you're in your teens—and you've not yet gone off to formal art school—to find whatever way of strengthening your resolve what attracted you to art in the first place.

Because the post-Kantians are now very sophisticated, and they are institutionalized, and when they get their hands on you when you go into art school they are very good at deconstructing you and turning you into another zombie.

That's where the fight has to be.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:27:59

Yes. Being aware of the main components of Kantian and Kantian-influenced philosophy can help you understand what's coming. Now, we're not going to discuss the kitsch term, but one of my main arguments for "kitsch" as a superstructure for classical painting is that it gives you a clear understanding of two opposing value systems: kitsch and art. You can get a much deeper understanding of where you stand. Do I aim for aesthetical indifference or sentimentality? Do I perceive craft as superfluous, or the very fundament of my discipline? Do I believe in originality, or do I value archetypal images? You can go down the list and say: "Check, check, check" and come out even more confident of your values.

**Stephen Hicks**

I think that's a very good starting point.

**Jan-Ove Tuv**

It's a way of orienting yourself and finding out: What is my direction? And when these Kantians or post-Kantians come, you quickly realize that they are coming from a diametrically opposed value system to the one you are following. And so you do not fold under pressure.

**Stephen Hicks**

The more intellectually armed you can be, certainly the better. The hard thing, though, is that if you want to be an artist, you need to pour yourself into doing your art. You cannot also get Ph.D. degrees in philosophy or psychology at the same time, but you need a certain amount of intellectual armor in your defense. You can't let it slide.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:29:19

Yes. Don't let Kant fool you. Indeed, a central trait of Kant's genius is being oblivious to knowing what you are doing. So the genius needs a philosopher to decide, he says. And if you accept that as "an artist" you are not supposed to think—that the philosophers shall do that for you—well, then you *are* stuck in the box.

**Stephen Hicks**

Exactly.

To come almost full circle. That's what Greenberg did for Jackson Pollock, who would have remained in obscurity, because nobody's going to go in the studio and see what Pollock is doing and say: *Oh, this is great art*. It takes a Kantian intellectual like Greenberg, who has a social status, to say *This is it*, and then everyone suddenly is *Oh yes, he's a genius*, and then the money and prestige follow and everybody starts to imitate Pollock because they want to be in the club.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:30:06

But there is also a slight danger here. I am thinking of a painter Cheetham mentions in his book. I think he Fernow was his name. He started reading Kant and lecturing on Kant for some painters in Rome in the late 18th century. And the end of this story was that he stopped painting—because he was reading Kant!

**Stephen Hicks**

A perfect anecdote.

**Jan-Ove Tuv**

I absolutely agree you should read Kant, and understand his ideas, but always have something that builds you up.

So what about Aristotle?

**Stephen Hicks**

I'm broadly Aristotelian, I think Aristotle is, is the greatest philosophical genius of all time, but that doesn't mean you have to become an Aristotle scholar. I would say: Read some Aristotle, it will be enriching for you. I also want to say that Aristotle was 2,400 years ago, so lots of things need to be updated. So there's still a significant amount of work for philosophers and psychologists and art historians to do.

But the main point here is that Aristotle is a naturalistic philosopher: the natural world is the real world. We might be able to argue our way to something beyond the natural world as well, but that's where we start. And it's real, it's knowable.

And the human being is capable of magnificent things. If he or she develops his core capacities for sensibility, for reason for passion, in an integrated way—you will put together a full life, and you will become something special yourself. And you will, if you're going to be an artist, be a contributor to the already-impressive traditions of great art.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:32:17

In short: Read Kant to deconstruct your subconscious presumptions, and then read Aristotle to build yourself up.

**Stephen Hicks**

Yes, he's the other foundation for sure.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:32:29

Okay. Stephen Hicks. This has been very, shall we say, enlightening.

**Stephen Hicks**

Nice word.

**Jan-Ove Tuv** 1:32:35

Thank you for coming to the Cave of Apelles.

And thank you for watching. Remember to head over to cable plus.com/subscribe and become a member today. I'll see you next month.

\* \* \*

The interview online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TaevdezX2uo>

Jan-Ove Tuv's website: [CaveofApelles.com](http://CaveofApelles.com)

Stephen Hicks's website: [www.StephenHicks.org](http://www.StephenHicks.org).