


## The feeling of life in Kant: teleology, nature, and freedom

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**ENG Abstract:** This article examines Kant's concept of the "feeling of life," addressing it as a feeling that transcends mere physiological response and intertwines with the aesthetic, ethical, and teleological domains in Kant's work. Beginning with an analysis of the organism as a structure endowed with a formative force that coordinates its parts, the feeling of life is explored on three levels: the animal, the human, and the spiritual. Each of these modes reveals distinct facets of the experience of existence, ranging from sensory delight, through the aesthetic appreciation of the beautiful and the sublime, to the moral pleasure of autonomous action. In addition to contributing to the understanding of organisms as teleological entities, the investigation into the feeling of life paves the way for an interpretation of human subjectivity that considers the interdependence between pleasure, freedom, and nature.

**Keywords:** Kant, feeling of life, pleasure, nature, teleology.

**Summary:** Introduction. 1. Perspectives on the Notion of Life in Kant. 2. Sensation and Feeling. 3. Different Modes of the Feeling of Life. 4. A Shared Pleasure: complaisance (*Wohlgefallen*). 5. Life and Pleasure. 6. Conclusion. 7. References.

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### Introduction

The notion of the "*feeling of life*" (*Lebensgefühl*) plays a central role in Kantian philosophy, connecting key aspects of his theories of nature, aesthetics, ethics, and anthropology. In Kant (KU. AA, 05: 340; Sánchez Madrid 2012, p. 173–175; Lebrun 2002, p. 618), organic life can be understood not merely as the result of physiological processes, but as the manifestation of a teleological principle that internally organizes, preserves, and continuously renews the organism. By proposing the teleological judgment as a means to comprehend this organization, Kant challenges mechanistic explanations of nature and offers a perspective in which living beings are understood as "natural ends," endowed with an autonomous formative power. Within this framework, the feeling of life represents an essential dimension of subjective experience, in which the subject perceives their vital forces through the unity of body and *Gemüt* (mind/spirit) or *Seele* (soul).

This study aims to explore the structure and implications of Kant's concept of the feeling of life, encompassing its three modalities: the animal, the human, and the spiritual feeling of life. In each of these modes, Kant (Ref. AA, 15: 246.04–07) relates pleasure and displeasure to the feeling of life, describing them as responses to stimuli that affect the subject's vital organization. At its most basic level, the animal feeling of life is linked to sensory pleasure and the vital needs of the organism (KU. AA, 05: 205.26–27). On the human level, it manifests in aesthetic appreciation, as in the feelings aroused by the beautiful and the sublime, which go beyond empirical satisfaction (KU. AA, 05: 242). Finally, at the spiritual level, the feeling of life is elevated to the moral sphere, being tied to autonomy and respect for the practical law, that is, to life as an expression of freedom (KU. AA, 05: 207).

In addressing the feeling of life, Kant does not reduce it to a merely physiological sensation, but understands it as a sensible manifestation of the disposition of the *Gemüt* in response to the promotion or inhibition of vital forces (Anth. AA 15: 154). This approach cuts across several domains of his philosophy, from the teleology of the *KU*, through the *Anth*, and into the moral writings and later reflections such as those in the *OP*. In these contexts, the feeling of life functions as an index of an internal relation between representation, pleasure, and



movement, offering a privileged lens through which to think the unity of the subject as both a sensible and rational being. This feeling manifests not only in bodily delight, but also in aesthetic experience and moral elevation, dimensions that, although distinct, are interwoven in the dynamics of living. Taken together, they reveal the possibility of conceiving an integrated experience of existence, in which nature and freedom, body and soul, pleasure and reason are brought into a common horizon.

## 1. Perspectives on the Notion of Life in Kant

Before addressing the notion of “feeling of life” in Kant, it may be useful to briefly consider some reflections on the notion of “life” in Kantian philosophy, given that it does not present itself as a fixed and systematic concept but rather as a philosophical problem whose treatment extends across different moments of the thinker’s work. Life, like other fundamental concepts of nature, does not find a clearly determined place within the critical system, which would require a careful investigation of the various ways in which Kant refers to it and the contexts in which these references occur. From his early writings to his later reflections, Kant oscillates between different formulations.

Kant acknowledges the epistemic limits of inquiry into life. In one of his texts (TG. AA, 02), he states that it may be impossible to determine with certainty to which members of nature life extends and which touch upon its total absence. This uncertainty does not stem from mere empirical ignorance but from a fundamental principle of critical philosophy: the fact that human knowledge is structured by the conditions of sensibility and understanding, never reaching the thing in itself. Thus, life, as an internal principle of organized matter, eludes exact empirical determination and is accessible only through analogies and regulative suppositions.

The distinction between matter and body is essential for understanding Kant’s position on life. Matter, as such, is devoid of life (MAN. AA, 04: 544: 16), serving only as the substrate of sensible experience. The body, however, is organized matter, possessing an internal and external form that allows its structuring into a system. Nevertheless, not every organized body can be considered alive. For Kant, organisms are characterized by a peculiarity that distinguishes them from machines: they not only possess a motive force but also a formative force (*bildende Kraft*), which grants them self-organization and autonomous development. This distinction, inspired by the thought of the naturalist Blumenbach, leads Kant to postulate that living beings cannot be explained solely by the mechanical laws of physics, requiring instead the idea of an internal purposiveness for their comprehension.

The discussion on life in Kant unfolds in the analysis of fundamental forces. In texts such as *ÜGTP*, *EEKU*, and also in the *KU*, Kant rejects the possibility of reducing all forces to a single radical origin, asserting that there exist multiple fundamental forces both in nature and in the soul. In the case of the human soul, the fundamental forces are organized around understanding, will, and imagination. In the Introduction to the *KU*, Kant reformulates this division, reducing all faculties of the mind to three broad categories: the faculty of cognition, the feeling of pleasure and displeasure, and the faculty of desire. This reformulation suggests that life, as a dynamic principle, can be conceived through these three fundamental dimensions of human experience.

The definition of life in Kant also hinges on the distinction between spiritual life and derived life (Refl. 4240. AA 17: 474). For the philosopher, life properly speaking is the life of the spirit, that is, rational life, which manifests itself in the autonomy of the will and the capacity for moral self-determination. Animal life, on the other hand, is a derived life, which can only be considered life in a figurative or analogical sense.

Kant proposes in §65 of the *KU* that the explanation of organisms must be carried out through teleology, that is, through the idea that they are structured *as if* they followed an internal purposiveness. This perspective does not imply that nature actually operates according to purposes but rather that human reason, in attempting to comprehend living beings, finds itself compelled to interpret them in this way. This “purposiveness without purpose” is a regulative principle that guides investigation without committing to dogmatic metaphysical explanations (Pires, 2006). Thus, for Kant, life is not a given empirical concept but an idea that allows us to organize our understanding of nature.ww

If spiritual life is the truly original life, this means that the human being, as a rational being, participates in a mode of existence that is not reducible to natural determination. Freedom, understood as the autonomy of the will, is what distinguishes man from other beings in nature, allowing him to transcend mechanical determinations and to self-determine according to rational laws. This aspect reinforces the thesis that life, in its fullest sense, cannot be reduced to a biological phenomenon but must be conceived as an expression of reason.

From the Kantian text, life can be thought of in terms of an action (determination of forces), or it can also be discussed in terms of activity according to the desire or aversion to the present state, desire or aversion felt in reference to the pleasure or displeasure that a representation provokes in the animal. In Kant’s own words, in one of his formulations:

Life is called the power of a substance to determine itself to act from a principle, of a finite substance to determine itself to change, and of a material substance to determine itself to motion or rest as a change of its state. Now, we know no other principle of a substance for changing its state except desire, and, in general, no other activity except thinking, along with what depends on it: the feeling of pleasure or displeasure and desire or willing (MAN. AA, 04: 544).

Added to this, among the main formulations of the notion of life in Kant, are the following: “the faculty of a being to act according to its representations is called life” (MS. AA 06: 211.08-09); “life rests upon the internal



capacity to determine itself according to arbitrium" (TG. AA, 02: 327); it is "the faculty of an entity to act according to laws of the faculty of appetite" (KpV. AA 05: 9).

According to Kant, "if we seek the cause of any change of matter in life, we must at once look for it in another substance different from matter, though connected with it" (MAN. AA, 04: 544: 17-19). Thus, it is already stated that this capacity must be sought beyond the corporeality of the animal. That which would be responsible for the movement of maintaining or rejecting a state, for activity, for the determination of forces, is not the body itself, although this action is realized in the body. In this sense, the "grounds of determination and actions do not belong to representations of external senses and, consequently, not to the determinations of matter as matter" (MAN. AA, 04: 544: 14-16). These are grounds of determination and actions of this immaterial substance, which, however, are related to matter or, still, to the body of the animal, since all pleasure and pain are felt in the body of the animal (KU. AA, 05). From this perspective, this other substance different from matter would be the one possessing the capacity to determine itself to change through desire, as an internal principle. That is, life could only be presupposed in matter if an immaterial substance related to it were also presupposed, given that "all matter as such is devoid of life" (MAN. AA, 04: 544: 16).

Kant considers, as a hypothesis, in his private notes (Refl. 158a), that there would be basic capacities of the soul<sup>1</sup>. In this sense, the capacity to feel would be original to the soul, alongside the capacity to know, which may be related to the contemporary debate that considered free will and intellect as attributes of the spirit. According to Beckenkamp (2012, p. 216), this is still an "inheritance" from Wolff in Kant, who only after that essay from the 1760s began to distance himself from this connotation of spirit and instead focused on a meaning of the term more closely related to the aesthetic debate, connected to the notion of genius, although one might say that Kant never arrived at "a clear and distinct concept of spirit in this aesthetic sense" (Beckenkamp 2012, p. 232).

The soul is addressed in this context as a substance capable of receiving (passive) representations and provoking (active) an action in response to the reception of these representations. In §7 of the *Anth*, Kant, using the term *Gemüth* instead of *Seele*, mentions that, regarding the capacity to know, the soul connects and separates representations. Meanwhile, the soul's capacity to feel is mentioned in *Refl* 158a as a faculty by which it engages with itself and is affected in a positive or negative way. From this perspective, its activity is directed exclusively toward modifying its own state in response to the unpleasant and enjoying the pleasant.

In creatures, this capacity to feel, linked to an immaterial principle, here referred to as the soul, can be illustrated by a footnote passage in *RGV*, in which Kant comments that Malebranche chose not to attribute souls and feelings to irrational animals, since doing so would imply recognizing that they suffer torments without having committed any fault, like the case of horses, which suffer without having eaten from the forbidden hay (*RGV*. AA 23). In this context, the soul also appears associated with the capacity to feel.

In the *KrV*, Kant mentions "the thinking substance as the principle of life [*Principium des Lebens*] in matter, i.e., as soul [*Seele (anima)*] and as the foundation of animality" (*KrV*. AA, 04: 218, AA, 03: 265). In the *OP*, Kant distinguishes between lifeless machines and living animals, attributing to the latter the presupposition of a soul (*Seele*) (*OP*. AA 22: 373.11-17). In another passage, Kant even mentions that internal motives alone are insufficient to speak of life in matter, as it also requires a principle of movement (or a *vis locomotiva*), namely the soul (*Seele*) in what is living (*OP*. AA 22: 373.11-17).

These considerations regarding the relationship between body and soul, as well as the role of the soul as a principle of movement and sensation, present themselves as challenges to be addressed in any endeavor aiming at a comprehensive understanding of the concept of life in Kant, a task that lies beyond the scope of the present article. Beyond this, and it is in this direction that we shall proceed, by associating feeling with an immaterial substance (the soul) which is capable of both affecting and being affected, Kant points to a form of interiority that cannot be reduced to bodily mechanics. This opens up a number of further questions, among which: what does it mean, after all, to feel alive? To what extent can the feeling of life be attributed only to rational beings, or does it also apply to non-rational animals? How does this experience unfold in different modes of existence, and what role do pleasure and displeasure play in this dynamic? Considering the aim of this article and based on these initial provocations, the following section will delve more specifically into the distinction between sensation and feeling, seeking to determine what exactly can be felt of life, and how such feeling relates to the vital forces of the subject.

## 2. Sensation and Feeling

Kant denies that we can feel life itself. However, we can feel the promotion or the hindrance of life (*Refl*. AA 15: 244.03-04). What can be felt of life is its alternation between pleasure and displeasure. This promotion of life is not merely a transition from displeasure to pleasure but consists in the very dynamics of this alternation. The feeling of pleasure, according to Kant, arises from the relationship between representations and the subject's active forces, originating from the soul, which seek to maintain or produce a representation.

The feeling of life in Kant is distinct from mere vital sensation and from the objective perception of the senses. While *vital sensation* (*Vitalempfindung*) concerns how the subject perceives its own life in an

<sup>1</sup> However, as a matter of prudence, I emphasize that I will cite considerations on the soul in the following discussion based on the *Refl* as well as from the *Anth*, which could compromise the terms of the question, given that the context prioritizes the debate concerning the human being rather than animals in general. Cf. on the context of this discussion regarding the basic faculties of the soul, the approach of Falduto in 1.3 The 1773/1775 Berlin Academy Prize Competition: Examen des deux facultés primitives de l'ame, celle de connoître et celle de sentir, in: Falduto 2014.



organic and physiological manner, *the feeling of life (Lebensgefühl)* refers to the subjective experience of the promotion or inhibition of vital forces from the perspective of pleasure and displeasure (Anth. AA 15: 154).

Kant distinguishes between sensation and feeling by stating that the former is an objective representation of the senses, whereas the latter remains strictly subjective, referring not to the object itself but only to the way it affects the subject (KU. AA, 05: 206). This distinction is further developed in the division between external and internal sense, with the former relating to bodily affections and the latter to those of the *Gemüth* (Anth. AA 15: 154). However, both differ from what Kant calls *inner sense*, which he associates with the subject's receptivity to pleasure and displeasure (Anth. AA 15: 153).

Thus, the feeling of life cannot be reduced to objective sensation or vital perception. It is not merely a simple apprehension of life but rather the way life manifests itself within the subject, mediated by the conditions of pleasure and displeasure.

Kant distinguishes (Anth. AA 15: 154) between two forms of bodily sensations: *vital sensation (sensus vagus)*, which affects the entire nervous system, and *organic sensation (sensus fixus)*, which is restricted to a specific part of the body. Heat and cold, for instance, belong to the domain of vital sensation, as does the shudder induced by the representation of the sublime. However, this relationship between the sublime and vital sensation requires more careful analysis, as the pleasure and displeasure of the sublime belong to the domain of the feeling of life.

The initial shudder before the sublime does not constitute a feeling in itself but rather an internal sensation that accompanies the awareness of nature's overwhelming power. This sensation, however, is overcome when the judging subject recognizes the superiority of its rational faculty, at which point the pleasure proper to the sublime emerges. The pleasure of the sublime, therefore, is not immediate but results from a process in which reason asserts itself in the face of the threat imposed by the immensity or force of nature.

This distinction between sensation and feeling is essential in Kantian anthropology. Heat, cold, and pain belong to the domain of internal sensations, but they do not, by themselves, constitute feelings of pleasure or displeasure. The awareness of undergoing an action in our body is inscribed in sensible intuition rather than in feeling, as Kant suggests in *Refl* 558, the perception of bodily suffering is an intuition, not a feeling. Thus, only when a sensation is assessed in relation to the state of the subject, either promoting or inhibiting its vital forces, does it become a feeling of pleasure or displeasure, thereby entering the domain of the feeling of life.

Therefore, life cannot be felt objectively but can only be subjectively enjoyed through the promotions and inhibitions that generate pleasure or displeasure. The sensation of life, in this sense, is restricted to these moments of promotion and inhibition of vital forces, being limited to the subjective experience of these feelings.

In the *KU* (KU. AA, 05: 204), Kant addresses the feeling of life in a context in which the subject disposes its faculties of the *Gemüth* both in the judgment of cognition, with the understanding as legislator, and in aesthetic judgment, in which these faculties engage freely and indeterminately. In this latter case, the representation is entirely referred to the subject and its feeling of life, expressed in feelings of pleasure or displeasure, without contributing to cognition. Here, Kant reinforces the distinction between feeling and sensation while presenting an understanding of the feeling of life linked to the feelings of pleasure and displeasure, which are fundamental to the discussion of obstacles and promotions to life.

As mentioned, Kant (*Refl*. 561. AA, 15: 244.03–04) reiterates that life itself is not felt, but rather its promotions and inhibitions, which are perceived in the body through pleasure and displeasure. These feelings become a way of “feeling oneself alive,” or of experiencing the feeling of life. In *SF* (SF. AA, 07), Kant mentions that the free use of life, related to spiritual life, is more gratifying than the mere enjoyment of life, which is limited to the body. In this sense, he distinguishes the feeling of spiritual life, which elevates the soul, from the sensation of pleasure or pain, proper to animal life, which is linked to bodily sensation.

Kant (*Refl*. 582. AA, 15: 251.04–06) also highlights that the feeling of life persists even in pain, when the spirit is compelled to abandon its state. The enjoyment of life, on the other hand, involves pleasure, when the spirit is compelled to remain in its state, rather than merely alleviating pain.

In the *Anth* (Anth. AA, 07: 165. 19–24), Kant suggests that “frugality with the capital of your vital feeling” can make the subject “richer by delaying pleasure.” In this context, he reiterates the idea that the mode of feeling of life related to freedom is superior to the mode of feeling of life linked to delight and pain, which belong to sensory pleasure. Kant asserts that the “consciousness of having enjoyment within one's power” is more fruitful and extensive than any sensory satisfaction.

These passages suggest that the modes of feeling of life are not necessarily harmonious with one another, and the pursuit of pleasure, such as the enjoyment of the agreeable, may be incompatible with other forms of this feeling, especially those associated with freedom or self-determination.

Although the feeling of life related to freedom is considered by Kant to be a superior mode, it is not the only mode of feeling of life, as the philosopher himself suggests in his *OP*. Kant (*OP*, AA 22: 495. 03–05) mentions that “organic creatures have not only life, but also a feeling of life that is exhausted through copulation, and, in insects, through starvation itself”<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> It is important, however, to exercise caution when interpreting this text, since the *OP* is not a completed work but rather a collection of notes and drafts that Kant did not have the opportunity to finalize. This makes the work subject to various interpretations. Nevertheless, even without a conclusion, the text is significant for Kantian thought, as scholars such as Santos recognize, pointing to a continuity in the understanding of life and the vital principle, despite some influences of naturalist Romanticism present in the text.



In the context of the *OP*, the idea that irrational animals, such as insects, also possess a feeling of life does not contradict the premises of Kant's earlier texts. In discussing the feeling of life in organic creatures, Kant indicates that this feeling is not limited to human beings but also applies to irrational animals. In this sense, the issue of the species of pleasure and displeasure, as well as the notion of the feeling of life, should be addressed in a way that allows its application both to human beings and to irrational animals, such as insects.

### 3. Different Modes of the Feeling of Life

The *Refl* 567 points to a reconciliation between different modes of feeling alive, establishing a connection between the feeling of life (*Lebensgefühl*) and pleasure. Kant distinguishes three distinct spheres: animal life, human life, and spiritual life. Each of these spheres is associated with different ways in which we experience pleasure or displeasure: "everything that promotes or increases the feeling of life [*Lebensgefühl*] pleases [*gefällt*], concerning either animal life, human life, or spiritual life" (*Refl.* AA, 15: 246.04–06). Kant then adds that "the first pleases in sensation, the second in intuition or phenomenon, the third in concept" (*Refl.* AA, 15: 246.06–07).

By mentioning in *Refl* a distinction between three modes of feeling alive, Kant states that the mode of the feeling of life concerning animal life pleases in sensation. In §3 of the *KU*, Kant mentions that "the agreeable [*angenehm*] is what pleases [*gefällt*] the senses in sensation" (*KU.* AA, 05: 205.26–27). Similarly, regarding the second mode of the feeling of life, the human one, which according to the cited *Refl* pleases in intuition or phenomenon, a possible correspondence is found in the *KU*, this time in the discussion of aesthetic judgments, in which "*complaisance* [*Wohlgefallen*] or displeasure [*Mißfallen*] is immediately connected, without consideration of use or purpose, to the mere contemplation of the object" (*KU.* AA, 05: 242). Regarding the third mode of the feeling of life, referred to in the excerpt as spiritual, which, according to the *Refl* text, pleases in concept, I understand that this reference pertains to the good, which, again according to the *KU*, "is what pleases [*gefällt*] through reason by means of mere concept" (*KU.* AA, 05: 207).

In all cases, the feeling of life is intrinsically linked to pleasure and displeasure, making it impossible to conceive of it without this fundamental relation. Kant further observes in the *KU* that "agreeableness also applies to irrational animals; beauty only to humans [...], but the good applies to every rational being in general" (*KU.* AA, 05: 210.03–05).

The passage stating that "everything that promotes or increases the feeling of life pleases, concerning either animal, human, or spiritual life" (*Refl.* AA, 15: 246.04–06) suggests that, although the feeling of life is related to pleasure, there are at least three ways of experiencing it. This is not a rigid opposition between *Lebensgefühl* and *Geistesgefühl* but rather an expansion of the concept of *Lebensgefühl*, including *Geistesgefühl* as a specific way of feeling alive within the human context.

Thus, the three spheres of feeling alive, animal, human, and spiritual, can be understood as distinct yet interconnected, in the sense that all involve forms of pleasure or displeasure, each in a unique manner. The relationship between the feeling of life and different types of pleasure suggests that the notion of life applies both to human beings and to irrational animals, each in its specific form.

Following this interpretation, the first mode of the feeling of life, the animal one, corresponds to delight or pleasure related to the agreeable. This pleasure is associated with an interest in the object's existence and is fundamentally linked to the faculty of appetite, which is pathologically stimulated. Delight, in this context, precedes the principle of appetite and is determined by the quantity of stimuli (both simultaneous and successive), with an emphasis on the mass of the agreeable sensation. In this case, there is no need for a concept (of the good or the useful) nor for reflection on the object's purpose.

Pleasure in the agreeable, therefore, is private and not universalizable. One cannot assume that everyone will feel the same pleasure in an identical situation, as it is subjective and limited to the individual. Kant emphasizes that, in the case of the agreeable, judgment is based on a private feeling and cannot be generalized. Delight, therefore, does not imply a universal rule regarding the reaction to the object, nor does it involve knowledge of what the object represents.

The second mode of the feeling of life, termed human, is related to pleasure in the beautiful and emotion in the sublime. In this case, *complaisance* involves not only the harmony of the mental faculties but also an awareness of the state of the mind. Kant explains that "everything whose contemplation subjectively produces a consciousness of the harmony of our faculties of representation" generates pleasure (*KpV.* AA 05: 160). In aesthetic judgment, there is a relationship between the given representation and the totality of the faculties, in which the mind becomes conscious of this state.

Aesthetic pleasure occurs when the faculties of cognition, in a "free play," are not constrained by determining concepts, which characterizes the disposition of the mind necessary for the judgment of taste. Kant notes that beauty cannot be linked to a specific concept of the object, such as symmetry or utility, because aesthetic judgment is subjective and connected to the subject's feeling of pleasure or displeasure. Thus, beauty is a disinterested pleasure, without the involvement of an interest in the object's existence.

Although aesthetic judgments are subjective, they possess a universality that is not based on private conditions but on a common foundation shared by all. Beauty, therefore, is universally appreciated, and *complaisance* (*Wohlgefallen*) in the beautiful occurs necessarily, as a subjective necessity, without depending on objective laws.

*Complaisance* in the sublime, in turn, involves a relationship between imagination, understanding, and reason, in which the object arouses both attraction and repulsion in the mind. The sublime does not refer to the object itself but to the disposition of the mind it awakens, characterized by an intense emotion, a deep stirring, in which the subject experiences an indirect displeasure, not caused directly by the object but by the



imagination's inability to represent the totality suggested by the object. The overcoming of this limitation of the imagination, which then becomes free and unlimited, is accompanied by pleasure, even in the face of the initial feeling of powerlessness.

The third mode of the feeling of life, termed spiritual, as suggested, refers to the pleasure associated with respect for the good in itself, which is universally valid. Kant emphasizes that freedom is essential to this type of feeling, as it is incompatible with the adoption of heteronomous principles and can only align with autonomy. This respect for the good in itself cannot be reduced to personal interest, as in the case of the useful, which involves pleasure related to inclinations and particular interests. In the case of the good in itself, pleasure is not the motive for action but emerges as a peculiar modification of the feeling of pleasure, which Kant associates with respect for the moral law (KU. AA, 05: 222).

Complaisance in the good in itself is linked to interest, as the good is the object of the will determined by reason. Pleasure, in this context, would be related to the realization of what is morally good, in accordance with practical reason. The faculty of appetite, according to Kant, is linked to desire, and pleasure or displeasure is connected to the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of the desired object. In the case of moral good, the faculty of appetite identifies with a productive force that seeks not only the possibility of the object but its actual realization, that is, the moral act. Pleasure, then, arises in the execution of the moral action, in the complaisance of the existence of the good, which is a reflection of freedom and the autonomy of the will.

In general, the spiritual feeling of life, founded on freedom, is considered by Kant to be the highest mode of feeling alive, as previously stated. It represents the ultimate expression of life, for it is through freedom and respect for morality that the will attains its fullness. The other modes of feeling alive, such as the animal and the human, promote life only in part, whereas the spiritual feeling of life, connected to the good and to freedom, is what grants life its true totality. In *RefI* 6870, the philosopher suggests that "the complete use of life is freedom" (*RefI*. 6870. AA, 19: 187. 02-03). Thus, the spiritual feeling of life is the fullest, while the animal and human feelings represent incomplete or partial forms of experience.

Life itself cannot be felt, only its promotion or its obstacles can. The modes of the feeling of life, though related to pleasure and displeasure, vary according to their congruence with the subjective principles of life. The spiritual feeling of life, related to the good in itself, is the highest, while the other modes reflect diminished forms of vital experience.

Although the three modes of the feeling of life (animal, human, and spiritual) may at times seem to follow distinct directions, Kant's text suggests that the partial promotion of life can, paradoxically, expand life as a whole. The spiritual feeling of life is incompatible with the animal not only because of the difference in the relations between representation, object, and subject, but also because of the total vivification of the human being that it entails, oriented toward a universalizable principle.

In *RefI* 567, Kant states that "the more the arbitrium is in agreement with itself and with an external will, the more it aligns with the universal principles of life" (*RefI*. 6862. AA, 19: 183. 25-26). Freedom, as a fundamental condition for this universal concordance, is closely tied to the free use of the faculty of appetite, which serves as the foundation of full and original life. However, a presupposition of universality is also present in the other two modes of the feeling of life, making it not an exclusive prerogative of the spiritual feeling of life.

#### 4. A Shared Pleasure: complaisance (*Wohlgefallen*)

Although in *RefI* 567 Kant associates what promotes the feeling of life with pleasure (*gefällt*), and in §5 of the *KU* he reserves the term *Gefallen* for the complaisance related to the beautiful, there is a broader use of the term *Gefallen* in other passages of the *KU*. In §§3 and 4, Kant applies *Gefallen* to the agreeable and the good, without restricting it to the beautiful. It is only in §5 that he makes a precise distinction between the three modes of complaisance, related to delight, pleasure, and approval, emphasizing that "the expressions that befit each one" of these modes "are not identical" (KU. AA, 05: 210).

This leads us to question some understandings of *Wohlgefallen*, which tend to reduce the term to only one of these modes. In this sense, *Wohlgefallen* could be understood as encompassing all three modes of pleasure mentioned, rather than as a synonym for just one of them, such as delight. Indeed, *Wohlgefallen* can be seen as a higher degree of *Gefallen*, which Kant uses to refer to both the agreeable and the good. That is, based on this reading of the *KU*, *Wohlgefallen* can be understood as a totality of the modes of pleasure (delight, pleasure, and approval), considering that these are the only modes of pleasure contemplated by Kant (KU. AA, 05: 266).

Rohden (2010b, p. 49) notes that "to the genus of complaisance, equivalent to *Lust* (pleasure), belong the species called *Geschmack* (taste) [...] and *Vernügen* (delight)". Indeed, in the Kantian text, there are conditions for this interpretation of the relationship between complaisance and pleasure, as well as for the use of the terms *complacentia* and *Complacenz*, which at times refer not only to *Wohlgefallen* but also to *Lust* (pleasure). *RefI* 606 suggests that all possible feelings are reducible to pleasure and displeasure, these being the only feelings a living being could experience, which can be related to the idea that there would be only one immaterial principle in the animal (*RefI*. 6871. AA, 19: 187).

However, for prudence, this equivalence between complaisance and pleasure still requires some further observations. After all, the distinction between the modes of complaisance in Kant is not trivial. It represents an essential part of his theory in the *KU*, where the autonomy of pleasure is discovered, especially by detaching it from the faculty of desire, to which it is still linked up to the *KpV*, associating it with a perspective of demerit. For Kant, the autonomy of pleasure requires its dissociation from the faculty of desire, which gives rise to the concept of disinterested pleasure, no longer tied to the satisfaction of an interest but rather to the conformity



to ends. Thus, one does not feel pleasure or displeasure simply because the representation satisfies an interest but because this representation conforms to an end.

In §5 of the *KU*, Kant distinguishes three different modes of relations between representations and the feeling of pleasure and displeasure: the agreeable (*das Angenehme*), the beautiful (*das Schöne*), and the good (*das Gute*). According to Kant, complaisance may refer to inclination (*Neigung*), favor (*Gunst*), or respect (*Achtung*) in the three cases mentioned.

This observation indicates that complaisance (*Wohlgefallen*) should not be confused with one of the specific kinds of pleasure, such as delight (*Vergnügen*), pleasure (*Gefallen*), approval (*Billigung*), or emotion (*Rührung*), but rather understood as a broader concept encompassing these different modes of pleasure. The distinction between these modes of pleasure arises from their relation to interest, that is, whether pleasure is linked to interest or to disinterest in the existence of the object.

The *KU* tells us that, for pleasure to be experienced, the object must be considered as belonging to one of these four types: agreeable, beautiful, sublime, or good (*KU*. AA, 05: 266). This allows us to understand that, regardless of variations in the feeling of pleasure or displeasure, all are contained within these four cases, with different degrees or forms of pleasure that, even if not mentioned directly, are implied in these four fundamental modes.

Thus, the Kantian distinction between complaisance and its species of pleasure reflects the complexity of the experience of what is living, considering the relation to interest or disinterest. Complaisance, then, can be seen as a more comprehensive category that includes different modes of pleasure, manifesting in the various ways in which the subject relates to the object of their experience.

Perhaps it is not advisable to attribute excessive importance to the nomenclature of the modes of pleasure in the *KU*, even though Kant there appears to follow a more precise systematization, namely, delight, pleasure, emotion, and approval. In other texts, such as the *RefI*, the *MS*, and the *Anth*, he refers to the same distinctions but without maintaining this specific terminology. However, even when the nomenclature varies, with expressions such as pleasure of inclination or contemplative pleasure, the characterization of the modes of pleasure remains constant.

In the *MS*, for example, Kant classifies pleasures in a manner analogous to what he does in the *KU*. The central distinction is given by the relation between pleasure and interest in the existence of the object: pleasures that depend on this relation are practical, whereas pleasures indifferent to the existence of the object are contemplative. Practical pleasure, in turn, is subdivided into two forms: one in which pleasure precedes appetite (interest of inclination) and one in which pleasure results from it (interest of reason). This criterion also appears in the initial paragraphs of the *KU*, although there the species are named with greater precision.

Rohden (2010b, p. 49) suggests that the term *Wohlgefallen*, in Kant's context, would correspond to *complacência* in the sense of a collective pleasure, related to the Latin *complacere*, which means "pleasing to many". This pleasure, in a communal sense, is immediately understandable in reference to aesthetic and moral judgments, where the universality of judgments requires a dimension that transcends private pleasure. However, this conception may at first seem problematic when applied to the case of the agreeable, in which pleasure appears as individual and private, as in the case of delight. Nevertheless, Kant also used the term *Wohlgefallen* in reference to the agreeable.

Regarding this issue, additional questions arise, such as: Why do we feel pleasure or displeasure with certain representations? What criterion defines whether a representation pleases or displeases us? And furthermore, what causes the activity involving the feeling of life to be directed toward maintaining a pleasurable state?

In this sense, a possible path to answering these questions based on the Kantian text suggests considering, even in terms of *als ob*, that the nature of the human being, as well as that of animals in general, is structured in such a way that it tends to "reward" the body when it finds itself in situations that align with a certain perspective and to "punish" the body when these situations oppose that perspective. This perspective, in turn, is linked to the criterion that governs experiences of pleasure and displeasure and would be related to a hidden plan of nature<sup>3</sup>.

The human being, like all of nature, is subject to something beyond itself, and even beyond its species. The human being possesses reason, freedom, for a causality not bound to the mechanism of its nature as a phenomenon; the very development of its reason and free action, which combines a causalist and non-physicalist perspective, is already part of nature's plan. Pleasure would be this manifestation of concordance with the whole, an expression of nature in the animal that feels. The relation between parts and the whole, when thought of in terms of bodies as living beings, might thus be extrapolated to the whole of which living beings themselves are a part—something Kant, in fact, came to consider in his final texts, unpublished during his lifetime, even addressing a perspective of the world soul (*Weltseele*) in the *OP*.

The feeling of spiritual life integrates the human being into a whole through the universalization of the moral law. The feeling of human life integrates into a human whole through the universalization and communication inherent in aesthetic judgment. The feeling of animal life integrates the animal into the environment of which it is a part from its metabolic perspective, through its need for the environment for its own subsistence and the transformation of matter that serves as its nourishment, as well as in relation to reproduction, which also

<sup>3</sup> "When we think as if nature had a purpose, it then becomes possible to provide some kind of explanation as to how organized beings are possible. Life emerges because nature has a purpose, and the purpose of nature is to create life [...] and, especially, to create rational life" (Nahra 2016, p. 199).



implies the other. Not only aesthetic and moral judgments integrate the living being into the world, but also the merely animal pleasure in the situation of the agreeable integrates the animal into the whole of which it is a part. Moreover, these three modes of integration of the living being into the whole to which it belongs are inseparable from the soul, which is a condition for speaking in terms of the living. As Rohden (2010a, p. 341) tells us, everything that operates in the soul corresponds to a full idea of life and seeks to realize itself even corporeally. Since it is nature that has organized and structured the animal, endowing it with reason according to its hidden plan, the soul is also placed in the animal by nature and is part of nature. And since the soul has the criterion of maintaining or dispersing a representation according to its concordance with a plan, the soul seems to be in a more intimate connection, or even a clearer awareness of the hidden plan of nature than the animal, even the rational one, is able to attain.

Kant tells us:

In the end, everything depends on life; what enlivens (or the feeling of the promotion of life) is agreeable. Life is unity: thus, all taste has as its principle the unity of the sensations that enliven. Freedom is the original life, and in its connection, the condition for the concordance of all life; therefore, that which promotes the increase of the feeling of universal life or the feeling of the promotion of universal life causes pleasure. But do we feel well in universal life? Universality causes all our feelings to harmonize, even if no particular type of sensation precedes this universality. It is the form of *consensus* (Refl. 6862. AA 19: 183.21-31).

The animal feels itself alive as part of a greater plan; the animal feels alive in occasions when the representation agrees or disagrees with something beyond its phenomenal ephemerality, though including it nonetheless. This is nature organized as a system, as an organism. This does not imply having consciousness of the whole of which the animal is a part, nor consciousness of what makes it feel alive to feel alive, or even of why it feels pleasure in order to feel pleasure. The mind/soul must become conscious in the feeling of its state (KU. AA, 05: 277), not the animal. This notion of what agrees and what disagrees with this hidden plan of nature must be sought in the vital principle, in the soul, not in matter as such.

When the feeling of animal life comes into contradiction with the feeling of spiritual life, the question arises: is this contradiction, in some way, in conformity with nature's plan? Moreover, is it possible to understand this natural organization in such a way as to integrate both the private pleasure of delight and the communal perspective of moral or aesthetic pleasure? Perhaps the key to this compatibility lies precisely in the universality implicit in the concept of *Wohlgefallen*, which, by transcending the individual, indicates a broader criterion aimed at harmony and concordance, not only on the individual level but also on the collective and universal levels.

## 5. Life and Pleasure

This distinction between the forms of pleasure and the universality of *Wohlgefallen* is particularly relevant when considering the definition of life presented in the *KpV*, where Kant states that "life is the faculty of a being to act according to laws of the faculty of appetite" (*KpV*. AA 05: 9 n). What distinguishes this definition from others in Kant? The reference to the laws of the faculty of appetite. In this sense, it seems to privilege the feeling of spiritual life, linked to freedom and the good in itself, since it mentions laws that, according to *Refl* 5237, contain imperatives about what ought to happen. Thus, it is not merely a matter of desire or disinterested contemplation, but a force directed toward the production of a represented object.

This definition, however, is partial. Its limitation becomes even more evident when considered in light of the definition of pleasure that Kant presents immediately afterward in the same passage: "pleasure is the representation of the concordance of the object or the action with the subjective conditions of life, that is, with the faculty of causality of a representation with a view to the actuality of its object" (*KpV*. AA 05: 9 n). Here, pleasure appears as linked to the realization of what is desired, that is, to the satisfaction found in the actualization of an end. This pleasure will be called interest, a satisfaction mediated by reason in the existence of something. But this is not the only kind of pleasure possible, as has already been clarified. Aesthetic judgment, for example, implies a pleasure independent of the existence of the represented object, as Kant himself had already mentioned in the Introduction to the *MS*: "there may be a pleasure that is not united with any desire for the object, but rather with the mere representation one has of an object (regardless of whether it exists or not)" (*MS*. AA 06: 211).

Kant distinguishes the faculty of appetite from pleasure, as well as a pleasure detached from appetite, a necessary condition for addressing morality and taste. However, "life," "pleasure," and "faculty of appetite" are closely related, as observed in both the *KpV* and the *MS*, where they are defined consecutively.

One possible interpretation is that life refers to the soul's capacity to determine its forces, but without implying the creation of the object of representations. The soul experiences a representation as such, whether sensible or intellectual, and organizes its forces or faculties in the sense of maintaining or dispersing that representation. In the animal body, this manifests as pleasure and displeasure, which, in Kant, are merely symptoms of life, perceived by the living subject.

Pleasure, although a unique feeling to which all possible feelings are reducible, reveals nothing about the represented object. This pleasure cannot be the foundation of morality, for in Kant's view, moral action is not based on pleasure. Furthermore, the value of life is not measured by the amount of pleasure experienced. For Kant, pleasure is a stratagem of nature, which, by endowing man with reason and the freedom of the will, reveals its purpose.



Kant argues in the *laG* that the human being should not be guided by instinct, but at the same time, nature is not extravagant in means, always being efficient in its ends. In this sense, the question arises: why did nature constitute us in such a way that we experience pleasure in the agreeable, if this were superfluous or contrary to moral action? Man is not meant to live in constant deprivation, struggling against his animality. The human destiny is not dissatisfaction but rather a complex synthesis between material body and reason, in which pleasure and displeasure become fundamental elements of the experience of life.

Pleasure and displeasure, for Kant, are not mere obstacles or complications in moral life but rather the foundation for the very possibility of feeling alive. Without them, the human being could have consciousness of his existence but would not experience the feeling of life. Pleasure, thus, becomes the expression of life, being inseparable from the human being as a living subject.

In *Refl* 4857, Kant states that “only pleasure and displeasure constitute the absolute, because they are life itself” (*Refl*. 4857. AA, 18: 11.18-19). In this sense, pleasure is not merely a reflection of life but life itself, being the source of human feeling and action. Animality, the aesthetic perspective, and morality are thus directly related to life and pleasure, rather than to their negation, as is often interpreted. Nature, in constituting the human being, integrates pleasure into the experience of life, and it is the harmony of this representation with the hidden plan of nature that determines whether the representation is felt as pleasurable.

Kant identifies the *animus/soul* as the vital principle (*KU*. AA, 05: 277), highlighting its relationship with the body in the alternation between pleasure and displeasure. This conception is situated within both the aesthetic and ethical contexts and can be extended to the animal sphere in the case of the agreeable. Obstacles to and promotions of life emerge from this relationship between *animus* and body, which recalls the idea of a life seeking to realize itself corporeally.

In this sense, in *Refl* 6658, Kant tells us: “to live in conformity with nature does not mean to live according to the impulses of nature but according to the idea in which the foundation of nature is found,” that is, to live according to nature means following the idea that grounds nature, not mere natural impulses. Conformity with the foundation of nature is not reduced to the satisfaction of impulses but requires the development of man's natural dispositions. Thus, the totality of the human being, as both material body and soul, is considered in order to understand the articulation between nature, pleasure, and purposiveness.

In the First Proposition of the *laG*, Kant states that the natural dispositions of a creature are destined to develop fully according to an end. In various passages, he elaborates on these dispositions, as in the essay *MAM* (1786), where he distinguishes two dispositions: the animal and the moral.

Even dispositions that do not directly aim at morality, such as the “crude dispositions,” contribute to the development of nature's greater plan, as Kant observes in the Fourth Proposition of the *laG*, inviting us to be grateful to nature for its complexities, such as competitive envy and the insatiable desire for power.

In *Refl* 571, Kant states that *Wohlgefallen* is the foundation of appetites and activities, being the direction of forces and the practice of life. This idea highlights the importance of the feeling of animal life within the hidden plan of nature. Kant argues that if the instincts and capacities of a living creature were meant to be fought against or repressed, the resulting feeling from their activation would be one of mere displeasure, as life would be perceived as being hindered. However, in the *RGV*, Kant maintains that natural inclinations are, in themselves, good and irreproachable and that attempting to eradicate them is not only futile but harmful (*RGV*. AA 23).

Nevertheless, natural dispositions present a paradoxical character, as, although they are related to animality and bodily delight, they were not placed in human beings with the aim of achieving the moral state but rather to ensure the preservation of the species. This conflict between animality and morality is resolved only through a perfect civil constitution, something that Kant considers to be the highest goal of culture. Until this ideal constitution is achieved, the human being remains in a state of vices and miseries.

In §83 of the *KU*, Kant observes that nature has not spared human beings from destructive effects, such as diseases, hunger, and natural catastrophes, in addition to having endowed us with contradictory dispositions. As long as we have not reached the full use of reason and a perfect civil constitution, we remain subject to the torments that individuals create for themselves and for others. Although human beings have the unique capacity to act beyond their empirical inclinations, finding in their reason the causality of action, they still remain, as phenomena, part of nature and subject to it.

The discussion of Kant's natural dispositions is intrinsically linked to the idea that nature, which includes the human being, has endowed man with dispositions that enable him, among them reason. Regarding human behavior, Kant states that, although nature provides dispositions for both animality and morality, the human being, endowed with reason, is not predestined to follow these dispositions in a predictable manner. He possesses the freedom to act according to his immaterial principle, which allows him to become aware of his supersensible condition.

Instinct guides and regulates desires, but its satisfaction is not even sufficient for nature itself, which responds with boredom to mere obedience to animal impulses (*Anth*. AA 15: 253). To refuse these impulses is not to deny nature's plan but to fulfill it. Even though animal inclinations are teleologically suited to our determination as a species, for the preservation of the species, their isolated satisfaction remains insufficient.

If acting according to the idea of nature implies pleasure in all natural dispositions, where does aesthetic pleasure fit? Aesthetic judgments, related to the feeling of life, do not derive from inclinations or interests, but are in conformity with the foundation of nature, possessing a purposiveness without a determinate end. They are, so to speak, a grace of nature to the human being.



The feeling of life refers to the totality of the world. Thus, even the pleasure of the animal, however selfish it may be, participates in a greater plan, even if hidden. If it were not in conformity with this plan, its experience would not be one of pleasure but of displeasure.

Every promotion of life, whether physical or ideal, is partial and is only fully realized within a greater design, which also applies to the human being as a species. Kant distinguishes the feeling of spiritual life as higher than the animal one, as it aligns more perfectly with the hidden plan of nature. Kantian terminology is precise: the feeling of animal life refers to the sensible capacity common to living beings; the human one, to the self-awareness of its dual nature, rational and animal; the spiritual one, to pure practical reason or free will.

This discussion thus highlights an integral perspective of the human being, overcoming reductionist dualisms between soul and body or a depreciative view of the body in relation to reason. In this sense, for example, Rohden (2010a, p. 234) mentions that “in beauty, man feels himself entirely as man, because it reintegrates soul and body, animal and rational; only in it does man feel at home in the world”. Oroño (2014, p. 208) also emphasizes this relationship, which is also revealed in the case of the sublime. It is the revelation of “human existence as a sensible and supersensible complex; bodily and spiritual; finite and infinite”. In an approach that broadens this discussion in Kant beyond the perspective of aesthetic reflective judgments (thus including in the debate the *KrV* and the *KpV*), Ugarte (2010, p. 110) suggests that “the life and corporeality of the subject must be interpreted as the subjective and material condition of all possible experience, at least among us humans”.

## 6. Conclusion

The article began with an introductory analysis of the notion of life in Kant, showing that it is not a notion with a stable and unequivocal status throughout his work, but one that traverses multiple domains, from the metaphysics of nature to anthropology, from teleology to morality. Life, understood as the *capacity of a substance to determine itself to act according to representations*, implies an internal principle of motion that cannot be explained merely by the mechanical forces of matter. This formative force, linked to the soul, forms the basis for conceiving the living being as an organism endowed with internal purposiveness. The soul, in this sense, is understood as the condition both for life and for sensibility, paving the way for the formulation of the feeling of life as an expression of the relation between body, mind (*Gemüt*), and world.

Subsequently, the distinction between sensation and feeling in Kantian philosophy was examined, with emphasis on the subjective and non-representational character of feeling. The feeling of life, understood as the sensible experience of the promotion or inhibition of the subject's vital forces, does not refer to life as an object. Unlike vital sensation, which can be localized in organs or regions of the body, the feeling of life appears as an internal disposition connected to how the subject is affected by its own representations. This distinction is essential to understanding how Kant articulates pleasure, displeasure, and life, without reducing the experience of feeling alive to a physiological datum. To feel alive, for Kant, is to feel the internal modulation of one's own forces, in the form of pleasure or displeasure, in relation to the subjective organization of life. The feeling of life, in this context, occupies an intermediate position between pure corporeality and pure rationality: it expresses the condition of the subject as a sensible being who is, at the same time, oriented by an internal structure of purposiveness.

Based on this differentiation, the article explored the three modes of the feeling of life in Kant's work: the animal, the human, and the spiritual. Each of these modes manifests in distinct forms of pleasure, sensory delight, aesthetic pleasure, and moral respect, which correspond to different ways in which the subject is integrated into a greater whole. The animal feeling of life, linked to delight and the satisfaction of inclinations, reflects the organism's dependence on its environment; the human feeling of life, articulated with aesthetic judgment, expresses the subjective harmony of the faculties and the opening to universal communication; while the spiritual feeling of life, grounded in moral respect and autonomy, manifests life in its highest form, presupposing freedom and alignment with practical reason. This tripartition, far from establishing rigid oppositions, allows for an integrative view of the modes of feeling alive, as all of them relate to the promotion of life, each in its proper domain.

The analysis of the concept of *Wohlgefallen* suggests that, although complaisance in Kant is usually associated with aesthetic judgment, its application is broader, potentially encompassing the various forms of pleasure described throughout his work: from sensory delight to moral respect. Pleasure, in this sense, functions as an index of concordance between the subject and the natural order, not in the empirical sense of biological adaptation, but as a sign of the subject's insertion into a living and organized totality. The soul, in judging a representation as in accordance or not with that order, mobilizes the subject's forces such that pleasure signals the promotion of life. Thus, even seemingly private pleasures, such as delight, can be understood within a broader teleological framework, as they indicate the subject's alignment with the world of which it is a part.

Finally, the reflection on the link between life and pleasure showed that the feeling of life in Kant is not merely a contingent subjective experience, but rather a bond between nature, freedom, and purposiveness. Life is not reduced to mere biological reproduction or to blind obedience to natural impulses but consists in the capacity to act according to internal principles, a capacity that manifests, sensibly, through pleasure and displeasure. The feeling of life, as the expression of the unity between body and soul, enables an understanding of human existence as an integrated phenomenon, in which reason and sensibility, finitude and freedom, are interwoven.

The feeling of life, in its highest form, points to freedom as the original principle of life. Freedom, as the capacity to determine oneself according to laws that reason gives to itself, fulfills life in its fullest sense.



Thus, feeling alive, for the human being, is not merely a sensible experience, but also an exercise of their rational and moral condition. Life is not exhausted in biological subsistence or in sensory delight; it is fulfilled in autonomy, when the subject feels, through the internal harmony of its forces with the moral law, that their existence has meaning, not only in the world, but with the world.

Therefore, pleasure and displeasure are not mere sensory reactions, but indicators of the living being's integration into a greater whole, be it biological, aesthetic, or moral. Pleasure, in this context, is an expression of harmony, a manifestation of the whole. The soul, in its connection with the hidden plan of nature, is responsible for directing the forces of the subject in relation to representations that orient bodily feelings. It is through the soul that the living being connects with the totality. It is a soul that feels, a soul somehow aware of nature's hidden order, a soul that establishes the criterion by which we feel something in the body as pleasurable or painful, a soul that orients, creates representations, undoes, and moves more than just limbs: it moves nature itself, it moves the course of history.

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