

# Taking People as People — Kant, Judgments of Beauty and Judgments of Morality

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ABSTRACT. I address the questions of why Kant connects aesthetic judgment per se with the ideal of human beauty. Kant realizes that the new paradigm of judgment introduced in the third *Critique* leaves it open which of these three judgments (logical, aesthetic and practical) will be employed in making sense of what Kant call the “general cognition” preceding all three. Though Kant believes that aesthetic judgment helps us become attune to moral ideals, it also raises the problem that beauty distract form moral personhood, aesthetizing the individual, turning her into an object, thereby effecting the breakdown of moral relations.

## I. Introduction

In this paper I address two important sections in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, those on free and adherent beauty (§15) and on the ideal of beauty (§16), with reference to Kant’s moral theory. I address the questions of why Kant connects aesthetic judgment per se with the ideal of human beauty, especially given his earlier emphasis on aesthetic judgment as disinterested because it is without a concept, and hence outside the purview of moral or any type of conceptual judgments. The need for this move arises because Kant realizes that the new paradigm of judgment introduced in the third *Critique*, according to which there are logical judgments, judgments of pleasure and displeasure and judgments of desire, leaves it open which of these three judgments will be employed in making sense of what Kant call the “general cognition” preceding all three (§:219)<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> All in text citations are given according to the Akadmie Ausgabe edition pagination and are to Kant, I. 1987. *Critique of judgment*, Indianapolis, IN.: Hackett.

This leads to the potential problem that that moral judgments might be undermined by the conceptual indeterminacy of objects of beauty.

The answer, I suggest, is that Kant realized that unless he linked the object which elicits the aesthetic response to some sort of conceptual (and hence possibly ethical) content, aesthetic judgment runs the risk of becoming irrelevant and potentially at odds with morality.

An important issue that lies behind Kant's treatment of both aesthetic and moral judgment, but one which is never quite put in the terms I will employ here, is the question of who is a moral subject. This is an empirical or historical question in the sense that the set of those objects in the world who are also capable of self-determination is estimated to be different at different times. The question is one which has preoccupied both ethics and political philosophy since at least Plato's *Republic*. In Plato, different sorts of responsibilities and capacities are attributed to different sorts of humans, not all of whom are capable of making decisions for themselves. In general, as history progressed, the group of humans who were recognized as moral subjects steadily increased, including white women first, then including people of color and so forth. There have, of course, been times when people previously thought to be moral subjects were stripped of their moral personhood, for instance in the concentration camps of the Third Reich.

The point that is interesting for our discussion of Kant's aesthetics and moral theory is that Kant seems to have two different understandings of ethical and aesthetic judgments. These are by no means exclusive, but, as I argue elsewhere, Kant gradually shifts from the first to the second after the completion of the *Groundwork*.<sup>2</sup> The first theory, the one which readers of Kant have generally concentrated on, is what I will call the tran-

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<sup>2</sup> In general the transition from the first, the static model, to the second, dynamic model, can be seen in Kant's development of the fact of reason in the second *Critique*. The failure of the deduction of morality in *Groundwork* III showed Kant that any 'proof' of morality has to be conceived of from the first person perspective, from the perspective of the moral judge herself rather than from the standpoint of reason alone. Morality thus becomes an experience, still mainly thought of as universal, but one which requires us to know something more about the subject making the moral judgments. Those humans who are incapable of taking up the moral standpoint are thereby not capable of morality themselves. Thus the question of who is a moral subject becomes of particular importance and no longer something that can be taken for granted.

scendental model. This is Kant’s usual perspective, concentrating on the conditions for the possibility of certain types of judgments whether they occur frequently in everyday life or not.<sup>3</sup> Under this moral judgments are accurately able to distinguish between things and persons, treating each according to the correct law.

The second model, which I will call the phenomenological or experiential model, concentrates rather on what it is like to be a human subject having to make ethical decisions. This is the perspective of moral reflection, of the application of the categorical imperative. Kant writes: “Inexperience in the course of the world, incapable of being prepared for whatever might come to pass in it, I ask myself only: can you also will that your maxim become a universal law?”<sup>4</sup> Here there is space and need for thinking about how we determinate that an object of general cognition is a moral subject rather than an object. Thus, in order to apply the categorical imperative, we must know whom to apply it too. This, as history has shown, is by no means always an easy or obvious task. This problem is tackled, at least in part, in the discussion of the relation between morality and beauty and in particular, in the ideal of beauty, to which I now turn.

## 2. The Aesthetic as Aid to the Moral

One of the innovations which Kant saw himself bringing to the debate about aesthetics was the claim that aesthetic judgments are a special type of judgment distinct from logical judgments and judgments of practical reason. Kant also wanted the new aesthetic judgment to function as a way of overcoming the “immense gulf” between the concept of nature and the concept of freedom. This might be bridgeable, according to Kant, by thinking of “nature such that the lawfulness of [nature’s] form will harmo-

<sup>3</sup> This perspective is exemplified by Kant’s unapologetic claim that “if there is no genuine supreme basic principle of morality that does not have to rest only on pure reason independent of all experience, I believe it is unnecessary even to ask whether it is a good thing to set forth in their generality (*in abstracto*) these concepts as they, along with principles belonging to them, are fixed a priori, if this cognition is to be distinguished from the common and called philosophic.” Kant, I. 1996b. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 4:409.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 4:403.

nize with at least the possibility of [achieving] the purpose that we are to achieve in nature according to laws of freedom”. In this way, Kant continues, “the transition from our way of thinking in terms of principles of nature to our way of thinking in terms of principles of freedom” is made possible. (5:175-76) The second task of the third *Critique*, according to this above passage, is to link aesthetics to morality. This occurs because, “the *contemplation of nature*, [...] indicates at least a mental attunement favorable to moral feeling.” (5:299)

The connection between judgment of beauty (I leave aside the sublime) and morality is central yet fraught for Kant. For reasons I’ve already indicated, the need to connect these two types of judgments is important for more than pedagogical reasons, but the connection also threatens to undermine precisely what Kant aims to show in the third *Critique* namely that aesthetic judgments are autonomous of logical and moral judgments.

Kant’s theory of judgment is of fundamental importance for understanding this problem. In first two *Critiques* Kant argued that the world of experience was divided between cognitive and practical judgments. In the third *Critique*, Kant introduces a tripartite distinction according to which we have three powers or capacities: cognitive power, that of the feeling of pleasure and displeasure and the power of desire. These correspond to logical judgments, aesthetic judgments and practical judgments. (5:177-78) Kant also situates the power of judging according to pleasure and displeasure between the two others, stipulating that this power makes possible a transition between the realm of nature and the realm of reason.

Aesthetic judgment, to which we now turn in detail, thus holds a special position within the theory of judgment for Kant, since it is a judgment which neither yields knowledge nor prompts action. It interrupts us and is not, therefore, completely without efficacy (this having been ruled out by the underlying theory of purposiveness which is included in all judgments). Rather, judgments which fail to yield a determinate judgment of the “general cognition” given to the understanding by objects in general, produce a quickening of the understanding and the imagination which gives rise to pleasure at being kept in this state of searching for a concept. “Consciousness of a [re]presentation’s causality directed at the subject’s state so as to *keep* him in that state, may here designate generally what we call pleasure”. (5:220) Kant adds a few sections later that in aesthetic judgment we

“*linger* in our contemplation of the beautiful, because this contemplation reinforces and reproduces itself. [... Here] the mind is passive.” (5:223)

This passivity of mind experienced in aesthetic judgment exposes the underlying character of judgment itself, namely purposiveness. This is evident from the fact that in judgments of beauty, what comes into view is purposiveness without purpose rather than purposiveness mixed with actual purpose or interest. That is, the aesthetic judgment reveals to us that our orientation is always purposeful even if we cannot make out the purpose. This is of interest from the transcendental perspective in the sense that we have learned something about how judgment itself works before it is taken up by practical interests. What is more, this general purposiveness connected to lack of concrete purpose reveals to us our constant struggle for determinate conceptual content.

Putting this point together with the experiential model’s claim that the aesthetic judgment attunes us to the good, we can say that the judgment of the beautiful attunes us to morality in the sense that it sharpens our judgment by challenging it, by provoking the search for more and more adequate concepts through which to give conceptual content to the world. In the practical realm of moral experience, this search is meant to translate into a better discernment of the relevant categories of the good as they relate to our actions. It is in this way that, I suggest, the aesthetic is meant to aid the good.

Adding in the original question about the potentially problematic task of identifying humans as humans, we can now see that judgments of taste may open us up to particular types of judgments which has been previously obscure and which, thanks to either natural or artistic presentation, now become available to us. Aesthetic judgment attunes thus us to the purpose not just of particulars but also to our purpose in general. Given that our general purpose is to respect humanity and improve it, aesthetic judgment also attunes us to that purpose.<sup>5</sup> But in order to fulfill this purpose, we must become aware of all those who are co-involved in that purpose, hence judgment also seems to exhort us to pay attention to those around us.

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<sup>5</sup> Our fundamental purpose, as Kant puts it in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, is “one’s own perfection and the happiness of others”. Both include the recognition of dignity, either within the subject or in the subject whom one is working to make happy. Kant, I. 1996c. *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 6:385.

### 3. Aesthetic Judgment as Danger to Morality

The aesthetic appreciation of an object, as we saw, interrupts us in our practical activity. Kant clearly thinks that this sort of interruption is productive of morality in the way I sketched above. But what if it is not? What if, on the contrary, the aesthetic judgment takes us out of our practical moral relation to the other and makes us forget about our duty to the object of beauty which happens, also, to be human?

That this is no idle point becomes clear when we reflect a little more on the history of aesthetics and the attribution of dignity. The point is particularly striking in questions of gender where women are often referred to as the fair sex, *le beau sexe*, in French and *das schöne Geschlecht* in German.<sup>6</sup> Women, among others, have been routinely aestheticized as a, perhaps unconscious, way of depriving them of their moral status. In such cases, the aesthetic, the desire for beauty, might prompt a certain group, voluntarily or not, to dress or look a certain way, hoping to arouse the pleasurable experience of beauty of those in power, thereby objectifying themselves.

### 4. Kant's Solution to the Problem of the Aestheticized Human Subject

Though perhaps not thinking in these terms exactly, Kant proposes an answer to exactly the problem raised above by attempting to link human beauty to conceptual content in a controversial move clearly designed to avoid the possibility of aestheticizing the human subject. The main discussion of this issue comes in the third moment of the Analytic of the Beautiful. Here Kant introduces the concepts of free and adherent beauty as well as the ideal of beauty.

Kant gives little warning that he is about to add considerable qualifications to the analysis of the beautiful given so far. There Kant had defined

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<sup>6</sup> Kant writes: "That by far the greatest part of humankind (including the entire fair sex [*das ganze schöne Geschlecht*]) should hold the step toward enlightenment to be not only troublesome but also highly dangerous will soon be seen by those guardians who have kindly taken it upon themselves to supervise them." Kant, I. 1996a. *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* In: Gregor, M. J. (ed.) *Practical philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 8:35.

the beautiful as what is purposive without a purpose, that is, as something that elicits liking through the harmony of the understanding and the imagination. Indeed, Kant maintains this definition for what he now qualifies as free beauty: “Free beauty does not presuppose a concept of what the object is [meant] to be.” (5:229) Kant’s example is a flower, but he also mentions “designes *à la grecque*, the foliage on boarders or on wallpaper” including artistic beauty in the category. (5:229)

Adherent beauty, by contrast, is the beauty of a human being (his other examples include horses and churches) which “does presuppose the concept of the purpose that determines what the thing is [meant] to be, and hence a concept of its perfection”. (KU 5:230) Kant thus asserts that the human being includes a concept which is not erased or put on hold by the aesthetic judgment. Human beauty is thus a hybrid between aesthetics and moral cognition.

This hybridity is illustrated by a somewhat strained reference to Maori tattooing practices: “A figure could be embellished with all sorts of curls and light but regular lines, as the New Zealanders do with their tattoos, if only it were not the figure of a human being.” (5:230) Kant’s point is that the designs on the Maori warrior would be beautiful if they were not drawn on a human being. Humans, in other words, should not be decorated in that way. But why is this so? It appears that the worry Kant is here perhaps clumsily articulating is the worry that by being decorated or perhaps represented in some way, the concept of human dignity is being obscuring. The problem, in other words, is that the Maori warrior is being turned into something which he is not: an object of free beauty.

The problem that potentially arises in free beauty, as Kant has just made clear in his example of the flower, is that even the botanist, “while recognizing [the flower] as the reproductive organ of a plant, pays no attention to this natural purpose when he judges the flower by taste.” (5:229) Kant’s reservation against certain kinds of artistic practices involving humans is that in these practices, humans are instrumentalized for the pleasure of aesthetic appreciation and may be seen as objects rather than as subjects. This worry is the more mild version of my initial concern that aesthetic judgment might remove some humans from the realm of moral consideration or interrupt our moral relations with them in favor of aesthetic pleasure. Too strong an aesthetic pleasure in the human being, in

other words, violates Kant's stricture to act so that you "use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means."<sup>7</sup>

However, it *is* the case that we aestheticize human, and that we do so all the time, whether it is the 18 Century French actor or actress, not permitted a church burial because of perceived immorality or the modern equivalent, the aptly named 'it girl' who is understood chiefly (or only?) in relation to her physical beauty. Kant understood this problem and responded to it in his concept of the ideal of beauty. According to this theory, beauty is exemplified by the human form and therefore represents a melding of concept and judgment of taste. This theory would then safeguard human form from being aestheticized to the exclusion of human dignity.

In presenting this corrective to the dangers of free beauty Kant picks up on his previous claim that the object that which elicits the judgment of adherent beauty contains within it an intrinsic purpose or "the concept of its perfection". Kant defines the ideal as "the presentation of an individual being as adequate to an idea" of reason. (5:232) For Kant, the ideal of beauty must thus be a rational concept as well as a determinate one. This means that while Kant previous included horses and churches within the category of adherent beauty which he now elaborates on, we can see that these will not do for a rational ideal since they are incapable of containing within themselves their own determinate and rational standard.

Kant concludes: "this leaves only that which has the purpose of its existence within itself— *man*." (5:233) In humanity, then, perfection and beauty are properly combined. By postulating a necessary connection between human perfection and beauty Kant has avoided the problem of aestheticization. As the theory now stands, it is impossible to make a true or intersubjectively valid judgment which reduces a human to a mere object of aesthetic enjoyment. All such judgments are now seen to be deficient with regard to the just articulated ideal of beauty.

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<sup>7</sup> Kant, I. 1996b. *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 4:429.



## 5. Problems

The problem with Kant's defense of humanity from aestheticization are, however, significant. We can see the problems in terms of both the transcendental and the phenomenological model in Kant. On the philosophical level, the first and perhaps largest problem is that by connecting dignity and beauty in the way he has, Kant might have voided the necessary distinction between aesthetic judgment and moral judgment in the sense that aesthetic judgment is now, in its paradigmatic form as judgment of human beauty, no longer free but tied to the concept of human dignity.

But even if the transcendental account is not defective, it still becomes difficult to see where aesthetic judgment stops and where moral judgment starts from a practical perspective. The second problem is therefore that if there is no clear distinction, *in concreto*, between aesthetic judgment and moral judgment, then aesthetic judgment may be unable to perform the task of helping the agent to become attuned to morality.

However, from an experiential or phenomenological perspective, I still think that Kant is right that of judgment of beauty interrupts our attention, focusing it in new ways, and thus training us to see the world in a more nuanced way. The problem ultimately, then, winds up being that Kant has no argument against the possibility that aesthetic judgment could be used for good *or* for evil.

## References

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