

Ancient Poetics and Kantian Judgments of the Beautiful

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ABSTRACT. This paper begins a rapprochement between Kant and Aristotle concerning judgments of the beautiful or *kalon*. Despite the popular scholarly division between Kant as a non-realist and Aristotle as a realist (in aesthetics as in other areas), as well as Kant's general orientation toward the beautiful in nature, whereas Aristotle is explicitly talking about made things (which are teleologically definite), we will see how such a rapprochement is plausible. Both try to defend a universalist position in aesthetics, which—while working from opposite ends of the problem—have some substantial agreements underlying their perceived differences. As one example, we will see how the particular pleasure of tragedy (catharsis) in the audience, which is used by Aristotle to determine the *kallistos*—most beautiful—plots, is related to Kant's contention that judging of a thing's beauty is a subjective and disinterested judgment.

I. Introduction

The gods have ordained the change of holidays as times of rest from labor. They have given us as fellow celebrants the Muses... in order that these divinities might set human beings right again. Thus men are sustained by their holidays in the company of the gods. (Laws 2:653d)

There has been some considerable work done in ethics attempting to show that the traditional antipathy between Kant and the ancients, Aristotle particularly, has been greatly exaggerated.¹ In this paper I will begin to examine how an Aristotelian poetics may provide helpful insight into some

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¹ See Engstrom and Whiting, eds. (1996) for starters.

of the scholarly cruxes of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*.² One reason to consider that such a rapprochement should be plausible is because both want to defend a universalist position in aesthetics. Kant's claim that the judgment of the beautiful has a "subjectively universal validity" is perfectly clear on that matter, though what this means and how it is most adequately played out is a matter about which there is not a universal agreement. On the other hand, Aristotle is less direct about such a claim, though the interlocking claims that 1) mimesis is natural to man, and that 2) different kinds of mimesis have differing natures which undergo distinctive quasi-natural development³ in order to best achieve the end of each form, which is 3) a certain kind of pleasure⁴—about which pleasure many audiences make mistakes—leads Aristotle to conclude that while there is not actual agreement on the fineness or beauty of certain works of art, there should be. So, in *Poetics* 13 and 14, e.g., we find Aristotle deciding which tragedies are *kallistos*—most beautiful, most fine. Further, like Kant, we can see that Aristotle is clearly uniting this "should be universal" judgment regarding very particular works of art with a certain kind of pleasure—other types of pleasure or feeling not being appropriate for the art (1453a 30-37). So, Aristotle's judgment about a work of art, like Kant's, intends universality and is based on particular kind of, or relation to, pleasure.

These introductory remarks already touch on one problem any argument proposing this kind of rapprochement will have deal with; namely, the popular scholarly division between Kant as a non-realist and Aristotle as a realist. This difference would seem to divide their agreement about specifically aesthetic judgments and pleasure rather strongly: for Kant the judgment and pleasure are traced to what the 'so-called' beautiful thing or work of art arouses *in us*,⁵ while Aristotle is pointing rather explicitly to things *in the beautiful work*. Perhaps this dilemma between realism and

² Hereafter abbreviated *KU* and noted according to the *Akademie Ausgabe* pagination in the text. I have generally used the Pluhar translation (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), but have occasionally made adjustments without additional notation.

³ See *Poetics* 4. I have generally used Halliwell's translation in the Loeb Classical Edition, though I may occasionally change it to fit my sense of the Greek. Henceforth noted in the text according to the usual convention.

⁴ E.g., at 1450a 29-31, and underlying the argument of *Poetics* 13 and 14.

⁵ I say 'so-called' because Kant says that we "talk about the beautiful as if beauty were a characteristic of the object" (*KU* 211).

non-realism is false, or at least overstated. Aristotle's argument, we will see, depends on how and what those things in the work which he points out arouse and work on certain feelings. There is a dependable set of correlations between the work and what it arouses in us; this dependable set of correlations between work and emotions rules out certain tragic plots, and makes some better than others in *Poetics* 13 and 14. We will have to face as well the fact that Kant's preferred examples for judgments of the beautiful are natural, and his discussion of art and use of artistic examples quite limited, while Aristotle is explicitly discussing made things and only briefly relates artistic work to what is natural—for the mimetic arises out of nature.

Let's deal with this second matter briefly: Kant clearly means his theory of judgment to apply to artistic works⁶, but focusing on natural things allows him, for some time at any rate, to keep away from the difficulty that works of art (if judged beautiful) are certainly made with a purpose in mind (to make a beautiful work of art, and even of a certain kind of art—poem rather than painting, tragedy rather than comedy, e.g.)—which seems immediately to rule out free play of reflective judgment in favor of a determinative or teleological judgment. We may, then, see that Kant's preference for nature in his examples and discussion of judgments of the beautiful is for heuristic presentational purposes—precisely to avoid the point of this teleological problem, which is at the forefront of making (*poësis*) or *technê*, while trying to clarify the wider issue of judgments of the beautiful in general. What applies to judgments of the beautiful in nature will apply *mutatis mutandis* to judgments of the beautiful in art: while in art the specific issue of the made thing's designed teleology may in one way impinge on our thinking, it need not make impossible an aesthetic judgment of the beautiful about the thing.

Aristotle, on the other hand is writing a poetics—a book specifically on the *technê*; he is proceeding from entirely the opposite end of the problem. “About poetry itself” (1447a), he begins. So he discusses the history of its development (ch. 4-5), the ways of distinguishing among such works (ch. 1-3), their causes and parts (ch. 6-12), how each part works. It is only when he asks how one sort of plot works better, and how they work best (ch.

⁶ *KU* §46 requires it, if nothing else does.

13-14) that he turns away from what concerns poetry itself to point out a matter that is more *pros ta theatra* (1149b9)—for he is concerned there to point out the most effective tragedy, an effect having to do with proper feeling in the audience. Similarly for Kant, judging of a thing's beauty is a consideration discovered in the relation between the work and the feelings of the audience, it is not *in the work* judged *kath auto* (1149b9). We should also remember here that for Aristotle, this proper feeling art aims to bring off was one that arose *originally* in human nature, the work of art was developed and produced for the sake of enhancing and perfecting this emergent and inchoate natural happening (ch. 4), one that comes by fits and starts, and differently to different sorts of character.

2. Free Play: Everything or Nothing?

One of the problems with understanding the pleasure of a free harmony of the imagination and understanding is that understanding just is the faculty of giving rules to the manifold of sensation, so when Kant argues that the judgment of the beautiful cannot be a determinate one (one of subsuming the particular under a rule or concept) nor yet a reflectively teleological one (for the beautiful object exhibits “purposiveness without a purpose”), one might wonder how the faculty of rule-giving may be operating at all. Kant's explanation is that this pleasure, “connected with mere apprehension of the form of an object of intuition,...cannot express anything but [the object's] being commensurate with the cognitive faculties that are, and insofar as they are, in play” (*KU* 189-190). But this free play seems either too little or too much. For it seems this free play of powers means that understanding cannot recognize the beautiful object as any particular kind of *thing* at all—that would be to subsume it under a rule: sunflower, e.g.; *or* it must be the case that absolutely everything we experience (except the sublime) puts our cognitive faculties into harmonious commensurate play and is therefore beautiful; e.g., urinal, used, badly hung.

Both legs of this dilemma re-appear in a related key in Kant's attempt to distinguish free and adherent beauties, about which he says: “*Free beauty* does not presuppose a concept of what the object is to be. *Accessory beauty* does presuppose such a concept, as well as the object's perfection in terms

of that concept” (KU 229). Kant’s further explanation, that hardly anyone except a botanist knows that a flower is the reproductive organ of the plant clearly frees the judgment of the beauty of the flower from a judgment of perfection as to the plant’s parts of generation, but that seems to be a rather constrained freeing up and a strikingly limited view of determinate judgment; we still know it is a flower, not a tree or a horse; we even know a sunflower is not a rose or poppy. And then, Kant says the botanist can and does *put his knowledge aside* when he judges of the flower’s free beauty. Must the non-botanists put aside their knowledge that it is a sunflower, not a rose or poppy? A flower? Further, Kant’s example of a horse as an adherent beauty requires that we be judging the horse under the concept of its perfection, but perfection for what? an instrument for pulling plows? cabs? for the generation of other horses? For speed on a race-track? For the carrying of a knight in armor? For hamburger? So the original problem seemingly repeats itself: either we can know nothing of the thing when we judge of free beauty (or we abstract from *all* our knowledge of it when we do so, as the botanist abstracts from his) or every real thing can only allow judgments of adherent beauty: in which case free play is *always* bound to some determinate concept. Either no thing is beautiful or everything can be—everything might be more or less “freely” beautiful, depending, it seems, on how much of our understanding we can abstract from.⁷ Free beauty presents us with the ‘we can know nothing of the beautiful object’ side of the original dilemma, while adherent beauty suggests a restricted free play, a play which is aroused by things that answer to a teleological or objective perfection, and insofar as a thing is recognized as a particular thing, judgment regarding it is not “an entirely pure judgment of taste,” but must be “a partly intellectual one...governed by determinate concepts” (KU 233-34). In fact, Kant seems openly self-contradictory about understanding’s relation to free beauties: he says of free beauties both that they are “(self-subsistent) beauties of this or that thing” and that “they represent nothing, no object under a determinate concept” (KU 229). But clearly judgments of the beautiful are about particular presentations and mean to say something about their particular subjective (though universally as-

⁷ This dilemma is also one Ralf Meerbote (1982) presents to Kant: either free harmony is literally a harmony devoid of concepts (so we seem to lose cognition) or aesthetic judgment uses concepts (so we lose *free* play).

cribed) entrancement of the human powers: this rose or tragedy is beautiful; that one not, or that one is less so.

3. An Attempted Kantian Answer

There have been numerous attempts to resolve this difficulty. One has already been suggested (in parenthesis) above. This response holds that in free play Kant is requiring of each what he requires of the botanist's judgment of the flower as a free beauty, namely that his "aesthetic judging abstracts from the specific rule employed to unify the manifold;" we have "*no interest* in what rule prescribes the order of the manifold" we are perceiving.⁸ In these cases, that the object is "commensurate with the cognitive powers" (*KU* 189) is certain since the powers have worked together in our knowing what the object is—perhaps even in scientific (i.e., teleologically oriented) detail as the botanist; but any pleasure we take in such harmony we must take (or be able to take—abstractively) in *everything* we know. So either every thing we know is possibly (via abstraction from our knowledge) beautiful;—but what does such abstraction mean, since understanding is supposed to be operating in such judgments? And what does 'is beautiful' mean if abstractively applicable to everything? Or else understanding has given a determinate rule—sunflower; but this seems to restrict our free play: no matter how disinterested, we cannot judge the beautiful flower before us to be either camel or weasel or whale.⁹ The abstractive solution, as Kenneth Rogerson explains, thereby vitiates Kant's arguments against perfection and utility as rules for aesthetic judgment.¹⁰ On the other hand, choosing the non-abstractive solution seems to push Kant toward admitting that *all* judgments of the beauty of things (both natural and artistic) are really judgments of adherent beauty, which judgments, Kant himself states "presuppose ... a concept of [the thing's] perfection" (*KU*: 230). For, while we may not be *interested* in the rule that pro-

⁸ My italics; this suggestion is offered and then criticized by Kenneth Rogerson (2008), pp. 10-11 from which pages the quotes were taken.

⁹ Hamlet, in 3.2.361-369, indicates that only the *madman's understanding* would be allowed such an inordinate freedom, and "they fool [him] to the top of his bent." But surely judgments of beauty are not the same thing as nonsense or madness.

¹⁰ As discussed by Kant in *KU* §15.

vides the order to our percept, understanding is clearly operating with, or under, some such concept; so the judgment of the beautiful must operate within this determination—sunflower, or tragedy, or horse. Kant realizes that this “connection of beauty with the good (i.e., as to how, in terms of the thing’s purpose the manifold is good for the thing itself) impair[s] the purity of the judgment of taste”(KU: 230)—but he seems singularly undisturbed by this fact. What can he be thinking?

4. A Step Back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*: Tragedy and Freedom from Determination by Reason or Sensation.

Hoping that we will not end up explaining the obscure by the debatable is probably a thing philosophers ought to abandon upon entry, nonetheless we may achieve some clarity in Kant, and at least point out some striking similarities in philosophy by stepping back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*. In *Poetics* 13 and 14 Aristotle is arguing for an order of rank in the beauty or fineness of tragedies. The word at stake is the superlative, *kallistos*, of the same word (*kalon*) about which Diotima had much to say in Plato’s *Symposium*, and while the Greek word may arguably have a somewhat different scope than beautiful or *Schönheit* in their respective cultures, it is certainly the word Attic Greek would use to cover the experience and judgment we are concerned with, judgments and experiences which both Kant and Aristotle consider ordered to a kind of universality and involving a certain kind of pleasure in all human beings.

There is a popular misconception about *Poetics* that it valorizes *Oedipus Rex* as the best kind of tragedy. The argument in favor of the *Oedipus* type appears in chapter 13 and is immediately refined by an argument for the *Iphigenia at Tauris* as *kallistos* in chapter 14. As the *Iphigenia* ends happily, Aristotle’s argument has caused no little consternation.¹¹ But rather than argue in favor of Aristotle’s choice here I will point out how his argument in favor of the *Iphigenia* parallels several of the points Kant makes about the freedom of aesthetic judgment. In the course of his argument Aristotle is constantly pointing out that the less good forms fail to accomplish

¹¹ A defense of Aristotle’s choice and argument for *Iphigenia*, along with some other considerations of an Aristotelian rapprochement with Kant can be found in Fendt (2007).

tragedy's particular *ergon*, which is a certain kind of pleasure associated with a catharsis of pity and fear. In Kantian terms this means that Aristotle is arguing that the beauty of a tragedy is adherent, but about such beauties Kant himself allows that a pure judgment of taste would be possible "only if the judging person either had no concept of this purpose, or if he abstracted from it in making his judgment" (*KU* 231). This would put the judgment of the fineness or beauty of the tragedy on the same footing we have already seen Kant exemplify in the judgment of the beauty of the orchid by the botanist. Free play seems possible in the case of both only if we abstract from our knowledge of the purpose and working of the thing as play or flower.

In the course of his argument Aristotle several times excludes some types of mimetic action because they are "repugnant."¹² From the examples he gives of this phenomenon—the decent changing from prosperity to adversity, a son knowingly attempting to murder his father, whereas when accomplished (particularly outside the play) or attempted in ignorance there is nothing repugnant—it seems clear that repugnance or 'the polluting' is a moral judgment or a feeling related to such a judgment. The use of this word in other contexts almost universally signifies religious or moral defilement. Such plays fail, then, because even if the play arouses pity and fear, *we cannot fail to make* the moral judgment *miaron*, or suffer the feeling of pollution, or both, when witnessing or reading the play. Now Aristotle is not criticizing the audience for making such judgments, nor directly for enjoying such plays, but criticizing the playwright, for "it is not every pleasure one should seek from tragedy, but the appropriate kind" (1453b10-11). So at least part of the reason this kind of play gets ruled out of the running for *kallistos* by Aristotle because its mimetic action necessarily calls up the moral power which makes a determinate judgment and/or it produces quite a different feeling from that at which art aims. Aristotle, like Kant, is presuming that such actions and the moral judgments they entail "rightfully claim to be valid for everyone... as the object of a universal [dis]like."¹³ But precisely by arousing what is *miaron*, such plays

¹² *Miaron*, 1452b35, 53b39, 54a3.

¹³ *KU* 213; in *KU* Kant is clearly ruling out judgments of the *good* (rightful claims about the judgment of a universal liking) from aesthetic judgment, not explicitly ruling out the polluting or rightful claims of a universal *dislike*. But in my estimation Kant is much more

thereby disallow the pleasure appropriate to tragedy. Kant, too, requires that a judgment of the beautiful be *free from* determination by the moral power. Aristotle is pointing out that some kinds of dramatic action *make this freedom impossible* and for that reason they are not the finest tragedies; their plot/character synthesis makes them fail as aesthetic objects. They produce (universally, we may expect) the wrong kind of feeling: *miarón*, a feeling concomitant with moral judgment. Aristotle seems to think the events of these plots universally (if not necessarily) arouse the feeling of pollution; our mimetic nature responds thus to these mimeses. They cannot be, therefore, the finest plots. Neither Kant nor Aristotle need to be making a *moralizing* judgment here. By this I mean they need not be saying (as Plato perhaps) that because it arouses a feeling of moral pollution it is an *immoral* play. Rather, such plots arouse a feeling of moral pollution which judgment *disables* one from making a free aesthetic judgment about beauty. Since aesthetic judgments are based on the pleasure of free play, they must include the working of the rational power—which is in these cases *determined* to dislike. So, Aristotle's ranking of plots, and ruling out of some, shows us a Kantian point: aesthetic judgment must have a *freedom from determination* by the moral power of reason; this freedom, while necessary, is not sufficient for Kantian free play; judgment of the beautiful must also be distinguished from teleological judgment, as well as free from determination based on a private feeling of sense or inclination.

We can see Aristotle ruling out this latter as a basis for judging the beautiful when he argues that creating something *merely sensational through the spectacle* of the play lies outside what is in common with tragedy, "which comes from pity and fear *through mimesis*" (1453b9-13); just hearing the story should be sufficient to produce the tragic effect. Producing fearful shudders through sensational spectacle (while obviously enjoyable to certain audiences) does not produce correct judgment about the fineness of the play. While sensational effects are clearly an element of the tragedy performed and may well increase the experience of fear and thus aid in the

successful as a moralist in presenting the categorical imperative as one which *rules out* certain actions as based on maxims that *can't* be universalized than in presenting positive judgments about duty. Socrates' divine sign, it should be remembered, only spoke to him in the negative. Aristotle's *ruling out* of the *miarón* is in line with what Kant's moral philosophy is most successful at determining.

play's *ergon*, the *merely* sensational cannot be the basis for judgment of the fineness or beauty of the play, nor yet of the teleological judgment of how good it is at being the kind of thing a play is. As the judgment of fineness or beauty of the tragedy cannot be *based on* such sensations, the correct judgment must be free of determination by such pathological stimuli (cf. *KU* 209)—though then as now some people both like and judge things on that basis. Such are not pure aesthetic judgments. So Aristotle and Kant agree that we ought to be able to make our judgment “without any charm of sense being mingled with our liking for its object” (*KU* 236).

But even if the judgment of the beauty of a tragedy must be free *from* determination by the principle of reason and *from* determination by pleasure or displeasure in sensation (including pleasure in the production of suddenly fearful sensations), we have not yet got to the point of seeing how the contemplation of the beautiful object is not “as such, directed to concepts, [hence allowing that] ... a judgment of taste is not a cognitive judgment (whether theoretical or practical) and hence is neither *based on* concepts nor directed to them as *purposes*” (*KU* 209). In fact, when we claim that a rose, field of sunflowers, horse, mis-hung urinal or tragedy is beautiful we know what it is; the manifold before us is not just a presentation of orderliness without a determinate order, or of rule governedness without a determinate rule, or of purposiveness without a purpose, or “the mere apprehension of the form of an object of intuition, and *we do not refer the apprehension to a concept so as to give rise to determinate cognition;*”¹⁴ we are experiencing a presentation clearly ordered, governed by the rule, and falling under the empirical concept of rose, sunflower, horse, urinal, tragedy. So even if both Aristotle and Kant might agree that we must abstract from mere sensation and from determinate judgments of the moral power in calling a thing beautiful, it is still not clear how Kant could think understanding is at free play with imagination when it has given us the determinate rule or concept for the presentation: it is a rose, horse, urinal, tragedy.

¹⁴ *KU* 189, my emphasis.

5. Free Play and Cognition of the Object Called Beautiful

Kant says that free play is “the mental state that we find in relation between the presentational powers insofar as they refer a given presentation to *cognition in general*” (KU 217) and that this activity “is indeterminate but ...nonetheless accordant: the activity required for cognition in general” (KU 219). This description has led several scholars to attempt what Paul Guyer has called a precognitive interpretation of free harmony,¹⁵ for all of them start from the idea that the feeling of pleasure in the quickened and accordant activity of perception of an orderly manifold must precede (logically or temporally) our learning of empirical concepts. Further, as this pleasurable experience/activity is at the root of all of our cognition, it *must* be universally communicable; or else there would be no communication of cognition either. So then, for example, manipulable, mouthable, suckable, swallowable aren’t *concepts* to an infant, but nearly every sensory presentation to an infant is subjected to these behaviors—everything gets all of the infant’s understanding going. Such behaviors should be considered as the visible activities of imagination mediating between sensibility and understanding. What the rules are for all the orderly confusion of infantile percepts is not clear, but the infant (we must think) is enjoying the pleasure of rule governedness of sensibility in such exploration, without a cognizance of any particular rule.

In line with this view let us remember that Aristotle points out that “all instruction proceeds from pre-existent knowledge”¹⁶ and that human beings must possess some capacity beneath scientific knowledge (*epistemê*), but higher than mere sense perception (*aisthesis*) and memory which can *develop* the stable universals of experience by which we accurately identify and then work on (as *technê*) and come to know (*epistemê*) things.¹⁷ There must be some orderliness in the way we experience things out of which we develop our concepts or rules; this will not be knowledge (*epistemê*) in the strict sense, but is a kind of understanding (*mathêsis*); this queer sort of pre-existent understanding is echoed in Kant’s repeated phrasing

¹⁵ See Paul Guyer (2006), p. 165. He is referring to interpretations like those of Carl Posy (1991), Hannah Ginsborg (1997), and Henry Allison (2001).

¹⁶ *An post* 71a1.

¹⁷ *An post* 99b34-100a9.

(generally italicized) ‘cognition in general’ contrasting with the determinate cognition of concepts. It is through and out of and because of this primary and original activity that all of our knowing, *technê* and the determinate cognition of *epistemê* will come, though this natural activity—in Kant’s terms, mutual activation of receptivity and understanding—has a ‘for its own sake’ kind of activity and pleasure, which we see in the infant. The *telos* of determinate cognition is neither known nor purposed as such (how could it be?) in this sort of *mathêsis*; nonetheless, out of this infantile and originating *mathêsis* determinate cognition grows.

Aristotle, then, seems to be pointing in the direction these ‘precognitivist’ interpreters of Kant are going. Perhaps in this precognitive harmony everything is beautiful to the infant—until one sucks on the Drano can or manipulates the burner on the stove: suddenly interest and liking become quite (sensationally!) determined and require determinate action. Before such occurrences the cognitive powers and activities are all called up at once, and this pleasant activity of the mind is free—until the percept bites, burns, shouts or in some other way breaks off the play with a distinctively interesting (in Kant’s sense) sensation. So then, once upon a time, everything in the world might have been beautiful to us. Such natural free play becomes less and less so as experience becomes governed by determinate concepts; these determinate concepts are the rules we now use to operate in the world.¹⁸ Childish wonder, as it were, is replaced by determinations of use, sensory pleasure and danger; or, we are aiming to accomplish some task and understanding divides things first along the axis related/not related to the task’s accomplishment. So then, can there be no free play now, for us knowers and agents in the world? Is the experience of the beautiful merely childish or infantile? (Does that sound like Freud?).¹⁹ Are we all realists insofar as we are adults, and realists are such by the fact that they *know* better?

Aristotle suggests a few more things which Kantians may use to escape the pressure to draw such conclusions. “All men by nature desire to know,”

¹⁸ Gradgrind (in Dickens’ *Hard Times*) is the picture of someone whose mind is entirely determined to such determinations.

¹⁹ I am thinking particularly of a scene in *Future of an Illusion*, where Freud speaks proudly of his young son, who asks if a fairy tale is true, and finding it is not walks out in disgust (p.36).

and both seeing and knowing are among the kinds of activities we engage in “for their own sake”—without any further purpose.²⁰ In fact the word translated ‘to know’ from *Metaphysics* 1 (*oída*) is far less specific than we might think (having in mind *NE* 10.7 for instance—*theôreô*): the first we engage in by nature; theoretical contemplation is an achievement we may reach. So the ‘precognitive’ experience of the interaction of receptivity and understanding is where *Metaphysics* begins, and is always operating, and if we abstract from the interests understanding (for good biological reason) or reason (producing moral universals) have become quick to determine or propose, the pleasure of this harmonious operation which underlies all further cognition can still be both apperceived and enjoyed. The mimetic world of art being an *opseôs kosmos* (1449b32), not the real kosmos, creates a space for this originary play, enriched in the adult by concepts both moral and scientific. In the real world, abstracting from such interests are easier in the case of the rose than the mosquito, for the existence of the mosquito impinges on us in ways which make disinterested contemplation more difficult; but if we could so abstract ourselves we would necessarily find them to be beautiful. Complete abstraction from such impingements is not the real state of the infant (as she will shortly discover), but it might be thinkable regarding the gods. The beauty of the Greek gods, then, is that in them each thing is experienced as beautiful: each one is the representation, not of a thing, but of the experience of a thing as beautiful—even thought. In the play we become as them. The *opseôs kosmos* of art is one in which we cannot be harmed, nor may we take any action.

Aristotle holds, too, that mimesis is a natural activity, like knowing and seeing, one which human beings engage in for its own sake; so while we know better than to seek—and we do not enjoy—suffering things that are pitiable and fearful, the pitiable and fearful through mimesis, as in tragedy, we do seek out and enjoy. For *in the mimesis* of such things we are abstracting ourselves from the interests our cognitive judgments and existential impingements have come to be tied up with, and we are enjoying the presentation’s instigation of “a reciprocal subjective harmony between our cognitive powers” (*KU* 218) for its own sake—we are re-instituting the original, pre-cognitive-determination play of wondering infancy; within the

²⁰ *Metaphysics* 980a20, *NE* 1096b16-19.

magic circle of the mimetic we become as the gods. Aristotle further explains that our first understandings are made through mimesis;²¹ and the construction of that sentence is in the untranslatable middle passive, in which the subject is both agent and acted upon. This natural human activity of mimesis (which underlies all the arts) then must be a major source of those “frequently repeated memories of the same thing” out of which develops the universal²²—what Kant would call concepts.²³ Our natural mimetic activities are also the source of a peculiarly human pleasure (which develops into the arts)—one not directly resulting from sensations, but enjoyed for its own sake (1448b4-8)—and leading into all cognition. So, when we are *contemplating* something—of nature or of art—we are mirroring the actual thing, not actually subject to or active in existential, including cognitive, importunings such realities do engender. We are set in the place of the gods at the tragic festival. Mimesis seems, in its origin, disinterested; it is, we might say, the mirror of the existential, not the existential: *opseôs kosmos*, not *kosmos*. Art allows, then, the flowering of our original joy in the world and aims to return us there. It actually might work *more* effectively than experience of the natural world, which is always Kant’s example for the experience of the beautiful, precisely because of its mimetic, or mirroring (rather than existentially importing) nature. Kant’s emphasis on the disinterestedness of aesthetic judgment is his way of marking this removal from existential import.

Finally, let us recall that Aristotle says that music (by which he seems to imply all the arts) provides a catharsis, which is an uplifting pleasure;²⁴ and catharsis is also a term for religious purification. One way art can be seen as purifying, then, is that it raises us out of, and frees us from our ordinary existentially driven cognitive interests and raises us into the free pleasure at the root of all cognition. Artworks are less beautiful when and because they are less capable of recreating us in that free state. So a play where reason (even in the mirror) judges an act to be polluting (*miarón*)

²¹ *Kai tas mathêseis poieitai dia mimêseôs*, *Po.* 1448b 7-8.

²² *An post* 100a5.

²³ To modernize our account we should point out that mirror neurons, which fire both when one watches someone do something and when one does the same thing oneself, would seem to be the physiological underpinning for this earliest understanding.

²⁴ *Pol* 1341b37, 1342a17.

is less fine than one which keeps us free of, or frees us from, such feelings and judgment. Similarly, with the already mentioned sensationalism in tragic presentations, which Aristotle argued was not the proper basis for judgment of the fineness of a play. This freedom which art recreates us in is a sort of holiday from the ordinary work of understanding, and in this way the beautiful can be “the symbol of the moral” precisely in the analogy we can see holding between the rules for their activity. For, just as the intuition of the object called beautiful keeps us from determining our aesthetic judgment by any effect (hoped for or actual) but pays attention merely to the universal communicability and agreement of powers which the appearance *instantiates* in us, so in moral judgment we refrain from determining our judgment by any effect (hoped for or actual) but pay attention merely to the universal communicability and agreement which our maxim *is instantiating*. Thus does the experience of the beautiful indirectly instantiate (KU 352) what moral judgment does instantiate: the beautiful is the symbol of the moral.

This short excursus into ancient philosophy will, I hope, have clarified something of Kant’s idea of *free play* and judgments of the beautiful, but at least this paper has reiterated, by its quickening of your powers, the universal agreement that the invention of this concept was an act of genius.

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