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The Fall of Reason and the Rise of Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. In this paper I'll argue that it is only when the mantle of high reason and absolute rationalism is (through Kant) shown to rest upon the presumption of unconditioned qualities, does aesthetics come into own as the embodiment of moral reason and disinterested judgement. By this I'm arguing that the *fall* of reason is more important for the development of aesthetics than the traditional separation between sense and intellect entertained by Leibniz, Wolff and Baumgarten.

The above argument is addressed by examining transformations to the practice of reason as it shifted from the high reason of Leibniz and Wolff to the critique of reason in which Kant outlays the limits and virtues of reason.

There are therefore three stages I want to take the listener through. The *first* entails briefly describing the status of reason throughout much of the eighteenth century and how figures such as Wolff and Leibniz contrasted intellect and sensation. The *second* part describes the challenges that Kant brings to practice of reason – most notably how reason often exceeds its own limits and must call upon the unconditioned to complete itself. The *third*, as the core of the argument, demonstrates that the unconditioned quality of moral reason combined with disinterested judgement transforms the traditional stigma of art as a “confused” form into the “complex” example of higher order thinking.

i. Argument

The core of this argument is never going to be neatly contained – its stage opens up just as the eighteenth century closes and represents the intersection of events which have a definitive effect upon a modern day conception of the arts. In this presentation I want to argue that within the age

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of aesthetics the status of reason itself had a far greater effect upon the modern artistic movement than any formal aesthetic theory which tries to address a theory of art. More specifically, what I'm arguing is that the modern conception of art owes a great deal to how reason, exceeding its own limits, is reconceptualised by Kant for the sake of moral reason.

There are, immediately, a number of problems this argument has to address. Firstly, one is not so much a problem, but a necessary explanation. This paper is titled "The fall of reason and the rise of aesthetics" – but I'm not claiming that reason falls out of sky with a great thump. I'm using the 'fall of reason' as one might say 'the fall of an empire' – the high optimism in which reason was held during the early parts of the 18th century faded towards the end of it. It is not a matter of reason suddenly becoming useless – but a manner of knowing its limits. Secondly, whilst the late eighteenth century is boom time for aesthetics, I don't believe the growth and interest in the arts has much to do with a "science of the senses".

How can I possibly make this outrageous claim? There are two factors which strongly influence this argument. *One is the timing in which the plastic arts become autonomous, and the other is the direction the arts take after becoming autonomous.* Autonomy (to describe it in very general terms) is the period in which the status of the plastic arts shifts from a discipline which is conceived in terms of technique, skill and craftsmanship, to one that equals the status and independence of poetry or music. Given the merits of Renaissance painting and sculpture it seems logical that the plastic arts should have granted this autonomy long before the age of reason. I think it is altogether revealing that it happens at this particular point in time. There has been almost two thousand years of philosophical discussion concerning the role of the imaginary – and in that period it has always been regarded by philosophers as beneath language and reason. At best it was regarded as a confused form of reason, at worst the painted imitation represented a form of deception that impressed fools and children.

The other factor is the direction that art takes after this autonomy. In fifty short years the confidence to depart from literal representation gives birth to the modern artistic period. I'll argue that the character of modernism cannot be explained with reference to aesthetics alone – but must draw upon the status of reason itself. This isn't a problem that aesthetics normally concerns itself with, but the manner in which it influences

a particular fusion of moral and aesthetic judgement arises for problems concerning the short-comings of reason itself. The other problem is that the correspondence between moral and aesthetic qualities is well known – the association between beauty and goodness is archaic – why should Kant’s conception make any difference? For that matter why should this focus solely on Kant? What about Baumgarten, Schiller, Hegel and perhaps even Schopenhauer? The first will be addressed by characterising the age of reason and the ideals that it holds, along with the criticisms directed at that very ideal. The second, concerning the focus upon Kant, is something I’ll return to towards the end – once all the cards on the table (so to speak). Apart from these foundations, the third section will focus on a number of principles within Kant’s moral reason that became instrumental to a modern conception of art.

2. The Age of Reason

I’m going to describe the philosophical mood of reason and rationality in the eighteenth century because there is quite a marked difference by the time Kant is through with it. It is also useful because the concern for reason and rationality is not solely a German preoccupation but is also well developed amongst English philosophers. Both of these traditions sought to modernise philosophy by attempting to separate what they perceived as the virtues of philosophy, from the background of religious and theological ties. In a sense the quest for absolute reason is philosophy’s striving for autonomy.

To talk about the age of reason is to describe the kind of problems philosophers were reacting against. With the rise of science in the seventeenth century advocates such as Francis Bacon were heavily critical of the scholastic system in which one could teach medicine without ever having any practical experience – the classical method of consulting the old masters was indeed a science based upon the empty authority of antiquity. To generalise vastly, the threat that science would largely consume philosophy gave rise to its strict emphasis upon reason and rationality as a means of distancing themselves from some of the more nefarious aspects of religion and spirituality. This is not to say it was a rejection of God and religion – to the contrary reason and rationality sought to fortify the morals and

teachings of God without the ultimate fallback upon holy ghosts, miracles and supernatural beings.

If one could imagine the most perfect case of rationalism it would be one in which philosophy cannot draw upon indeterminate, incomplete or confused notions to form an argument. Reason and rationality was meant to epitomise the clarity of logical argument in which the parts and their functions could be discerned clearly in relation to the whole argument. Reason and rationality were meant to liberate us from the manner in which history and culture conditions arguments. The vision thus afforded by this was meant to pave the way for an absolute clarity of thought.

One more thing I need to comment on concerning the age of reason is the division it held between thought and sensation. Leibniz speculated that if we could break perception down into its component parts, then we would be able to access reality directly (Beiser, 2009, p. 39). The point Leibniz is making is that the world exhibits a unity to the senses which appears “composite” – we can perceive the unity of the thing presented but its components, in his words, appear to us as “confused” – not chaotic, but blended in such a way we cannot identify what makes this object different from others. For Leibniz aesthetic comprehension is certainly a lesser form of cognition. Whilst the sensory took in the surface of things, it was the intellect that penetrated the inner workings of a thing. This is a key distinction – and one I’ll return to later when thinking about changes to how we perceive art.

3. The Fall of Reason

If we observe that art’s autonomy emerged at the height of conversation concerning aesthetics we could be mistaken in thinking that the intense discussion alone somehow elevated the arts into their own separate domain. Whilst I’m not denying that the seriousness for which Leibniz, Wolff and Baumgarten applied to the question of sensation, it is revealing that art emerges at the point in which the strictness of reason and rationality is reigned in by Kant’s critique of reason. In his own way Kant reconciled some serious doubts concerning the practice of reason. I’ll return to this point soon, but it is illustrative to quickly grasp some of the general problems that such a reliance upon reason presented.

The effectiveness of philosophical reason has long been disputed by sceptics going all the way back to the pre-Socratics. Gorgias, often called both a nihilist and sophist, expressed this by claiming that there is no truth. And even if there was, you wouldn't know it, and even if you did, you could not express it. In addressing the plight of reason in the eighteenth century the primary source of scepticism emerges from the English philosopher David Hume. There are others, but Hume's influence is curious in at least two respects – one is the survival of the imagination amidst the decimation of reason, and secondly his influence upon Kant's contemporary Johann Georg Hamann.

In the *Treatise of Human Nature* Hume argues that metaphysics has become so obscure that every argument takes a great deal of attention to work our way through abstruse concepts. Hume's *empiricism* is based upon a radical distrust of reason as the improbity of the passions generating rules unto themselves.

He examines this weakness by pulling apart the traditional notion of justified reason by arguing that reason is often a well founded case of inference and probability. The probability of past conditions causing an event leads us to a belief in reason concerning the casual relations between objects. However, Hume argues that this is hardly a solid foundation for the establishment of facts. Throughout section three of the *Treatise*, Hume repeatedly demonstrates that the certainty of reason is a tenuous claim. He believes that all reasoning is nothing more than a comparison and discovery of relations between two or more objects. His final claim is that we have no reason to draw any inference beyond the objects we have experienced. It so falls that the imagination plays an exponential role in continuing above and beyond the dictates of experience. Imagination allows us to form the identity by joining together successive and resembling ideas.

What I've just described is Hume's blunt application of reason upon reason itself – which, as he describes it, is perpetually diminished the more we apply reason.

Hamann, a contemporary of Kant, takes up the scepticism of Hume as the basis for his attack upon the enthusiasm for pure reason. Hamann extends this considerably by arguing that the process of reasoning cannot be isolated from culture, language, history and religion. Hamann's critique

of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* not only encapsulates his disagreement with the enlightenment as a whole, but also Kant's transcendental reason as fundamentally misled by an abuse of language which seeks to separate itself from the physical world. Hamann likens this urge to isolate reason to a type of despotism in the sense that reason becomes almost like a rule unto itself. He accused those who pursued reason as attempting to emulate the mind of God and went so far as to describe original sin not in terms of sexuality, but in the overemphasis upon reason itself (Griffith-Dickson, 2007, §II).

These are two positions which question the status of reason. They describe the manner in which reason fails on two accounts. One is the process by which reason consumes itself, the other is the process by which reason consumes all the human values that cannot be substantiated through reason, but exist in spite of it. The former points to reason's inadequacy as a method in itself, the later places stress upon human complexity.

In the preface to his *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant acknowledges that reason often transcends its own powers – capable of imagining questions it cannot ignore, yet for all its power is incapable of answering them (Kant, 1929, p. 5). Reason, which depends upon a series of conditions for completion (or closure), eventually reaches a point where it cannot achieve this by the knowledge it has gained from experience alone. Exceeding its own limits, reason oversteps the limits of experience and appearances by gravitating toward unconditioned values which allow it complete the series of conditions. At its ultimate point the unconditioned depends upon nothing else for its significance. Concepts such as God, the soul and the notion of beauty are examples of unconditioned values. But rather than dismissing these as phantasms of the mind, Kant claims that these are the natural products of reason.

In saying that reason has a tendency to move toward universals without conditions he is by no means dismissing the entire project of reason. On the contrary Kant states that unconditionality 'by necessity and by right' is required by reason to complete the series of conditions (Kant, 1929, p. 24). This freedom from conditionality allows us conceive of our own humanity as an end in itself and therefore allows us to form universal principles which cannot be grounded by experience alone (Kant, 1953, p. 98).

4. Moral Reason and Aesthetic Value

By arguing that unconditionality is essential for the sake of moral reason, Kant is mending the criticism that the pure exercise of reason leads to nihilism. Instead of banishing this to the function of inexplicable ideals he argues that this freedom to conceive of the ultimate ideal is essential for moral reason. Kant calls this freedom the absolute ground upon which moral principles are formed – and it remains unconditioned because the concept of freedom cannot be explained either through experience nor can it be observed in nature. He claims that it is only by this freedom that moral principles are capable of producing the very concept of God. Without this freedom it is impossible to imagine universal principles which transcend the particularity of interests. It is by this that Kant lays down the imperative which demands that we, ‘Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law’.

It is worth mentioning, at this point, that by the time Kant finishes *The Metaphysics of Morals* in 1797, the practice of art – in particular the plastic arts begin a transition to autonomy in which they are elevated to the seriousness for which music and poetry have long enjoyed.

To be sure Kant himself realises that the effect of art exhibits a kind of moral presentation. Throughout the *Critique of Judgement* Kant constantly reminds us that *sensations* of “goodness” or “truthfulness” are pleasures which emerge from reason, and not from the thing itself. His argument rests upon the dictum that we cannot know anything in itself, but instead we can only know how the object impresses itself upon the senses. This is not to demote the role of sense – as philosophers before Kant have done – he argues that if the subjective constitution of the senses is removed all relation between objects in space and time – and even space and time itself – would vanish (Kant, 1929, p. 82). For Kant without sensation there is no understanding – and without understanding no concepts can be formed (Kant, 1929, p. 65).

It is therefore the case that Kant says that only morality, and humanity so far as it is capable of morality, can possess dignity. He comments that the value of art and nature resides in the attitudes of the mind rather than any intended virtue or promise. For Kant the actions of art do not

produce effects in any determinate way but rely upon the state of mind which receives it.

Yet the strength of moral presentation in the form of beauty and the sublime is particularly strong in Kant's case. Both examples are deeply connected to reason as a kind of symbolic representation of reason itself. For Kant beauty is a symbol of the morally good. As the beautiful is said to demand the assent of all, its universality comes close to the moral maxim which favours no *particular* interest. It also symbolises the freedom of the imagination – in doing so recalls the capacity for the human mind to imagine God. Whereas beauty is meant to inspire love the sublime is claimed to demand respect – even contrary to our interests. The sublime is given an intellectual character which represents the magnitude of indeterminate reason above and beyond the comprehension of mere human cognition.

It is important to dwell on the incomprehensible character that Kant gives to the sublime. It is something that cannot be measured except through a supersensible impression – one that invokes feelings of respect rather than love and affection. The qualification of what cannot be determined links back to the concept of freedom as a value which cannot be gained by experience, nor explained by reference to nature. It is not so much that freedom is inexpressible – freedom must *remain* inexpressible for the sake of human dignity.¹

As art emerges autonomous it increasingly takes on the ethos that art is beyond rational explanation – by which modernism takes up the maxim that art is not art if it can be easily explained. Compelling art is never without a certain 'freedom-from' prior expectations and conventions. It increasingly established itself along the axis of essence without determination. From the original Platonic notion of essence as a property which cannot be reduced to anything else, the work of art is elevated for its very presentation of freedom conceived without conception – through the symbolism attached to self-definition.

If Kant had not characterised the over-extension of reason as symbolising the very freedom which grants human autonomy above all else, the modern conception of art would not have developed. The conception

¹Derrida comments that the pure sense of beauty that Kant refers to must, by necessity, be *free* – as in detached from all determination (Derrida, 1987, p. 92).

of art about the time of Kant through to Hegel is still conceived of in terms of technique, skill, craftsmanship combined with a medieval notion of science. In his *Philosophy of Fine Art* Hegel argues that the artist, for the period in which Romanticism begins to grow tired, is perfectly adapted, in the material and intellectual sense, to take up the role of science (Hegel, 1920, p. 392). Yet this end-of-art prediction could not have been more wrong. Instead of gravitating toward science, artists rebel against the dullness of naturalism and the rigidity of literal representations. The imprecisions of what first appears to sensation as impressions of colour and light are what the artist returns to. This primacy and directness rejects the ethos of technical precision in favour of an indeterminate impression which connects it with the freedom of the imagination. By this it takes on a type of dignity – a thing existing for its own sake under the measure of its own strokes.

This certainly isn't the only cause to art's autonomy and a movement toward a modern notion of the arts. The key shift can be seen in how art is no longer a "confused" demonstration of reason, but is often described as complex in the same manner that Kant views the magnitude of indeterminate reason when he ascribes an intellectual quality to the sublime. If one has read enough modernist criticism it is clear that the virtue of complexity nearly always suggests superior art. Complexity is no longer the mess of cognition *beneath* reason – complexity without ultimate determination becomes a reason unto itself as if demanding the same liberties as personhood.

5. End/Summary

The argument here is that, to a significant degree, Kant's moral principles have been taken up by modernist thinkers – whether he approved of it or not. The modernist critic Clement Greenberg considers modernism to be, 'the intensification, almost the exacerbation, of this self-critical tendency that began with the philosopher Kant.' (Greenberg, 1993, p. 85). What I want to underline is that autonomy, freedom, unconditionality and dignity become crucially important qualities for artistic modernism. Once Kant establishes a system of values in which these elements express a kind of moral matrix, it follows that artistic modernism reoccupies a kind

of spiritual void in which reason and rationality had previously ravaged. It is telling, in the late nineteenth century, that the critic G. L. Aurier, bemoaning the fall of religion, urges us to fling ourselves upon the spectre of art as the last hope of salvation (Chipp, 1968, p. 89).

It is probably clear why I've chosen to pick on Kant. It is timely that Kant's particular synthesis of moral reason and aesthetic qualities immediately precede an important elevation of the arts from a kind of "confused" form of reason to a complex example of experience which cannot be subordinated to metaphysics. However, what I haven't explained – which would take infinitely more time than I have here, is that Kant's conception of the arts synthesises a number of different positions which can be seen by examining the works of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson and Hume. It is the strength of Kant's formulation of reason as having crucially errant properties – for the sake of freedom and autonomy – that catalyses the very elevation of art.

It is within modernism that art has defiantly moved away from the notion of "content". Greenberg describes art's content as, 'indefinable, unparaphraseable, undiscussable'. This is, to quote Greenberg again, 'what art, regardless of the intention of artists, *has* to do, even the worst art; the unspecifiability of its "content" is what constitutes art as art.' (Greenberg, 1993, p. 269).

Through autonomy we come to trust and appreciate the very indetermination that art often presents to the rational mind – as the modern artistic period matured, we came to valorise this independence as the very essence of modernism itself.

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