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Kant's Two Approaches to the Connection between Beauty and Morality

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ABSTRACT. In this paper, I distinguish between two approaches in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* concerning the relationship between the aesthetic and the practical. The first is a *formalistic* account of an intellectual interest in the beautiful. Against the prevalent reading, I argue that beauty itself does *not* exhibit nature's specifically moral purposiveness. The second is Kant's *semi-substantive* approach to the mediation between the domains of nature and freedom. In judging the *beautiful*, through a *practical* necessity, we conceive of nature as cooperative with practical ends and, thereby, reinforce our hope in realizing them.

1. Introduction

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant characterizes the judgment of taste as *disinterested* and universal; and yet, in §42 of the third *Critique* he declares an intellectual, moral *interest* in the beautiful (KU 5: 298–303).²

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² Kant's works are cited by abbreviation and volume and page number from *Immanuel Kants gesammelten Schriften, Ausgabe der königlich preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902–). Abbreviations: Anthro = *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*; KpV = *Critique of Practical Reason*; KU =

On a prevalent interpretation, we take the intellectual interest in the beautiful because beauty itself exhibits nature's specifically moral purposiveness and indicates that nature will cooperate with our practical pursuit.³ As I shall show, such a substantive connection between the aesthetic and the practical would be untenable; nevertheless, this interpretation does inquire into the general task of the third *Critique* that is the mediation between the domains of nature and freedom.

In this paper, I distinguish between Kant's two approaches in the third *Critique* concerning the relationship between the aesthetic and the practical. The first is Kant's strictly *formalistic* account in §42. Insofar as both the realization of practical ends in nature and the existence of natural beauty correspond to disinterested and universal satisfactions, our intellectual interest in the former grounds a similar interest in the latter. In judging the beautiful, we assume some entirely indeterminate, amoral purpose underlying nature. The second is Kant's *semi-substantive* approach to the mediation between the domains of nature and freedom. In judging the *beautiful* but through a *practical* necessity, we conceive of nature as cooperative with practical ends and, thereby, reinforce our hope in realizing them.

Critique of the Power of Judgment; MS = *The Metaphysics of Morals*. Translations are sometimes modified. I replace bold in the translations with italics.

³ Most prominently, Allison 2001: 262–263, Ostaric 2010: 33–34. See also Munzel 1995: 322, Guyer 1998: 351, Recki 2001: 139, Wenzel 2005: 115.

2. The Intellectual Interest in the Beautiful

According to the third *Critique*, a judgment of taste is *disinterested* and indifferent to an object's existence (KU 5: 204). For an object's beauty consists in its mere form, which is "the combination of different representations" (KU 5: 224), and which is composed through our imagination, namely, the faculty of intuition "*without* the presence of an object" (Anthro 7: 153). For Kant, from the disinterestedness of the judgment of taste we can already "deduce" its freedom from personal idiosyncrasies and its intersubjective universal validity (KU 5: 211). Analogously, a moral judgment is also disinterested and universal, for morality consists in the accordance of our power of choice with the *a priori* moral law.

On the other hand, we may take an interest in something in light of its beauty; and the moral satisfaction, disinterested as it is, always produces an interest. And so, in §42 of the third *Critique*, Kant proposes an intellectual interest in the beautiful:

since it also interests reason that the ideas (for which it produces in the [*im*] moral feeling an immediate interest) also have objective reality, i.e., that nature should at least show some trace or give a sign that it contains in itself some sort of ground for assuming a lawful correspondence of its products with our satisfaction that is independent of all interest (which we recognize *a priori* as a law valid for everyone, without being able to ground this on proofs), reason

must take an interest in [an] every manifestation in *nature* of a correspondence similar to this; consequently the mind cannot reflect on the beauty of nature without finding itself at the same time to be interested in it. (KU 5: 300)⁴

I break down Kant's rather cryptic reasoning into three steps.

Firstly, the faculty of desire is morally good insofar as its disposition accords with the moral law or with ideas of practical reason. For Kant, the "moral feeling" is the "susceptibility to feel pleasure or displeasure merely from being aware that our actions are consistent with or contrary to law of duty" (MS 6: 399). The pleasure produces an interest in the objective reality of the ideas in nature, that is, in the execution of moral actions or in the existence of practical ends. Now that the satisfaction, which we perceive through our moral feeling, gives rise to this interest, it is an interest "in the moral feeling".

Secondly, since the interest in the practical ends is necessarily produced by the satisfaction in morality, there is a "lawful correspondence" between the ends and the satisfaction that is "independent of interest" and "valid for everyone". Meanwhile, Kant maintains that we cannot "ground

⁴ With my modification. Guyer and Matthews translate Kant's phrase "*sie im moralischen Gefühle ein unmittelbares Interesse bewirkt*" as "it produces an immediate interest in the moral feeling", which is not incorrect but can be misleading. In view of the term "*im*" (i.e., *in dem*), what interests reason is the reality of practical ends (determined by the moral feeling) rather than the moral feeling itself. In contrast, when Kant writes in the same paragraph "reason must take an interest in [an] every manifestation in nature", the proposition "*an*" indicates that the manifestation interests reason.

this [satisfaction] on proofs”, because the practical law is reciprocally implied by freedom (KpV 5: 29), which is, much like the immortality of the soul and the existence of God, a postulate without theoretical proofs (KpV 5: 312).

Thirdly, since we are interested in the practical ends, which must be realized in nature, and which correspond to a certain satisfaction, we are, *by extension*, interested in whatever objects correspond to a similar satisfaction. Therefore, we must take an interest in natural, beautiful objects, insofar as they similarly correspond to a disinterested and universal satisfaction. In contrast, the satisfaction in beautiful art is “not combined with an immediate interest” (KU 5: 301), for artistic genius “presupposes a determinate concept of the product, as an end” (KU 5: 317). In other words, we are not immediately interested in art exactly because its appreciation is preoccupied with a mediate, non-moral interest.

Kant characterizes the interest in beauty as “moral”, for it derives from our moral interest in practical ends; as such, one’s interest in beauty indicates one’s “predisposition to a good moral disposition” (KU 5: 300–301), which is why we expect it of others (KU 5: 302). On my reading, the derivation is possible due to the merely *formalistic* analogies in our reflections on aesthetic and practical objects, that is, due to the similarities in the *satisfactions* these objects correspond to. In the next section, I shall examine a prevalent interpretation, which argues quite differently.

3. The Prevalent Interpretation and its Difficulties

On Guyer's reading, Kant's idea of intellectual interest implies that the natural existence of beauty "suggests the possibility of the realization in nature of the highest good" and, therefore, "symbolizes the possibility of the natural fulfillment of the rational intentions of morality" (1998: 351). In the same vein, Allison declares natural beauty to "express or symbolize the same rational idea" that is the thought of "nature's moral purposiveness" (2001: 262). Recki contends that we are interested in that "nature at least 'gives a sign' on the objective reality of our rational ideas" (2001: 139).⁵ According to these commentators, insofar as beauty and morality bring about similar satisfactions, beautiful objects in nature indicate that nature will cooperate with our practical pursuit, such that we must be as much interested in the existence of natural beauty as in the reality of moral ideas. Should this be the case, beauty itself would exhibit nature's specifically moral purposiveness, and the connection between the aesthetic and the practical would be more than formalistic but indeed substantive.

According to Kant, insofar as the "mere universal communicability" of the satisfaction in beauty must "in itself already involve an interest", we can explain why "the feeling in the judgment of taste is expected of everyone as if it were a duty" (KU 5: 296). In view of this, Allison further

⁵ My translation. Munzel also comments: "We are seeking to show that nature has an inherent purpose coinciding with our moral purpose" (1995: 322). Wenzel makes similar remarks (2005: 115).

argues that we have an “indirect duty” to take an intellectual interest in beauty, because the capacity of aesthetic appreciation is a “moral facilitator” which reinforces the sense that nature is on our side and that our moral efforts will not be futile (2001: 233–234). Ostaric also states that works of artistic genius, much like natural beauty, serve as a “source of moral motivation” on their own terms and strengthen our feeling that “nature is cooperative with our moral ends” (2010: 34).

Despite its merits, I find the prevalent interpretation untenable in three respects.

Firstly, as I have shown, Kant does not directly refer the existence of beautiful objects in nature to the objective reality of moral ideas, as if the former indicates the possibility of the latter. Rather, Kant argues that our intellectual interest in practical ends extends to natural beauty insofar as they correspond to similar satisfactions. In fact, Kant explicitly states that natural beauty interests us not through its association with moral ideas but through “the quality inherent in it by means of which it qualifies for such an association” (KU 5: 301–302). The association in question presages the symbolic link between beauty and morality in Kant’s later discussion (KU 5: 350–354). Beauty does not interest us by being a symbol of morality; rather, it is the “inherent quality” of beauty, namely, its correspondence to a disinterested and universal satisfaction, that qualifies beauty for an indirect association with morality and, simultaneously rather than consequentially, attaches beauty to an intellectual interest. Hence, beauty does *not* interest us by symbolizing morality, let alone by exhibiting nature’s moral purposiveness.

Secondly, what Kant claims to be “as if it were a duty” is not the intellectual interest in beauty (as in Allison’s reading), but rather the “feeling in the judgment of taste” (KU 5: 296). For Kant, since both satisfactions in beauty and morality are universally valid, the beautiful experience brings to our mind “a certain ennoblement and elevation above the mere receptivity for a pleasure from sensible impressions” (KU 5: 353). Given that we are obliged to cultivate and strengthen the moral feeling (MS 6: 399–400), the aesthetic satisfaction becomes a duty, as if it were. We explain this duty in terms of the universal validity of the satisfaction, which “must in itself already involve an interest” (KU 5: 296), but this does not entitle the interest as a duty.

Thirdly, to regard beauty as the sign of nature’s moral purposiveness would render the judgment of taste determinable by moral concepts and undermine its autonomy. While a beautiful object arouses an aesthetic *satisfaction* which resembles the moral one, this does not entail that the *object* itself should resemble a practical end. The correspondence between certain natural objects and an *aesthetic* satisfaction does not suggest that nature would contain in itself some sort of ground for assuming a correspondence between its objects and the *moral* satisfaction, as if nature would, through its products, harmonize with our pursuit for the good.

Despite these difficulties, the commentators’ attempt at a substantive interpretation is rich in suggestions, as it addresses the central question of the third *Critique* that is the mediation between the domains of nature and freedom. As I shall show in the next section, Kant’s approach to this mediation is semi-substantive: the experience of beauty directs us to some

indeterminate purpose underlying nature, such that practical reason (rather than taste itself) can further *determine* this substrate for the sake of moral motivation. Beauty itself does not manifest nature's moral purposiveness; rather, through a practical necessity, reason ascribes a moral purpose to nature's supersensible substrate.

4. The Mediation between the Domains of Nature and Freedom

According to Kant, the judgment of taste is the subjective representation of "the purposiveness of nature" (KU 5: 188). We call something "purposive" insofar as we cannot conceive of its possibility without assuming "as its ground a causality in accordance with ends" (KU 5: 220). In representing a beautiful form, our cognitive faculties undergo a harmonious and free play, as if the form is produced according to some concept which we cannot determine, such that we judge the form to be subjectively purposive for our faculty of subsuming under concepts in general, and we represent this purposiveness aesthetically through the mere feeling of pleasure. Therefore, a judgment of the beautiful evokes in us the conception of an indeterminate purpose underlying nature, although we have no insight into its objective reality.⁶

According to Kant, the experience of beauty facilitates our assumption

⁶ For Kant, even artistic genius is a mental predisposition through which *nature* gives the rule (KU 5: 307).

(rather than knowledge) of some utterly indeterminate purpose in the supersensible substrate of *nature*, which is then determinable by practical reason and its law of *freedom*. I break down Kant's reasoning into three steps.

Firstly, the pure concepts of the understanding enable our cognition of nature as mere appearance and indicate its noumenal substrate. But, in this regard, we cannot justifiably ascribe any purpose, let alone a moral one, to nature's supersensible substrate. Meanwhile, in accordance with our moral vocation, we are to realize the final, practical end in the same sensible world. The problem is how to determine the as-yet "entirely *undermined*" substrate of nature in such a way that it would harmonize with our moral pursuit (KU 5: 196).

Secondly, on account of the free mental harmony in judging the beautiful, taste necessarily appeals to some purpose in nature's substrate and, thereby, provides the latter with "*determinability*" (KU 5: 196). In other words, we could not explain the possibility of beauty except by assuming as its ground a causality according to a concept of end. Although taste still leaves the exact content of this purpose undetermined, the mere assumption of a *purpose* already makes nature's substrate determinable.

Thirdly, our "intellectual faculty", namely reason, necessarily postulates this purpose's consistency with the practical law (KU 5: 196). For Kant, "from a practical point of view", we must assume "a moral cause of the world" in order to "set before ourselves a final end, in accordance with the moral law"; and so, the assumption is as much necessary as the final end itself (KU 5: 450–453). Hence, reason gives a specifically moral

“*determination*” to the otherwise indeterminate purpose underlying nature (KU 5: 196).

In my view, Kant’s account of the reconciliation involves two necessary assumptions: the first is based on the subjective purposiveness we represent in judgments of taste, the second on reason’s practical necessity. Accordingly, without theoretical cognition of nature’s supersensible causality, we are justified to conceive of nature as harmonizing with our practical ends. My interpretation finds more textual support in §42. As a side note to his analysis of the intellectual interest in beauty, Kant writes:

To that is further added the admiration of nature, which in its beautiful products shows itself as art, not merely by chance, but as it were intentionally, in accordance with a lawful arrangement and as purposiveness without an end, which latter, since we never encounter it externally, we naturally seek within ourselves, and indeed in that which constitutes the ultimate end of our existence, namely the moral vocation ... (KU 5: 301)

We admire nature insofar as its beauty displays “purposiveness”, that is, as if it were intentionally and lawfully arranged according to some as-yet indeterminate concept of end. Since this purposiveness of nature is “without end” and the determination of the concept cannot be encountered in nature, we must turn to the ends of our own practical reason. For Kant, this “admiration” concerning nature’s moral purposiveness neither grounds nor derives from the intellectual interest in beauty but rather, externally, “further

added” to it.

To conclude, in the third *Critique*, Kant presents a formalistic account of the intellectual, moral interest in the beautiful and a semi-substantive account of the mediation between the domains of nature and freedom. The two approaches, clearly distinct, are consistent with each other and convincing in their own right.⁷

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