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***From Natural Beauty to Moral Theology:
Aesthetic Experience, Moral Ideal, and God in Immanuel
Kant's Third Critique***

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University of Potsdam

ABSTRACT. This paper addresses Immanuel Kant's controversial moral duty to *realize* the highest good *in* the natural world as the ideal object of morality. The main problem is that the realizability of the highest good does *not* derive directly from Kant's rationale that duty indicates possibility. Hence Kant argues that we need the postulates of practical reason as transcendental conditions of the highest good.² I argue that for this solution to *actually* work it needs to address the question of our moral motivation to strive to realize the highest good in nature. For this, we need the power of imagination that provides us with two kinds of presentations (*Darstellungen*): objective and subjective purposiveness. I demonstrate these two presentations through the idea of culture and our aesthetic experience in natural beauty respectively, as they are presented in Kant's third *Critique*. I wish to argue that only by presenting a *structure of possibility* in imagination, the necessary connection Kant makes between the realizability of the highest good and the postulate of God gains practical meaning *within* nature.³

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² i.e. God, freedom, and immortality of the soul. I refer in the present paper mainly to the postulate of God.

³ A longer version of this paper was presented at the workshop "A Hidden Art: Kant and Fichte on the Imagination" at the University of Leuven in October 2018. I would like to thank the workshop's participants for their constructive questions and comments on the paper and am particularly indebted to Karin de Boer and David Wood.

1. Introduction

Imagine an ideal *moral* world, a world of purely rational creatures where their only desire is a rational one, that is, the desire of being reasonable. In such a world happiness would be necessarily proportionate with morality since rational beings “would themselves be the authors of their own enduring welfare and at the same time that of others”.⁴ Such a system of self-rewording morality, as can be seen from this description and as Kant himself immediately clarifies, “is only an *idea*, the realization of which rests on the condition that **everyone** do what he should”.⁵

Can such an intelligible ideal world be indeed imagined from our position in the natural world where motives and forces other than rational are at work and where certainly *not* everyone do what they should? The question becomes even more complex in view of Kant’s claim that we must strive to create that moral world (i.e. the systematic connection of morality with happiness) *in* the natural world even though this end cannot be *known* as a practical possibility, since there is no guarantee whatsoever in the

⁴ *Critique of Pure Reason* (CR), A809/B837. All citations from Kant are according to the Akademie edition by reference to volume and page number: the *Akademie Ausgabe* (AA), *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by *Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften* (29 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900–). Quotations from the *Critique of Pure Reason* are cited by the standard (A/B) pagination. I will use the following abbreviations: CR= *Critique of Pure Reason*, CPR= *Critique of Practical Reason*, CJ= *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

⁵ CR, A810/B838. Italic emphasis mine.

natural world that the consequences of our moral actions will be happy ones.⁶ Thus, that ideal world I presented earlier as an ingenious thought experiment turns out to be, for Kant, the highest moral object that we have a moral *duty* to realize as part of our obedience to the moral law we ascribe to ourselves.⁷

The interesting point I wish to dwell on is that even though we have no way of *knowing* the existence of such an ideal moral object/world/system, nor to *imagine* its realization for that matter (in the sense of representing it in intuition), Kant argues that we must at least be able to *believe* it is possible to realize. Otherwise the moral law itself, which commands us to promote that ideal object, “must therefore in itself be false”.⁸

In order for the belief in the realization of the moral ideal to take place, Kant contends that we must postulate the conditions for its possibility, vis., God and immortality of the soul. I wish to argue that in order to reconcile between our faith in the realizability of the moral ideal and the postulates (in particular that of God) one crucial aspect of the problem is missing: that is the aspect of moral motivation.⁹

⁶ *Critique of Practical Reason* (CPR), 5:113-114.

⁷ CPR, 5:110-111.

⁸ CPR, 5:114.

⁹ Cf. Kneller, 2007, 50. Kneller is also referring to that aspect of the problem, but her solution is mainly materialistic since she refers to the ideal situation contained in the moral ideal (i.e. the highest good) as something that *can* be realized in nature without being

My point is that in order for our faith in God, as a condition of the possibility of the moral ideal, to actually work it must be somehow connected to the natural world we live in and to the way we *represent* ourselves in it. For after all, although we can indeed decide to believe in God (or in an ideal world as in our initial thought experiment), if we do not have good reason to *imagine* the moral ideal as realizable *in nature*, this faith will not be able to turn into a rational possibility for us. What we are required for is both: 1) some concrete evidence that the natural world is indeed *compliant* to our moral end, and 2) some indication that we *ourselves* have the capacity to accomplish it.

I wish to argue that these two requirements are met by the power of imagination, as described in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which provides us with two (kinds of) presentations (*Darstellungen*): objective and subjective purposiveness. I demonstrate these two respectively through the idea of culture and our aesthetic experience in natural beauty. My aim is to show that the moral ideal (henceforth: the highest good) must be an object of our aesthetic abilities, that is, of our ability to present a

determined. I, on the other hand, am interested in the *form* of possibility of the highest good. I wish to argue that our aesthetic experience in nature gives us means to construct the highest good as *realizable* (not that it can be actually realized) through their similar form of purposiveness. For a more elaborated account on the connection between moral motivation and the principle of purposiveness in Kant's third *Critique* see my "The Nature of Moral Faith", 2019, 117-144.

structure/form of possibility in imagination. It is only in this way that the question of moral motivation is addressed.

I proceed as follows: I start with a brief presentation of the problem embodied in the highest good regarding its practical possibility and its necessary connection to the existence of God. I show why this connection is not sufficient for understanding the moral *motivation* to realize the highest good in nature. Then I turn to the ‘Teleology’ in the third *Critique* arguing that *there* can be found the beginning of a solution to the problem of the realizability of the highest good. I show how, through the presentation of objective purposiveness in nature carried out by the power of imagination, we are led to the idea of culture as the ultimate end of nature which, in turn, serves as a criterion of reflective assessment of our progress towards realizing the highest good as the final end of nature. Finally, I return to the ‘Aesthetics’ which complement the solution to the problem of the highest good. I demonstrate how our aesthetic experience of natural beauty gives us means to construct the highest good as *realizable* through the way imagination operates in aesthetic judgment. Thus, it provides us proof that nature is indeed compliant with our moral abilities.

2. The Problem of the Highest Good and the Postulate of God

In the ‘Dialectic’ of *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant states that “the question, *How is the highest good practically possible* (...) remains as unsolved problem, despite all *attempts at coalition* made thus far”.¹⁰ The main difficulty of the highest good is that it seems both necessary and impossible: on the one hand, Kant defines it as a moral duty, that is, as something that must and *can* be realized. But on the other hand, there is no *rational* reason to believe that we *can* actually realize it (at least not in this lifetime).¹¹ This is because Kant describes the highest good as an ideal state composed of two heterogeneous and completely distinct elements, happiness and morality,¹² that we have no means of joining together.¹³

The only way we can reconcile them is to assume that our phenomenal world is *not* our only possible mode of existence and regard ourselves simultaneously *also* as noumenon, i.e., “as pure intelligence”.¹⁴ If we assume this, then we have reason to make a further assumption that there is

¹⁰ CPR, 5:112.

¹¹ CPR, 5:113-114.

¹² CPR, 5:111-113.

¹³ In the “antinomy of Practical Reason” Kant explains that the only way for us to join together the two elements of the highest good is if one is the condition of the other, but both alternatives are false. Happiness cannot be the motive for morality for it reduces the latter to prudence. And vice versa, morality cannot be the cause of happiness as it turns the latter into the satisfaction of virtue, and hence it is impossible according to the Kantian definition of virtue (CPR, 5:113-114).

¹⁴ CPR, 5:114.

some transcendent cause that mediates between our noumenal moral will and its phenomenal effects, or, put differently between morality and happiness. In other words, Kant's claim is that in order to presuppose the possibility of the highest good one must at the same time presupposes its conditions of possibility in the form of a transcendent cause that mediates between its two heterogenic elements.

Kant refers that transcendental cause to "an intelligible originator of nature", that is, to the idea of God,¹⁵ and describes it as inseparably linked with the *real* possibility of the highest good.¹⁶ Thus, God becomes a postulate of pure practical reason - by which Kant understands a proposition that, although it is not capable of theoretical demonstration in nature, is nevertheless inherently attached to an a priori unconditionally valid practical law.¹⁷ This is, broadly speaking, the way Kant resolves the antinomy of the highest good in the second *Critique*.¹⁸

I wish to argue that this solution is not satisfactory for it does not address the question of moral *motivation*, especially in the context of moral

¹⁵ CPR, 5:115.

¹⁶ Kant stresses that this is a real and not just logical possibility (CPR, 5:4). This possibility requires also the ideas of freedom and immortality, but I will not treat of them here as they require a broader discussion beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁷ For elaboration see, Förster, 2012, 119-124.

¹⁸ Formulated very generally, Kant's solution to the problem of the highest good takes the following form (aka the 'moral argument'):

I. We have a duty to promote the highest good.

II. We must assume the conditions for the possibility of this good.

III. God is a condition of the possibility of the highest good.

Therefore, we must assume the existence of God (cf., CPR, 5:124-132).

faith. Stated differently, here we find no answer to the question of *how* the highest good becomes something we should (and could) *strive* for.

The point I wish to further is that our moral commitment to the highest good does not simply depend on our automatic affirmation of its conditions of possibility, i.e. of God (or of the other postulates, for that matter), but we must look for some further *sign* that nature is indeed disposed to our moral end.¹⁹ In other words, we must have some *indication* of an underlying unity of moral causality with natural causality that would be the ground for the realizability of the highest good in the sensible world.

To do this, we must turn to the third *Critique* where Kant deals with the question of mediating between nature and morality (freedom) describing nature as giving us actual signs²⁰ that it is amenable to our moral endeavor and *also* to our capacities. One of these signs, is our ability to present nature as purposively organized. This presentation of natural purposiveness reveals its connection to the highest good through the idea of *human culture*.

3. Presenting Purposiveness *in* Nature

¹⁹ See: “we find ourselves *compelled* to seek the possibility of the highest good - which reason marks out for all rational beings as the goal of all their moral wishes” CPR, 5:115.

²⁰ see also: hints/traces/marks. *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (CJ), 5:298-299; 300; 390; 476.

In section VIII of the published introduction to the *Critique of Judgment* Kant introduces two kinds of purposiveness: objective and subjective and argues that natural ends and natural beauty are their *presentations* (*Darstellungen*) respectively.²¹ Without explicitly mentioning it, Kant uses here terminology that is identified with the main function of the power of imagination as “the faculty of presentation”.²² In its common use from the *Critique of Pure Reason* imagination is “the faculty of presentation” in the sense of representing in intuition an object that can be subsumed under certain concepts.

The presentation of purposiveness, however, cannot be described in the same way. That is because it is presented in the third *Critique* in the context of reflective judgments. Thus, our starting point is not in an a priori concept under which the object is determined, but in a particular within nature of which we must seek out a rule in order for the judgment to be implemented. I wish to argue that in presenting purposiveness, imagination gives us a ‘*form of possibility*’. By which I mean that it enables us to regard nature itself *as* purposively organized and at the same time it presents our own highest purpose: the moral ideal *as* having the *form* of a real possibility in that nature. Let me demonstrate this first with the presentation of *objective* purposiveness in natural ends.

²¹ CJ, 5:193.

²² CJ, 5:232.

On Kant's account, we cannot comprehend the form and function of certain natural products (Kant is referring mainly to living organisms) unless we *represent* them as having a purpose.²³ Put differently, Kant argues that in order for us to *not* regard nature's causality as a blind mechanism, we must *represent the possibility* of objects in it teleologically: as ends.²⁴ The point is that even though this is *our* way of observing nature and conceive objects in it, the presentation of purposiveness in this regard is nevertheless *objective*. This means that when we intuitively construct certain natural objects in imagination according to the concept of purposiveness, we actually observe *real* purposiveness *in* nature (as oppose to our mere relation to nature).

This *intrinsic* objective purposiveness we find in nature, Kant argues, makes us raise a further question, namely: whether these organized, natural beings are also *extrinsically* connected so that the whole of nature is a system of ends.²⁵ And this, in turn, makes us wonder whether this system

²³ CJ, 5:360. Analogically to the production of man-made objects that are designed according to their purpose.

²⁴ See: "we adduce a teleological ground when we (...) *represent the possibility* of the object in accordance with the analogy of such a causality (like the kind we encounter in ourselves), and hence we conceive of nature as **technical** through its own capacity." CJ, 5:360.

²⁵ See: "It is therefore only matter insofar as it is organized that necessarily carries with it the concept of itself as a natural end, since its specific form is at the same time a product of nature. However, this concept *necessarily leads* to the idea of the whole of nature as a system in accordance with the rule of ends, to which idea all of the mechanism of nature in accordance with principles of reason must now be subordinated." CJ, 5:378-379.

has a final end, namely, an unconditioned end whose ground of existence lies solely in itself.²⁶ Stated differently, our *experience in nature* that requires us to represent it teleologically: as having objective purposiveness, leads us to the idea of a final purpose that can otherwise be found only in the ethical sphere.²⁷

The point I wish to stress is that on the one hand our teleological perspective of nature leads us to the idea of a *final* end [*Endzweck*] which constitutes an unconditional end (the moral ideal). Yet on the other hand, this final end *cannot* be found *in* nature since all natural beings are conditioned precisely by being means to an end. Nevertheless, Kant argues that nature can still have an *ultimate* end [*Letzte Zweck*]: the *culture* of human beings. That is the highest end nature can accomplish. Thus, culture is the point towards which the whole of nature is oriented. In other words, culture is the principle that organizes men's *natural* purposes into a system.

The question arises: if nature in itself cannot lead us to the moral end, but only to culture as an ultimate end of nature, how can we continue to

²⁶ for reasons of space I simplify this argument presenting only the points that are relevant to our case.

²⁷ Cf. "once we have discovered in nature a capacity for bringing forth products that can only be conceived by us in accordance with the concept of final causes, we may go further and also judge to belong to a system of ends even those things (or their relation, however purposive) which do not make it necessary to seek another principle of their possibility beyond the mechanism of blindly acting causes; because the former idea already, as far as its ground is concerned, leads us *beyond* the sensible world, and the unity of the supersensible principle must then be considered as valid in the same way not merely for certain species of natural beings but for the *whole of nature as a system*" CJ, 5:381.

imagine its realizability from our position in nature? To answer this, we must first understand the connection natural purposiveness has with cultural practice.

Kant describes culture as the ability for transcending the mechanism of nature *within* nature itself through man's ability of freely set ends in that nature.²⁸ Culture demonstrates human striving to give teleological shape to nature as a whole, including to man himself as the ultimate end of nature in accordance with his cognitive powers. It is the ultimate end of nature since culture gradually separates man from his immediate ends, while allowing him to set new *higher* ends in nature without being dependent on it. This means that man must direct his own existence purposively by *freely* determining his actions. Culture is the tool for this, because it does not describe any *specific* goal or end. Rather, it allows man to freely direct his actions, by letting him "to feel an aptitude for higher ends, which lie hidden in us".²⁹

²⁸ See: "[Culture is] the aptitude for setting [one]self ends (...) and (independent from nature in his determination of ends) using nature as a means appropriate to the maxims of his free ends in general, as that which nature can accomplish with a view to the final end that lies outside of it and which can therefore be regarded as its ultimate end" CJ, 5:431. One could say that culture is an empirical analogy of moral freedom. Cf. Cheah, 2003, 8.

²⁹ CJ, 5:434. I purposely do not go into the details of Kant's account of culture as being promoted through inequality between men, nor to the internal distinction Kant makes in the concept of culture itself between 'culture of skill' and 'culture of discipline' as I elaborated on this in my "The Final End of Imagination", 2017, 107-115. What interest me in the present context is the idea of culture as a standard for assessing our progress towards

My point is that our ability to freely set ends in nature creates in us the need to raise the question of the moral ideal and whether we have reason to *believe* that it is realizable within that nature. Since the moral ideal cannot be represented in intuition, as opposed to any other practical end that we might pose to ourselves, it appears that it can only be portrayed in thought as having the *form* of an end and it is thus articulated through culture as the human ability to freely set ends in nature.

With this in mind, we can return to the question of how to continue to imagine the final end (the highest good) as realizable from our natural position (that at best can lead us solely to culture). My point is that even though we cannot create in imagination any direct representation of the highest good, in the sense of the ability to give it embodiment or realization, we can still point at its *realizability*: the presentation of culture as the ultimate end of nature becomes a criterion for a *reflective assessment* of how close, or how far, we are to, or from, realizing the final end.

It emerges that our teleological perspective on nature as a whole, through the presentation of nature *as* a system of ends, enables us to articulate our *striving* towards the highest good as a final end of nature hence, to articulate its realizability. But, since we cannot provide that final end with any correspondent intuition, this articulation comes in a form of an indeterminable *gap* between it and the ultimate end of nature: culture. As

realizing the highest good and the way we come to the idea of culture from the outset through the *presentation* of purposiveness in nature by the power of imagination.

such, culture refers nature *beyond* itself since it mediates between the mechanism of nature and the final end that lies beyond it. Kant puts it in terms of hints [*Winke*] that are “given to us by nature that we could by means of that concept of final causes step *beyond* nature and even connect it to the highest point in the series of causes [the highest good; MGR]”.³⁰

But is it enough to claim that nature gives us *hints* in order to reach such a far-reaching conclusion: that the highest good is indeed attainable? I wish to argue that this insight gains its full value only once we integrate it with the subjective purposiveness presented in natural beauty. For, while objective purposiveness in nature gives us purposeful *direction*, *as if* nature itself was purposively organized, subjective purposiveness demonstrates that nature is *indeed* purposive with respect to our faculties through the presentation of natural beautiful objects.

4. From Natural Beauty to *Moral Theology*

Kant describes the subjective purposiveness of nature as an *aesthetic* representation that is connected immediately with the feeling of *pleasure*, without being brought under a determinate concept or end.³¹ According to

³⁰ CJ, 5:390. Emphasis mine.

³¹ See: “If pleasure is connected with the mere apprehension (*apprehensio*) of the form of an object of intuition without a relation of this to a concept for a determinate cognition, then the representation is thereby related not to the object, but solely to the

Kant, this principle of subjective purposiveness is revealed only by aesthetic experience concerning natural beauty. For in exhibiting beauty nature is *actually* presenting intuitively its own subjective purposiveness, that is, its purposiveness with respect to our faculties.³² The point is that even though natural beauty is not actually *in* nature, it is intuitively given by certain objects of experience that we judge as if nature *itself* is being purposive to our faculties.

This unique presentation of purposiveness is made possible by the *free* play of imagination with the different representations given to us by certain objects in nature, without being constraint, as aforesaid, by any determined concept of what the object ought to be in order to serve any *particular* end. Nevertheless, imagination in its free play with the understanding satisfies our *general* cognitive end to find something that unifies our experience in nature as a whole by presenting the compatibility between nature and our capacities in the act of aesthetic judgment.³³

The question arises as to how this presentation of subjective purposiveness, embodied in natural beautiful objects, relates to the realizability of the highest good, or to our moral motivation to strive to it?

Similar to the pure moral interest we take in the highest good which

subject, and the pleasure can express nothing but its *suitability* to the cognitive faculties that are in play in the reflecting power of judgment, insofar as they are in play, and thus merely a subjective formal purposiveness of the object” CJ, 5:189-190.

³² CJ, 5:245.

³³ CJ, 5:190.

does not involve any personal interest and is thus universal, we take what Kant calls “an *intellectual* interest” in natural beauty,³⁴ which is articulated through the universal agreement that the judgment of the beautiful demands of everyone “as if it were a duty”.³⁵ The stress is on the fact that in taking intellectual interest in natural beauty we experience pleasure not only in the *form* of natural beautiful objects but also in their actual *existence*.³⁶

This point is directly linked to Kant’s description of the highest good as a final end of practical reason that must be thought as (objectively) realizable *in nature*. Kant’s claim is that in exhibiting natural beauty, nature becomes an object of interest of practical reason since it presents *in nature* a subjective formal purposiveness that is similar to the interest of practical reason, namely the moral satisfaction in the striving for the highest good.³⁷

In other words, the subjective purposiveness embodied in natural

³⁴ CJ, §42.

³⁵ CJ, 5:296.

³⁶ Cf. “Someone who (...) considers the beautiful shape of a wildflower, a bird, an insect, etc. (...) takes an immediate and certainly intellectual interest in the beauty of nature. I.e., not only the form of its product but also its *existence* pleases him, even though no sensory charm has a part in this and he does not combine any sort of end with it” CJ, 5:299.

³⁷ See: “since it also interests reason that the ideas (for which it produces an immediate interest in the moral feeling) [i.e. the highest good] 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 (...), reason must take an interest in 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. Because of this affinity, however, this interest is moral.” CJ, 5:300.

beauty gives us for the first-time proof for the claim that nature is suitable for our capacities. Hence, practical reason is now learning to recognize itself as *part* of nature and to think in a way that is attuned to it.³⁸ Consequently, the subjective purposiveness exhibited by natural beautiful objects demonstrates the connection between the highest good, as the final end of practical reason, and reason's capacity (i.e., our capacity) to realize it.

Practically speaking, the fact that our encounter with natural beauty produces a feeling of pleasure indicates that nature's hint is being received and responded to as something meaningful. This is done, as indicated earlier, through the free play of imagination "in the representation of an object without any end". Thus, imagination gives us "the mere *form of purposiveness* in the representation through which an object is **given** to us".³⁹

The point, for our purpose, is that it is *precisely* this "mere *form*" of purposiveness that enables the highest good to be *symbolically* presented in natural beautiful objects *as* a form of possibility. That is how Kant can argue that "the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good".⁴⁰ For although the highest good cannot have any direct presentation in intuition, yet it still has to be realizable, we are required to think of it analogically with a concept

³⁸ Cf. Angelica Nuzzo, 2008, 229.

³⁹ CJ, 5:221.

⁴⁰ CJ, §59.

that *can* be intuitively presented (e.g. natural beauty) in a way that the two forms of thinking will be sufficiently similar.

It is here where we can return to the question of God as a condition of possibility of the highest good. For the common characteristics of the highest good and natural beauty that enables the first to be presented symbolically through the latter is what Kant refers to as the supersensible ground of nature.⁴¹ Kant argues that we must think of the supersensible ground of nature as responsible for nature's exhibition of its *own* subjective purposiveness.⁴² Thus, although we cannot know the supersensible, we still need to appeal to it so that we can think of natural beauty as subjectively purposive, i.e. as compatible to our abilities. By doing so, we can reflect on the possibility of the highest good through its symbolic manifestation in natural beautiful objects.

The point is that instead of merely postulate God, we have now further support *in* nature to do so. For we can now see that without the subjective purposiveness as it is presented in natural beauty, one cannot believe in God as a moral creator who *also* contains our capacities. It is only due to the

⁴¹ For time reason I directly connect the supersensible ground of nature with the idea of God. Although I am aware that this link is not accurate textually and requires a broader explanation of the relationship between the two.

⁴² See: "the judgment of taste is based on a concept (of a general ground for the *subjective purposiveness of nature* for the power of judgment), from which, however, nothing can be cognized and proved with regard to the object, because it is in itself indeterminable and unfit for cognition; yet at the same time by means of this very concept it acquires validity for everyone (...), because its determining ground may lie in the concept of that which can be regarded as the *supersensible substratum of humanity*" CJ, 5:340.

intuitive presentation of subjective purposiveness carried out by imagination that we can actually perceive the possibility of the determination of nature and its supersensible ground as a way to realize the highest good in that nature.

In other words, only after we integrate subjective and objective purposiveness through their respective presentations in imagination can we answer the question of moral motivation regarding the real possibility of the highest good.

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