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Beauty, Grace and Morality in Schiller's 'On Grace and Dignity'

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ABSTRACT. According to standard interpretation, Schiller's discussion of grace provides the theoretical and systematic framework for his attempt to refute Kantian ethics. Since the harmonious state of grace requires a balance between reason and sensibility, duty and inclination, Schiller is able to bring forward the claim that in order to reach that desired state, the predominance of reason must be relinquished.

I shall, however, argue that this interpretation misrepresents both the textual basis and Schiller's systematic concern in his essay *On Grace and Dignity*.

Schiller develops his conception of grace as *moving beauty* in contrast to the purely sensual *architectonic beauty*. The essential difference lies in the fact that grace is an accomplishment which can solely be realised by the subject itself. For grace - as a condition of the subject - is the effect of the moral capacity of reason. Grace is thus attained when an agent's moral purpose originating in the sphere of reason passes into his natural movements. What Schiller seems to indicate is that the more an agent cultivates his moral agency, the more it is going to agree with his sensual nature; thereby producing a beautiful soul the appearance of which displays grace.

It is therefore not to deny that Schiller touches on the moral aspect of Kantian philosophy if he addresses the dualism of duty and inclination, in order to elaborate his concept of a beautiful soul. However, as Schiller seems to conceive of the same as the effect of the cultivation of moral ideas, he cannot intend to confute Kant's theory pertaining to the foundation of ethics. For the Kantian separation of duty and inclination which lies therein must already be accepted in order to conciliate the systematic divide. Therefore a close reading of the text strongly suggests that Schiller's concern lies elsewhere.

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1. Introduction

With his essay *On Grace and Dignity*¹ Schiller partakes in the discussion of the phenomenon of grace, a discourse which was quite vivid in the 18th century.² Schiller's remarks on grace as well as a "beautiful soul" have turned out to be rather influential since his thoughts are still being adopted regarding the contemporary understanding of human beauty.³

According to standard interpretation grace is construed as the specification of the sort of freedom, the impression of which serves as a prerequisite of the notion of beauty that Schiller had developed in his *Kallias-Letters*. Most scholars usually conclude the following two systematic consequences from that specific interpretation.

Firstly, the newly introduced concept of grace resolves the logical fallacies of the *Kallias-Letters*, thereby superseding the theory of beauty. Although Schiller adamantly adheres to the definition of beauty which he brought forward as *freedom in the appearance* in the *Kallias-Letters*, he only now finds the conceptual means to clearly characterise the aforementioned freedom.⁴

Secondly, the primary aesthetic discourse provides the theoretical framework for Schiller's attempt to refute Kantian ethics. Since the harmonious state of grace requires a balance between duty and inclination, Schiller is able to support his claim that in order to reach that desired state, the predominance of reason must be relinquished.⁵

I do, however, disagree with this reading and shall particularly call into question the uncritical entanglement of beauty and grace which has been claimed in scholarship.

Having said this, I will not offer a complete interpretation of Schiller's

¹ Hereinafter all direct citations from the *Kallias-Letters* will be cited according to the translation by Zepp-LaRouche, Helga (1988), *Friedrich Schiller. Poet of Freedom*. Volume II, Washington, DC: Schiller Institute. Further reference to Schiller's writings refers to the so-called "Frankfurter Ausgabe", denoted as *FA* following volume and page number, further reference to Schiller's correspondence refers to the so-called "Nationalausgabe", denoted as *NA* following volume and page number.

² Cf. Pomezny (1900).

³ Cf. for instance Berghahn's remark's concerning Schiller's relevance. Schiller (2006), p. 170.

⁴ For instance Schiller (2006), p. 146 as well as p. 171; furthermore *FA VIII*, p. 1322f.

⁵ Guyer (2006), pp. 187-205, Koukou (2011), pp. 40-50, Brelage (1965), pp. 230-254.

essay in this paper; and I will not attempt to do so on account of two reasons. Firstly, such an interpretation would require a full and most of all very precise account of the *Kallias-Letters* which I am not able to provide here.⁶ Secondly, it would be necessary to approach Schiller's concept of dignity, its connection to Kant's and Reinhold's theories of will and the sublime, respectively, and eventually, its (logical) (co-)dependence on grace.⁷ Undoubtedly those issues pose relevant questions – all of which I will, however, exclude from my paper altogether. Instead I shall merely attempt to lay part of the groundwork for a complete account of Schiller's concept of grace and therefore I shall only concern myself with establishing the relation between the concepts of grace and beauty. This promises to shed some light on Schiller's position towards the relation between the phenomenon of beauty, broadly construed, and morality.

It is in this respect indeed rather noteworthy that Schiller introduces his findings on the matter by referring to an ancient myth which centers around the goddess of beauty and her belt of grace. I shall begin there by addressing the theoretical framework established by Schiller's consideration of said myth. From there I shall move forward to discussing a quite important distinction pertaining to grace and beauty themselves and eventually draw some conclusions with regards to the relation between beauty and grace on the one hand and grace and morality on the other hand.

2. The Myth of Grace and Beauty

According to ancient mythology, the goddess of beauty is in possession of a belt which bestows a graceful posture upon every subject that comes to wear it. Thus, in order to enchant Jupiter, father of the gods, Juno solicits said belt from Venus.⁸

Schiller concludes two things from this narrative.

At first, apparently, the Greek myth differentiates beauty from grace by representing them separately.

In case Venus gives her belt away to Juno she still remains perfectly

⁶ Regarding a first impression of my reading of the *Kallias-Letters* cf. Sommer (2015), pp. 464-475.

⁷ Regarding Reinhold's influence on Schiller, cf. for instance Heinz (2007), pp. 27-39.

⁸ *EA VIII*, p. 330.

beautiful while Juno becomes graceful under the *effect* of the belt. Since the goddess of beauty does not herself wield the power to bestow grace upon a person, but requires the *assistance* of an object to do so, it follows that beauty cannot be quite the same as grace. To be more precise, beauty, incarnated by Venus, and grace, symbolised by the belt, are essentially, not merely gradually different from each other.⁹ Additionally, it is important to emphasise that Juno aims at enchanting Jupiter, not merely please him. The belt must therefore be able to evoke love, not only aesthetic pleasure, as beauty is supposed to.¹⁰

As a consequence, if Venus parts with the belt, one can only judge that her corporal appearance remains an ideal of beauty. Accordingly, it has been all along merely her physique that could have been considered to be beautiful for the architectonic quality, as Schiller terms it, of what renders her beautiful does not extend to her intellectual features.¹¹

Notwithstanding the above, it must secondly be recognised that Juno can receive the desired belt and its effect from none other than Venus, the goddess of beauty herself.¹² While in accordance with the myth, grace remains a moving¹³ or, if one permits, interchangeable beauty, it is yet strongly suggested that it come from (architectonic) beauty alone. If grace, in fact, is not to be separated entirely from beauty, the question arises in what regard grace is dependent on architectonic beauty.

Schiller's rather poetic than logical introduction begs the question which greater purpose it serves with respect to his discussion of grace. In other words: how do the myth and his following philosophical conclusions relate? Do his further remarks fit into the narrative framework with which he opens his essay? He himself certainly seems to be of this opinion since he asserts that the imagination adumbrated all along what reason could only later clearly conceive. He writes:

The tender emotion of the Greeks differentiated quite early what

⁹ As a result, it can at least be doubted that Schiller refers to and endeavours to develop further the ideal of beauty that Kant had conceived in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Cf. *AA V*, pp. 231-235, cf. *FA VIII*, p. 332-334, especially p. 333 as well as p. 341.

¹⁰ *FA VIII*, p. 330ff.

¹¹ *FA VIII*, p. 335.

¹² *FA VIII*, p. 330.

¹³ *FA VIII*, p. 331.

reason was not yet able to elucidate, and, searching for an expression, borrowed it from the imagination, since the understanding could as yet offer it not concepts. This myth, therefore, deserves the philosophers respect [...].¹⁴

3. The Difference between Grace and Beauty

Schiller renders the myth this demanded respect when he holds that grace not offhandedly be qualified as beauty. Consequently he introduces a distinction between "architectonic beauty" and grace, or "moving" beauty.

Hereinafter I am not going to focus on every aspect of architectonic beauty and grace, respectively, but foremost on the defining difference that dissociates them. Architectonic beauty does only apply to the physical appearance of an object under which a human being is comprised as well, and exclusively so at least in an aesthetic regard.¹⁵

Furthermore, it does not extend further than the realm of nature, or the "jurisdiction" of general natural law, as Schiller might phrase the relation.¹⁶ Only what appears before the senses pertains to architectonic beauty; a person's capacity of reason, be it moral or otherwise, does not apply. Hence, under the category "architectonic beauty" fall all those properties of an object whose representation do not require understanding, but merely intuition.¹⁷

In contrast to this purely sensual architectonic beauty Schiller brings forward his conception of grace as *a moving beauty*, as had already been mentioned earlier.

It is indeed a *moving* beauty, as, in case with the belt, it can be given or transferred to any person.¹⁸ Venus, who has parted with her belt, may be regarded as a suited example to underline this contrast. For she remains beautiful, even without the belt, but stops to be graceful; which means all

¹⁴ Zepp-LaRouche (1988), p. 337; cf. *EA VIII*; p. 334 as well.

¹⁵ Cf. especially *EA VIII*, p. 341.

¹⁶ *EA VIII*, p. 335.

¹⁷ *EA VIII*, p. 341.

¹⁸ Schiller lauds the belt as a symbol of grace within the Greek myth since it precisely meets with the criteria that the concept of grace has to fulfill. Mainly, it can be passed along between the goddess of beauty and another subject which is why it cannot be depicted by a fixed property of neither Venus nor any other subject. Cf. *EA VIII*, p. 332.

there is left to constitute her beauty are her corporeal features which do not extend beyond her physique.¹⁹

What, then, is the qualitative “more”, as it were, that grace has to offer?

The essential difference lies in the fact that grace is an accomplishment which can solely be realised by the subject itself; not by nature or an artist.²⁰ For grace - as a condition of the subject - is connected to the moral capacity of reason. According to that grace or a graceful posture comes about when the moral purpose originating in the sphere of reason passes into the natural movements of an agent.²¹ What Schiller seems to indicate here is that the more an agent cultivates his moral agency - his moral ideas as Kant might say²² - the more is his reason going to agree with his sensual nature; thereby producing a beautiful soul the appearance of which displays grace.²³ In contrast to architectonic beauty, grace is based upon the merit of practical reason the effects of which can indirectly be represented in nature. Namely then, when freedom and morality are not only the determining factor for an action, but also their expression.²⁴

As to the process of the hinted cultivation, Schiller leaves no other clue as for the reader to assume that it is brought upon by the benefit of aesthetic pleasure; in other words: the enjoyment of beauty. Architectonic beauty, that must be. This reading is strongly suggested by the fact that

¹⁹ *FA VIII*, p. 335 – Since Schiller is quite explicit as to the purely physical quality of (architectonic) beauty and even illustrates his position by the example of Venus, it remains surprising how easily grace is often identified as the objective quality of beauty which was at the center of the *Kallias-Letters*. Needless to say that thus far I have not yet clearly shown either that the sphere of Schiller’s objective criterion and the architectonic beauty coincide, but his systematic distinction strongly supports this reading. Cf. especially *FA VIII*, p. 340ff where Schiller very possibly alludes to his reasoning of the *Kallias-Letters* with regards to the objective quality of architectonic beauty. Additionally cf. *FA VIII*, p. 292-295 where Schiller uses the narrative of the good Samaritan to demonstrate an application of his aesthetic theory in an “improper sense” (“uneigentlichem Sinne, *FA VIII*, p. 292) with regards to moral beauty.

²⁰ Needless to say that I do not mean to dispute that an artist is able to depict graceful characters in a work of art, but the fact remains that the exterior influence of an artist is not suited to render a person gracious beyond the scope of a depiction.

²¹ *FA VIII*, p. 333 as well as 353ff.

²² *AA V*, p. 356.

²³ Cf. for instance *FA VIII*, p. 344 as well as p. 359.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

grace can only be passed along by beauty, as it was described by the Greek myth wherein exclusively Venus was able to give the belt to Juno.

Schiller's argument would in this case present itself as follows. The effect of beauty brings sensual feeling successively more into line with moral feeling.²⁵ Since the conflict between the two spheres, as it were, with regards to the requirements of morality begins to resolve, the moral actions of an agent begin to appear much more natural to the (aesthetic) beholder; or to better put it: a moral action which is carried out graciously conveys the impression of being carried out in harmony with the sensual desire, or at least not against the same. What this argument entails with regards to the moral agent himself, I must leave untouched at this point.

As a consequence, there are two aspects to consider. Firstly, architectonic beauty takes effect on the moral nature of a person. Secondly, the appearance of this cultivated effect is qualified as grace which is essentially a harmonious display of duty and inclination. Therefore, it must strictly be differentiated between beauty on the one hand and grace on the other.

4. Strict and Wide Sense of Beauty

Admittedly, Schiller's terminology adds to the confusion which has been occurring with regards to the relation of beauty and grace. As he subsumes what he calls *architectonic beauty* as well as grace or *moving beauty* under the term *beauty* in general, it would appear to suggest itself that they both pertain to the same phenomenon. However, such an interpretation would obscure the systematic distinction which Schiller explicitly draws between beauty and grace. One might rather say that they both pertain to the phenomenon of beauty in terms of different aspects. This manner of speaking would be insofar correct as although grace is (merely) an effect and can thus be separated from beauty, it always remains an effect of beauty. In this regard, grace is indeed dependent on beauty. But this does not apply vice versa, which Schiller already remarks at the beginning of his essay.

All grace is beautiful, for the belt of grace is a property of the goddess of Gnidus; but not all that is beautiful is grace, for even without this

²⁵ Cf. especially *EA VIII*, p. 340; moreover regarding Schiller's reading of Kant, cf. *AA V*, p. 354.

belt, Venus remains what she is.²⁶

And a few sentences further, he states:

Grace is therefore not an *exclusive* prerogative of the beautiful; rather it can also pass, although only from the hand of the beautiful, over to the less beautiful, even to the not beautiful.²⁷

Schiller does, in fact, reference the myth in the quotations cited above, but they serve to underline the apparent parallels between his interpretation of the myth and his own understanding of the relation between beauty and grace.

For, in Schiller's thinking, too, every graceful posture is necessarily beautiful as it is the product of a beautiful effect; whereas not every beautiful object must necessarily be gracious. Moreover, the fewest of beautiful objects can, in fact, display grace since the term does apply to human beings alone, as Schiller emphasises rather strongly.²⁸

One might also argue that once a person, initially regarded as a beautiful object, as it were, became gracious, it raises above the merely architectonic judgement. For in this respect, not its physical features are evaluated, but rather its aesthetically formed moral personality.

As for the relation between beauty and grace, it can accordingly be concluded that grace does not fall under the phenomenon of beauty in the strict sense. At least, not when beauty is construed in terms of objective properties and a theory of objective beauty with which the *Kallias-Letters* are primarily concerned.²⁹ Grace can be subsumed, however, under the phenomenon of beauty in a wider sense, that is to say when the cultivating effect of aesthetic pleasure is to be taken into account. This consideration also sheds light on the relation between grace and morality or freedom.

²⁶ Zepp-LaRouche (1988), p. 337.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ *FA VIII*, p. 333ff.

²⁹ It would at this point both necessary and productive to pose the question what Schiller precisely means when he uses the word „objective“ and accordingly, whether Schiller resorts to the Kantian meaning of „objective“ regarding the aesthetic discourse. A closer look at the *Kallias-Letters* in this respect might provide scholarship with new insights as to Schiller's fundamental terminology.

5. Conclusion

That brings me to my final point, as one must note that my exegetical findings bear some consequence as to the claim of the critical concern of Schiller's essay as far as Kantian ethics are concerned. This claim usually provides, as I had mentioned in my introduction, the theoretical background in which context Schiller's remarks on grace have been interpreted thus far.

On Grace and Dignity can undoubtedly be read and may very well be an examination of Kantian ethics and aesthetics, respectively. However, as the distinction between architectonic beauty and grace clearly shows Schiller is far more concerned with the effect which beauty takes on the (human) subject. This issue is explicitly hinted at in the *Kallias-Letters*³⁰, but remains as such beyond the scope of Schiller's objective aesthetic theory.

As a result, it is not clearly evident that Schiller refutes his own aesthetics which he had conceived in the *Kallias-Letters* nor that he extends his theory of beauty in the strict sense.³¹ Instead he preoccupies himself with the relation between culture and morality as he does in the *Letters to the Prince of Augustenburg* and subsequently the *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Men*.

Thus, Schiller's concepts of grace and a beautiful soul indeed are of moral significance. It is not to deny that Schiller touches on the moral aspect of Kantian philosophy if he addresses the dualism of transcendental idealism, which Schiller construes as a dualism between duty and inclination, in order to elaborate his concept of a beautiful soul. However, since grace requires an agent's movements to be molded by pure practical reason Schiller does not seem to attempt at all to refute Kantian ethics but rather to develop it further. As a matter of fact, a beautiful soul provides the approximation of inclination and duty - a thought which is not entirely alien to Kantian philosophy.³²

³⁰ *EA VIII*, p. 292-295; cf. footnote 18 as well.

³¹ As a matter of fact the term „theory of beauty“ (Theorie des Schönen) is used by Schiller explicitly, but always refers to the *Kallias-Letters* or an objective criterion of beauty in general. Cf. *NA XXVI*, p. 246, furthermore *NA XXVI*, p. 336.

³² Of particular interest in this context are Kant's remarks regarding „practical love“ (praktische Liebe) in the *Critique of practical reason* as well as the connection between eth-

Taking into account what Schiller sets out to do by addressing the discussion of grace, one must read his remarks on Kantian ethics rather closely. As Schiller seems to conceive of a beautiful soul as the effect of the cultivation of moral ideas, he cannot intend to confute Kant's theory on the foundation of ethics. The Kantian separation of duty and inclination need already be accepted in order to conciliate the divide. Therefore a close reading of the text strongly suggests that Schiller's concern lies elsewhere. If that concern is indeed the *effect* of beauty rather than beauty itself, Schiller's endeavour might be construed as a development of Kant's final remarks on aesthetics in the third critique.

However, be that the case or not, it would appear to be promising at least, to read the essay closely along the proposed regard. For instance, one would have to specify in which aspect of freedom both beauty and grace share and how precisely Schiller construes the cultivation of moral agency. One would have to answer the question whether Schiller differentiates between freedom in an aesthetic and an ethic sense.³³

Contrarily, one might arrive at the conclusion that my interpretative proposal introduces much more questions than it is able to provide answers for. Nevertheless, only when grace is not considered to be the conceptual answer to the (supposed) fallacies of the *Kallias-Letters*, those questions can arise and give scholarly debate a new and hopefully productive perspective. The necessity of posing those questions, however, is already and foremost warranted by the text itself and cannot be foregone.

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ics and aesthetics in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Cf. AA V, p. 88f, also pp. 351-357.

³³ Düsing tries to answer this question. Cf. Düsing (2014), pp. 73-89.

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