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Edited by Dan-Eugen Ratiu and Connell Vaughan

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A Call to Freedom: Schiller's Aesthetic Dimension and the Objectification of Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT. This paper returns to historical aesthetic theory, particularly Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller's reading of Kant, in order to argue that the experience of the work of art opens an aesthetic dimension that incites ethical action. Through a close analysis of Schiller's *Kallias* letters and his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, the author will argue that one of Schiller's most important contributions to aesthetics is that he conceives of an aesthetic dimension that prioritizes the freedom of the object over that of the subject and locates the subject's recognition of her freedom in the encounter with the beautiful object. This makes the work of art crucial to our understanding of ethics and politics and rebukes claims that it may be "wicked and egoist and cowardly" to make or enjoy art in society.

1. Introduction

This paper is motivated originally by Emmanuel Levinas' critique of art that argues that "there is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague" (Levinas 1989, p. 142). In a world ravaged by poverty, famine, and genocide, when we enjoy art are we only feasting in the face of plagues we have created? The goal of this paper is to respond to that question with an emphatic "no." To accomplish this task, I will return to historical aesthetic theory, particularly Friedrich Schiller's reading of Immanuel Kant, in order to argue that the experience of the work of art actually opens an aesthetic dimension that incites ethical action and love,

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that art may be precisely what we need to address rampant inequity. This paper will provide a close analysis of Schiller's *Kallias* letters and his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* to argue that one of Schiller's most important contributions is that he conceives of an aesthetic dimension that prioritizes the freedom of the object over that of the subject and locates the subject's recognition of her freedom in the encounter with the beautiful object. This makes the work of art crucial to our understanding of ethics and politics and rebukes claims that it may be "wicked and egoist and cowardly" to make or enjoy art in society.

Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic project begins as a response to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. While highly impressed with Kant's work, Schiller argues that Kant's articulation of aesthetic judgment has only considered the beautiful object from the position of the subject, leaving the object itself largely untreated. Schiller's philosophical project across a number of texts, then, is an effort to treat the object itself and develop an "objective" side of aesthetics or produce the "objectification" of aesthetics. In this paper today, I'm interested in the way that that effort to address the object produces a new understanding of ethics at the heart of early German aesthetics that isn't attached to Kant's proposal of beauty as a symbol for morality.

While Schiller's treatments of the work of art do not necessarily present a coherent or consistent aesthetic theory, this paper will work to systematize Schiller's aesthetic writings in three primary steps: 1) Schiller's reconfiguration of Kant's articulation of reason; 2) Schiller's assertion that the work of art resists conceptualization; and 3) the intersubjective ethical demand that arises from this encounter in Schiller's explanation of it. We'll take these steps one at a time.

2. Schiller's Reconfiguration of Kant

The first step is Schiller's reconfiguration of Kant's articulation of reason. As Frederick Beiser argues, Schiller's conception of reason is much broader than Kant's and this allows Schiller to compare judgments in new ways.

Beiser explains, “Schiller takes reason in a very general sense as the power of combination or synthesis, a power which unites all kinds of representations among themselves, and even representations with other faculties, such as the will” (Beiser 2008, p. 58). Beiser continues, “whether strictly Kantian or not, Schiller’s general concept of reason is strategic and significant: it allows him to bring all forms of judgment within the general domain of reason” (Beiser 2008, p. 59). By subsuming all forms of judgment under the domain of reason, Schiller is able to compare logical, teleological, moral and aesthetic judgments as analogous applications of reason in alignment with the configuration of theoretical and practical reason as outlined above.

For Schiller, theoretical reason is the realm of logical and teleological judgments because in those judgments “reason thus adduces an end of its own devising for the object and decides whether the object is adequate to that end” (Schiller 2003, p. 150). In contrast, moral and aesthetic judgments are functions of practical reason. As opposed to theoretical reason which makes the object a means to its end, Schiller argues that “practical reason abstracts from all knowledge and has to do only with the determination of the will, with inner actions” (Schiller 2003, p. 150). Where theoretical reason relates representations to reason by way of intuitions or concepts, practical reason always relates the will directly to representations of reason. Schiller argues that this means that practical reason relates the will to reason “to the exclusion of every external principle of determination ... To adapt or imitate the form of practical reason thus merely means not to be determined from the outside but from within” (Schiller 2003, p. 150). Because Schiller understands aesthetic judgment as a function of practical reason, he can argue that beautiful objects appear to determine themselves freely and that aesthetic judgment is not only a feeling of pleasure but also a recognition of an object’s self-determination as a result of that object appearing to determine itself. It not simply that the subject takes pleasure in the free play of her faculties and chooses to linger in the face of the beautiful object, but that the object refuses to be determined and forces the lingering; the object *resists*.

3. Schiller's Assertion of Resistance

This fact of the object resisting is the second step. Unlike Kant, who locates aesthetic judgement and pleasure purely in the subject, Schiller argues that the work of art itself *resists* conceptualization. Now we must trace Schiller's understanding of *how* the work of art resists conceptualization in its encounter with the subject. Schiller explains this encounter as the shift from the subject's exclamation "May it be what it will!" about the work of art (object) to the object (work of art) calling to the subject to "Be free like me!" (Schiller 2003, p. 150). In order to elucidate this shift, this paper will articulate three moments of the encounter with the work of art which will each be explained in turn: upon encountering the beautiful object, first reason lends the object a will; second, this lending must be concealed so as to appear natural; and third, the object appears to present its freedom and calls to us to respect it. We will consider these three moments in turn.

3.1. *The Lending of a Will*

First, in the letter where Schiller first defines beauty as freedom in appearance (the February 8, 1793 letter), he argues that "reason lends the object (regulative and not, as with moral judgements, constitutive) a power to determine itself, a will, and then examines the object under the form of *that* will (not *its* will, since this would yield a moral judgement)" (Schiller 2003, p. 151). Reason is able to recognize the appearance of freedom, because it has lent freedom to the object. As we saw above, Schiller does not develop a constitutive principle of beauty – proving that there *is* beauty in an object. Rather, he provides a regulative conception of beauty. Here this means that reason ought to lend certain objects a will with which to appear to determine themselves, thus appearing as beautiful. Because the freedom "is merely lent to the object by reason," the freedom is merely an appearance of freedom (Schiller 2003, p. 151).

But having articulated this idea of reason lending a will to the object, Schiller also develops an objective side of this moment in the following letter (dated February 18, 1793). There he argues that Kant's entire

philosophy can be understood in the simple dictum to “determine yourself from within yourself” (Schiller 2003, p. 153). Here, Schiller argues that “this great idea of self-determination resonates back at us from certain appearances of nature, and we call it *beauty*” (Schiller 2003, p. 153). The direction of beauty seems to have shifted from a subject lending an object a will to an object reflecting freedom back at the subject – and not even reflecting but resonating, an auditory rather than visual metaphor that suggests listening rather than seeing.

In the next paragraph, Schiller argues that “there is a view of nature, or of appearances, in which we demand nothing other than freedom from them and where our only concern is that they be what they are through themselves” (Schiller 2003, p. 154). Here Schiller seemingly opens an aesthetic dimension by way of practical reason. The aesthetic encounter is no longer only reliant on the beautiful object, but also on a responsibility of the subject and her attention to practical reason. The judgment of taste is no longer only a statement of “this *x* is beautiful;” it entails the call, “May it be what it will!” (Schiller 2003, p. 154).

Schiller still recognizes that the natural object does not have its own will. But here that recognition is a recognition of the object’s relationality. Schiller argues that each object “exists through another, each exists for another, none has autonomy” (Schiller 2003, p. 155). But rather than being a statement of how unfree the object is, there is a new, positive character to this statement. What is at stake is not the freedom of the object, but the ability of the subject to lend a will to the object and respect this appearance of freedom in relation to herself. In a strikingly phenomenological statement, Schiller argues that “everything changes if one leaves theoretical investigation aside and takes the objects only *as they appear*.” (Schiller 2003, p. 155). If one does so, then one must “regard every being in aesthetic judgment as an end in itself, [for] it disgusts us, for whom freedom is the highest thing, that something should be sacrificed for something else, and used as a means” (Schiller 2003, p. 159). The object cannot be a means to a concept; it must be lent a will with which to resist objectification or conceptualization.

3.2. The Concealment of Lending

But something happens between reason lending the object a will and regarding the object as an end in itself. This is the second step of the aesthetic encounter, where the lending, Schiller tells us, must be rendered invisible, because “we never want to see coercion,” Schiller argues, “even if it is reason itself which exercises it” (Schiller 2003, p. 159). Schiller parses this through his discussion of autonomy and heautonomy. Autonomy, for Schiller, is freedom. As Dieter Heinrich defines it, “Freedom here means to be completely self-determined, to develop according to inner necessity independent of external influences” (Heinrich 1982, 244). Heautonomy is self-determination that is also self-given. It is an intensification of autonomy in which the subject not only develops according to its inner necessity but also develops that inner necessity willingly. Autonomy is the realm of the moral, when an action is freely determined by the human actor. Heautonomy is the realm of the beautiful, because not only is the action freely determined by the actor, it also appears as an immediate product of nature. Thus, Schiller will argue that “a free action is a beautiful action, if the autonomy of the mind and autonomy of appearance coincide” (Schiller 2003, p. 159).

When the direction of beauty shifts, as mentioned previously, not only freedom but also beauty is reflected back on the subject, and the encounter itself must become beautiful. This means that aesthetic judgment must not only be free but also beautiful, presenting not only autonomy but heautonomy. It cannot simply be the case that reason has intentionally decided to respect the self-determination of the beautiful object by lending it a will. This would be a moral judgment. Rather it must appear that it is in reason’s nature to respect all beautiful objects. Thus, Schiller tells us that the aesthetic judgment is only beautiful if the subject has “forgot[ten] himself in his action” and “fulfilled his duty with the ease of someone acting out of mere instinct” (Schiller 2003, p. 159). As Schiller puts it, it must be that “duty has become its nature” (Schiller 2003, p. 159). Reason ought to lend objects a will with which to appear to determine themselves. Only when the subject conceals this lending can the object appear to be free. And only in

forgetting this lending, can aesthetic judgment itself become beautiful. This is what Schiller will call the “objective ground” of beauty: that the representation of the object “simply necessitates us to produce the idea of freedom from within ourselves, and to apply it to the object” (Schiller 2003, p. 160-1). Schiller’s *objective* ground is a necessary, *subjective* state, a state so necessary that we recognize it as our own nature.

3.3. The Call to Respect Autonomy

This leads us to the third moment of the aesthetic encounter: the object calling to us to respect its autonomy. Schiller foreshadowed this point in a section previously quoted from the February 8, 1793 letter where he argued that the “idea of self-determination resonates back at us from certain appearances of nature” (Schiller 2003, p. 153). Schiller expands on this notion of resonance in the February 23, 1793 letter. There he argues that “the thing itself, in its objective constitution, invites us, or rather requires us to notice its quality of not-being-determined-from-the-outside” (Schiller 2003, p. 161). The beautiful object *invites* or *requires* us to recognize its freedom and, therefore, its beauty. It demands that we lend it a will with which to determine itself and then conceal that lending so that the object can appear beautiful and even forget that its will is borrowed so as to make the aesthetic judgment beautiful. In this dual concealing-forgetting, we find that the beautiful object appears beautiful not as a result of our reason but as a product of its own nature. The object no longer *appears* to be free but presents its freedom. Thus the encounter appears to begin from the object’s exhortation to “be free like me” (Schiller 2003, p. 173). It is no longer only a matter of the object being what it will. In the exchange of will, freedom, and beauty in the aesthetic encounter, the object comes to call to and demand from the subject whose freedom is then intertwined with the freedom of the object. Therefore, Schiller tells us that “in this aesthetic world ... even the gown I wear on my body demands respect for its freedom from me ... In exchange, it promises to use its freedom in such a way that it will not curtail my own freedom; and if both keep their word, the world will say that I am well dressed” (Schiller 2003, p. 170). In the aesthetic

dimension, therefore, the subject works in conjunction with the object to ground both subject and object in freedom. To reiterate the moments just explored on these terms: First the subject's practical reason lends the object a will to resist the violence of theoretical reason. Then the subject conceals this lending so that the object can appear to be free (beauty as freedom in appearance). The subject then finds that the object comes in upon her presenting its freedom (beauty as the exhibition of freedom), and she forgets that she has lent the object a will, establishing her own freedom again in heeding the call of the object to "be free like me."

4. Schiller's Aesthetic-Ethical Dimension

The proceeding three moments take up the second step in my attempt to articulate Schiller's aesthetic theory (understanding how the object resists conceptualization), and they lead us to the third and final step of my argument: the way in which this encounter opens an aesthetic dimension that is inherently ethical. To explain this aesthetic-ethical dimension, In order to understand this question in the context of Schiller's thought we must turn to Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* written in 1795, two years after *Kallias*. Schiller opens that text with a colorful critique of a certain mode of thinking:

For alas! Intellect must first destroy the object of inner sense if it would make it *its own* ... In order to lay hold of the fleeting phenomenon, he must first bind it in the fetters of rule, tear its fair body to pieces by reducing it to concepts, and preserve its living spirit in a sorry skeleton of words. (Schiller 2001, p. 87-8)

Here we can see an echo of Schiller's division between theoretical and practical reason and emphasis on practical reason as refusing this sort of reduction to concepts. Throughout the following letters, Schiller sets up a conflict between reason and sense or the formal drive and the sensuous drive. Sense contemplates the natural world while reason lays hold of the fleeting phenomena. And Schiller tells us that "only through individual

powers in man becoming isolated, and arrogating to themselves exclusive authoring, do they come into conflict with the truth of things, and force the common sense ... to penetrate phenomena in depth” (Schiller 2001, p. 102). Schiller’s aesthetic dimension allows us to attempt to avoid the destruction of the object of sense by the intellect, to resist penetrating phenomena in depth and to begin thinking how we might relate to objects and others ethically.

Opening this aesthetic-ethical dimension is the function of the third fundamental drive that Schiller posits in the thirteenth letter: the play drive. The role of the play drive is “first, to preserve the life of sense against the encroachments of freedom; and second, to secure the personality against the forces of sensation” (Schiller 2001, p. 122). In the play drive, both reason and sense linger in free play, but this drive is awakened not simply by a mediation or balance of the two conflicting drives. Rather Schiller argues that

Should there, however, be cases in which he were to have this twofold experience *simultaneously*, in which he were to be at once conscious of his freedom and sensible of his existence, were, at one and the same time, to feel himself matter and come to know himself as mind, then he would in such cases, and in such cases only, have a complete intuition of his human nature, and the object that afforded him this vision would become for him a symbol of his *accomplished destiny*. (Schiller 2001, p. 126)

The play drive is the simultaneous experience of oneself as matter and mind. It is a result of the aesthetic encounter with the beautiful object that is an interruption and suspension of thinking that is either technical (knowledge via reason) or sensuous (feeling via sense) in favor of an encounter with the object in which the subject only knows the object through feeling. The play drive opens the possibility that the subject can feel sensuous matter and know it without determining it, that the subject can allow the object to be what it will while hearing the call to be free like it. As Schiller notes in a footnote in the thirteenth letter, aesthetic judgment resists the mistake of “thrusting ourselves *out upon [nature]*” rather than “letter her come *in upon*

us” (Schiller 2001, p. 123). In heeding the call to “Be free like me” the subject “ha[s] the active determination already within [her]” while being “at the one and the same time passively, and actively, determined” (Schiller 2001, p. 153). In the three moments of the aesthetic encounter, she lends, conceals and forgets; she is both free to determine herself and determined by the beautiful object. This is why beauty is our “second creatress,” according to Schiller (Schiller 2001, p. 148). And how beauty is both “an *object* for us,” and “a *state of the perceiving subject*” (Schiller 2001, p. 164). Beauty is both the object we find beautiful and a state in which we find objects beautiful. The play drive opens an aesthetic dimension that allows us to relate to objects otherwise by way of the beautiful.

5. Conclusion

Much has been written about Schiller as both a metaphysical and a political thinker, interpreting his aesthetic theory either as (1) too “deeply metaphysical” and failing to reach ethics or politics or (2) simply a stepping stone to a political and social theory which must be his larger philosophical contribution. Fewer writers, however, have paused to consider the ethical implications of Schiller’s consideration of the aesthetic object. One goal of this paper is to present Schiller as an importantly aesthetic-*ethical* thinker who provides resources to respond to critiques of art as inherently politically and ethically disengaged, such as the critique by Levinas cited here in my opening or other critiques like that of Simone de Beauvoir when she argues that art is “a position of withdrawal, a way of fleeing the truth of the present” (Beauvoir 2015, p. 81).

In his response to Kant and articulation of the encounter with the work of art in aesthetic judgment, Schiller rebukes these arguments that art withdraws from our responsibilities toward others by showing how our encounter with a beautiful work of art opens an aesthetic dimension that is inherently ethical and simultaneously grounds our freedom and the freedom of others. In the penultimate paragraph of the *Letters*, Schiller argues that “in the aesthetic state everything – even the tool that serves – is a free citizen, having equal rights with the noblest; and the mind, which would

force the patient mass beneath the yoke of its purposes, must here first obtain its assent” (Schiller 2001, p. 178). *Even the tool that serves* – Alongside the establishment of a social or political state, there is the beautiful object, and even, or especially, in the aesthetic state that object must be a free citizen. It is the encounter with the beautiful object that inaugurates the thinking otherwise that allows us to hear and to heed the call of the object to be free like me. The aesthetic encounter returns us to the ground of our freedom by way of the beautiful object, bringing the beautiful object back with us as we allow it to come in upon us. It establishes autonomy alongside relationality, and in that this relation demands respect for freedom, I would argue that the encounter with the beautiful object opens an aesthetic dimension that is inherently ethical. While Kant posited the beautiful as a *symbol* for morality, Schiller makes the aesthetic *inherently* ethical, embedding within it a notion of relationality that regulates our interaction with objects and, by analogy, people in the world.

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