

On Exemplary Art as the Symbol of Morality. Making Sense of Kant's Ideal of Beauty.

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I Three Intersections Between Aesthetics and Ethics

1. According to Kant the experience of knowledge of the world depends on the categories of our understanding and the forms of our intuition. What exceeds this experience, the supersensible, comes in two guises: either as the substrate of appearances, the thing in itself; or as the moral law within us. Metaphysics is one way to deal with this transcendently unknowable: a centrifugal effort to look at the world from a God's eye point of view.¹ Art is, I think, the other: a centripetal effort to deal with the supersensible from our own point of view. In what follows, I shall be concerned with the second project only. As scholars of Kant's philosophical aesthetics, we tend both to stress the issue of aesthetic judgements' claim to universal validity, and to neglect the sheer intimacy of our encounters with beauty or artistic merit. The question is: how can we claim a universal validity to something as private as our encounter with a beautiful work of art? Dangers lurk in this corner: is the judgement of beauty merely an expression of personal preference? No, it isn't. Should we be subjectivist relativists? I don't think so. Kant perceived his challenge as having to address the subjectivity of beauty without giving up its assent to universal validity. Approaching the intimacy of aesthetic judgement without giving up the search for a notion of correctness motivates my present discussion of Kant's centripetal effort to think the analogy of art (sic) to morality.

2. Both explicitly and implicitly, Kant has held positions with regard to each of the three intersections which Jerrold Levinson recently distinguished between aesthetics and ethics.² The first of these intersections concerns the

¹ In her contribution to this Congress, Jane Kneller argues that metaphysics has remained Kant's project all the way through, even to the third Critique. (See there). ² In a paper on "Aesthetics and Ethics" he delivered in Utrecht, June 1998: "One way [in which both intersect] concerns ethical aspects of aesthetic and artistic activity, and in particular the question of whether and why ethical evaluation of art is legitimate." The other two intersections are, secondly, the respective ontologies of moral and aesthetic values and properties, and, thirdly, the idea that morality might in the end be answerable to aesthetic criteria. Cf. also Eaton, M. M., 1997: "Aesthetics: the Mother of Ethics?" In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 55, p. 355-64, Levinson, J., Ed. *Aesthetics and Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, and Davies, S., Ed. *Art and its Messages*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press 1998.

legitimacy of *moral assessments of art*. In general, Kant bars these from the aesthetic domain since no concepts or ideas are to be allowed to determine our judgements of taste. They subsume an object's internal coherence or external purpose under rules: of which beauty does not admit any. Yet, Kant distinguishes pure beauty, i.e. a beauty fully disconnected from concepts from dependent beauty, which is not fully disconnected from concepts but yet is not determined by any (§ 16).³ The only sustainable version of this—otherwise apparently unintelligible—distinction is a weak one: whatever role determinant or moral concepts play in aesthetic judgements, they cannot be used to establish or prove an object's beauty.⁴ Thus, ethical concepts, or ideas of reason may arguably play *some* role, but never that of determining the beauty of the object under appreciation. However this argument develops judging morally a work of art will not help us discern its beauty.

3. Levinson's second intersection between aesthetics and ethics is about the *ontology of values*, and Kant approaches it by addressing the role of our interests. Kant's thesis that aesthetic judgements ought to be disinterested is in fact threefold. This may be elucidated if one starts from representation instead of nature.⁵ Pictures, for instance, first and foremost address vision, not our hearing or touching, and assume us to stand in front of them.⁶ Also, in contrast to looking at things in real-life (or even through a mirror)⁷ when we watch a picture, moving our body should not normally make a difference to the measure of information retrievable from the picture. By moving our head sideways we cannot, for instance, get to see the person who is depicted as hiding behind a tree. Curiously, our bodies are not in the centre of represen-

³ References to Kant, I.: *The Critique of Judgement*. Indianapolis, Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company (tr. Werner S. Pluhar) 1987 (1790) will be to (§ [section number]:[paragraph]). ⁴ See, for the unintelligibility, Lorand, R., 1989: "Free and Dependent Beauty: a Puzzling Issue". In: *British Journal of Aesthetics* 29, p. 32-40, and for the 'weakening': Cohen, T., 1990: "An Emendation in Kant's Theory of Taste". In: *Nous* 24, p. 137-45 and Savile, A.: *Kantian Aesthetics Pursued*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 1993. According to Savile (in Chapter I) truth-values apply to the subject concept, but not the predicate, which attributes—more or less legitimately—a specific type of experience to the perception of the entity described by the subject concept. In Gerwen, R. v., 1995: "Kant's Regulative Principle of Aesthetic Excellence: The Ideal Aesthetic Experience". In: *Kant-Studien* 86, p. 331-345, I argue that Kant's analysis of the legitimacy of our use of this predicate describes a regulative ideal for aesthetic discourse. ⁵ Based on a distinction offered in Currie, G.: *Image and Mind*. New York, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995, 72-75. ⁶ Kant implicitly alludes to this phenomenology, not in the First Moment, but in 51:7 (Ak. 322). There is an ambiguity in the notion of disinterestedness, stemming from Kant's starting point in natural beauty, since here the distinction should be laid along different lines. Natural beauty can be seen to literally point us to our place in reality, whereas art can be held to achieve such recognition only through addressing our minds, not our bodies. In fact, we need quite a detour before my phenomenological explanation of disinterestedness can be held to apply to the appreciation of nature. We need two distinct accounts of artistic and natural beauty. ⁷ As against the comparison of pictures with mirrors provided in Scruton, R.: *The Aesthetic Understanding: Essays in the Philosophy of Art and Culture*. London, New York: Methuen 1983, *Photography and Representation*.

tational perception: such perception is non-egocentric. It is such phenomenological constraints to perception as these which indicate that *represented* worlds are spatio-temporally and, therefore, morally discontinuous with the everyday world that contains both us and the work (as a thing). Against standard aesthetic attitude theories I submit that the shift away from moral constraints is secondary to a shift in perception: the required disinterestedness concerns primarily our perceptual stance, and only as a—necessary—consequence our moral stance. And this is ‘normal procedure’ with representations of whatever kind. Thus, firstly, if one takes an interest in the represented object’s existence this marks a failure of understanding the art form one is confronted with.

This helps us understand one of Kant’s basic assumptions, namely that beauty “refers the object’s presentation merely to the subject” (§§ 1 and 6). To make sense of this basic assumption, we must remind ourselves that for Kant ‘Vorstellung’ refers to how our ‘perceptions’ affect our inner sense: ‘presentations’ are circularly definable as ‘the intermediaries that our minds work with (whatever they are like)’ when we perceive something.⁸ Arguably, they are not full-fledged representations with a substantial character distinct from what they ‘stand for’. Given this understanding of the problems of perception, what Kant assumes applies to something’s beauty is that we somehow treat the thing’s perceptual presentation as a representation. While perceiving the beautiful object, we do not, however, hold the presentation up to our mind’s eye as if it were a picture, which would be a superficial view of Kant’s remarks. What we do is: borrow the phenomenology that is specific of representations, and refrain from considering the reality of what is present to us. We judge the beauty of an object if we treat it as if it were represented. This we do by treating the object as if it is not in the spatio-temporal, moral continuum that it actually is in, but as if it addresses us in the peculiar ways that we know from representations. Natural beauty is derived from artistic beauty. Thus, secondly, we don’t bestow on to the beautiful object an egocentric perception that involves more normal moral constraints on our agency.⁹

Representations are to be appreciated (aesthetically) for their representing, not for the nature of the things they represent, let alone for (an interest in) the consumption of these things. One may ask: What is the implication of this for the nature of representations themselves? In pornography, for instance, we assume the ability to ‘consume’ the bodies of the persons depicted.¹⁰ They are

⁸ I favour Werner S. Pluhar’s translation of ‘Vorstellung’ with ‘presentation’. See Pluhar, n.17 with Ak. 175, p. 14, and n.4 with Ak. 203, on p. 44. I benefited from Lancelot Fletcher’s discussion of this issue on kant@onelist.com. Also compare Kant in § 37: “.. all judgements of taste are singular judgements, because they do not connect their predicate, the liking, with a concept but connect it with a singular empirical presentation that is given.” (Ak. 289). ⁹ Cf. this with the argument developed by Olivia Custer elsewhere in these volumes; she relates the named assumption to the transcendental aesthetics of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, whereas I strive to establish how, notwithstanding standard interpretations, Kant used the phenomenological peculiarities of art to think about natural beauty. ¹⁰ In pornography, the flesh is depicted as ‘consumable’; with humiliation-television the mental life of the depicted is thus presented.

depicted as a means: to our ends of ‘consuming the flesh’—not as an end in themselves or a purposeless purposivity.¹¹ If a representation occasions an interest in the *existence* of a person it represents, the representation can be argued to offend, through a kind of misrepresenting, the represented person’s inherent worthiness, his humanity.¹² Thus, thirdly, in connection with representations, disinterestedness forms a moral demand when the representing is of human beings.

4. The third intersection between the aesthetic and the moral is the one with perhaps the largest scope. For Levinson this intersection concerns the question if the moral perhaps answers eventually to aesthetic standards. Kant conceives of this intersection as an analogy. He thinks *beauty is a symbol of the morally good* (§ 59). This, supposedly, is so because both in aesthetic and moral judging the subject is free from outward laws and rules of experience, and holds its own law. According to a standard interpretation, for Kant only the beauty of nature, not that of art, functions as a symbol of the morally good.¹³ A lover of nature admires a flower for its merely being there, without connecting this with any interest. Since the lover of nature finds no purpose in nature he ascribes the purposefulness that he observes there, to his own moral vocation (§ 42:8, Ak. 301). That Kant thinks that art cannot symbolize the morally good, is however, puzzling, mainly for two reasons. First, because some of nature’s beauties he relegates in § 42:8, and more elaborately in § 58, to teleological judgement: “Consider flowers, blossoms, even the shapes of entire plants, or consider the grace we see in the structure of various types of animals, which is unnecessary for their own use but is selected, as it were, for our taste. Consider above all the variety and harmonious combinations of colors [...] (as in pheasants, in crustaceans, insects, down to the commonest flowers).” (Ak. 347). Kant thinks that we do not judge these forms aesthetically. It is unclear how so-called pure beauties of nature do not, too, fit this bill, let alone why they alone can serve as analogous to morality. Also, we supposedly take objective purposiveness into account when judging animate objects, such as human beings and horses, but: “We then judge nature no longer as it appears as art, but insofar as it actually *is* art (though superhuman art) [...]” (§ 48:4, Ak. 311). So firstly, art is our model for judging natural beauty aesthetically,¹⁴ but as soon as we take natural beauty *as* art we are no longer judging it aesthetically.¹⁵ Secondly, fine art is the art of genius. That is, although it must be recognized to be art, a work of fine art must also appear

¹¹ See previous note. ¹² I.e. his natural means of expression. The locution ‘*natural*’ is not intended as a denial of the *cultural* bend of mental life. Instead, it means to oppose *artistic* expression. The distinguishing mark of natural expression is the presence of the mental life that is expressed to the beholder. Artistic expression presupposes the absence of the relevant mental life. ¹³ See for instance Paul Guyer: *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*. New York, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993. ¹⁴ And this fits with the second argument for disinterestedness, above. ¹⁵ Cf. also § 23:5, Ak. 246. Putting aesthetic judgements thus at the risk of becoming teleological judgements qualifies the claim (in § 59) that only natural beauty symbolizes morality.

as if it were a product of mere nature. And “.. it must be nature in the subject (and through the attunement of his powers) that gives the rule to art . . .” (§ 46:3, Ak. 307). If not determinate—artistic or moral—rules but nature itself generates artistic beauty, then artistic beauty must arguably also be able to summon up a realization of the moral law within us—assuming that this is what natural beauty is doing. In what follows I shall develop an argument that sustains a positive thesis to that effect.

II Developing Kant’s Philosophy of Art

5. Kant characterizes beauty as the purposeless purposivity of the beautiful object, which—as it were—causes in its beholder a free play of the cognitive faculties and is, therefore, viewed as subjectively purposive, or as purposive towards our cognitive faculties as is required for knowledge in general, without, in this case, such knowledge coming about or being aimed at. The human mind is pivotal to beauty. However, not all our mental capacities are at stake here. What is not, is our perception of the phenomenal properties of the beautiful object as such—the what it is like to perceive them—what is, is the formal ordering of these.¹⁶ How is that? According to Kant the judgement of beauty is not about our pleasures in the phenomenal. In §§14 and 39, Kant explains why the phenomenal in itself, but especially our liking it, should be irrelevant to our aesthetic judgements: they

¹⁶ CJ, § 41. Kant’s examples of flowers and birds as free beauties are in section 16. Even natural beauty, however, is supposed to be based on form, not charm or the phenomenal. (§ 42:10, Ak. 302).

do not allow of communication.¹⁷

¹⁷ Kant confuses the issue. It would have been more appropriate, had he put his remark in terms of judgements about universals as opposed to particulars. Liking a string quartet *because* it has strings in it involves an inference from a general classification. It is plainly wrong to judge an instance of music on account merely of its belonging to a specific genre or kind. We have to hear the particular work for ourselves and cannot derive its beauty from any such determinate concept. But once we embark on this acquaintance there is no way to deny the relevance of the phenomenal. Kant provides two arguments for expelling charm and what pleases directly in the senses, but he seems to mispresent his conclusion. The first argument is hardly more than a suggestion based on earlier sections. It says that finding a mere sensation agreeable is a *personal* thing dependent upon one's personal preferences, as a consequence of which it cannot claim a universal agreement. However, the *reason why* this feeling might not rightly claim universal validity cannot lie in its being a *feeling*—since the judgement of beauty is based on a feeling as well. So this first argument does not hold in itself. In comes the second argument: the phenomenal as such does not admit of communication. We cannot possibly explain to someone else how we perceive a specific colour or tone—we can only explain which role we think it is playing *within a series* of colours or tones. The problem Kant sees with what pleases directly in the senses, does not concern a type of feeling—the agreeable—but a type of sensation, the phenomenal, the “what it is like to see a colour or hear a tone”.

Kant recognized the problems he was faced with after distinguishing within our experience of art between the phenomenality of tones (and colours) and their formal role: “[...] we cannot say with certainty whether a color or a tone (sound) is merely an agreeable sensation or whether it is of itself already a beautiful play of [component] sensations and as such carries with it, as we judge it aesthetically, a liking for its form.” (§ 51:10, Ak. 324). See also Gerwen, R. v., 1999: *Kant on What Pleases Directly in the Senses*. In: *Issues in Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics* 9, p. 71-83.

We cannot explain how we experience some phenomenal property, let alone how we experience our liking of it, because these experiences are highly subjective. Only what Kant, in this context, calls the formal aspects of objects allow for such communication.¹⁸ So, it is in addressing these formal aspects of a beautiful object that we prove our capacity for communicating our minds' workings, or more specifically, our consciousness of the subjective purposivity that we perceive the object as showing forth. Judgements of beauty concern the *communicability of human feeling*.

(...) taste is our ability to judge a priori the communicability of the feelings that (without mediation by a concept) are connected with a given presentation. (§ 40:6, Ak. 296).¹⁹ According to Kant, in section 45, a work of art “.. must seem as free from all constraint of chosen rules as if it were a product of mere nature.”²⁰ Its finality is not inferred from rules of whatever kind, but is attributed to the very nature of the artist's own subjectivity (§ 49:11, Ak. 318). Kant's motivation to say this was not merely negative. He did not only oppose charlatans or those who produce ‘merely academically correct’ works. However, what is ‘nature’ supposed to achieve in Kant's argument? Obviously, Kant is not referring to ‘mimesis of nature’ for that would allow for rules and mere academic correctness; nor is his claim that in a work of genius the material speaks for itself, as that would grapple with his demanding academic correctness and his opposing the phenomenal. Instead of this, genius is the artist's capacity to capture and express his own subjectivity: the ephemeral mental life that consists of a happy, free coincidence of his cognitive powers (§ 49:10, Ak. 317). If genius's guide in this is his own nature, his ‘Geist’, then art's most important trait is its being a lively expression of mental life, and, according to Kant's characterization of the “nature of man as the subjective ground for the use of his freedom in general” (*Religion innerhalb des Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, 1793, Ak. IV, 19) this is of major moral significance. Arguably, apart from our inferential dealings with the ideas of reason in our moral reasonings the communicability of mind is *the* most important basis for humanity's moral destination.

In § 51:1, Ak. 320, Kant characterizes beauty of either art or nature as the expression of aesthetic ideas, and these he saw, by definition, as animating the beholder's mind (§ 49:3, Ak. 314). Such animating takes place because the beholder's understanding cannot grasp the aesthetic idea with his concepts and yet is somehow stimulated to think more to it than is strictly perceptually

¹⁸ § 13:3, Ak. 223. Kant proves tributary to the empiricists' distinction between primary and secondary qualities. ¹⁹ This passage affirms the phenomenological substantialization—inherent in Kant's notion of beauty—of the presentations of perception. The passage is also connected to the role and nature of ‘sensus communis’ in aesthetic judgement. Our culture's motivation for sustaining the domain of art might be formulated to be: to celebrate the communicability of mental life. ²⁰ § 45:1, Ak. 306. And see § 46:3, Ak. 307: “it must be nature in the subject (and through the attunement of his powers) that gives the rule to art.”

there. But why would the aesthetic appreciator be thus stimulated by beauty? It is not that beautiful things are just too complex—because no stimulation would follow upon a frustration ensuing excessive complexity. According to Kant, Geist is the animating factor (§ 49:2, Ak. 313) and the challenge for artists is to produce a wealth of it (Geistreich, § 47:1, Ak. 308). Our best shot at the meaning of ‘Geist’ is by interpreting as *moral profundity*. Think of section § 59:7 where Kant remarks that we often call beautiful objects “by names that seem to presuppose that we are judging [these objects] morally”, of which he provides the examples of ‘majestic’, ‘cheerful’, ‘gay’, ‘innocent’, ‘humble’, ‘tender’.²¹ I submit that Kant made use of a *model* to understand the stimulating or animating factor, and can seriously think only of a person’s *natural powers of expression* in face and gestures as the model for beauty as the expression of aesthetic ideas, and another person’s empathy as a model for aesthetic appreciation.

Like the experience of beauty, empathy surpasses a merely conceptual determination of someone’s mental life, and implies an imaginative effort of simulation on our behalf. What animates these efforts is something suggested within the other’s expression which is somehow difficult to determine. That there should be some profundity in the other’s mental life is what motivates us not to give up in the light of indeterminacy. Someone’s expressiveness gives us much to think about but, we feel, no concept is going to satisfactorily determine the other’s experience. In both empathy and aesthetic experience our judgement follows the same rules, i.e. the form of the reflection is identical in both cases. This analogy conforms to Kant’s definition of ‘symbol’ (in § 59). Thus, fine art, which intentionally expresses Geist, can be viewed as a symbol of natural expression. Natural beauty cannot in any straightforward way be equally conceived of as the symbol of morality. Then again, Kant does not argue for his position that only the beauty of nature can function as such a symbol. He merely starts from the everyday thought that people with a good disposition are likely to take an interest in natural beauty.

6. Now let us look at art proper, i.e. at *matter made expressive*. The analysis of art’s celebration of the communicability of feeling is framed by a discussion, crucial to Kant’s philosophy of art, in sections 47, and, especially 60, of the ‘method or manner’ of the artist. According to Kant there can be no methods concerning the fine arts because there are no rules to be followed.²² Instead, there is what he calls ‘manner’ (*modus*), which entails that . . .

²¹ Kant did not subscribe in his alleged formalism to a view of *objective* beauty that would strip beauty of such mental aspects. ²² Apparently, Kant’s was an honorific definition of art (in the terminology of the classical paper by Weitz, M., 1956: *The Role of Theory in Aesthetics*. In: *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 15, p. 27-35. Kant disputed art’s capacities referring to its flawed instances, whereas whenever his enthusiasm for the fine arts surfaced, he aimed at exemplary works. Only if one *characterizes* art in terms of what can *sometimes* be held against it, such as charlatannerie, can one deny art’s being a symbol of morality, because in those respects it is not nature which ‘gives art its rules’. Since my interest here is with Kant’s views on exemplary works of art I shall neglect the criticisms.

“the master must show by his example what the student is to produce and how.” (§ 60:1, Ak. 355).

The master may put down rules or teach techniques but these are to function only as reminders, not as constraints for the artist-to-be. In all, the way a master can teach his student is by making exemplary art himself, by putting the paint onto the canvas and showing how specific bodily actions make communicable some aesthetic idea. Kant thinks that the propedeutic for this learning situation lies in studying humaniora. Arguably, this is because art concerns the communication of human mental life: It develops our moral ideas and cultivates our moral feeling (§ 60:4, Ak. 356). Unless we connect the fine arts, closely or remotely, to moral ideas, they will share the fate of sensation: namely mere enjoyment, which

“leaves nothing behind as an idea and makes the spirit dull, the object gradually disgusting, and the mind dissatisfied with itself and moody because it is conscious that in reason’s judgement its attunement is contrapurposive.” (§ 51:1, Ak. 326).²³

Lastly, Kant thinks that master and student must work towards an ideal, and obviously this ideal is not meant as a set of rules. Kant refers, assumably, to the ideal of beauty, which he attributes to:

“only that which has the purpose of its existence in itself—*man*. Man can himself determine his purposes by reason [...]. It is *man*, alone among all objects in the world, who admits of an ideal of beauty [...].” (17:3, Ak. 233).

Kant explains this in terms whose analogy with natural expression is hard to miss:

“the ideal of the beautiful [...] is only to be sought in the human figure. Here the ideal consists in the expression of the moral [...] The visible expression of moral ideas that govern men inwardly [...].” (§ 17:6, Ak. 235).

Kant’s addressing the ideal of beauty seems out of place in the context of the Third Moment at the end of which the section is placed, since the argument therein is devoted to excluding any and all purposes or ends from the judgement of beauty. Only when this section is brought to bear on Kant’s philosophy of art does it fit in. Our internal determinations do not only steer our actions, but also cause our outlook; i.e. the ways we dress, and move our bodies, and how we express our thoughts and feelings facially and gesturally. Does Kant mean to say that every single human being has his own ideal of beauty—or does the thesis, instead, apply to representations of humans? Although the allusion (in § 17:6, Ak. 235) to academic correctness points directly to the latter view—which in itself is awkward because representations do not morally and internally determine their own outlook, at least not in any

²³ “..what is essential in all fine art is the form that is purposive for our observation and judging, rather than the matter of sensation (i.e., charm and emotion). For the pleasure we take in purposive form is also culture, and it attunes the spirit to ideas..” (§ 51:1, Ak. 326).

literal sense—assuming that Kant took natural expression as his model for artistic expression, that difference is mute. As a thesis concerning exemplary art, and viewing it as analogous to challenges of natural expression, the ideal of beauty applies to how genius is to make his work render its own internal determinations, or, in case some person or persons are represented: how the work renders the relevant mental life in lifelike manner, finds it a suitable expression that animates its beholder’s mental powers onto an empathetic free play. Here is a notion of correctness which at once sustains the subjectivity of the judgement of taste and its claim to universal validity via the *sensus communis*.

The ideal of beauty viewed as a purposivity with no external purpose—but internal ones—and applied to artistic expression and the representation of humanity, mirrors what Kant has called the practical imperative which, he thought, makes the categorical imperative applicable in practice: “Act in such a way as to treat ‘humanity’ either in your own person or in someone else’s person always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means.”²⁴ In this imperative the ‘humanity’ in a person is seen as a purposivity without an external purpose. It motivated Kant’s demand of disinterestedness; it applies directly to the ideal of beauty and to the artistic representation of humans. In short, for Kant, fine art, as a symbol of natural expression is inherently moral.²⁵

²⁴ Kant, I, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1956 (1786), S. 61, Ak. IV, 429.

²⁵ I thank the audiences at the 2nd Joint Conference of the British and the German Society of Aesthetics, March 1999, Berlin, and at the IXth Kant Congress, March 2000, Berlin for critical remarks.