

BEAUTY : KANT'S DISCUSSION

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I admit that I do not understand what beauty is, but I want to explore the matter. First, it is clear that (fine) art involves a multiplicity of complex qualities, e.g., skillful execution of the field's materials of an intended purpose, ingenuity of conception or of working materials, social or cultural comment, etc. By this I suggest that art is not associated or simply associated with the creation of beauty. Indeed, a work of art need not be beautiful. This is a different view than many have, especially in the eighteenth century. Like Winkelmann and Lessing, some assumed that ancient Greek artists are the standard for a work of art by their ability to execute the beautiful in terms of universal rules. The task of execution of course involves skill and a temperament that one might call Pythagorean, that is, the creation of beauty through rather mathematical qualities such as harmony, proportion order, etc. Behind this is the Pythagoras' most stimulating suggestion that art (music especially) can be translated into the mathematical. This means that the realm of feeling can be related to the mathematical order supposed in nature. Beauty made by man, then, shares the divine order of the Kosmos.

The specific task of an art work is therefore to create the beautiful and express divinity. Nevertheless, the question of aesthetic theory is whether the creation of beauty through art is the supreme task of an art work or even whether it is the necessary criterion of it?

One can understand that those who think that beauty is the supreme task follow the Pythagorean path and associated the Beautiful with the True and the Good in the Platonic trinity, and, further, even emphasize that recognition by the supreme act of contemplation as in Plotinus. The neo-Platonic philosophers, most of the Church Fathers of Christendom, had the model of God as Creator

associated with Plato's Demiurgus in the *Timaeus*, to present an imitation but with the presence of a sense of human divinity, in the artist's creation. This might be associated with but went further than the notion that the poet (and other artists) provided a wisdom that was equal or better than philosophy, which is an attitude that pagan myths or the *halachah* (cosmic and moral interpretations of the stories) of the Bible or, in Nietzsche, "a well struck aphorism," is wiser than any conceptual knowledge. This is the old rivalry over whether (divine) poetry or philosophy is wiser.

The eighteenth century emphasized beauty in its aesthetic theories. As the Germans, Winkelmann and Lessing were inspired particularly by Greek art, the English, Addison, Shaftsbury, Hutcheson, Kames were inspired by Newton. Their inspiration reminds of the line from the American poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay: "Euclid alone looked at beauty bare." Order, harmony, design, openness to contemplation and wonder, and such that was attributed to Greek sculpture were located in the world system attributed to God. The English moral sense philosophers who so admired Newton's world picture, found a sense of beauty in mankind that intuitively recognized this in a work of art. Again on the path of Pythagoras, through Plato and Plotinus, like beauty in nature, the human creation of beauty had the divine as its foundation and imitative reverberation.

When we consider these attitudes of the eighteenth century, it immediately strikes us that they are at a rather distant shore from the attitudes of the present time. Surely, however intricate and complex are the factors that have made the cultural change, one cannot mislay the following obvious differences: the low esteem of ontological metaphysics, cultural secularization, and, even, the complexity of scientific theory with its introduction of possibilities of chaos, disorder, black holes, evolutionary unpredictability, etc., that both undermines and distances the educated man from understanding in science a view of nature. Even Edna St. Vincent Millay's "beauty bare" must be revised to include Gauss, Reimann, Lobachevsky and other non-Euclidean geometers. It is no wonder that Hutcheson's sense of beauty seems an unmoored supposition despite it still having some attraction because of our particular experiences of beauty.

II

The problems of the above historical apercu raises for philosophy questions that must be pursued in detail by its own techniques. Since there is a competition

of meanings and views of its capacity, philosophical examinations of a subject matter like aesthetics hinges upon the ambiguity of its own powers. Kant has brought these methodological considerations to the strong attention of modern philosophers. But even if final resolution of any philosophical investigation depends on understanding what philosophy itself is, we can try to think about the arguments and implications of a thinker like Kant, (1724-1804). Kant holds many eighteenth century views, including the preeminence of beauty as the goal of an artistic work but that proposition is not left hanging as a mere intuition but is correlated to his methodological revolution. His critical or transcendental philosophy turned the problem of the beautiful into a discussion of the work of judgment as part of his systematic attempt to describe the structures and limits of all human capacity; in doing that the assumption of beauty as found outside of man in nature or objects of craft becomes instead the problem of the human subject. Subjectivity however must consider its foundation which, without the possibility of an ontological metaphysics that provides knowledge, is a suppositional result of a systematic description of human powers. This speculative assertion, within the limits of knowledge, seems to be part of what Kant calls "a rational faith." Beauty relates to this rational faith in vivifying its suppositional demands for the existence of a God that has created nature with a teleological principle and the freedom of man's essential character as an ethical being, in a non-natural noumenal realm.

Kant was influenced by both Lessing and Hutcheson, particularly through his friend Mendelssohn and by his former student and polemically opponent, Herder. A long and detailed survey of his position would need to examine these influences. Here, it is enough to say that he offers a great thinker's attempt to systematically present a unified consideration of reality, within the critical limits he imposed on cognition, by finding a place for beauty. This is the work of the first part of his third Kritik, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790). Historical influences aside, he can be looked upon through a rationally argued systematic aesthetic theory. Let us, then, turn to consider the first paragraph of this work, in the section called the "Critique of the Aesthetical Judgment":

In order to distinguish whether anything is beautiful or not, we refer the representation, not by the understanding to the object of cognition, but to the imagination... to the subject and its feeling of pleasure and pain. The judgment of taste--the definition of taste is the faculty of

judging the beautiful -- is therefore ... *no other than subjective*.¹

Kant's italicized emphasis on subjectivity must be taken as an aspect of his anthropological psychology, that is, how the human mind judges the beautiful. This emphasis on process leaves the question of content open. The critical system has the understanding (*verstehen*) represent a noumenal reality in a sensuous or phenomenal manner through the intuitions of time and space schematized by organizational categories: this determines the nature of Newtonian physics. Reason (*verstand*) determines ethical laws on the supposition of human freedom. Judgment (*urteil*), as a determinative judgment of art, provides "formal subjective purposiveness; this sort of judgment deals with feelings of pleasure and pain.

The judgment is the mechanism of any human mind's machinery that allows us to experience the beautiful. There is a universal aspect here which is subjective in the sense that it depends on the individual human rather than the object. But when Kant relates that to pain and pleasure, to feeling, he presents a second sense of subjectivity. One that is not of anthropological psychology but rather of a person psychology. Since feelings, ruled by the indetermination of the imagination, are different in quality and quantity as well as differently elicited in different persons, the actual judgment of what objects are beautiful are understandably different. However, Kant emphasizes the relationship to the judgment of a beauty, whatever object it relates to, is always the same, it judges that others find the object judged to be beautiful to be beautiful. This last structure of aesthetic judgment has the character of an illusion in that there is no necessity that another person agree that any particular object is beautiful. Yet, the thrust toward universality in this matter suggests a linkage of the judgment of beauty to morality since, in Kant's ethics, ethical law is unconditional and universal.

It is to be noted that despite Kant's rejection of ontological metaphysics as a basis for cognition, as in the work of the Leibnizean or Wolffian, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, who first used the term 'aesthetics' (*Aesthetica*, 1750)-- in Greek, meaning perception -- and whose works Kant used, nevertheless, Kant agrees with Baumgarten that the arts depend on what is unique to it and precisely not cognitive and that art has a value that is not reducible to any other value; further, that the imagination allows a lower value and confusion for judgment and yet, it points toward an ideal. Yet, unlike Baumgarten, and the general orientation of his near contemporaries -- including the English: Addison, Shaftsbury, Hutcheson, Kames -- Kant did not look for perfection in the object called beautiful

and therefore, he does not need to consider such an object in terms of "Euclidean" characteristics cum Lessing, et al" harmony, balance, order, proportion, a "Golden Section," etc. In Kant's case that ideal is not an object like a Greek statue but, instead, in the higher value of moral autonomy which merges freedom and reason. Kant writes in the first *Kritik* that Baumgarten's attempt to base taste on a science of rational principles is not possible (footnote to A374); in the third *Kritik* he can still hold to that language in terms of the objects variously considered beautiful.

Kant retains the attitude of the rationalist tradition that elevates reason over imagination -- the tradition that includes Spinoza who called the imagination the "mutilated intellect." Further, the realm of feeling is the less godly aspect of a human being; so, whereas the moral law is open to any rational person, perhaps porpoises and, if He exists, also to God, the experience of beauty (and the sublime) is particularly human. It is the imagination, itself burdened by the limits of sense, which is a pointer toward the supreme ethical value asserted by reason. The judgment's regulative function of organizing our experience, including the experience of beauty, becomes constitutive -- that is, thought to be necessary in a speculation about reality -- when nature and human creation is supposed as divine order. Thus, in the second part of the third *Kritik*, "The *Kritik* of Teleology," Kant ironically secures a sort of neo-Platonic intimacy of the ideas of the Good, True and Beautiful, despite beauty being weakened by the imagination to merely presenting a human condition, as duty is a human condition of the good - and attribute of man but not of God because the passions burden reason.

Poised between nature and freedom, the aesthetic judgment is discussed with the categorical framework of the first *Kritik* (a80/B106): quantity, quality, relation and modality. Beginning with quality in the third *Kritik*, Kant clearly emphasizes that the pleasure and pain felt by the work of art is different than that received by our natural appetites such as hunger or sex or that of a satisfaction in the (ethical) good which has a purpose suggested by a demand to act upon (any) good : aesthetic appreciation does not satisfy, it is disinterested. It appreciates the *mere existence* of the object. Thus:

The pleasant, the beautiful and the good designate three different relations of representations to the feelings of pleasure and pain.

....That which gratifies a man is called pleasant; that which merely pleases him is beautiful; that which is esteemed -- that which is accorded an objective worth -- is called good. Pleasantness concerns even irrational animals, but beauty

concerns only men... and the good concerns every rational being. (KU,#5)

The quality of the beautiful is then that of being disinterested; the quantity relating to the beautiful is that which pleases universally without the need of a concept. Kant explains this sort of universality as being due to the lack of interest and therefore, it brings the assumption that all men would equally stand in the same appreciation of the object: take beauty as a characteristic of the object rather than the reaction the object has for an individual's judgment. That is the psychological illusion of projecting the cause of the appreciation into the object. This trick of mind, Kant calls "subjective universality." Since beauty is not a concept found in the object but a judgment about an object, taste varies among human beings but each is led to consider his own the appropriate standard for all other individuals.

The third categorical moment, that of relation, is summed up by Kant with these oxymoronic words: "Beauty is the form of the purposiveness of an object, so far as this is perceived in it without any representation of purpose." (KU,#18) The phrase "the form of the purposiveness" is the clue to take the purpose from a transcendental viewpoint; that is, to find in the existence of a beautiful object a non-conceptual causality; one might say in the beauty of the beautiful object as beautiful there is an affect solely in the very reason or cause for its existence and there is no other reason of purpose for beauty's existence. The art object is therefore self-contained in its presentation to the individual, cause and affect are united so that though one may say the purpose of the beautiful object is to give pleasure that pleasure is contained in its very disinterestedness; it does not accomplish anything beyond providing pleasure. Yet, upon further meditation of this situation, at the deeper level of attempting to unify through reason the all human capacities, Kant finds in the beautiful a symbol of the good. It is the very unification of the beautiful as a star without a firmament that is the goal of reason in relation to the understanding (nature) under the dignity of the ethical order. This consideration is yet more striking by a *Geistesgefühl* provided by the sublime because of the awesomeness of nature's power. Further, in the deepest meditation on the subject Kant considers that the imagination is free but yet conformable to laws; there is the same pattern here as taking moral autonomy or freedom always to result in the pure will choosing universal, unconditional ethical laws.

Of the fourth moment, modality, Kant says, "The beautiful is that which

without any concept is cognized as the object of a necessary concept." (KU, #22) This necessity is neither a theoretical necessity, like solving a geometric problem, nor a practical necessity as derived through the categorical imperative, but is rather "exemplary," that is, it is a necessity that one attributes to all other viewers of the object determined only by feeling and not by concepts. It therefore is a characteristic play of the faculty of judgment that assumes a common sense in terms of feeling the beautiful. This is a presupposition that leads one to lay down universal assent for judgments of taste. In the deep meditation, the universal assent is more important than the object that stimulated the aesthetic judgment of beauty in the individual and, indeed may not so stimulate another individual. Like a sign post's showing, whether it is constructed by an object of wood or iron or rubber, the beautiful object has provided an occasion of the beautiful for the appreciator and shows a unanimity that is fulfilled in mankind's position as recognizing a moral will but not a holy will in human beings. This gives Kant's aesthetic its unique humanistic character. Unlike God whose actions are simultaneously good and acted upon, a human being as an ethical person knows the good but can be dutiful because his awareness is burdened by natural passions. A holy will is unburdened by passions; it is beyond duty. Similarly, the mind's gift of pleasure in the beautiful, considered by the philosopher Kant, is like moral duty. It is a very human value, arising from sensuous nature, with something of an illusory character when compared to suppositions about the real as it has an essential worth in the noumenal, where Kant locates every rational person's foundation. Thus he speaks of three ideas manifesting themselves:

First, there is the idea of the supersensible in general, without any further determination of it, as the substrate of nature, Secondly, there is the idea of the same as the principle of the subjective purposiveness of nature for our cognitive faculty. And thirdly, there is the idea of the same as the principle of the purposes of freedom and of the agreement of freedom with its purposes in the moral sphere. (KU, 357)

III

But it seems that the judgment's work in terms of considering what we find beautiful can be overridden by some other power of mind, perhaps some other aspect of the judgment itself, since many individuals do not think that others indeed must find their evaluation of a beautiful object to be beautiful. This seems a soft necessity and universality. Indeed if the beautiful is a pleasant feeling

whose quality is within these parameters (along with disinterest) surely, without them the feeling would persist. Necessity and universality are conceptual considerations that interpret the feeling of beauty in its relation to such a feeling in others. But if there is no need to suppose others to have the same feeling or, more specifically, the same feeling in terms of a particular object, experience convinces one that this is not the case. Therefore, if one holds to this principle one needs either an argument for excusing this failure. Kant recognizes the inconsistency in the judging of beautiful objects but he does not treat the matter as the lack of a faculty as one might expect, say as a blind man cannot be expected to have the color sensation of red; instead, Kant treats the parameters of necessity and universality as something of an illusion -- that the imagination brings illusions is a rationalist doctrine-- and finds that these elements of the illusion a justification for the ultimate symbolic structure of beauty as signpost of the unconditional moral that is universal and necessary.

But considering that the appreciation of a work of art can be in terms of more qualities than beauty: in terms of its skill, in terms of its originality, in terms of its intellectual content as a social message or some other message, etc. the notion of taste becomes more diffuse in its appreciative possibilities. Kant is too narrow in making taste have beauty as the *sine qua non*. It limits conceptual aspects that are proper to art or some art, especially by not at all considering the history of innovation in the craft of a field like painting or music. And, also in a historical consideration, the aspect of social comment or cultural expression of attitudes both in the style and subject matter of the art field.

Therefore, a theory of beauty does not exhaust a theory of art. Kant indeed accepted the false tendency in the eighteenth century that equates taste with beauty. The question about whether beauty is subjective or objective as a real characteristic of the object. Schiller, influenced by Kant, finds play (*Spiel*) in art as part of being human and emphasize the objective character of semblance (*aesthetische Schein*). Hegel, who believed that Kant had the first important aesthetic theory, though he found it too abstract and formal so that he reintroduces historical and cultural elements into aesthetics. In any case, in Schiller and, ultimately, even in Hegel the emphasis is still on beauty. But this does not detract from my view that one can understand a great deal about art without an understanding of beauty; in fact, the very ameliorative efforts of Kant's theory provide evidence for my view.