

From Individuality to Universality: The Role of Aesthetic Education in Kant

Immanuel Kant has long been held to be a rigorous moralist who denied the role of feelings in morality. Recent scholarship has put this claim into question. Some authors argue that for Kant the cultivation of feelings does play, after all, an important role in moral perfection.¹ While this is correct, I would like to highlight what might be considered to be a limit to emphasizing this aspect of Kant's moral philosophy. For Kant, the ethical standpoint is always a universal standpoint. Kantian ethics is, in an important sense, not oriented to the individual human being as an individual. This point remains in force even when Kant considers the role of feelings in moral life. What arouses the indignation of many readers of Kant is not *the means* of achieving morality but its *end*. Kant allowed and even encouraged the cultivation of one's sensible nature, or other individual capacities, but not for its own sake. The ultimate value for Kant is universal reason, not any particular individual. It is especially striking that even his account of aesthetic life can be seen as defined by this hierarchy of values.

I suggest that this fact provides an interesting approach to the role of aesthetics in Kant's ethics. Although Kant did not, as far as I know, use the phrase "aesthetic education," I will argue that from his writings we can reconstruct an idea of aesthetic education, that is, a systematic methodology for cultivating feelings and inclinations.² However, for Kant aesthetic education serves a very different goal than it does for post-Kantian German philosophers. Friedrich Schiller and the German Romantics viewed aesthetic education in an ethical context that held out *bildung* (individual self-formation, self-cultivation) as the highest good. Thus for Schiller and the Romantics, aesthetic education was aimed at the development of unique and rich personalities. I argue that for Kant, by contrast, aesthetic education was supposed to help strip from a person that which is merely individual, thus facilitating one's transition to the universal standpoint needed for morality. Accordingly, Kant's idea of aesthetic education, as that of his successors, is closely related to his ethics. And precisely because this idea is so unusual for us, it can be used to highlight the features of Kant's ethics that, I suggest, are for the most part responsible for the criticisms it often evokes, even though many of the readers formulate their objections differently. Although scholars such as Frederick Beiser, Paul Guyer, and Nancy Sherman have pointed out that Kant had some program for cultivating our sensibility, what heretofore escaped a systematic treatment is the specific anti-individualistic character of Kant's aesthetics.³

In the first section I will briefly outline those features of Kant's ethics that are relevant for this problem; namely its universalistic character. In the second section I will show how aesthetic experience, according to Kant, could help to make an individual less sensitive to the demands of particular interests and motives. In particular, I'll discuss the roles of the beautiful and of the sublime. In the conclusion I will briefly compare Kant's idea of aesthetic education with Schiller's idea of the same.

I. KANT'S ETHICS

It is well-known that for Kant morally good action is action that seeks to attain universality. This is most evident from his formulation of the so-called supreme principle of morality: "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law."⁴ Similarly, Kant's formulations of the categorical imperative also suggest that in order to live in accord with the supreme moral principle an agent should take a universal standpoint. For Kant the essence of the human being is only reason and thus is universal: "...it is there, as intelligence only, that he is proper self (as a human being he is only the appearance of himself)."⁵ Accordingly, Kant's moral ideal is to strip off everything particular for this or that individual and to strive toward the state in which inclinations will not influence one's actions at all, and the will acts morally without hindrance: "A perfectly good will would, therefore, equally stand under objective laws (of the good), but it could not on this account be represented as necessitated to actions in conformity with law since of itself, by its subjective constitution, it can be determined only through the representation of the good."⁶ Kant calls this ideal a holy will: "A will whose maxims necessarily harmonize with the laws of autonomy is a holy, absolutely good will."⁷ For finite rational beings, as we are, this ideal is unattainable; we are always already subject to the influence of inclinations on our will. All the same, to be virtuous, we have to strive to approximate an ideal that overcomes what is particular about us.

Recent scholarship has nevertheless appropriately drawn attention to the role that inclinations play in the moral life for Kant. Particularly in his *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant developed a rich theory of virtue and paid much attention to the fostering of inclinations and emotions. However, this fostering plays only an auxiliary role in Kant's ethics, an ethics which is ultimately not directed at one's individual self-formation (in contrast to those German philosophers who endorsed the ideal of *bildung*). As Lara Denis put it, "duties of virtue require agents to adopt and promote the ends of their own perfection and the happiness of others because respect for the rational nature of finite, imperfect agents implies a commitment to foster and further their agency."⁸ Thus, in this context, cultivation of feelings and emotions is needed only insofar as it will promote moral actions guided by universal norms.

II. AESTHETIC EDUCATION IN KANT'S PHILOSOPHY

We can understand aesthetic education to mean a systematic use of aesthetic objects, aesthetic experience, or the cultivation of taste for some higher—often moral—end. Typically the phrase "aesthetic education" is associated with German Romantics and especially with Schiller. Unlike Schiller, Kant did not write a separate treatise on anything like aesthetic education and did not use the phrase "aesthetic education" itself. But when he came to the richer picture of the role of feelings and inclinations in moral life, which he developed in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, he suggested a few ways in which morality and aesthetics are mutually contributory. I argue that among these ways we can discern the suggestion that aesthetic experience can help to foster morality. Thus, while Kant may not have formulated a theory of aesthetic education like that of Schiller and his Romantic followers, we can nevertheless reconstruct a kind of Kantian aesthetic education.

In the third *Critique* Kant suggested a number of ways in which aesthetic experience can contribute to morality. As is well known, Kant (following the eighteenth century aesthetic tradition) distinguished two kinds of aesthetic experience: experience of the beautiful and experience of the sublime. In the general remark after paragraph twenty-nine Kant writes that both the beautiful and the sublime "are purposive in relation to the moral feeling. The beautiful prepares us to love something, even nature, without interest; the sublime, to esteem it, even

contrary to our (sensible) interest.”⁹ Thus, the beautiful and the sublime can be seen as means for fostering morality, and it is natural to organize the consideration of aesthetic education in Kant around these two notions. In the next two subsections I will consider these two kinds of aesthetic experience.

1. *The Beautiful as a Means of Aesthetic Education*

The beautiful, on Kant’s view, has an affinity with the good, and as such it can allow for a transition from nature to morality. While the Kant scholars I have mentioned in the introduction have articulated several different ways the beautiful can have moral import, for our purposes I will focus on how the beautiful moves us away from the demands of sensuousness. As Henry Allison puts it, the beautiful helps to “wean us from an excessive attachment to sensuous interests and egocentric involvements in the world.”¹⁰ My claim in this section is that, according to Kant, repeated experience of the beautiful aids us in becoming virtuous, and we need this aid since none of us is strong enough always to act morally on our own. This experience does it, I suggest, by helping us to overcome our particularity and take the universal standpoint.

Our experience of the beautiful shares important similarities with our experience of the good. These similarities are what ultimately ground the possibility of an aesthetic education that aims at moral goodness. The first and perhaps the most important similarity is that experiences of the beautiful and of the good have universal validity. In paragraph five of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant delineates this by comparing three kinds of “relations of representations to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure”: the agreeable, the beautiful, and the good.¹¹ Satisfaction brought by both the agreeable and the good is connected, although in different ways, with the faculty of desire and so with the existence of the object of desire. Only satisfaction brought about by the judgment of taste, satisfaction in the beautiful, is purely contemplative and does not depend on the existence of the judged object. In this sense “only... the taste for the beautiful is disinterested and **free** satisfaction.”¹² Kant further uses this claim in paragraph seven as a premise for the argument that judgments of taste have a normative dimension, that is, a claim for a universal validity. Indeed, if the satisfaction obtained in the contemplation of beautiful objects is free from all particular interests then, as Guyer puts it, these objects “produce the same response in all subjects who encounter them under suitable circumstances,” and thus it is rational to expect everyone’s agreement to the claim that something is beautiful.¹³ Now this clearly recalls Kant’s assertions about morality: a moral action is an action that is free from all particular interests.

Kant elucidates further similarities between the beautiful and the good in the famous paragraph fifty-nine, “On Beauty as A Symbol of Morality.” He adduces four analogies between the beautiful and the good: One, both the beautiful and the good please immediately, that is, without being useful for further ends (although the beautiful, unlike the good, pleases in intuition and not in the concept). Two, the beautiful pleases without interest, whereas the good pleases with an interest that is first produced after the judgment is done and is not the motive for judgment. Three, in our experience of the beautiful imagination is free; it is unconstrained by any particular concept and yet is in accord with lawfulness of the understanding in general, whereas the will in the moral judgment determines itself in accordance with universal laws of reason. And four, the judgment about the beautiful, as well as that about the good, lays claim to universal validity, although only to subjective validity and not by means of a universal concept.

I think that the most important of the qualities of the beautiful, which underlie these analogies, is the character of pleasure we feel in our experience of it. Because aesthetic pleasure presupposes taking an impartial perspective in contemplation of the beautiful object, aesthetic experience is closer to moral experience than to sensuous experience. This is the most important point, for my goal, that can be drawn from three out of the four analogies. The third analogy is different. In it Kant compares imagination and will in aesthetic and moral judgments: both the imagination in an aesthetic experience and the will in a moral action are free in the sense that they are not determined by anything antecedently given. Instead, the will gives a law to itself, while the imagination acts in accordance with the understanding even though imagination is not constrained by understanding.¹⁴ But the lack of antecedently given determinations implies that the imagination and the will in these cases are not constrained by anything particular: the will acts according to laws it gives to itself without being determined by any particular circumstances, and the imagination also is not determined by the concept of any particular object but pleases merely because it conforms to the structure of our cognitive capacities, which is common for all human beings.

The analogies Kant draws between the beautiful and the good have implications for the way aesthetic experience can foster morality.¹⁵ The analogies say that both the beautiful and the good are free from particularities of different kinds: the beautiful and the good are not means for further particular ends, they are free from interest in the existence of any particular objects and from their charms, they are not determined by antecedently given particular circumstances, and their validity is not dependent upon who exactly is the subject of these judgments. It is because of these implications that aesthetic experience may help us overcome our particularity and take up a universal perspective. More specifically, those who often have aesthetic experience may accustom themselves not to pay attention to the merely sensuous pleasures obtained from beautiful objects. Given this, it is plausible to assume that as a result they also become less susceptible to sensuous inclinations in general. This, in turn, will later help them act morally, without regard for pleasure. More generally, people with refined taste cultivate the ability to take a more impartial standpoint because the refinement of taste on Kant's aesthetic theory includes the movement to an impartial perspective on the object of art. This point comes out in what Kant says at the end of paragraph fifty-nine:

Taste as it were makes possible the transition from sensible charm to the habitual moral interest without too violent a leap by representing the imagination even in its freedom as purposively determinable for the understanding and teaching us to find a free satisfaction in the objects of the senses even without any sensible charm.¹⁶

From this quotation we can see that taste's function is to help us become free from sensible charms and to habituate ourselves in acting morally. Two aspects of this help are clear: one, taste demonstrates how the imagination is free and still purposive; and two, taste provides us with pleasure that is not merely sensible, thus reducing our attachment to sensible charms. The first way is connected with the indeterminate and free accord of the faculties in the experience of the beautiful (and here the point of the third analogy between the beautiful and the good is revealed). The second way the beautiful promotes morality corresponds, I think, to the first two analogies. As it can be seen, Kant's formulation of this way is quite close to the implications I drew from the analogies above. Aesthetic education, that is, the cultivation of taste and regular aesthetic experience, helps distance us from the urges of our sensible nature since aesthetic pleasure is purely contemplative and based on the grasp of the object's "regular, purposive structure" as opposed to the gratification obtained through subjective sensations or feelings.¹⁷ Those with refined taste accustom themselves not to pay attention to these material gratifications, and this may reduce their susceptibility to them when a moral decision is at a stake.

Kant's assertions that taste facilitates the transition from the motivation by sensible charms to the moral motivation and that the beautiful and the sublime contribute to the moral feeling (treated in the introduction to this section) constitute direct textual support for the argument that an implicit idea of aesthetic education exists in Kant's third *Critique*. The parallels between the beautiful and the good, especially those which Kant expounded in paragraph fifty-nine, provide certain indirect support of the argument. Additional indirect support can be drawn from Kant's discussion of the "communal sense" (*sensus communis*). This indirect argument can be put as follows: Kant claims that taste helps us to start thinking from the universal standpoint. Morality also requires the universal standpoint. Therefore taste prepares us to assume a standpoint that is necessary (although not sufficient) for morality. Indeed, in paragraph forty Kant claims that people with refined taste are likely to think in an unprejudiced, broad-minded, and consistent way, that is, from the universal standpoint.¹⁸ He writes that it is taste and not healthy understanding that, contrary to the usual use of words, can most appropriately be called "communal sense" because it is both universally communicable and is linked to sense or sensation, that is, to the feeling of pleasure. This "communal sense" is "a faculty for judging that in its reflection takes account (*a priori*) of everyone else's way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human reason as a whole."¹⁹ Thus taste, for Kant, turns out to be an instrument of the development of the Enlightenment's rationality insofar as it promotes adopting the perspective of universality.

This thought appears again in the very end of the first part of the book, in paragraph sixty, where Kant remarks that communicating judgments of taste can help educate society and enhance its cohesion by establishing "the reciprocal communication of the ideas of the most educated part with the cruder."²⁰ Guyer claims this to be one of the many (at least four) ways in which aesthetic education can promote

morality, but he does not spell out how exactly the social role of taste is related to morality.²¹ As I have tried to show, this role of taste is just a manifestation of the capacity of aesthetic experience to move us from the particular point of view to the universal standpoint.

2. *The Sublime as a Means of Aesthetic Education*

Now that we have discussed the beautiful, its analogy with the good, and the ways it can help cut off particular sensible affections and lead to a universal standpoint, we can look at the sublime as well. The sublime, recall, prepares us “to esteem” something “even contrary to our (sensible) interest.”²² If the beautiful teaches us to love something without interest by accustoming us to a perspective that does not take into account our particular interests and goals, then the sublime, according to Kant, must teach us to esteem something even if it will threaten our personal interests and goals but not the interests of reason as such. Kant recognizes that the sublime is more suitable than the beautiful for representing the good: “From this it follows that the intellectual, intrinsically purposive (moral) good, judged aesthetically, must not be represented so much as beautiful but rather as sublime.”²³ This follows from the similarity of feelings called forth by the moral law and by the sublime: in both cases we feel respect. Because of that, the experience of the sublime is also an even better means for fostering morality by aesthetic education than is the experience of the beautiful.²⁴

Both the mathematically sublime and the dynamically sublime challenge our sensible nature while showing the superiority of our reason, that is, of what is universal in us. The mathematically sublime is that which is so great in size that it cannot be comprehended in one intuition. Imagination has a limit in its ability to unite and comprehend the manifold in one intuition, and it is hampered by this limit when it encounters something that is too big for it.²⁵ But reason demands that the whole totality of any object be grasped entirely by the imagination. This demand shows the limitations of imagination, because at some point the latter can grasp new content only at the expense of previously acquired content. But the limitedness of imagination shows the unboundedness of reason because it was reason that imposed the demand on imagination in the first place. Thus, sublime experience shows the superiority of reason above imagination, which also means that reason is superior to nature because imagination, according to Kant, deals with the sensible, that is with nature. Therefore, there are two moments in the mathematically sublime: first, “a feeling of displeasure from the inadequacy of imagination in the aesthetic estimation of magnitude for estimation by means of reason” and, second, a pleasure from consciousness of our higher vocation being aroused by this inadequacy of “the greatest sensible faculty in comparison with ideas of reason.”²⁶ The experience of the sublime humiliates that which is particular in our nature (namely, our imagination and sensibility) and shows the superiority of the universal in us (that is, of reason).

Analogously, in the case of the dynamically sublime we encounter in nature something so powerful that it far exceeds our physical capacities to resist it. Such an encounter shows our physical capacities to be insignificant in comparison with natural powers and thus humiliates our sensibility. However, at the same time “another, nonsensible standard” that exceeds everything merely natural is revealed in our faculty of reason.²⁷ This experience of the sublime is very similar to the feeling of respect caused by the moral law itself, although in the former case its object is mistakenly considered to be in nature. However, Kant says, this is only subreption and that the true source of this feeling is not any natural object but our higher faculty—reason.²⁸

As we have seen, both kinds of the sublime indeed foster the disregard for our sensible nature in theoretical and practical matters respectively. Unlike the experience of the beautiful, the experience of the sublime is even hostile to our sensibility and imagination and thus to the particular in us. Therefore, intensive or regular experience of the sublime teaches us to disregard the demands of senses and imagination and accordingly facilitates our acting in accordance with

judgments that are displeasing for us personally. Such changes in our dispositions can make a difference in our moral behavior since the paradigm cases of the truly moral behavior are, for Kant, precisely the cases when one is acting out of the moral law even though those actions threaten that person's own well-being.

III. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Kant had an idea of aesthetic education. He can be regarded as a predecessor of Schiller and the German Romantics in this respect. However, as it can be seen from my reconstruction, Kant's idea of aesthetic education is quite unlike that of his successors. As is well-known, Schiller and the Romantics aimed to achieve the development of rich and harmonious individuality by means of aesthetic education while Kant endeavored to strip from a person that which is merely individual, thus facilitating one's transition to the universal standpoint.²⁹ Indeed, Kant's view on aesthetic education can be said to be quite paradoxical: what is usually considered an individual and intimate experience becomes for Kant a means for transporting us to the universal standpoint. This view is an interesting and instructive parallel to the more well-known accounts of the connections between ethics and aesthetics. However, a more thorough analysis of the resemblances and differences between Kant's and Schiller's (and the Romantics') ideas of aesthetic education can only be undertaken in a larger work.

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¹ See, for example, Paul Guyer, "Feeling and Freedom Kant on Aesthetics and Morality," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48, no. 4 (Spring 1990): 137-146; Nancy Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially 121-86; Lara Denis, "Kant's Conception of Virtue," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

² Frederick Beiser, in his *Schiller as Philosopher: A Re-Examination* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005), 185 makes this point as well, although he refers to different passages than I focus on.

³ An anonymous reviewer has objected that the characterization of Kant's ethics as anti-individualistic seems to clash with claims of Kant as the second formulation of the categorical imperative, which prescribes to treat every person as an ends and not simply as a means. Another comment by the reviewer suggested a parallel between Kant and Plato on overcoming particular inclinations, again suggesting that Kant's ethics is ultimately in the interest of the individual rather than anti-individualistic. I think that there is a substantial difference between Kant and Plato on this point, Plato's ethics being ultimately directed at the cultivation of the best element *in us*, and Kant's ethics lacking this element of cultivation; the full discussion of this point will require a separate paper. Similarly, the full discussion of the relevance of the second formulation of the categorical imperative and similar passages cannot be undertaken here.

⁴ Kant, Immanuel. *Practical Philosophy*. Translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸ Lara Denis, "Kant's Conception of Virtue" in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 519.

⁹ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Translated by Paul Guyer, edited by

- Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 151.
- ¹⁰ Henry Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 219.
- ¹¹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 95.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Guyer, "Feeling and Freedom," 12.
- ¹⁴ Michael Neville, "Kant on Beauty as the Symbol of Morality," *Philosophy Research Archives* 1, no. 1053 (July 1975): 158.
- ¹⁵ John Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Zammito recognizes the educational import of art (292-93), although his main point is the significance of the analogies for an argument for the unity of the supersensible of both nature and freedom.
- ¹⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 228.
- ¹⁷ For Kant's characterization of aesthetic pleasure as purely contemplative, see *ibid.*, 89.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 174
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 173.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.
- ²¹ Paul Guyer, "The Ideal of Beauty and the Necessity of Grace: Kant and Schiller on Ethics and Aesthetics." In *Friedrich Schiller und der Weg in die Moderne*, edited by Walter Hinderer (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006), 204.
- ²² Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 151.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 153.
- ²⁴ Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment*, 278: "The sublime was added late and added precisely to establish a much more substantive relation between the aesthetic experience and the ethical one." See also *ibid.*, 293-294, for a more detailed analysis of Kant's quote cited in the paragraph.
- ²⁵ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 153.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.
- ²⁸ For an insightful and rich discussion of the similarities and dissimilarities of the feeling of respect and sublime experience see Zammito, 288-300.
- ²⁹ See Beiser, "Schiller as Philosopher," on Schiller's and Frederick Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), Chapter 6, on the German Romantics' views on aesthetic education.

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