

The Divine Inspiration for Kant's Formalist Theory of Beauty

Robert Wicks, University of Auckland

The exposition and interpretation of Kant's aesthetic theory presents difficulties that extend beyond the ordinary challenges of understanding a philosopher who employs a technical vocabulary and a complicated architectonic of concepts. Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) requires interpreters to decide which among Kant's fundamental claims – at first sight equally-important ones – should be emphasized and which should be minimized or revised for the sake of preserving a coherent, as well as an insightful, aesthetic theory.

A dilemma arises in Kant's theory of beauty, where at the outset of the third *Critique*, we encounter a strictly formalistic account that limits beauty-constitutive qualities to an object's spatio-temporal design. These are more precisely an object's perceptually-accessible scientific qualities, or what one could refer to as ideas of Lockean primary qualities (e.g., extension, figure, motion, number). Later in the book, Kant appears to modify this position in favor of a broader conception of formalism – and sometimes he seems to go beyond any kind of formalism – as would apply when reflecting upon the relationships between patches of colors in a modernist painting, or between a song's music and lyrics, or between the meanings of an artwork's symbols. Kant characterizes beauty at this point as the expression of aesthetic ideas – a notion whose meaning requires some clarification.

Since a strict formalism that attends mainly to an object's spatial and/or temporal design does not include a good part

of what is valuable in aesthetic experience – the limited comprehension of expressive and symbolic properties is one of its drawbacks – and since interpreters who sympathize with Kant’s aesthetics would like to see his position presented as viably as possible, Kant’s strict formalism tends to be discounted in favor of ascribing to him a broader kind of formalism that admits *any* aesthetic elements into formal relations to generate a supposedly beautiful effect.¹

The difficulty with this broader formalism is that of squaring it with Kant’s irrevocable position that judgments of beauty, unlike judgments concerning the taste of wines, fruits and vegetables, licence us to expect other people to agree, for given the nature of beauty as Kant understands it, we assume a universal voice when we judge. This expectation for agreement extends to all human beings in principle, and to achieve this wide application, Kant’s characterization of pure beauty presumes to remain unaffected by historical, linguistic, political, religious, psychological, philosophical and cultural differences in its endeavor to establish universally recognizable conditions for judgments of beauty, both with respect to an object’s beauty-relevant qualities and with respect to the beauty-appropriate mental orientation towards an object.

Kant’s motivations for restricting our attention to an object’s mathematical and geometrical properties – that is, his gravitating towards a strict formalism – are obvious. People may originate in different times, places and cultures, but since he is convinced that all human experience is structured identically in terms of space, time and logical categories, he

¹ The following excerpt is exemplary: “[. . .] Kant’s claim that beautiful objects are beautiful in virtue of their form can be taken to mean that beautiful objects are beautiful in virtue of everything about them, of all (or indeterminately many of) their sensible properties as related to one another— i.e., briefly, in virtue of their overall design, arrangement, or form (Zuckert, Rachel: “The Purposiveness of Form: A Reading of Kant’s Aesthetic Formalism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 44, No. 4, 2006, p. 612).

is sure that everyone in principle can recognize, for example, that triangles have three sides and that $2+2=4$. This common human capacity to appreciate mathematical and geometrical structures in an identical fashion – a capacity for which Kant argues in the *Critique of Pure Reason* – constitutes the backbone of his aesthetic formalism.

The present inquiry aims to understand why Kant thought that he could extend this kind of formalism into the field of semantically-rich fine art without a loss of universal validity. The path taken will be different from usual, for we will consider how Kant's conception of God inspires his theory of beauty, and how this affects Kant's conception of universal validity in judgments of artistic beauty in particular. This will bring us to the interface between his theory of beauty and his equally formalistic and universalistic moral theory – a theory he assumes would apply to ancient tribes-people and space station workers alike – that along with space, time and logic, defines a complementary dimension of human experience where all people can agree in principle.

I. The Harmony of the Cognitive Faculties and God's Blessedness

When, in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), Kant states that the universal feeling of pure beauty is grounded upon the pleasurable harmony of our cognitive faculties – a pleasure whose *a priori* sources imply that it is not a sensory pleasure – he requires a generic word that refers to a “pleasure” that is not semantically wedded to sensory feelings. He settles upon the word, “*Wohlgefallen*,” which English translations of Kant's writings render alternatively as “liking,” “delight,” “well-pleasement” or “satisfaction.” Not usually noticed is how Kant faced the same kind of problem five years earlier in his “Lectures on the Philosophical Discourse of Religion”

(1785-86) in his efforts to describe what would be God's "pleasure," since God is not a sensory being. He wrote the following in that context:

The powers of our mind are (1) *cognition*; (2) the feeling of pleasure and displeasure [*Lust und Unlust*], or better, since the word *feeling* appears to connote something sensible, the faculty of *satisfaction and dissatisfaction* [*Vermögen des Wohlgefallens und Misfallens*] and (3) the faculty of desire.²

[. . .] a complete satisfaction [*Wohlgefallen*] with one's independent existence is called [. . .] self-sufficiency [*Selbstgenügsamkeit*] (*beatitudo*). This blessedness of a being consists therefore in a satisfaction with one's own existence apart from any need, and thus it belongs solely to God alone; for he alone is independent.³

Kant here conceives of *complete* satisfaction and blessedness as expressions of self-sufficiency and independence, and by implication, as expressions of freedom in the sense of self-determination. Radiating from blessedness, moreover, is Kant's conception of benevolence, which he defines as "an immediate satisfaction with the welfare of others" [*unmittelbare Wohlgefallen an der Wohlfahrt Anderer*]⁴ The image is of a perfect, free, moral being whose subjective condition is permeated with a sense of self-satisfaction or *Wohlgefallen*,

² V-Phil –Th/Pölitiz, AA 28: 1059.30-33. Immanuel Kant, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Religion and Natural Theology*, translated and edited by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni. Cambridge. 1996, "Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion," p. 396 (translation slightly modified here and below, using "satisfaction" in place of "well-pleasedness"). The translators note that "*Wohlgefallen* also has Biblical connotations: e.g. "Thou art my beloved son, in whom I am well-pleased" (Luke 3:22)" (p. 396n).

³ V-Phil –Th/Pölitiz, AA 28: 1060.15-20. "Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion," p. 396f.

⁴ V-Phil –Th/Pölitiz, AA 28: 1076.3-4. "Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion," p. 409.

and whose moral feeling towards other beings is characterized by a positive concern for their welfare.

These characterizations of God's blessedness, or beatitude, bear directly on Kant's theory of beauty, for consider Kant's remark a few pages later about satisfaction as it occurs in humans:

In human beings, satisfaction is pleasure in an object. Thus, for example, I can be satisfied with a house [*ein Wohlgefallen an einem Hause*], even if I see only the plans. But satisfaction in the *existence* of an object [*am Daseyn der Objekte*] is called *interest*.⁵

Kant's example of being satisfied with a house merely by contemplating its architectural plans indicates that this kind of satisfaction does not involve the house's actual existence, but concerns the house's design. In contrast to how a satisfaction in an object's existence involves "interest," the satisfaction in appreciating the house's plans would correspondingly be a "disinterested" satisfaction. It is a satisfaction in the house's beauty, as Kant's third *Critique* would describe it.

We can thus discern and confirm that some years before he wrote the third *Critique*, Kant conceived of aesthetic disinterestedness in relation to the mere contemplation of an object's form. It is probably no coincidence that in the first section of the third *Critique*, Kant uses virtually the same architectural example to illustrate what he means by beauty:

To grasp a regular, purposive structure [*Gebäude*] with one's faculty of cognition (whether the manner of representation be distinct or confused) is something

⁵ V-Phil –Th/Pölit, AA 28: 1065.12-15. "Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion," p. 400. The italics on "Daseyn" appear only in the translation.

entirely different from being conscious of this representation with the sensation of satisfaction.⁶

Kant's remarks in 1785 occur in a context where he is not concerned with matters of beauty, but is reflecting and speculating upon God's nature, and is drawing a parallel between God's blessedness, defined in reference to satisfaction, and the idea of disinterestedly contemplating an object's form. Such thoughts invite the proposition that in the third *Critique*, Kant conceived of the satisfaction in pure beauty as the human analogue to how he was conceiving of God's blessedness or beatitude, from which radiates a feeling of benevolence. This would render the feeling of beauty that issues from the harmony of our cognitive faculties as a finite analogue to what one can imagine to be a divine feeling that resonates with moral overtones, and it suggests that to understand Kant's theory of beauty, it is worthwhile to consider the extent to which Kant's speculations about God inform his aesthetics. This will shed some light on the above-mentioned dilemma about deciding between Kant's strict formalism and a broader-scale, expressionist account of beauty.⁷

⁶ KU, §1, AA 05: 204.4-7. Immanuel Kant, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, Critique of the Power of Judgment*, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews. Cambridge. 2000, §1, p. 89f. All excerpts from Kant's third *Critique* will be from this translation. In §2, Kant uses a second architectural example – this time of a palace – and describes his conception of beauty in relation to this example in more detail.

⁷ From Kant's epistemological perspective, the question of whether God exists is forever unanswerable, and all references to, and characterization of, God are consequently speculative, speaking exclusively only "as if" God exists. From Kant's moral perspective, God's existence is postulated as a condition for realizing the highest good, and Kant is more confident of God's existence within this context. Kant's aesthetic theory is fundamentally epistemologically-based, and despite its weighty moral interest and motivation, the connections Kant typically draws between beauty and morality are indirect, e.g., through symbols and analogies. Within our present aesthetic discussion, all references to God are "as if" conceptualizations.

Every interpretation of Kant's aesthetics must decide whether the strictly formalist account, or a less constrained account, should take precedence, and must explain how this decision coheres with Kant's unwavering interest in establishing the universal validity of judgments of pure beauty. Recognizing how Kant's conception of God inspires his theory of beauty will resolve this problem in favor of a strict interpretation of Kant's formalism.

Overall, we will observe that four out of five key segments of Kant's theory of beauty, namely, (1) his account of pure beauty as the harmony of the cognitive faculties, (2) his account of pure beauty as the symbol of morality, (3) his account of human beauty as necessarily adherent to morality, and (4) his account of natural beauty as the expression of aesthetic ideas, are consistent with a strict formalist account of beauty, and that the anomalous segment – (5) his account of artistic beauty as the expression of aesthetic ideas – can be understood as a questionably-argued segment that Kant nonetheless intended to be consistent with his strict formalism.

The resulting proposal will be that it is misguided to project the anomalous, apparently non-formalistic segment (5) back across his aesthetics to suggest that in the spirit within which it was conceived and at its root, Kant's theory of beauty is fundamentally not strictly formalistic.⁸ Some

⁸ The denial of a strict formalism characterizes much contemporary discussion of Kant's aesthetics, a recent example of which is Christopher Dowling's essay "Zangwill, Moderate Formalism, and Another Look at Kant's Aesthetic" (*Kantian Review*, Volume 15, No. 2, 2010, pp. 90-117). Dowling's essay offers critical and constructive reflections upon Nick Zangwill's own Kant-inspired theory of moderate formalism. The present essay argues that in connection with Kant *interpretation*, which is a matter both philosophical and historical, the contemporary way of assuming Kant's theory of art as the interpretive take-off point inhibits a comprehensive understanding of Kant's aesthetics. The motivation for this style of interpretation derives from a strong interest in the philosophy of art, which generates the project of trying to square our ordinary intuitions about artistic production and artistic value with the details of Kant's theory of fine art,

aspects of Kant's theory of artistic beauty as the expression of aesthetic ideas are incongruous with a strictly formalistic position, but other aspects cohere with it, and these partially integrate the anomalous segment into the bulk of Kant's aesthetic theory.

II. God's Blessedness and Human Beauty in its Adherence to Morality

A related reason for regarding the satisfaction in our experience of pure beauty as inspired by, and as an analogue of Kant's conception of God's blessedness, is the latter's overall consistency with the moral content of Kant's theory of beauty. With respect to this content, Kant notes in the third *Critique* that human beauty must adhere to morality (§17), that taking an immediate interest in natural beauty is the mark of a good moral character (§42), that as the expression of aesthetic ideas, beauty transmits rational ideas, a subset of which are moral ideas (§49), that

where as required, one adjusts Kant's theory to produce a solid fit. This may yield interesting theories of art in their own right, but in the course of theorizing, some of the leading and motivating features of Kant's aesthetics as a whole become obscured.

As we will see, the key concepts and examples which operate in the fine art segment of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, e.g., aesthetic ideas, Jupiter's eagle, semantic resonance, etc., do not fit well into Kant's understanding of pure beauty, which is explicitly focused upon an object's spatio-temporal configuration. In light of Kant's wider interest in rationality, universal validity, the non-sensory basis of morality, as well as theology and God's existence, Kant's theory of fine art shows itself to be a less coherent and more troublesome segment of his aesthetics. Adding to the confusion inherent in contemporary discussions, it should be noted that if one starts with a definition of "formalism" that is inspired by Clive Bell's artistically-centered understanding as exclusively "lines and colours combined in a particular way, certain forms and relations of forms," then the baseline definition of formalism is non-Kantian from the outset, where even a strict formalism in accord with the definition would not be Kantian. Kant regards colors, aside from their purity, as a mainly a vehicle for sensory gratification and not as a constitutive element in a judgment of pure beauty.

beauty is the symbol of morality (§59) and that “taste is at bottom a faculty for the judging of the sensible rendering of moral ideas” (§60).⁹ His theory of the sublime also points in the direction of morality, reinforcing the idea that Kant’s moral interests significantly drive his aesthetic theory as a whole.

Still, it is important not to draw beauty and morality too closely together, since Kant characterizes the harmony of our cognitive faculties, not in reference to morality or moral feeling, but epistemologically in reference to the general conditions for cognition and the scientific quest for systematically-organized empirical knowledge. The satisfaction in pure beauty is not a moral feeling, for the satisfaction is disinterested and does not depend on any concept of the object’s kind, whereas moral feeling is interested and depends upon a concept of what the object judged ought to be.

Kant’s distinction between moral feeling and the feeling of pure beauty nevertheless reveals according to our present interpretation, only where the divine and the human part ways, for in Kant’s characterization of God’s self-satisfaction, God’s moral and disinterested dimensions are amalgamated: unlike humans, God has no desires in the sense of having a need to be satisfied by something that exists independently of God. It is human finitude that separates the beautiful and the moral into distinct mental spheres, just as it disengages our sensory from our intellectual aspects. The feelings that ground beauty and morality remain on a par in their *a priori*, non-empirical grounding, but since they are differentiated within us, the human problem – and this reveals our approach to interpreting Kant’s theory of beauty – is to *reintegrate* these

⁹ KU, AA 05:356.14-15. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 230.

feelings for the sake of emulating the divine condition more closely.¹⁰

If we interpret Kant's theory of beauty along the lines of this saintly effort to approximate a divine consciousness – and we must emphasize “approximate” – then the task of *integrating* pure beauty with moral content moves to the foreground.¹¹ Among the five interfaces between beauty and

¹⁰ These considerations underscore how Thomas Aquinas's distinction between beauty (which he relates to cognition) and goodness (which he relates to desire, for humans) informs Kant's aesthetics at the structural level:

Beauty and goodness in a thing are identical fundamentally, for they are based upon the same thing, namely, the form; and this is why goodness is praised as beauty. But they differ logically, for goodness properly relates to appetite (goodness being what all things desire), and therefore it has the aspect of an end (the appetite being a kind of movement towards a thing). On the other hand, beauty relates to a cognitive power [intellectual virtue], for those things are said to be beautiful which please when seen [or heard]. Hence beauty consists in due proportion [. . .].” *Summa Theologica*, trans. by English Dominican Province, 1947, First Part, Q.5., A.4, Reply Obj.1.

¹¹ Recognizing our finitude as sensuous beings, Kant states in §5 that “beauty is valid only for human beings, i.e., animal but also rational beings, but not merely as the latter (e.g., spirits), rather as beings who are at the same time animal; the good, however, is valid for every rational being in general” (KU, §5, AA 05:210.6-9. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 95). In §1, Kant mentions that the experience of pure beauty is related to the feeling of life (*Lebensgefühl*), conceiving of this feeling of life as jointly supported by sensory gratification (§53, Remark). In this respect, beauty is exclusive to human experience, and it is only an ideal to think of seamlessly integrating beauty with morality as one can speculate is the case in a divine consciousness.

Similar to how it was mentioned in note 7 above, that throughout our discussion it is essential to appreciate how Kant's exposition is fundamentally epistemological, although strongly directed by moral interests, his theory of beauty is also fundamentally human-centered, while being inspired by reflections on the nature of God. With respect to the human-centered perspective, Kant states that beauty is exclusive to the human experience, and that, for example, artistic genius is primarily a natural gift, notwithstanding its analogy to what we can speculate to be God's creativity. This dual quality in Kant's exposition arises precisely because he conceives of beauty as an intermediary between his epistemology, which is deeply cognizant of human finitude, and his moral theory, whose rationality directs our awareness beyond spatio-temporal limits.

morality mentioned above, Kant's account of human beauty in §§16-17 is his initial and paradigm instance, where he requires that judgments of human beauty respect how human are essentially moral beings. In its negative expression, Kant deems as inappropriate, formally-beautiful designs whose aesthetic presence interferes with the integration of beauty and morality:

One would be able to add much to a building [*Gebäude*] that would be pleasing in the intuition of it if only it were not supposed to be a church;¹² a figure could be beautiful with all sorts of curlicues and light but regular lines, as the New Zealanders do with their tattooing, if only it were not a human being [. . .]¹³

As a positive condition for morally-adherent human beauty, Kant recognizes a *natural plan* for the human body – one whose rudiments are discernible in classical Greek statues as well as in anatomical diagrams – and holds that any instance of a beautifully formed human body, at minimum, should not obscure or contradict this natural plan from the standpoint of formal composition. More affirmatively, it should draw that plan out into perception. On the semantic level, the beautiful form should also not interfere with the expression of moral ideas or be otherwise irrational, since Kant believes that humans are essentially rational beings, and that rationality is the essence of morality.

Let us consider this natural plan more closely. With respect to ideal human beauty, Kant writes:

But there are two elements involved here: *first*, the aesthetic *normal idea*, which is an individual intuition (of the imagination) that represents the standard for

¹² Note Kant's continued use of architectural examples in this excerpt.

¹³ KU, §16, AA 05: 230.14-18. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 115.

judging it as a thing belonging to a particular species of animal; *second*, the *idea of reason*, which makes the ends of humanity insofar as they cannot be sensibly represented into the principle for judging of its figure, through which, as their effect in appearance, the former are revealed.¹⁴

A beautiful human being should thus fit the natural plan, or archetype, for the human body and the articulations of this plan in a beautiful bodily figure should not obstruct the expression of moral ideas and ideally, should express them. This notion of an aesthetic normal idea may sound peculiar, but its employment within Kant's characterization of human beauty parallels, anticipates and informs his crucial notion of an "aesthetic idea," which is at the center of our inquiry. Kant introduces this latter notion in §49 when he describes artistic beauty:

[. . .] by an aesthetic idea, however, I mean that representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., *concept*, to be adequate to it, which, consequently, no language fully attains or can make intelligible. –One readily sees that it is the counterpart (pendant) of an *idea of reason*, which is, conversely, a concept to which no *intuition* (representation of the imagination) can be adequate.¹⁵

It will be helpful to remember this affiliation between aesthetic normal ideas and aesthetic ideas for later. Now an aesthetic *normal* idea is "the image which has as it were intentionally grounded the technique of nature, to which

¹⁴ KU, §17, AA 05: 233.19-25. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, pp. 117-118.

¹⁵ KU, §49, AA 05: 314.1-5. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 192.

only species as a whole but not any separate individual is adequate.”¹⁶ Such an archetypal image would be perceived through the form of some single image, although no image would fully capture the idealized type. We can imagine the innumerable instances of well-shaped human bodies among a set of athletes, all of whose structures are variants of pleasing, yet not precisely specifiable, proportions; well-proportioned swimmers look different from a well-proportioned football players, and so on.

Kant’s characterization of how we construct these idealized images for ourselves remarkably anticipates developments in photography that emerge towards the end of the 19th century. Specifically, Francis Galton (1822-1911) developed the process of “composite photography” in the 1880’s through which he constructed generic images of various types of people, which included racial types, criminal types, ethnic types and mentally abnormal types. Almost a century earlier, Kant wrote the following, and with regard to the mechanical technique he describes, we can just as well think of composite photography:

Someone has seen a thousand grown men. Now if he would judge what should be estimated as their comparatively normal size, then (in my opinion) the imagination allows a great number of images (perhaps all thousand) to be superimposed on one another, and, if I may here apply the analogy of optical presentation, in the space where the greatest number of them coincide and within the outline of the place that is illuminated by the most concentrated colors, there the *average size* becomes recognizable, which is in both height and breadth equidistant from the most extreme

¹⁶ KU, §17, AA 05: 233.29-31. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 118.

boundaries of the largest and smallest statures; and this is the stature for a beautiful man [. . .] It is the image for the whole species, hovering among all the particular and variously diverging intuitions of the individuals, which nature used as the archetype underlying her productions in the same species, but does not seem to have fully achieved in any individual. It is by no means the entire *archetype* of *beauty* in this species, but only the form that constitutes the indispensable condition of all beauty, and so merely the *correctness* in the presentation of the species. It is, as was said of *Polycletus's* famous *Doryphorus*, the rule [. . .]¹⁷

As a further example, Kant mentions the classical fifth century BCE sculpture of a cow by Myron (who was also the sculptor of the famous discus-thrower), so his discussion of aesthetic normal ideas extends beyond the morally-adherent plan that underlies the human form to include the archetypal, idealized forms of animals, plants, minerals and natural phenomena. The same intangibility of the basic plan that we noted in reference to the well-proportioned human body obtains in these instances as well. Although every individual snowflake is unique in its design, for example, all beautiful snowflakes express the same archetype.

We can now summarize some of the characteristics of the aesthetic normal idea, which we will recall in our consideration of Kant's characterization of artistic creation as the expression of aesthetic ideas. The underlying point will be that aesthetic normal ideas (or more precisely, the archetypes or natural kinds which our aesthetic normal ideas represent)

¹⁷ KU, §17, AA 05:234.9-37; 235.1-5. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, pp. 118-119. Kant discussed this process in 1781/87 as well, in his description of an "ideal of sensibility" in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KrV, A570-571/B598-599).

– in part, owing to how their instantiations can be expressed inexhaustibly in a variety of beautiful natural objects (e.g., millions of beautiful snowflakes) – are naturally-occurring kinds of aesthetic ideas.

Aesthetic normal ideas: (1) are our representations of the archetypes for the physical forms of natural kinds, (2) do not specify definite rules that anyone can completely formulate, but nonetheless “give the rule” to the physical forms of the respective kinds, or species, (3) as “rules,” have an intellectual, rational quality, (4) express in their reference to archetypes, the aesthetic style of their respective kinds, (5) can be instantiated in a multitude of equally-valid ways, (6) represent archetypes that have a non-human origin, either natural or supernatural, if regarded mind-independently, (7) represent archetypes that are not necessarily beautiful in themselves, but are the conditions for the beauty of the kind of thing they respectively characterize. In more traditional terms, the aesthetic normal ideas would be our humanly-constructed conceptions that aim to match the supposed set of Platonic Ideas, timeless patterns, archetypes, or natural kinds that underlie and prescribe the specific forms of the objects we perceive.

Some Kant scholars marginalize Kant’s discussion of aesthetic normal ideas in §17 as inconsequential to his overall aesthetic theory, but once we regard aesthetic normal ideas as our conceptions of what appear to be naturally-occurring aesthetic ideas, the importance of Kant’s discussion in §17 increases exponentially. Not only does this reveal that Kant formulates the nature of artistic beauty on the model of human physical beauty, his discussion of aesthetic normal ideas also makes sense of how, after having described *artistic* beauty as the expression of aesthetic ideas later on in §49, he can then immediately expand his account in §51 to say that beauty *in general* is the expression of aesthetic ideas, speaking as if he had already established

how the expression of aesthetic ideas applies to *natural* beauty. On our present interpretation, Kant established this in §17.

When referring to artistic beauty, Kant states that the artistic genius creates beautiful art through the production of aesthetic ideas. The genius is someone who has “a **talent** for producing that for which no determinate rule can be given” (§46), and who, in the production of beautiful art, thereby creates “another nature” [*einer andern Natur*] (§49). If aesthetic normal ideas are conceived of as our conceptions of the divinely-created archetypal images, or natural kinds, of objects, and if the artistic genius is said to create yet *another* nature, then the genius emerges as an analogue to, or finite condensation of, the intelligence that our power of judgment postulates originally as the source of natural kinds as well as of the beauty they exhibit within those forms. Just as God creates the universe with its set of natural kinds which contains beautiful instances of those natural kinds, the genius, with the same kind of energy, creates a beautiful work of art with its own particular style. Similarly, insofar as an artistic style, or aesthetic idea, is like a natural kind, God is conceivable as the artistic genius that creates the world.

Kant’s characterization of aesthetic ideas begins with the following paragraph:

Spirit, in an aesthetic sense, means the animating principle in the mind. That, however, by which this principle animates the soul, the material which it uses for this purpose, is that which purposively sets the mental powers into motion, i.e., into a play that is self-maintaining and even strengthens the powers to that end.¹⁸

¹⁸ KU, §49, AA 05: 313.30-34. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 192.

Kant's canonical position (§9) is that the feeling of pure beauty is the resonance of the understanding and imagination in their free play, insofar as the harmony of these cognitive faculties issues from our disinterested perception of an object's purposive form. In the above excerpt, Kant refers to the harmony of the cognitive faculties as the upshot of our apprehending materials (i.e., an artwork) that have been suitably organized by an artistic genius's "spirit." Hence follows Kant's remark that "nature in the subject [the artist] (and by means of the disposition [harmony] of the faculties) must give the rule to art; i.e., beautiful art is possible only as a product of genius."¹⁹

This yields a situation where, on the one hand, an object's purposive form stimulates the pleasurable feeling of the harmony of the cognitive faculties, and on the other, where that pleasure stimulates the artist in all of us, since that pleasure is none other than the upshot of the power to produce aesthetic ideas. The artistic genius has a special ability to generate the feeling of beauty spontaneously and to create a work of art whose purposive form expresses and transmits that feeling of beauty to us. As Kant states, "genius is the exemplary originality of the natural endowment of a subject for the *free* use of his cognitive faculties."²⁰

That the artistic genius's gifts are "natural" is essential to Kant's argument, for he describes the genius as "a favorite of nature" (§49) and suggests thereby that the same energies that produce natural kinds – and among our conceptions of these kinds is the morally-connected aesthetic normal idea of the human being – underlie the genius's own power to produce the spontaneous harmony of the cognitive faculties and consequent feeling of beauty from which artistic creation stems. In light of our earlier reference to God's

¹⁹ KU, §46, AA 05: 307.30-32. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 186.

²⁰ KU, §49, AA 05:318.6-8. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 195.

feeling of self-satisfaction and disinterestedness, it can now be said that the artistic genius's power to stimulate the harmony of the cognitive faculties is the finite human analogue to God's feeling of blessedness or beatitude. Precipitating thereby from Kant's theory of beauty is the well-known image of the artistic genius as a divinely inspired figure, much like a prophet, which coheres well with Kant's remark that artistic geniuses create a "another nature."

If we recognize this coincidence between God's blessedness-which-radiates-benevolence and the creative power of artistic genius which Kant calls "spirit," then Kant's description of poetic imagination, which first seems narrowly moralistic (since poets can write about any subject), becomes more understandable. He writes:

The poet ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc., as well as to make that of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature, by means of an imagination that emulates the precedent of reasons in attaining to a maximum [. . .]²¹

The interpretive problem that surfaces is how best to understand Kant's claim in §51 that "we may describe beauty in general (whether natural or artificial) as the expression of aesthetic ideas." He frames this characterization of beauty in reference to aesthetic ideas, so although it is supposedly coextensive with this original characterization of beauty as a feeling that issues from the harmony of

²¹ KU, § 49, AA 05:314.26-34. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 192-193.

the cognitive faculties in light of an object's purposive form, it has a different semantic texture than the original characterization. How well, then, does Kant's conception of beauty as the harmony of the cognitive faculties match his conception of beauty as the expression of aesthetic ideas?

We can answer this question by observing how these two conceptions of beauty cohere well within the contexts of pure natural beauty and adherent natural beauty, but how they are at some variance within the context of artistic beauty. By "pure" natural beauty, we intend a situation where the aesthetic judgment is of a natural object such as a rose, not as a rose *per se*, but simply as a perceptual object with a certain configuration. The question arising is thus: what is the aesthetic idea of which such a beautiful natural object is regarded as the expression, and is this idea consistent with Kant's original, strictly formalist account of beauty?

If we maintain the parallel between artistic and natural beauty, then the correlate to the human artist or intelligence would be a divine, or superhuman, artist. The aesthetic idea that all naturally beautiful things express, would consequently be the archetypal delineation expressive of the elementary thought that a superhuman intelligence resides behind nature. This is simply the presentation of highly purposive (i.e., systematic) form, and Kant suggests as much. He describes the underlying rational idea which the aesthetic idea would present, as that of the supersensible substrate of nature regarded as "the principle of the subjective purposiveness of nature for our cognitive faculty" (§57), which itself presupposes a superhuman intelligence:

I.e., nature is represented through this concept as if an understanding [i.e., God] contained the ground of the unity of the manifold of its empirical laws.²²

In a nutshell, owing to the extraordinary level of purposive form that is characteristic of naturally beautiful objects, the beauty of every natural object aesthetically confirms the central principle of our power of judgment and signifies the elementary rational idea that nature appears intended to be understood. As a condition for this appearance to be a reality, a superhuman intelligence must be postulated to coordinate natural forms with our cognitive capacities.

So when Kant states that beauty in general is the expression of aesthetic ideas, natural beauty continues consistently to assume the appearance of being the expression of a superhuman intelligence. Kant accordingly comprehends *artistic* beauty as reflection of this idea on the human level, as embodied by the artistic genius. This integrates his claim that the principle of the purposiveness of nature requires that we regard nature as a work of art (First Introduction, III) with his claim that beautiful art is an art insofar as it seems like nature. As he states: “nature was beautiful, if at the same time it looked like art; and art can only be called beautiful if we are aware that it is art and yet it looks to us like nature.”²³

Since the beauty of natural objects depends exclusively upon the objects’ impressively systematic form, Kant’s characterization of natural beauty as the expression of aesthetic ideas coincides with his strictly formalistic account of beauty as the felt harmony of the cognitive faculties, since the aesthetic idea that all naturally beautiful objects express,

²² KU, *Einleitung*, AA 05:180.36-181.1-2. *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 68.

²³ KU, §45, AA 05:306.20-23. *The Critique of the Power of Judgment*, p. 185.

is the presentation of a highly systematic form that conveys the thought that nature is thoroughly intelligible. When actualized, this intelligibility would ultimately take the form of laws of nature, characterized essentially by formalistic relationships as we find in mathematics and geometry.

Continuing with our focus on pure beauty and sheer systematic form, Kant also maintains that with respect to all beauty, natural or artistic, beauty is the symbol of morality. Since the power of our judgment requires us to regard nature as if it were a divine product, and since God's intelligence and God's moral qualities are amalgamated, it is not surprising that Kant would discern a moral content exuding from all beauty. Within human experience, beauty and morality nonetheless remain distinct and are conjoined only through a symbolic, rather than implicative, relationship – one that, for our purposes, also coheres with Kant's strictly formalistic account of beauty as the apprehension of an object's purposiveness of form.²⁴

We must think analogically to appreciate how beauty presents morality in a formalistic manner, matching one-for-one the features that respectively correspond to each in view of how the feeling of pure beauty and moral feeling are grounded *a priori*. As correspondences, Kant states (1) that both please immediately, (2) that both please apart from sensory interests, (3) that both involve freedom, and (4) that both are based on universal principles. We need observe

²⁴ Kant articulates the symbolism of morality that beauty conveys by mentioning in comparison, how in his theory of knowledge – specifically, in his schematism of the pure concepts of the understanding from the *Critique of Pure Reason* – pure concepts (e.g., substance and causality) need to be infused with temporal forms to ensure their application to sensory individuals. When aiming to render not determinate concepts, but indeterminate ones that have no adequate instantiation in experience, of which moral ideas are examples, rather than appeal to a schematic relationship, Kant introduces a symbolic one, which proceeds by means of an analogy. The analogy resides in a “similarity in the rules” according to which we reflect upon two different things.

here only that Kant characterizes beauty as a symbol of morality in abstract, formalistic terms, and does not require any reference to a conception of beauty beyond a strict formalism. The problem of preserving universal validity does not arise at this point, but rather at the more specific level of understanding the genius's expression of aesthetic ideas in contexts that involve the adherent beauty of art.²⁵

III. Judgments of Adherent Beauty and Aesthetic Ideas

When we move from beauty in general to more conceptually determinate contexts, there are two basic ways in which judgments of adherent beauty arise, namely, with respect to natural beauty, as when we judge a rose to be beautiful “as a rose,” and with respect to artistic beauty, as when we judge a work of art to be beautiful “as art,” that is, in view of the artist's intended meaning for the work.²⁶ To appreciate the problems that Kant's definition of beauty as the expression of aesthetic ideas poses for the preservation of universal validity in judgments of beauty, let us consider how his definition operates within the context of judgments of adherent beauty, considering in turn, adherent beauty in the context of judgments of natural beauty, and adherent beauty in the contexts of judgments of artistic beauty.

We have seen that with respect to pure beauty, the most general idea that all beautiful objects express through their highly systematic form would be that nature is receptive to

²⁵ Our concern here is to show only that beauty as a symbol of morality is consistent with a strictly formalistic conception of beauty, rather than address Kant's view that an appeal to morality is additionally necessary to preserve the universal validity of judgments of beauty.

²⁶ There are other, more specific genre concepts that can be involved as well, as when we judge the work in reference to its being a landscape, portrait, etc.

our understanding, i.e., the principle of the purposiveness of nature. It is the idea that as rational beings, humans fit into the world. With respect to adherent beauty in the context of *natural* beauty, the set of aesthetic normal ideas conceived of as referring to natural kinds, in conjunction with the core expression of the principle of the purposiveness of nature from which their beauty derives, would be the aesthetic ideas that naturally beautiful objects express when judged in light of their kind. The aesthetic normal ideas that we formulate to comprehend those ideas and the corresponding judgments of beauty that follow in such cases, would be occasioned by the concept and accompanying image of the natural kind at hand, as we would introduce when judging the beauty of an object as a cat, or as an oak, or as snowflake.

When Kant discusses aesthetic normal ideas, he refers to them as the patterns we construct in relation to an object's spatio-temporal design, stating that when judging beauty, the delineation and composition are the essential factors, and that sensory pleasures and emotions should be ruled out (§§13-17). So to summarize, with respect to judgments of pure beauty, beauty as a symbol of morality, and judgments of adherent beauty in reference to naturally beautiful objects, a strictly formalistic view coheres well and there are no threatening issues that interfere with preserving the universal validity of judgment of beauty.

The obstacles and apparent counterexamples to a strictly formalistic interpretation of Kant's theory of beauty arise in relation to artistic beauty and are exemplified by his paradigm case of the image of Jupiter's eagle with thunderbolts in its claws (§49), often found on Roman coinage. Consider how unlikely it would be for a tribesperson in the Amazon rainforest living 5,000 years ago, to understand the formalistic relationships that obtain among the meanings in this image. It would not be a matter of simply realizing some natural cognitive potential involving geometry and math-

ematics; knowing the meaning of Jupiter's eagle in Roman mythology is also necessary. Meanings that vary from culture to culture now enter the picture, and Kant no longer appears to be thinking exclusively within formalistic register of spatio-temporal structures.

In this shift from form to content, Kant's conception of universal validity in this characterization of aesthetic ideas seems unsustainable. For even if we suppose that the perception of the eagle and thunderbolts produces a feeling of the harmony of the cognitive faculties in someone who understands the image's meanings, that person could not reasonably demand of an ancient Egyptian or remote tribesperson that he or she should feel the same way. Kant nonetheless appears to believe that such a demand would be legitimate, and this is the puzzle.

Kant seems to have assumed that if the content of an artwork is moral, or otherwise humanly basic (in the case of Jupiter's eagle, Kant associates it with the rational idea of "the sublimity and majesty of creation"), then it is universally *accessible* and one can in principle demand that others agree with one's judgment. This accords with the motivations of his strict formalism insofar as the universal content is one with which all humans can in principle identify, just as they can all identify mathematical and geometrical propositions.

This is problematic, however. First, even if the contents are universal, if the artwork's aesthetic elements that express those contents are not themselves universally accessible, then the aesthetic relationships between them, which could include the universal meanings they express, will not be universally accessible. The point is easy to see: if someone utters a statement in Chinese that expresses the universal proposition $2+2=4$, one cannot expect a person who speaks only English to understand what the person is saying, let alone judge whether the statement was well said. Similarly,

someone who speaks only English is in no position to judge the beauty of poetry written in another language either with respect to the poetry's formal structure or its degree of semantic resonance, despite how it may contain a universal content.

Kant probably overlooked this as a consequence of his general style of theorizing, which is ahistorically oriented. If, as we have suggested, he were imagining the artistic genius as a human reflection of God's creativity and morality, and if he were appreciating God's creation of natural kinds as the formation of a universal language, then he would conceive of the artistic genius as a similarly creative spirit, speaking in a universal language to everyone, as if the genius were always painting a smile that everyone can humanly recognize and understand. The error is in assuming that adhering to universal content alone will preserve the universal validity of judgments of beauty.

Perhaps even more problematic is that the example of Jupiter's eagle with the thunderbolt in its claws, although suggestive, does not seem to be *beautiful* in any straightforward sense, unlike Kant's other exemplary images of tulips, crystal formations, and abstract biomorphic designs. In contrast to Kant's usual examples where beauty attaches to the item's systematic, purposive form, the Jupiter's eagle case is a symbol-filled image, in the same family of images where, for instance, a square might represent the solid earth, water might represent the subconscious, a departure might represent death, a long road might represent some voyage, and so on.

Such examples of aesthetic ideas in art are more like semantically-rich dream images, than beautiful presentations or configurations. They are thought-provoking, semantically dense, continually suggestive, and difficult to frame in terms of determinate meaning. They can also be thought to "put the mental powers into swing" and might be regarded as

good candidates for stimulating the harmony of the cognitive faculties, if one were to overlook that on the aesthetic level, the harmony of the cognitive faculties functions primarily as an invitation to scientific thinking. Aside from the semantic resonance having little to do with beauty on commonsense grounds, it does not obviously bear on the principle of the purposiveness of nature and the amenability of nature to be scientifically understood. So we should question whether Kant's theory of artistic beauty as the expression of aesthetic ideas is effective as a theory of beauty *per se*. It accounts well for an artwork's richness of meaning, suggestibility, and inexhaustibility in interpretation, but this is not the same as its beauty.

The appearance of these meaning-rich images within Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas is straightforwardly explainable, if we recall our earlier reference to composite photography and the construction of aesthetic normal ideas. Whereas in the construction of aesthetic normal ideas, contours or shapes (i.e., *forms*) are amalgamated to create a composite whole, in the construction of aesthetic ideas in art, meanings (i.e., *contents*) are amalgamated to create a composite whole, ideally towards a moral end. Such images, as are found in surrealist painting, are not paradigms of beauty, although they can be tremendously suggestive. This lack of beauty is understandable upon noticing how the process of amalgamating meaning compares to how Freud describes the process of dream formation. The resulting images are semantically-rich, metaphor-filled, multiply-interpretable, but not always attractive.

IV. Aesthetic Ideas in Art Formalistically Considered

Kant's characterizations of aesthetic ideas in art nonetheless contain some features which are consistent with the strict formalism that permeates the rest of his aesthetic theory. We can now highlight these to conclude the present effort towards outlining a more integrated understanding of Kant's theory of beauty.

Throughout the third *Critique*, Kant relies upon a three-fold distinction between sensations, forms, and concepts, stating repeatedly (e.g., in §31, §34, §38, §39, and §59) that to appreciate an object's beauty, sensations and concepts must be abstracted away from the object's form.²⁷ This methodological separation of form from concepts and sensations is also how he argues for *a priori* quality of space and time in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In that segment, he contemplates a (i.e., any) physical object, disregards its sensory qualities along with the kind of thing that it is, for the sake of distilling out the object's spatio-temporal form, and ultimately identifies space and time as *a priori* forms of experience. This parallelism is relevant to our present context, for Kant describes space and time as *a priori* individuals – individuals in the narrow sense that the whole/part as opposed to the universal/instance distinction applies to them – that as such, serve as intermediaries between *a priori* concepts and contingently-given sensory

²⁷ As an indication of its fundamentality to Kant's style of theorizing, he also employs this threefold division in his conceptualization of the fine arts themselves (§51), dividing them into conceptually-oriented arts (the "arts of speech"), spatio-temporal arts (the "formative arts"), and sensation-oriented arts ("arts of the play of sensations").

individuals to allow the pure concepts to apply to the sensory individuals.

Now if we coordinate Kant's discussion of aesthetic ideas with his account of space and time, aesthetic ideas also reveal themselves to be universalistic individuals. The difference between aesthetic ideas and space and time, is that aesthetic ideas instead serve as intermediaries between non-sensory moral ideas and their expression in a sensory form. For instance, the ideally-formed human body is the *natural* interface between the sensory and moral realms, and the artistic genius's aesthetic ideas are *artificial* interfaces between the same.

Conceived of in this way, aesthetic ideas in art would be formalistic structures created by an artistic genius within which moral ideas would be expressed, reiterating the model Kant initially established in reference to the aesthetic normal idea through which the human bodily shape would adhere to and express morality. This continued formalism into the realm of aesthetic ideas in art is supported by a number of factors. First, there is the above-mentioned reciprocal relationship between how, on the one hand, an object's purposive form stimulates the harmony of the cognitive faculties, and how on the other, the artistic genius generates the harmony of the cognitive faculties to create beautiful objects. Second, there is Kant's idea of beauty in general as a symbol of morality, which is also consistent with his formalism.

Third – and this returns us to the outset of our inquiry – if the satisfaction in beauty is a human version of God's blessedness, as Kant speculates upon God, and if we recall how divine consciousness and satisfaction is non-sensory, there is a further reason for conceiving of beauty and the artistic genius's creation of aesthetic ideas in a strictly formalistic, non-sensory way. To see this, we can consider the notion of "intellectual intuition" – a concept that stems

from a different segment of Kant's theory, but which bears on our discussion.

When Kant describes the difference between God (speaking as if there were such a being) and humans in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, he states that God has intellectual intuition, whereas humans have only sensory intuition (*CPR*, B135). We humans need to have our objects of awareness given to us in sensation, whereas God creates God's objects of awareness by sheer thought. Through intellectual intuition, presumably, God created nature. Since the artistic genius creates "another" or second nature through the power of "spirit" (*Geist*), parallels between intellectual intuition and the creation of aesthetic ideas immediately suggest themselves, since that second nature is constituted by aesthetic ideas. Insofar as they both involve "creating another world," the two terms appear to identify the same process, considered respectively in the divine instance (intellectual intuition) and in the human instance (aesthetic ideas and spirit).²⁸

Considering how humans construct their objects of awareness in a purely formal sense, namely, through the integration of concepts and intuitions in a judgment, the parallel becomes clear, for the artistic genius's spiritual capacity to generate spontaneously the harmony of the cognitive faculties – the general precondition for all judgments – amounts to the human analogue to the creation of an object through sheer thought. The artistic genius, however, can only formalistically replicate the divine process, inventively generating new, highly purposive configurations of spatio-temporal forms that await the addition of some sensory content.

²⁸ The semantic parallel between the terms "intellectual intuition" (i.e., concept-individual amalgam) and "aesthetic ideas" (i.e., individual-concept amalgam) is revealing here.

The artistic genius spontaneously resonates the understanding and imagination in this God-imitating way to generate diverse spatio-temporal forms in accord with the generally human way of constructing objects of perception. The genius envisions new patterns, or “aesthetic ideas,” whose stylistic instantiations define a second nature. Since the artistic genius only formally replicates God’s intellectual intuition, artistic creativity is restricted to the creation of new purposive forms, within which already-given sensory contents can fit. The artistic genius’s aesthetic ideas are the human, or artificial, versions of the spatio-temporal structures of the natural kinds that God is thought to create.

This, then, would be the primary sense in which the artist creates a “second nature.” The genius’s merely formalistic capacity of intellectual intuition, which Kant calls “spirit,” creatively sets the understanding and imagination in motion to generate novel, and formally beautiful, spatio-temporal forms. Since these forms are artifacts of the structure of the human mind insofar as this structure is common to all people, the universal validity of the judgments of beauty upon the objects that the artistic genius creates can be preserved.

If such novel spatio-temporal forms are artistically combined with a universal moral content, this will nonetheless not be sufficient to preserve the universal validity of a judgment of artistic beauty relative to the object, especially if the expression of the moral content involves non-universalistic symbolism. The aesthetic elements must be universally accessible as well. In this regard, given their more formalistic basis, the arts of music and architecture would be the most amenable to Kant’s efforts to preserve universal validity in judgments of artistic beauty, as would works of representational art that incorporate universally-accessible imagery such as smiles and other emotional expressions basic to human existence.

V. Conclusion

The central thematic divisions of Kant's theory of beauty are consistent with a strict formalism with one crucial exception. This is his account of artistic beauty as the expression of aesthetic ideas insofar as it involves culturally-relative content. The anomaly can be explained straightforwardly as the result of his having projected his notion of the construction of aesthetic normal ideas into the realm of aesthetic ideas in art, and as a result of Kant's having believed that if the content of a work of art is universal, then the content is universally accessible.

The divine inspiration for Kant's theory of beauty nonetheless leads us to appreciate the parallel between God's beatitude, as Kant speculates upon it, and the human experience of beauty as involving a moral resonance, and to recognize the parallel between God's creative activity and the artistic genius's creative activity. The genius's activity is conceived of here as a formalistic version and shadow of God's substantially creative activity. With this interpretive approach, the essentially formalistic dimension of Kant's theory of aesthetic ideas in art comes forth, and with it, a more integrated and historically faithful way to understand Kant's theory of beauty.