

James D. Reid

Metropolitan State
University of Denver

Freedom in Nature: The Moral of Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgment

Abstract: Kant's philosophy is centered on the idea of freedom. But the metaphysical condition of our responsibility appears to come at a price. We purchase Kantian freedom at the expense of intelligibility (we can know nothing about how an absolutely free cause is possible) and against every meaningful *natural* circumstance. Because freedom can't be experienced, it is impossible to know whether we've ever acted freely. The result seems to amount to an intellectual sort of schizophrenia: when we are doing science, freedom disappears in the causal order of nature; when we are acting morally, the natural world vanishes in the consciousness of our freedom. That Kant will develop an account of a natural world receptive to the work of freedom isn't surprising. What is initially strange is that some of Kant's most powerful thoughts on freedom *in* nature are forged in a treatise on aesthetics. The present paper offers an account of Kant's aesthetic vision of freedom in nature.

Key Words: Kant, Freedom, Nature, Aesthetics, Morality, Beauty, Sublimity

For beauty and sublimity are aesthetic ways of presenting, and if we were
nothing but pure intelligences [...] we would not present in this way at all.
Critique of Judgment, 5:271

Freedom, Nature, and Aesthetic Experience

Kant's mature philosophy as a whole gravitates around the idea of freedom.¹ On Kant's own testimony, the arguments for transcendental ide-

¹ In the Preface to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant observes that "the concept of freedom [...] constitutes the *keystone* of the entire structure of a system of pure reason, even of speculative reason; and all other concepts (those of God and immortality) [...] now attach themselves to this

alism in the first *Critique* serve both our scientific interest in the objective grounds of what is the case and our moral interest in what ought to be the case; and they accomplish the latter task by making room, in our philosophical thoughts and practical beliefs, for the abstract *possibility* of freedom.² The argument for a categorical imperative of morality in the second *Critique* establishes the objective *reality* of freedom as a necessary condition of moral agency and responsibility.³ And the *Tugendlehre* of the *Metaphysics of Morals* tells us (somewhat) concretely what finite moral agents are called upon to do with their freedom. Everywhere we look, we discern the influence of a moral image of human life in the wording of Kant's most enduring philosophical and scientific concerns. As Kant remarks succinctly in 1784, "Freedom is the inner worth of the world."⁴

But the metaphysical condition of our agency, moral responsibility, and human dignity seems to come at a heavy price. We purchase Kantian freedom at the expense of intelligibility (we can know nothing about how an absolutely free cause is possible) and, at least at first, against every meaningful *natural* circumstance and broad setting of our moral agency. And because freedom is nothing we can experience, at least not in the way we experience tables and chairs and other people as objects in nature, it is impossible to know whether we've ever acted freely. The result of our investment seems to amount to an intellectually respectable sort of schizophrenia: when we are doing science of any recognizable kind, freedom disappears in the causal order of nature; when we are acting morally, the natural world dissipates in the bare consciousness of our freedom and abstract moral obligation. In the second (published) Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant himself draws attention (twice) to the enormous gulf (*Kluft*) that separates the domains of freedom and nature, "just as if they were two separate worlds" incapable of influencing each other.⁵

concept and with it and by means of it get stability and objective reality, that is, their *possibility* is *proved* by this: that freedom is real, for this idea reveals itself through the moral law" (5:3-4). References to Kant throughout follow the pagination in the *Gesammelte Schriften* by volume, followed by page number(s), with the exception of references to the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, which follows the convention of referring to the first and/or second edition (A/B).

² See the *Critique of Pure Reason*, A802/B830 and the well-known passage in the Preface to the second edition on the need to deny *Wissen* in order to make room for *Glauben* (Bxxx).

³ In the second *Critique* Kant claims that the establishment of pure practical reason (as source of the moral law) also reveals a "consciousness of freedom of the will." *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:42.

⁴ Collins transcript of Kant's lectures on moral philosophy (1784-5) in *Lectures on Ethics*, p. 125 (27:344).

⁵ Kant, I., *Critique of Judgment*, 5:175-6 and 195.

And yet Kantian freedom is supposed to be embodied in the moral aspirations of agents who belong partly to nature.⁶ However strongly we moral aspirants identify with Kant's vision of freedom and human worth, we have to grant that the concept of freedom loses much of its point if it fails to illuminate the moral lives of creatures enmeshed in the natural order. It is therefore fair to ask what relevance Kant's metaphysics of freedom has in the concrete conduct of human life, where the natural world has a way of persisting and making its (often reasonable) claims and the moral agent sometimes manages to bring about something that agrees with her intentions. As Kant also notes in the third *Critique*, the (intelligible, supersensible and theoretically useless) world of free agency "is to have an influence on" the natural world in which the finite moral agent finds herself placed.⁷ The domain of freedom is not to remain aloof from the natural world (the only world we can, according to the first *Critique*, be said to know) but ought somehow to govern and shape it; otherwise the ideals of morality will seem chimerical, if not to the metaphysician, at least to the actual moral agent in whose name the metaphysics of free causality has been propounded. Kant's thought doesn't require the successful realization of every moral purpose. Sometimes we are left with only the best intentions. But an account of the moral life that forces us to choose between a vaporous freedom, bereft of every natural setting, and a nature that altogether excludes what freedom aspires to bring about is unlikely to encourage serious moral endeavor. And to the philosopher interested in defending the primacy of practical reason and the commitments that define our moral lives, such an account is likely to seem philosophically impertinent.

That Kant will eventually develop an account of (an *experience* of) a natural world less hostile to the work of freedom is, therefore, nothing surprising. What *is* at first blush strange is that the earliest concrete links between freedom and nature, developed without reference to God as the point of contact in our thoughts between the two domains, are forged in a treatise on aesthetics; for it is not until the first half of the third *Critique* that Kant begins to develop a vision of nature as freedom's collaborator and encourager, without theological underpinnings.

⁶ In the words of one prominent scholar, "the agent and the intelligent person are one and the same subject." Henrich, D., 1994. *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World*, p. 4. And a few lines later: "We certainly cannot claim that the world of objects and the world seen from the moral viewpoint are totally separate. For moral action has as its domain the very situations and circumstances we regard as part of the physical world."

⁷ Kant, I., *Critique of Judgment*, 5:176.

In what way Kant's account of aesthetic experience recasts his earlier vision of freedom and nature, what the final vision includes and what it disallows, and what the revision means for the life of theoretical and practical reason are topics as immense as the great gulf itself; in what follows I offer merely the humble beginnings of a larger and more systematic study of freedom, nature, and aesthetic experience and education in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, centered around the account of the moral import of the experience of natural beauty offered in section 42 of the third *Critique*, and supported by Kant's views on the ideal of beauty (section 17) and genius (sections 46 – 50).⁸

Taking an Intellectual Interest in the Beautiful

Someone inclined to dismiss either the moral significance of aesthetics or the aesthetic import of the moral point of view would have to conclude that moral considerations *intrude* throughout Kant's allegedly neutral analysis of judgments of taste. Despite the claim that every aesthetic judgment is disinterested (is neither a judgment about what is merely agreeable nor a claim about the morally good), Kant repeatedly ties aesthetic matters to certain features and concerns of ethical life.⁹ This is perhaps most obvious in the Analytic of the Sublime, which, contrary to some of our more commonplace romantic expectations, argues that certain natural objects make us aware of our own (moral and rational) superiority to the natural world: the vast and turbulent ocean, the mighty cataract, and the towering peaks of the rocky mountain chain are reduced (almost) to nothing alongside the sublimity of reason itself and its moral ideas.

We might, then, be tempted to look to the sublime as a way into Kant's moralizing aesthetics. And we would certainly not be disappointed. But from the critical vantage point mapped out above, the Analytic of the Sublime paints a regressive picture of the moral life: it reinforces Kant's earliest tendencies to elevate a disembodied moral vocation of human reason over everything merely natural.¹⁰ From the point of view

⁸ This essay is, in fact, the fragment of a chapter in a book manuscript in progress on Kant's evolving concept of freedom.

⁹ In section 17, as we shall see, Kant introduces the Ideal of Beauty, which amounts to the visible expression of moral ideas in the human figure. And the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment as a whole culminates in the suggestive claim (in section 59) that beauty is a symbol of morality.

¹⁰ What it adds, however, is the idea that natural objects can evoke moral experiences and expectations. And this is, of course, no small addition. But it doesn't advance the thesis that certain experiences reveal a nature that somehow *favors* our moral demands.

of the Kantian sublime, nature fails to live up to what reason demands. (This is perhaps why Kant says that the theory of the sublime is a “mere appendix to our aesthetic judging of the purposiveness of nature.”¹¹ And it also stands in contrast to Kant’s views on genius, which, as we shall soon see, espouse the notion that nature inscrutably gives rules to art and so cooperates in our spiritual and intellectual activities.¹²)

The same cannot be said for the account of the intellectual interest we take in the beautiful adumbrated in section 42: the experience of beauty appears to reveal a natural world that favors us by making room in our thoughts for the realization of our moral ends. Kant’s argument opens with a familiar debate: some claim that an interest in beauty is the mark of a good soul, while others point out that the aesthetically cultivated or cultured are often vain, obstinate, and delivered over to ruinous passions, and even less attached to moral principles than their untutored counterparts. It seems difficult, then, “to reconcile the interest which can be connected with the beautiful with the moral interest” and almost impossible to claim “an intrinsic affinity between the two.”¹³ But pessimism is certainly not the last word. Kant is happy to grant that an interest in beautiful *art* is no proof of moral earnestness but may be a sign merely of vanity. There is no reason to think that someone who admires a Renoir or a Picasso and loves to talk about her favorite artist must also take an interest in her moral *Bestimmung*. But he goes on to suggest that taking an unpremeditated and direct interest in the beauty of nature “is always the mark of a good soul.” When we are alone and take spontaneous delight in the shape of a flower or the song of a bird, our experience has recognizable moral content. And if our immediate interest in natural beauty becomes habitual, it “indicates at least a mental attunement [*Gemütsstimmung*] favorable to moral feeling.”¹⁴ The beauty in nature some of us discover and appreciate is, after all, morally significant, whether we appreciate it at the time of our discovery or not and regardless of the philosophical views we go on to defend.

¹¹ Kant, I., *Critique of Judgment*, 5:246.

¹² Kant’s account of genius is worked out in sections 46 – 50. We shall turn to it below. For an interesting account of genius in Kant and Wordsworth, see Timothy Gould’s “The Audience of Originality: Kant and Wordsworth on the Reception of Genius” in *Essays in Kant’s Aesthetics*. Allison doesn’t appreciate fully the central significance of the account of genius in the third *Critique*, which contributes to the theory of nature’s purposive contribution to human experience. See Chapter 12 of *Kant’s Theory of Taste* and, more specifically, Allison’s observations on p. 272.

¹³ 5:298.

¹⁴ 5:298-9.

We can interpret Kant's claim about the moral significance of natural beauty in one of two (it seems to me compatible) ways. On the one hand, Kant appears to be making a *psychological* claim about a state of mind favorable to the development of the moral life; and this claim cannot be separated from Kant's renewed appreciation of the importance of moral *feeling* in the development of mature moral agency.¹⁵ An ability to appreciate beautiful things in nature is a precursor to the moral sentiments Kant is better prepared to appreciate and defend in the *Religion* and *The Metaphysics of Morals*. As Henry Allison notes, the third *Critique* proffers aesthetic experience as a way of weaning the moral agent from "sensuous interests and egocentric involvements."¹⁶ From this point of view, taking disinterested pleasure in natural beauty is analogous to treating our fellow human beings as ends in themselves, and never as *mere* means.¹⁷ To be receptive to natural beauty is to be better prepared to heed the claims of others in the moral life; receptivity itself is an important mark of a morally good soul in the making. (And from this there seems to follow the pedagogical point, exploited by Schiller, that aesthetic experience can play a vital role in moral education.)¹⁸ The beautiful "prepares us for loving something, even nature, without interest."¹⁹

This already marks a significant advance over the earlier view of freedom and nature locked in seemingly eternal conflict: the soul attuned to natural beauty stands a better chance of taking an interest in the moral life. For those who think that Kant's views on the moral life exclude love and moral sympathy, the *Critique of Judgment* offers welcome relief from the tedious examples used in the *Groundwork* to illustrate action *aus Pflicht*. In 1790, at least, a certain sentiment can be said to *ground* or further our commitment to, if not our knowledge of, what duty requires. For knowledge of the latter, we have always to look to pure practical reason.

But Kant also seems to be making another sort of claim about what it is that the good soul discovers to be good about natural beauty; and this bears less on how the soul's feelings and affections are readied for the higher demands of the moral life and what role moral sentiment

¹⁵ See my "Morality and Sensibility in Kant: Toward a Theory of Virtue" in the *Kantian Review* for an analysis of Kant's shifting and final evaluation of the role of feeling in the moral life.

¹⁶ Allison, H., 2008. *Kant's Theory of Taste*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. p. 196.

¹⁷ Notice that the possibility of this moral interest rests upon the *disinterestedness* of the judgment of taste defended in the *Analytic of the Beautiful*.

¹⁸ See Schiller's letters *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*.

¹⁹ Kant, I., *Critique of Judgment*, 5:267.

might play in the mature cultivation of virtue, and more on what it is about the beautiful object itself, at every stage of our moral education, that is worthy of the good soul's "admiration and love." This conception of the experience of natural beauty is consistent with a view of what we feel in response to nature that ties our feelings to what we experience or consider their objective *target* to be.²⁰ Aesthetic experience may not add to the content of our scientific *knowledge* of what there is; but it seems to amplify what we take nature to be able to do, with or without an explicit intention. Kant adds to these remarks the important qualification that if the natural object turns out to have been fabricated, if the admired bird proves artfully carved or the beloved flower skillfully made by an artist, the intellectual or moral interest in the item disappears; and it vanishes precisely because the intellectual interest in the beautiful is motivated by the thought that natural beauty is like an intended *work* of nature: *here*, at least, nature's complex activity is responsive to the mind's love of order and purpose. In nature under the aspect of beauty we discover "a voluptuousness for the mind in a train of thought" that we can hardly unravel.²¹ And part of what we find voluptuous is an apparent reconciliation between the mind in contact with its own distant ideals and a nature infinitely complex and often thought to be indifferent to what the ordering mind longs to see. When nature shows traces, however faint, of a concealed harmony between ourselves as moral and spiritual agents and what is out there in the (physical) world of objects not intentionally made to conform to our plans and projects, we have reason to think that nature is not always and necessarily in conflict with what moral reason demands. If we disregard what the aesthetic experience of nature is *about*, we miss something important about the experience and its object.

If the first construal of the intellectual interest some take in natural beauty makes freedom over in an image of nature in the shape of moral sentiments consistent with the requirements of duty, the second view makes nature over in an image of freedom consistent with our desire to find ourselves in accord with what is out there in the world. But in each case, we have to contend with a world in which the demands of freedom and the value of nature are two sides of the same *moral* coin.

²⁰ I have defended elsewhere a heavily qualified *cognitive* view of emotion in Kant against variations on the claim that Kant's views of emotion are always dismissive of the affective life and insensitive to the intentionality of our emotional orientations toward what we find significant in the world of our moral involvements. See "Morality and Sensibility in Kant."

²¹ Kant, I., *Critique of Judgment*, 5:300.

The Body as Expression of the Moral: An Excursion on the Ideal of Beauty

In terms of the epistemological and psychological intentions of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment, admirably detailed by Guyer in an early work on Kant's third *Critique*,²² the account of the ideal of beauty in section 17 of the *Critique of Judgment* (a description of what we rightly find lovely in the human figure) might be dismissed as a digression, perhaps rather interesting in itself, in Kant's otherwise undeviating account of the purity of our judgments of taste;²³ for here, too, Kant allows moral notions and concerns to contaminate what might have been a coherent defense of the validity of our conceptually indeterminate experience of beauty, anchored in a free play of our cognitive powers (without moral or utilitarian designs). An account of beauty worthy of the name has to account for what we find delightful across the spectrum and in distinct areas of our aesthetic experience: from this point of view, it matters little whether we are dealing with an interesting pattern painted on a wall or the aesthetic complexities of *King Lear* or a certain look about the human body. And it shouldn't matter that Shakespeare's play might be said to have a moral (this is controversial enough anyway) and the human body a moral configuration while the design on the wall doesn't. What matters is only what delights in a certain way, by encouraging a free play of our cognitive faculties (understanding and imagination) without the deployment of a fixed concept. Does Kant himself not confess in section 16 that judgments of taste resting on definite conceptual underpinnings are neither pure nor free, the beauty of their objects being merely adherent (*adhärierende Schönheit*) and dependent on what we think the thing we take delight in is supposed to be, how it functions, and what it looks like at its (functional or moral) best? Doesn't the introduction of a concept of perfection restrict the imagination's freedom?²⁴

But what we find digressive or more relevant depends on what we take the author's overarching, and often unacknowledged or dimly expressed, intentions to be: if the third *Critique* displays an abiding and consistent interest in the possible *connections* between aesthetic experience in its purity and the demands of the moral life, then what appears from one

²² Guyer, P., 1997. *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

²³ Kant himself tells us that judgments concerning an ideal of beauty are not pure judgments of taste. (5:236)

²⁴ 5:230.

point of view irrelevant, perhaps even incoherent, becomes crucial to the overall design of the work. As Kant himself notes, judgments on adherent beauty, and the experiences they rest upon, further taste itself by allowing rules to be “prescribed for it with regard to certain objects that are purposively determined.”²⁵ And more to the point, “these rules will not be rules of taste but will [...] be rules for uniting taste with reason, i.e., the beautiful with the good, a union that enables us to use the beautiful as an instrument for our aim regarding the good.”²⁶ As Allison wisely notes, Kant’s discussion of adherent beauty tells us “how taste can enter into more complex forms of evaluation.”²⁷ Here, too, aesthetic experience serves the interests we take (or ought to take) in the moral life.²⁸

But Kant’s account also sheds important light on the interweaving of moral concepts and natural forms; for what comes into sharp relief in the ideal of beauty is the human figure *as expression of the moral* in a natural form. Surprisingly, Kant doesn’t take quite as seriously our ability to find the human figure beautiful without discovering moral purposes displayed in it, unless the idea of beauty, in contrast to the ideal of beauty, is supposed to capture the pre-moral experience of lovely human forms. But even this idea of beauty is tied to the (moral) ideal of beauty.²⁹ He might, however, reply that every impure judgment of taste regarding the human form is, if not grounded in morality, then merely sexual, and so not really aesthetic and not truly a judgment of *taste*. In this case, we would be reducing the object of our aesthetic regard to a pleasing collection or combination of attractive fleshy parts, fascinating precisely because of the pleasure we associate with amorous conquest. Here, our interest in the object reduces to mere desire: what we take delight in is the anticipation of the agreeable sensations we associate with a certain experience of, or contact with, the erotic object. Our relation to the human form, and what we find appealing in it, would be (morally, if not always biologically, and possibly culturally) regressive; and what is at stake in section 17 is the possibility of elevating aesthetic experience onto the plane of the morally good, where what we find desirable and what we are inclined to pursue must often be held in suspension for the sake of our

²⁵ 5:230.

²⁶ 5:230.

²⁷ Allison, H., 2008. *Kant’s Theory of Taste*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 140.

²⁸ See also Zammito’s discussion of dependent beauty in *The Genesis of Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment’*, pp. 124–9.

²⁹ See 5:233.

proper ethical intentions and ends.³⁰ But we are getting ahead of the story in this parenthetical remark.

Kant tells us that human beings *alone* can exhibit an ideal of beauty, tied to concepts of objective purposiveness and perfection, precisely because we are the only objects in the natural world capable of giving ourselves moral purposes and perfecting ourselves by reason; for the ideal of beauty is nothing less than the expression of the moral (as an *Urbild* of taste) in a particular human figure. In searching for an ideal of beauty, reason itself is seeking to discover itself and its highest vocation—namely, the moral determination of the will—in the sensible world. Kant grants that we come to know *how* the moral takes shape in the visible world only empirically. We become gradually acquainted with the signs of serenity, fortitude, purity of soul, and so on. But we must still be able to connect what we see in this particular figure with what reason alone is able clearly and distinctly to think. We must learn to subsume certain configurations of the face and limbs under concepts of the morally good. (Similarly, we must learn to associate other configurations with the tokens of vice. The human body bears witness to the activities of soul. To take a trivial, or not so trivial, example, the face bears visible traces of a life spent in dissipation. We must learn as well how avarice or lust or self-control and courage display themselves in the movements of our bodies. In the absence of moral concepts, we are left with a mere object, however lovely, in motion or at rest. Our concepts of the morally good allow us to move from what we discover in the object to what we suspect lies within it—the soul in its *moral* endeavors and successes.³¹ When we judge a human body in this way, we apprehend something of the inner life that animates it.

This is an important admission; and it qualifies Kant's often skeptical views concerning our concrete moral knowledge. Although we can never know with absolute and unshakable certainty that the moral law is weaving itself more durably into our dispositions, we can, it seems, be more *confident* that we are on the track of the morally good. And our confidence comes *not* by merely reflecting upon the purity of our own souls, where we are likely to go astray and to nurture opinions flattering to our

³⁰ This still doesn't really answer the question: Can't we find the athletic body lovely without sexualizing it and without moralizing it? I think Kant grants that we can: there is an average norm or standard of the human figure that we can appreciate without erotic impulses and in the absence of moral purposes. But Kant's discussion of this idea of beauty in section 17 is apparently meant to lead to the (moral) ideal of beauty.

³¹ I discuss the importance of this ability for the exercise of moral judgment in "Morality and Sensibility in Kant."

self-esteem, but by learning to read the signs of moral commitment and success in the life of the body, where our virtues (and, of course, our vices, too) have a local habitation as well as a name.³² Here, too, freedom and its laws work themselves out in the realm of nature.³³

Genius and the Moral Life: Nature Gives the Rule to Art

On the surface at least, Kant's account of genius in sections 46-50 of the third *Critique* contributes little to our understanding of the moral life: what does a sonnet by Rilke or a painting by Cézanne, a sculpture by Phidias or Rodin or Proust's monumental *In Search of Lost Time*, at once beautiful and rich in thought, tell us about our duties and how to fulfill them, assuming we can call these works of genius without controversy? We can, and perhaps should, appreciate fine art (which Kant identifies with the work of genius in section 46) on its own terms, without allowing moral notions to interfere with our aesthetic experience. When we bring moral convictions, or biases, as the case may be, into the encounter, we run the risk of moralizing our experience and passing hasty judgment upon the work from an alien point of view, before we've come to appreciate what it has to give *as a work of art*, and not, say, as the illustration of some moral lesson or catechism.

Kant's remarks sometimes lend support to this plausible suggestion, a grounding principle in the practice of formalist criticism in the last century, where the pleasure we take in the work has little to do with what we value and what we think human life ought to be and what we aspire to bring about in our ethical commitments and communities: the imagination of the genius "creates, as it were, another nature out of the material that nature gives us."³⁴ And fine art is valuable in part because we can use it "to entertain ourselves when experience strikes us as overly routine."³⁵ A poem or a play offers welcome relief from the tedium of everyday life, and provides the mind with a healthy escape from the toil and trouble of practical life. Occasionally (as in science fiction and fantasy novels) we expect the laws of nature themselves to be rewritten (or, if not altered, at least expanded in unexpected and hypothetical directions). Works of art offer

³² Kant develops an account of moral confidence (without certainty) in the *Religion*.

³³ I agree with Guyer that Kant's discussion of the ideal of beauty is motivated by the search for a sensible vehicle to represent the primacy of practical reason. Guyer, P., 1996. *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*, pp. 41-2.

³⁴ 5:314.

³⁵ 5:314.

us another, perhaps more absorbing and enthralling world in which we can (temporarily) lose ourselves; and they do this regardless of, perhaps, in some cases, even despite our moral convictions and practical concerns. After the encounter has run its course, we can return to the real world of daily life more refreshed and invigorated and ready to cope with what the burdensome day has to give. When our moral concerns are at issue, works of art must leave us stranded. Ethical interpretation of art rests upon a culpable failure to draw certain boundaries clearly and to respect the autonomy of the work.

On a slightly more elevated plane, but still consistent with the principles of aesthetic formalism, the products of genius “quicken the mind” and contribute to the cultivation of our mental powers.³⁶ Although the work of art gives no fixed *concepts*, it does give rise to “so much thought” and “makes reason think more.”³⁷ Art critics do, after all, expend considerable intellectual energy on their material; art criticism is a *reflective* activity, in a sense not altogether detached from the Kantian. The point of art appreciation at its best is not merely to have agreeable sensations. A fine bottle of wine and a plate of Kobe beef give pleasure at least as well as, and certainly more easily than, *The Sound and the Fury*. We rightly assess the value of the fine arts in light of “the *Kultur* they provide for the mind.”³⁸

The work of art is able to prompt thought and cultivate our mental powers in the way it does, without offering the audience any clearly defined concepts with which to work but merely suggesting lines of thought to be further pursued and developed in its reception. And this is because the *Geist* of genius responsible for quickening and strengthening our mental powers is “nothing but the ability to exhibit *aesthetic ideas*”³⁹ to which no concept is adequate.⁴⁰ And while the connection between genius and morality is not altogether explicit in the third *Critique*, it is thanks to the introduction of aesthetic ideas that Kant’s account of genius and its products can be tied to the life of the *moral* agent.

Aesthetic ideas can be linked to moral experience precisely because they offer a sensible analogue and compelling exhibition of the *supersensible*.

³⁶ 5:315. In section 44, Kant claims that a work is *fine* art “if its purpose is that the pleasure should accompany presentations that are *ways of knowing*” (5:305). We shall see in a moment why this must be so and what this claim implies.

³⁷ 5:315.

³⁸ 5:329. Kant says as much already in section 44, 5:306.

³⁹ 5:314-15.

⁴⁰ Kant contrasts the aesthetic idea with its rational counterpart, which provides a concept to which nothing in intuition is ever adequate (5:314).

Here, too, reason, both generally and as a *moral* faculty, is able to discover itself within the order of the visible—in spatial forms, in tone and rhythm, perhaps, and especially in the sounds of poetry.⁴¹ Among the sorts of supersensible things fine art is said to be able to capture in its own way, Kant includes “the realm of the blessed, the realm of hell, eternity, creation,” but also “death, envy, and all the other vices, as well as love, fame,” and, most importantly for our purposes, *virtue*.⁴² If we think of the pleasure the work of art furnishes the mind merely in terms of the complex structure it displays, say, or the wit an author has displayed in the creation of an original metaphor or trope, without considering the conceptually indeterminate *content* it strives to express, our encounter is more likely to be impoverished than enriched.⁴³ The work obviously derives its meaning from the complex interplay of form *and* content (most formalists would probably find nothing troubling in this claim); but Kant seems willing to grant in section 49 of the third *Critique* that the content worked over and symbolized in a work of art is often *moral*.

It makes no small difference that Withof’s line (cited by Kant in section 49) is about virtue, or goodness in the original, rather than, say, the pleasures of sex or the allure of a bowl of ripe figs.⁴⁴ If we wish to ponder and consider how the sun’s flowing serenely forth and gently illuminating the earthly turmoil below gives sensible expression to what we mean by virtue, we cannot afford to bracket our concepts of moral excellence and what virtue often has to struggle against, forces lying outside the agent’s own control, disappointing human affairs, and frustrated expectations: if content without form is barely conceivable—a lower limit of intelligibility, aesthetic or otherwise—form without content is an empty and frivolous play, something about which we rarely care, except when we are merely diverting ourselves with a pleasing show of design, regardless of where we find it, whether in a work by Milton or on a meaningless piece of wallpaper in a neighbor’s kitchen. Every work of art worthy of our sustained and

⁴¹ “And it is actually in the art of poetry that the power of aesthetic ideas can manifest itself to full extent” (5:314). This point won’t be lost on Hegel, who argues for a similar thesis in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*. In section 53 Kant places music at the bottom of the artistic hierarchy “in reason’s judgment,” just because it is “more a matter of enjoyment than of culture” (5:328). In this respect, Schopenhauer, good Kantian though he (thought he) was, shows himself to be no mere disciple of Kant.

⁴² 5:314 and 316.

⁴³ See Guyer’s discussion of form and content in *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, 357–8. Guyer rightly notes that concepts will come into play in the audience, but without being sensed as constraining the mind’s free play.

⁴⁴ 5:316.

attentive concern is *about* something. And, by implication, every work of art that commands our, or our reason's, greatest and most sustained attention is about the struggles, successes, and failures of the moral life, for the simple Kantian reason that reason's highest vocation and most important and lasting concern is ethical.⁴⁵

Importantly, there can be considerable ambiguity and richness in the moral portrait, in keeping with Kant's views on the conceptual indeterminacy and endless intellectual provocativeness of fine art. One has only to think of a novel by Dickens or Hardy, which may deal with moral problems, but never in an overly simplified and facile way, even when the author's underlying moral vision comes more or less clearly into focus in the work itself. Nobody doubts that *Hard Times* is taking a stand against the degradations of an overly industrialized and inhuman culture or that the heroine of *Tess* is the victim of social standards and conventions the author invites us to question. But these works leave ample room for diverse and non-dogmatic, moral interpretation and evaluation. Not every ethical criticism of fine art is necessarily *moralizing* criticism, where the critic knows *a priori* or in advance what the author's conclusions must be, because everything has already been decided before we've allowed the work to be more fully encountered in terms of what it has to say *about something in which we already take an interest*.⁴⁶

The train of thought just sketched, centered on ideas of a sort (call them 'aesthetic'), seems to place the phenomena of art-making entirely under the dominion of reason, consciousness, and freedom of choice, as we might expect when we have to deal with something brought into being by human agency. The work of art is above all something someone somewhere makes; and every instance of human origination is guided by what the maker knows, or thinks she knows, and what she conceives in light of a clearly delimited end or aim. Doesn't Kant tell us in section 44 that fine art offers representations designed to evoke pleasure in *ways of knowing*?⁴⁷ And isn't artistic production distinct from its natural counterpart by virtue of being "production through freedom, i.e., through a power of choice that bases

⁴⁵ It is worth noting that in the *Anthropology* Kant argues against the reading of (certain) novels, on the grounds that they encourage too much free-floating fantasy and disorganize the mind. And in the second *Critique*, Kant praises the telling of those tales that encourage in the developing moral agent the cultivation of morally praiseworthy dispositions.

⁴⁶ For this distinction, see Wayne Booth's fine study *The Ethics of Fiction*. Booth, W., 1989. *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁴⁷ 5:305.

its acts on reason”?⁴⁸ If the lovely honeycomb resembles a work of art in displaying what looks like conscientious design, the bee itself is no artist, precisely because the work’s production is a matter of instinct, without deliberation and choice, and, as Kant himself notes, the work itself is a product of its nature. Nature in the bee merely acts *as if* it had a clear end in view. The bee itself knows nothing of this; a creative artist, on the other hand, is knowingly and deliberately about something.

And yet, if the “audience of originality,” to borrow Gould’s fine phrase, is offered in the work of art something conceptually inexhaustible that always, therefore, surpasses its complete understanding (which is why we expect great art to be endlessly interpretable and exposed to potentially endless conflicts of interpretation), the maker of it, as the genius, likewise cannot be said to be in complete cognitive control of what gets made. A work that fails to be suggestive and leaves nothing in the dark is hardly worth our enduring critical concern.⁴⁹ Kant has here anticipated the view that the artist is in no privileged position as a critic to tell us what her work means.⁵⁰ As a member of the audience of critics, the artist is one voice among many. If she has done her job well, her own work will exceed anything she has to say about its making and its meaning. As Kant observes in section 47, “no *Homer* or *Wieland* can show how his ideas, rich in fancy and yet also in thought, arise and meet in his mind; the reason is that he himself does not know, and hence also cannot teach it to anyone else.”⁵¹ And this is because, *despite* the self-consciousness and deliberateness of art-making, which always involves something like rules, without which there would be nothing organized and *coherent* in the product, as Kant is eager to insist⁵², in true works of genius “nature gives the rule to art.”⁵³ If the artist herself could devise the rule in a clear and distinct consciousness of what she’s attempting to say or do, the work of art would be conceptually bound and determined. This is probably true of the mechanical arts, which can be methodically developed and

⁴⁸ 5:303.

⁴⁹ In the lectures delivered at the University of Virginia, Faulkner frequently claims that the novelist’s art partly consists in the ability to suggest various lines to the reader, without giving out too much.

⁵⁰ But this view was, of course, anticipated by Plato: see the *Apology* and *Ion*. But what for Plato constitutes a defect is in Kant’s view one of the merits of great art.

⁵¹ 5:309. The context is a contrast between the discoveries made by the scientist, always methodical and hence teachable, and the products of genius.

⁵² As Kant notes, perhaps with Herder in mind, “shallow minds believe that the best way to show that they are geniuses in first bloom is by renouncing all rules of academic constraint, believing that they will cut a better figure on the back of an ill-tempered than of a training-horse” (5:310).

⁵³ 5:307.

taught. But it is characteristic of the work of *fine* art that its aesthetic ideas can never be exhausted in a fixed concept. This is just what makes an aesthetic idea an *idea*, inexhaustible and endlessly thought-provoking: "it must be nature in the subject [...] that gives the rule to art."⁵⁴ As Gould shrewdly observes, "genius shows itself as one of nature's more singular interventions in the realm of the human."⁵⁵

Here, too, nature, this time *within* some of us, is no longer something to be conquered and subdued: in certain privileged individuals and in presumably rare moments, nature seems to operate as freedom's benevolent collaborator.⁵⁶ And if some works of genius illuminate and symbolize aspects of the *moral* life, as I've tried to show, then nature helps, at least indirectly, to promote the concrete life of freedom and morality in *this* natural world of ours, where we find ourselves invariably situated among meaningful *things* and called upon to embody the sensible tokens of our ethical aspirations.

Concluding Remarks: A Naturalized Freedom?

The suggestive trains of thought pursued along various and, as I hope we've seen, *converging* paths above prompt the difficult and more distant question: How close have we come in the first half of Kant's third *Critique* to a naturalized view of freedom? It would be rash to venture an answer without first working out a more comprehensive interpretation of the *Critique of Judgment* as a whole, including the frequently neglected Critique of Teleological Judgment, which may or may not (although I think it would) offer confirmation of the position we've been defending above. But confining ourselves to what we've already had a chance now to see, we can say at least a few words about the view of freedom working itself out in nature outlined in the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment.

⁵⁴ 5:307.

⁵⁵ Gould, T., 1982. "The Audience of Originality" in *Essays in Kant's Aesthetics*, p. 182.

⁵⁶ For a more cynical reading of Kant's account of genius, which sees in it an assault on Herder and the *Sturm und Drang*, see Zammito's discussion of the topic in *The Genesis*, 137-42. Even if Zammito is right to interpret a few scattered passages as polemical references to Herder, I still think that the discussion as a whole is meant to be taken seriously, as a way of explaining (or not) how great works of art are possible. It is true that Kant places science higher on the scale of reason; but this isn't incompatible with the view that works of art exhibit ideas that enrich our cognitive view and present otherwise remote and intangible ideas of reason in sensibly accessible forms. See Kant's discussion in section 59 of beauty as a symbol of the morally good. Kant's interest in bringing morality closer to feeling and intuition is already apparent in the Typic of the second *Critique*. And if the third *Critique* as a whole is motivated partly by the 'great gulf' problem, the account of genius contributes partly to its solution.

What is at issue in the first half of the third *Critique* is, among other things, how the natural world ought to appear (and occasionally *does* appear) from the standpoint of the morally attuned individual, and what works of fine art, where nature (in the genius) gives the rule to art, have to offer to culture, moral or otherwise. But in this context at least, the appearance of freedom in nature has nothing to contribute to the explanation of natural phenomena, including human behavior (although it does invite speculation on the harmonious play of our cognitive faculties). We are not offered an alternative model for the explanation of nature (as, say, the actual embodiment of our moral ends) more compelling than the causal paradigm of natural explanation defended in the first *Critique*.⁵⁷ Nor are we given another, more naturalized account of human freedom, comparable to the physiological explanation of perception or emotion. If the naturalization of freedom boils down to the claim that freedom is among the causes we rightly expect to find operating among a certain class of objects in nature (call them ‘human beings’), then the book’s vision of freedom in nature is nothing naturalistic. What the third *Critique* offers is a way of experiencing certain objects of nature (call them beautiful) that resonates with our developing moral sensibility: at most it can be said to contribute to the development of a *moral* image of the world.⁵⁸ But the *Critique of Judgment* lays out a framework for the moral construal of nature that leaves nature itself, as an object of scientific knowledge, well enough alone. And in this way the work reaffirms on the plane of aesthetics the primacy of practical reason: from the standpoint of the morally mature adult, nature need not appear always in conflict with the demands of moral reason and freedom.

This helps to explain the awkwardness of Kant’s views on the universality and necessity of the judgment of taste.⁵⁹ From the standpoint of science,

⁵⁷ As Kant reminds us repeatedly in the third *Critique*, in aesthetic experience nature displays *purposiveness* but no definite *purpose*. If we discovered true purposes in nature *as causes* of what we experience, aesthetic experience would have true scientific import.

⁵⁸ Again, see Dieter Henrich’s essay on “The Moral Image of the World” in *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World*. As usual, the essays in this volume anticipate a large body of more recent valuable work on the connections between aesthetics and moral philosophy in Kant. It is becoming clear that while the judgment of taste is disinterested, and so neither itself a moral judgment nor grounded in a claim about the good, Kant’s interest in aesthetic judgment is impossible to disentangle from an ethical interest in the formation of a coherent *moral* view of the world. Zammito documents the ethical turn in Kant’s work on the third *Critique* in *The Genesis of Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment’*, Chapter 13. Far from naturalizing freedom, the third *Critique* might profitably be read as an attempt to make nature over in an image of a morally invested freedom, without displacing the hard work of scientific explanation in accordance with the principle of (natural) causality.

⁵⁹ The very idea of ‘subjective universality’ is nonsense in the first *Critique*, where universality

aesthetic experience seems merely subjective: it gives us no new principle for the explanation of natural phenomena and ascribes no real predicate to bare physical things, but tells us something about how we are occasionally attuned in the presence of certain objects (and the third *Critique* tells us why we ought to care about this attunement). From the point of view of the individual who shares in an experience of beauty, aesthetic encounters appear curiously objective: when we discover something beautiful, regardless of the sort of object it is supposed to be, we naturally long to communicate our experience and rightly expect others to judge as we do. When they don't, we, again rightly, find fault with their capacity to judge, and say that they lack *taste*.

The conflict or tension disappears once we realize that Kant's contribution to the philosophy of nature, and his emerging conception freedom *in* nature, in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* unfolds in the order of the analogical. This comes forward clearly in the short discussion of beauty as a symbol of the morally good in section 59 of the third *Critique*. Freedom is still nothing natural. But the realization of freedom in the life of the moral individual is *like* what we find beautiful or harmonious in a natural form. Nature is still nothing free. But the appearance of the beautiful in a natural shape is *like* what we discover in a soul whose sensibility harmonizes with the claims of moral reason. Taste itself is, in the end, nothing less than the ability to judge the way non-sensible or supersensible moral ideas are embodied in analogous sensible forms in nature and in works of art.⁶⁰ And the tasteful individual is entitled at least to *imagine* the domains of freedom and nature combining to form a single moral world.⁶¹

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and necessity are the surest marks of objectivity (or apriority).

⁶⁰ *Critique of Judgment*, §60, 5:356.

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Professor Dr. James D. REID

Metropolitan State University of Denver
Department of Philosophy
Denver, Colorado, United States of America
e-mail: jreid12@msudenver.edu