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The Role of Transcendental Idealism in Kant's Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment

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Just as Kant believes that there are antinomies in our employment of theoretical and practical reason, so he believes that there is one which lies in the background of our judgments of taste. It is normally referred to as the Antinomy of Taste. This antinomy, and its resolution, constitutes the main topic of the Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment in his *Critique of Judgment*.

It has seemed to many commentators that the Antinomy of Taste - which, above everything else, leads Kant to invoke his transcendental idealism with regard to aesthetics - is a most unconvincing affair. Indeed, the appeal to transcendental idealism in the Dialectic, as well as the antinomy itself, is often treated as an irrelevance to Kant's aesthetics, which it is best to pass over as rapidly as possible[i]. This attitude strikes me as seriously mistaken on at least three counts. I shall argue that: 1) Kant is right to suppose that, on his analysis of the judgment of taste, there *is* an antimony in the claims that we make in our taste judgments; 2) He is correct to hold that the antinomy can only be resolved by invoking his distinction between phenomena and noumena (and, hence, by invoking transcendental idealism); 3) The intriguing relationships that he wishes to bring out in the Dialectic between beauty and morality depend on accepting transcendental idealism.

The Antinomy of Taste seeks to demonstrate that our ideas about the aesthetic judgment are self-contradictory:

1) Thesis: The judgment of taste is not founded on concepts since it is impossible to decide the validity of any judgment by means of a proof; each judgment, rather, is determined immediately by a disinterested feeling of pleasure or displeasure.

2) Antithesis: The judgment of taste is determined by concepts since the claim to universal necessary agreement, which is made by the judgment, is only possible if there is a rule governing its application.

This antinomy has frequently seemed unconvincing because, it is said, Kant has already explained, before embarking on the Dialectic, how it is possible for the judgment of taste to claim universal necessary validity *without* the ability to justify the judgment by reference to any concept. In the Analytic of the Beautiful, he has argued that, in a properly made judgment of taste, the pleasure must arise from the free play of the cognitive powers (imagination and understanding). Consequently, it is clearly impossible to provide any determinate rule for the application of the judgment of taste (otherwise the imagination could *not* be in free play relative to definite concepts provided by the understanding). Nonetheless since, as he has also argued (principally in the Fourth Moment and in the Deduction of Judgments of Taste), we must all have the same cognitive powers and they must be atuned identically for all of us, it follows that, assuming I have not confused the beautiful with the agreeable or with perfection, my judgment on an object's beauty can rightly claim the necessary agreement of everyone else.

But this expression of doubt, with regard to the existence of an Antinomy of Taste, overlooks a significant point. The free play alluded to refers to the freedom of the imagination - the productive imagination - from *determinate* concepts. The imagination, in other words, is not here under the control of any definite concept (and, hence, is not subject to the law of reproduction). But, as Kant had insisted in discussing freedom of the will (in the *Critique of Practical Reason*), a will that is free is not a will that is law*less*[ii]. If it were, no maxim of any action that is performed 'freely' could hold with necessity for the will of everyone: on the contrary, a will that is lawless is a will that operates randomly. A free will must be subject to a rule (in fact the rule expressed by the moral law). Similarly, a spectator's pure judgment of taste cannot possibly lay claim to universal necessary validity unless the imagination, in its freedom from any definite concept, *is* subject to a rule (that is, the *same* rule holding for everyone). If the productive imagination, in reflecting freely upon the manifold by which an object is given, behaved *chaotically*, or if it behaved regularly for each of us but could *vary* between us, it is obvious that no judgment of taste could lay claim to universal necessary validity. There must, therefore, be - what is for us - an *indeterminate* rule governing the imagination's free play in such cases ('indeterminate' because the action of the imagination cannot here be constrained by any definite concept).

Indeed, if there were no such rule, it would be impossible for us to share our *cognitive* judgments about the empirical world. For it is the same, spontaneous, action of the productive imagination, in initially synthesizing the manifold so that it can be apprehended in a single spatial or temporal intuition, that also makes possible the application of *empirical* concepts to the contents of the manifold. Clearly, in the cognitive case, the productive imagination has to be subject to a strictly universal rule, otherwise we would be incapable of *sharing* ordinary empirical knowledge of the spatio/temporal world. (Kant rightly assumes that we share empirical knowledge of objects when discussing problems in aesthetics). This rule, then, must equally apply in the case of pure judgments of taste since, in this case too, the imagination has to bring together the given manifold into the form of a single sensible intuition - although, here, our normal, everyday, activity of also bringing that manifold under empirical concepts is *suspended*.

I conclude that the Antinomy of Taste is not unconvincing, despite Kant's earlier claim that a common sense of beauty is well founded. By accepting the existence of such a sense, we are not released from acknowledging that the free play, which generates the disinterested feeling of pleasure, must operate according to a universal rule, albeit - for us - an indeterminate rule. Far from it: what makes it possible to affirm that there exists a *common* sense of beauty is precisely that the imagination, when it freely reflects on a manifold by which an object is given, must be governed by an indeterminate *rule*. Without the existence of a rule governing the free play of the imagination, it would be impossible to contend that certain forms are beautiful, *i.e.* such that they must *necessarily* please everyone who makes a pure judgment of taste.

But now the question arises as to how it is possible *both* to think of everything in nature as subject to determinate laws (as we do, according to Kant) *and* to think of some of its products (natural beauties) as capable of putting our cognitive powers into harmonious free play. Such a dual thought could not occur if nature is taken to exist as a *noumenon* (or *thing in itself*). For once nature is conceived as a noumenon, everything in nature, *including* the workings of our own minds, must be regarded as subject to natural law. Of course, the laws governing the operation of our minds would be *pyschological*, not physical, laws but they would be natural (determinate) laws for all that. It would be impossible, therefore, for a feeling of pleasure to be generated by the interplay of the understanding and imagination

when these are *not* acting according to any determinate law. This would be impossible because, since the spatio/temporal world, and everything that exists in it, is here thought of as part of noumenal reality, we too must exist wholly *in time*; and, consequently, the faculties of understanding and imagination, like everything that exists in time, must be subject in all their operations to natural law. Hence, it would be impossible for any of nature's forms to put our cognitive features into *free* play, and thus no such thing as a judgment of taste could occur (a judgment that is determined by a feeling which cannot be thought of as subject to a definite rule). The question as to whether a natural form is, or is not, beautiful could be calculated from a knowledge of its formal pattern and the natural laws governing the mind's operations. Beauty would then be founded on definite concepts, and not upon a feeling which is unmediated by any determinate rule.

If, however, we accept the distinction between phenomena and noumena, it is possible to allow that the judgment of taste can claim universal necessary validity and, at the same time, to allow that everything which happens in the spatio/temporal world is subject to natural law. While it is in principle possible to regard the determinate laws of nature as responsible for the production of any complex phenomenal object, the end result, the object's overall formal arrangement (upon which the judgment of taste is directed), can yet be regarded as governed by an indeterminate rule and be capable of putting our cognitive faculties into free play. For these faculties should now be conceived as part of our noumenal, non-temporal, selves; and, hence, as capable of operating free from determinate rules. More particularly, the imagination, when taken in its productive capacity (the capacity in which it operates in aesthetic reflection), cannot be governed by any natural laws. It cannot because the action of the productive imagination is required in order for the phenomenal world - i.e. nature (together with its laws) - to exist in the first place.

The same general points go for artistic creativity and appreciation. If the world is taken as a thing in itself, the artist's aesthetic ideas must be dependent, not on the free play of his cognitive powers, but upon determinate rules. The notion of the artist as genius would have to be abandoned since the so-called 'originality' of his work would have to be governed by definite concepts. Only if we distinguish between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds can we allow for the Kantian notion of artistic creativity. For although the artist's actions in putting together the various parts of his work into a beautiful whole must be subject to natural

law (like all other actions in the phenomenal world), it is nonetheless possible to regard the overall design that he thereby creates as the product of the harmonious free play of his cognitive faculties (and so as governed by an *in*determinate rule). Equally, we, the spectators, can judge the work to be beautiful only because this indeterminate rule puts our faculties into harmonious free play. Whether we consider the artist who creates the design or the spectators who appreciate it, the design can only be thought of as governed by an indeterminate rule provided that we *distinguish* between our existence as phenomena and as noumena.

It transpires, then, that we could not think of either the creation of art or the appreciation of beauty (whether in art or nature) as dependent upon the free play of our cognitive powers without distinguishing between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds. Transcendental idealism, far from being an unnecessary excursion into Kant's metaphysics, is a vital ingredient in his justification of the judgment of taste.

Finally, I turn to the connections that Kant wishes to draw between beauty and morality. Here again, I believe that we shall find that transcendental idealism is central to his views.

As he sees it, there is a striking parallel between our judgments of beauty and morality. In judging the beautiful, we are conscious of a wholly free delight (arising from our non-sensuous cognitive powers) which is held to be valid for everyone, just as we are conscious, in judging the morally good, of a feeling of respect (arising from our non-sensuous free will) which is held to be valid for everyone. Analogous to the way in which we find that the feeling of respect, in the presence of the morally good, gives us a consciousness of ourselves as beings who are capable both of rising above the urges of sensuous desires and of determining our own actions, we find that the feeling of delight which stems, not from the charms of the senses but from the free employment of our cognitive powers, gives us a consciousness of ourselves as beings who are capable both of rising above sensuous pleasures and of determining the beauties of nature. In each case, we become conscious of that noumenal ground within us: a ground from which, as the Antinomy of Taste has shown, the judgment of taste can alone derive, and from which, as the Antinomy of Freedom had earlier shown (in the *Critique of Pure Reason*), our acknowledgment of moral obligation is alone possible.

Mainly on account of these parallels between the two types of judgment, Kant speaks of beauty as the symbol of morality. And he emphasizes how the cultivation of taste encourages our interest in morality as against the charms of the senses. This it does by teaching us, without undue difficulty, to take a delight in natural objects not on the basis of their content or matter (a merely *passive* delight), but on the basis of the free, yet mutually supporting, employment of our cognitive faculties in estimating their form (a *spontaneous* delight, arising from our own intellectual activity).

Quite apart from these analogies of structure between moral and taste judgments, Kant contends that the discovery of an *abundance* of natural objects which accord with the harmonious free play of our cognitive powers provides a further, and highly significant, moral dimension to our aesthetic appreciation of nature. He thinks that the profusion of beautiful natural forms suggests the existence of a cause or ground of nature that is favorably disposed to us (in so arranging nature that we can discover, within it, a profusion of beautiful forms). The possible existence of such a ground of nature is, he holds, of profound moral interest because it provides us with reason for hoping that our attempts to realize our final *practical* goal - namely, the highest good - will not prove unavailing. However, Kant's attempt to link natural beauty with morality, via a cause or ground of the abundance of beautiful natural forms, can only be admitted by accepting transcendental idealism.

In order to see why this is so, consider the following objection: 'Kant's reference to a ground of nature as an explanation for the profusion of natural beauties is not compatible with his often repeated claim, both before the Dialectic and within it, that it is *we* who determine the beauties of nature (by an immediate feeling of disinterested pleasure). If the abundance of beautiful forms is really the intentional product of nature's ground, then we must not consult *our* disinterested feelings in order to determine nature's beauties; rather we must consult the special, purposive, laws *in nature* that determine which forms are beautiful'. But this objection is misguided. Agreed, it would be impossible to render consistent Kant's claim that the beauties of nature are determined by an immediate feeling of pleasure with the claim that, *in addition to* the physical laws of nature, there are purposive laws of nature specifically governing the production of beautiful natural forms. If such purposive aesthetic laws existed, we should indeed have to discover them before being in a position to judge the beauties of

nature. For the question of which natural forms are beautiful would not, on this hypothesis, be dependent upon a feeling of disinterested pleasure in us, but upon which natural forms are in fact governed by these purposive aesthetic laws. However, Kant's claim that the beauties of nature are determined by our feeling of disinterested pleasure *is* consistent with his holding, not only that there exists a noumenal ground for the whole phenomenal world, but that this ground can be conceived as having fashioned nature's physical laws so that there will arise an abundance of natural forms which, merely as *by-products* of these laws, are capable of putting our cognitive powers into harmonious free play. Accordingly, so far as we are concerned with explaining what happens in the spatio/temporal world (including the production of those natural forms that we judge to be beautiful), nothing beyond the physical laws of nature need, in principle, to be appealed to. At the same time, by taking the noumenal basis as ultimately responsible for the design of the whole spatio/temporal world, including its physical laws, we can give a purposive explanation for the extraordinarily large number of diverse natural forms which put our cognitive faculties into harmonious free play, and which are, consequently, found to be beautiful. But, of course, this capacity *both* to explain the existence of beautiful natural forms as solely arising from *physical* laws of nature *and* to account for the profusion of such forms as perhaps ultimately due to a *purposive* cause of the whole of nature can only be made if the spatio/temporal world is considered as a mere phenomenon with any purposive cause as its noumenal ground.

We can now see why, given transcendental idealism, Kant maintains that the abundance of natural beauties provides us with a further and vital link between beauty and morality. Although, from the phenomenal point of view, we should always seek to explain the manifold beauties that are to be found among the forms of nature as mere by-products of physical laws (and we ourselves as alone determining the beauty of these forms), we can, entirely consistently with this position, understand this profusion by reference to a noumenal ground of nature. The abundance of beautiful forms, distributed throughout nature, can suggest to us that its noumenal ground has designed the physical laws of nature so that, in our empirical investigations into the causes and effects of physical phenomena, there will be ample opportunity for us to experience the free and disinterested delight associated with the contemplation of beautiful forms. And, once we have developed this idea that, lying at the basis of the whole of nature, there may be a noumenal ground that is well disposed to the spontaneous use of our *cognitive* powers, we are provided with reason for hoping that nature

will not prove hostile to our realizing, by means of the free exercise of our *will*, the ultimate end of all our endeavors: the union of virtue with happiness (the highest good).

I hope it has become clear why the appeal in the Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment to transcendental idealism is not an irrelevance to Kant's aesthetic theory, as is often asserted. On his analysis of the judgment of taste, we could neither justify these judgments (since they would be self-contradictory) nor give to them the role of linking the realms of nature and morality unless transcendental idealism is accepted.

Notes

[i] For two representative examples of this line of thought see: Eva Schaper 'Taste, sublimity, and genius:The aesthetics of nature and art', pp 378-385 in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant* edited by Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Paul Guyer's 'Introduction', pp xxxv, to *Critique of the Power of Judgment* by Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

[ii] Immanuel Kant *Critique of Practical Reason*, Book I, Chapter I, Sections 5 (Problem I)-6 (Problem II) [5: 28-30].