

# The Significance of Plato's Notions of Beauty and Pleasure in the Philosophy of Kant

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Plato conceived of the Form of Beauty as quite distinct from the Form of the Good. Beauty was a means to the Good. The ascent theory of the *Symposium* has suggested to some commentators that Plato envisaged two kinds of beauty, the sensuous and the intellectual, and that to reach the Good we must transcend our sensuous desires and cultivate an appreciation of intellectual beauty. However, in the *Laws* Plato presents us with a third notion of beauty, which is neither sensuous nor intellectual. To experience beauty we need to cultivate our pleasure in harmonious forms. This is where we find a theory of beauty that resonates in Kant's aesthetic theory. According to the latter, the feeling for beauty is a feeling for harmony that takes us beyond the confines of a world marked out by self-interest. I conclude that Plato's aesthetic theory anticipates the role that aesthetic judgment would play in Immanuel Kant's system of the mind.

## I. Introduction

According to one interpretation of Plato's aesthetic theory, beauty directs us away from conceiving of ourselves as essentially sensuous beings (appetite). This interpretation is based on the ascent theory drawn from the *Symposium* according to which there is a lower beauty borne of sensual gratification and a higher beauty marked by intellectual pleasure. However, there is an alternative interpretation of Plato's aesthetic theory that draws upon his notion of beauty in the *Laws*. This notion of beauty shows that the dilemma between sensual and intellectual beauty is a false one. There is a feeling for beauty that is neither sensual nor intellectual, which Plato urges us to cultivate because it directs us towards the good.

The argument that the dilemma between sensuous and intellectual beauty is false is cemented by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*. Kant argues that the cultivation of the feeling for the beautiful in nature trains us to think of ourselves as moral agents. The cultivation of our feeling for beauty was for both Plato and Kant,

the cultivation of the feeling required for living in harmony within a community. In this respect Plato's notion of beauty anticipates the role that aesthetic judgment plays in Immanuel Kant's system of the mind (Kant, 1987 [1790]). Conversely, in the light of Kant's aesthetic theory, I believe we can more fully appreciate what Plato had in mind regarding the mimesis of form.

## II. A Hierarchy of Beauty

According to Plato, beauty had various manifestations in an ascending hierarchy from the beauty of the body, to moral beauty, to the beauty of human institutions and artefacts, to the beauty of knowledge and finally to some kind of access to the abstract entity of the Form of Beauty (*The Symposium & Phaedrus*). In order to ascend through this hierarchy one needed to cultivate one's response to beauty at each level, moving from the particular to the general. For example, we love the beauty of the individual until eventually we come to apprehend beauty as a characteristic of all bodies. The apprehension of the beauty of such an abstraction paves the way for perceiving the form of beauty in abstract entities associated with the person such as behaviour and personality. Moving from the individual to the general, we perceive beauty in the idea of morality, and from here we eventually see beauty in the way the relevant personality traits are manifested in human institutions and artefacts. Abstracting from this realisation we apprehend that the striving for order and harmony, which is the defining mark of the institution, is a manifestation of the human capacity that Plato understands as our capacity for beauty (which in Plato has a divine source). Finally we perceive the beauty of knowledge in the particular and then the general; knowledge as the key which converts the random and meaningless into order and meaning. From this manifestation of beauty we are close to discarding the contingent and transitory, and apprehending the Form of Beauty.

## III. The Mimesis of Form

"The Forms" as in the Form of beauty are distinct from the idea of form in the content and form divide as it applies to art. "The Forms" are entities that exist for Plato in a supersensory sense, not subject to time or space. They represent a distillation of all experience and thought into its most essential elements. Plato also makes use of the term "form" in its more usual sense when analysing poetry and music, and this is the sense in which we are interested.

Plato raised the issue of what kind of knowledge is acquired through art which is a question still asked today. He suggested that one can acquire knowledge through both content and form. Plato assumed that art could influence behaviour through its content (the idea being that we can learn from artistic representations). It is often assumed that Plato focused on the propositional content of art alone (*The Republic*).

However, in *The Laws* he argues that the form of art also influences behaviour.

Plato differentiated between form and content in his concept of mimesis. Of interest here is that he argued that the form of art could train us through its representations of rhythms and harmonies to direct our desire for pleasure towards the good. With this notion, the centuries between Plato and Kant dissolve. Kant can be understood to identify the kinds of mental capacities one would need in order to find pleasure in such harmonies. Kant was interested in this capacity as he believed that it played a role in alerting one to one's moral vocation. In this respect, Plato's conception of beauty is alive and well in Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. In *The Laws* Plato distinguishes between two kinds of mimesis — one concerned with content and the other with form. This distinction and particularly the higher status he attributes to form anticipate Kantian aesthetics.

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804).

Mimesis in relation to content is the more common notion of mimesis attributed to Plato. This is the notion that he associates with appearances. While appearances are once removed from objects of knowledge, artworks are at least twice removed from objects of knowledge, as they are copies of mere appearances. The raising of mere appearances to an object of contemplation is to be avoided because appearances distract us from knowledge of the Forms and it is only through the latter (which we apprehend in part through the apprehension of beauty) that we can ascend to the Good (be our best selves and find happiness). Consequently in book ten of *The Republic*, Plato bans art from the Ideal Republic on the basis that art distracts us from our ascent to the Form of the Good.

Mimesis in relation to form, on the other hand, concerns the harmony, balance and rhythms of music (Schipper, 1963:199–202). Rightness in mimesis of form does not refer to an accurate copy of visual objects or sounds but refers instead to representing harmonies of form. In *The Laws*, Plato implies that when these rhythms imitate the Form of Beauty, they have as their subject more than mere appearances (*The Laws* 653e–665e). If the young cultivate their response of pleasure to such forms, they will be drawn to the good.

#### IV. Disinterested Pleasure

The crux to understanding the difference between kinds of beauty, is to understand the difference in our orientation to the object required of each kind. Kant in his

*Critique of Judgment* differentiates between three kinds of pleasure: pleasure in the sensuous (the agreeable); pleasure in content (measured against a set of criteria or a matter of anticipated personal benefit); and the disinterested pleasure of beauty. The pleasure in the sensuous is the satisfaction of desires and physical needs. This is the province of the emotions, the charming and the personal, where agreeable pleasure is concerned. Moving onto the second kind of pleasure, pleasure in content or concept could be the pleasure in discovery for its own sake, an intellectual pleasure often confused with the disinterested pleasure of beauty. However, intellectual pleasure is distinct from that of beauty. It involves a build up of tension while a solution is still forthcoming and then a release of tension when the solution is found which accounts for the pleasure. Most other kinds of conceptual pleasure involve measuring an object against a set of criteria. Good design is like this where we judge an object to be good based on the fit between its design and its function. In fact Kant refers to conceptual pleasure as pleasure in the good. The good is always good for something and hence always involves an interest through cognition (see Savile, 1987:136–40).

Pleasure in beauty is distinct from these kinds of pleasure and demands a distinct orientation towards the object. Kant explains the grounds for this orientation according to his system of the mind. Bear in mind that Kant recognised that what we perceive is in part a function of the perceptual and cognitive mechanisms of the human mind. There are limitations on what we can know and these limitations can only be understood if we consider the kind of knowledge of which we are capable. Regarding our experience of beauty, Kant identified the features of the associated experience and then set about reasoning what would need to be the conditions of the mind in order for such an experience to be possible. As Kant's notion of beauty is neither sensuous nor intellectual, he grounds the experience of beauty in what to our contemporary minds we can understand as the exploitation of certain perceptual principles. Certain objects, in the course of perception, deploy perceptual principles in such a way, that either in economising their normal function or perhaps deploying them in unprecedented ways, draw our attention to an aspect of perception itself. We are not aware of the source of the experience. Instead we attribute the experience to something about the object.

Kant explains in his *Critique of Pure Reason* that all cognition is pleasurable, as is all perception. This is because for Kant, perception is an achievement rather than a given (Savile, 1987:136). What we perceive is constructed from certain primitives given in perception. We might think of this in terms of the retina simply picking up variations in light intensities and from this information perceiving edges and boundaries, and through operations like stereopsis, constructing forms that the higher cognitive system can recognise. One way of thinking about this is that the system settles on the right representation (or concept) when harmony is achieved. This is a harmony between the representation and the knowledge already present in the cognitive system. We know harmony is achieved through the pleasure

afforded by the fit between the newly constructed representation and existing knowledge. In most cases this is a very slight pleasure that we would hardly notice. However in the case of perceiving certain objects, particularly certain natural scenes and objects, the pleasure is heightened because instead of the process being closed off when a concept is found, no concept is found but a harmony is achieved nonetheless. The harmony felt is not a harmony between incoming data and our established body of knowledge, but a harmony between the processes involved in perception and cognition. At least this is how we might express it in contemporary terms while still remaining true to the spirit of Kant.

Corresponding to the three kinds of pleasure identified by Kant might be what in Plato are sensuous beauty, intellectual beauty and the beauty of form respectively. Looking back at Diotima's explanation of the development of beauty appreciation in Plato's *Symposium* with the hindsight provided by Plato's *Laws*, the cultivation of beauty appreciation is not so much an ascent as a matter of finely tuning the focus when looking through a telescope.<sup>1</sup> The coarse grained images are visible even when the telescope is out of focus. This is akin to our appreciation of sensuous beauty. Intellectual beauty requires some fine-tuning. But it is only once we have become familiar with sensuous and intellectual beauty that we notice the telescope is still out of focus. Learning to focus on harmonious forms brings us beyond both the sensuous and the intellectual because it involves an appreciation of the way forms in nature (and possibly replicated in human artefacts like music) are perfectly attuned to our perceptual apparatus which leaves us feeling integrated into the natural world.

This kind of beauty inspires a feeling response that is poorly served by the appellation "pleasure". Plato called our response to this kind of beauty "love" because he thought the concept of pleasure represented too transient and subjective a response to capture the lasting effect of beauty. His recognition of the peculiar feel-good but transformative rather than transient nature of our response to beauty, anticipated the use by Kant of the term "disinterested" in relation to the relevant pleasure (after the Third Earl of Shaftesbury in the early 18th century [Stolnitz, 1961]).

A question that might come to mind at this point is why be drawn through these manifestations of beauty? If pleasure is evoked by each kind of beauty, what makes the pleasure evoked by one form of beauty, say the less focused sensuous beauty, less satisfying than the pleasure evoked by another form, say the finely tuned formal kind? One way to answer this would be to draw upon the Stoic notion of virtue and happiness. The more finely tuned the experience of beauty, the less reliant one is upon external rewards and satisfactions and hence the less anxiety that is attendant upon it. The less we rely upon those events over which we have little control, the more that long lasting happiness will be ours, according to the Stoicism which derives from Plato in Seneca, Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus.

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<sup>1</sup> This metaphor is borrowed from James Kirwan (1999) *Beauty*. Manchester: Manchester University Press. I develop it from its original form.

Plato's analysis of pleasure in the *Philebus* is analogous to his hierarchy of beauties as expressed in the *Symposium*. The lower pleasures are a mixture of pleasure and pain. They result from alleviating pain, ceasing deprivation or satisfying desires. They are never pure pleasures because not only do they depend upon a former lack of some kind, but at the moment of satiation, another need begins to build in its place. To base one's search for happiness on such pleasures is to be at the mercy of a constant yearning. This kind of pleasure was not perceived by Plato as capturing our response to beauty. Such pleasures were too transient and subjective. On the other hand, he recognised a pure and true pleasure that was not the result of fate, fortune or any other kind of contingency. This was the pleasure in formal patterns which encompassed not only the forms in certain kinds of musical styles but also the contemplation of the higher Forms, and he named this kind of pleasure in the case of beauty, love.

The eighteenth-century philosophers recognised this peculiar characteristic of our response to beauty when they settled for the term "disinterested pleasure" to denote the response to beauty. Disinterest is not a matter of lack of interest. It simply means that the object of beauty does not cause pleasure in virtue of satisfying certain personal interests. Disinterested pleasure is a pleasure unconnected with desire. This is a key point in understanding Plato's distinction between Beauty and the Good (which we do desire). We desire what is good, but only find it through partaking in beauty, the apprehension of which, desire impedes. So we would reach what is good by overcoming the desire we have for it.

Kant's aesthetic theory is consistent with the notion that desire obstructs the apprehension of beauty but not by stipulation, but rather by a priori necessity. To desire is to conceive of the object (of desire) according to one's interests. One might find one and the same physical object to be both desirable and beautiful but not under the same representation. As an object of beauty it is not subsumed under a concept. As an object of desire it is necessarily subsumed under a concept related to our interests.

Kant provides the grounds for the feeling of beauty (a disinterested pleasure) in a harmony felt between faculties of the mind when confronted with beautiful objects. That is, certain objects have a constitution which when apprehended are experienced as perfectly attuned to the cognitive faculties, and this is experienced as pleasurable. The constitution of the relevant objects is such that when perceiving them, instead of simply subsuming perceptual data under a concept, which is the normal activity at the interface of perception and cognition, we are thrown back into a reverie on the object of perception. This is experienced as an intense focus on the particulars of the object. This in turn converts to reflection on general ideas associated with our integration into nature, which accounts for the lasting effect of experiences of beauty. According to Kant, such experiences prevent us from feeling alienated from nature. We are left feeling a part of something greater than the world as marked out by our own interests. This feeling, in turn, furthers our integration

into society, furthering culture. The experience of beauty leads us to a sense of self as a moral agent. The implication in Kant is that pleasure in the beautiful forms of nature should be cultivated in the young for the benefit of society. This is sufficient to make the link with Plato's aesthetic theory obvious.

## Conclusion

According to Kant, the pleasure in beauty is the pleasure we experience in the purposiveness of our minds; and this we are alerted to through the perception of certain objects whose constitution is perfectly suited to the operations inherent in the process of perception at a sub personal level. The perception of such objects prompts an experience of the harmony that unbeknownst to us ensues between the aspect of the mind responsible for ordering the incoming data and the concepts or categories necessary for the cognitive activities of reason. This purposiveness is an aspect of our moral selves. That is, Kant's concept of the human being is not of a higher animal but of a higher being with an important and significant vocation, which he refers to as our moral vocation. His conception of beauty is of a feeling response to evidence of our purposiveness reflected in our perception of nature and some human artefacts. Our response to beauty draws us away from a conception of ourselves as solely sensuous beings in a sensuous world, towards a realisation of our selves as moral agents. As such, one can apprehend the echoes of Plato in the role Kant hoped to fill with beauty.

It can be argued that Kant's epistemology and metaphysics incorporate aspects of empiricism and rationalism. He postulated a concept of a mind independent reality to which we nonetheless have access through what he called a supersensible substrate of humanity. However, he argued that anything known through the senses is only knowledge of the phenomenal, rather than knowledge of the thing-in-itself. Aesthetic judgment was symptomatic of these characteristics of mind, because beauty was the experience we had when the mind was alerted to something through the senses to which the normal channels for constructing knowledge of the empirical were inadequate. Here are echoes of Plato once again in the distinction between appearance and reality; and the disruption of their normal relationship in mind through the experience of beauty.

Kant constructs a map of the mind that would explain what is going on when we experience beauty that links the sensory with the supersensible. In this way he tries to show that it is through aesthetic judgment that our sensuous and rational selves are unified. The most important consequence of this bringing together of the sensuous and the rational is that through this we are meant to be alerted to our moral vocation. Whether Kant succeeds in this is another matter but what his attempts do show is that Plato's attempt to link a formal kind of beauty with the attaining of the good is repeated in Kant through the link between aesthetic judgment and our moral vocation. Conversely by studying Plato's aesthetics in the light

of Kant's aesthetic theory, we can better understand that for the mature Plato, the way to the good was not a simple ascent charged by self denial, but an ascent borne on the love for beautiful forms.

According to the aesthetic theories of both the mature Plato and Kant, cultivating pleasure in beautiful forms is the cultivation of a feeling that takes us beyond self interest. This is explained by Kant as that the beauty of nature causes us to feel integrated with nature which in turn translates into a feeling of community. In this sense the feeling for beauty is a feeling for the furthering of culture, which echoes Plato's notion of beauty derived from the *Laws*.

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