

The Art of Willing: The Impact of Kant's Aesthetics on Schopenhauer's Conception of the Will¹

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Much has been written about Schopenhauer's use of Kant's aesthetics as well as Schopenhauer's adherence to and departures from Kant's theoretical philosophy, not least by Schopenhauer himself. The hypothesis I propose in this paper combines these two research trajectories in a novel way: I wish to argue that Schopenhauer's main theoretical innovation, the doctrine of the will, can be regarded as the development of an aspect of Kant's aesthetic theory.

The aspect of Kant's aesthetic theory that I have in mind is the crucial third moment of aesthetic judgments: "*Schönheit ist Form der Zweckmäßigkeit eines Gegenstandes, sofern sie ohne Vorstellung eines Zweckes an ihm wahrgenommen wird.*"² In his account of this third moment, Kant condenses the definition into a claim, bordering on paradox, about the existence of a "*Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck,*"³ a purposiveness (in the sense of conformity to purposes) that lacks any particular determinate purpose. This claim is crucial because it is effectively Kant's explanation for the first two moments of aesthetic judgments of beauty: that such judgments are disinterested⁴ and that the target of such judgments, the beautiful itself, is capable of giving rise to pleasure universally, but in the absence of a concept.⁵

For Kant, any determinate end or purpose that gives rise to pleasure thereby constitutes an interest.⁶ So it is the absence of such a determinate

1 References to Schopenhauer's texts are to volume and page of Schopenhauer, Arthur: *Sämtliche Werke*. Hrsg. A. Hübscher. Mannheim 1988, abbreviated 'H'. Unflagged references are to *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* and include volume (I or II), part (1–4) and paragraph number of that text. Translations from Schopenhauer are my own.

2 KU, AA 05: 236.09–11.

3 KU, AA 05: 226.27–28.

4 KU, AA 05: 211.02–04.

5 KU, AA 05: 219.25.

6 KU, AA 05: 221.05–07.

end or purpose that makes it possible for aesthetic judgments of beauty to be disinterested in the relevant sense.

Similarly, Kant maintains that it is *only* practical concepts (i.e. purposes, ends or intentions) that can give rise to pleasure.⁷ And since any relation of beauty to practical concepts is counted out by the first moment, the second moment follows naturally: the beautiful must please without any concept at all.

The third moment also underlies the fourth moment, the modal necessity of aesthetic judgments of beauty,⁸ but more indirectly. The thought of a *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* is hard to pin down. There is an obvious epistemic interpretation of the idea: it describes the kind of entity that turns up sometimes in archeological digs, an entity that is clearly a human artifact of some kind, indeed probably a tool, but whose precise purpose is now unknown. But Kant, rightly, insists that such entities are not judged beautiful merely because the purpose we presume they serve is in fact unknown.⁹ Instead the idea must be taken as an ontic claim about the existence of a certain class of entities manifesting a certain kind of purposiveness or end-orientedness, but absolutely lacking a particular or determinate purpose rather than merely possessing an unknown one.

In fact, it follows from the argument supporting the second moment of judgments of taste (that the beautiful must please universally but without a concept) that talk of a 'class' of objects is misleading or wrong, for such vocabulary implies the existence of a determinate predicate that distinguishes the class. But no such property possessed by all and only beautiful things can exist.¹⁰

There is something quite disconcerting phenomenologically about this talk. I've been talking so far of beauty as primarily a predicate or pseudo-predicate. But many commentators have inferred from the fact that the beautiful resists determinate conceptualization so completely that it cannot be understood as having achieved the status of object at all. On this picture, the phenomenology of aesthetic experience that

7 "Denn von Begriffen giebt es keinen Übergang zum Gefühle der Lust oder Unlust (ausgenommen in reinen praktischen Gesetzen [...])" (KU, AA 05: 211–212.30–01).

8 KU, AA 05: 240.18–19.

9 KU, AA 05: 236.23–33.

10 This is why Kant says: "Er [der Urtheilende] wird daher vom Schönen so sprechen, als ob Schönheit eine Beschaffenheit des Gegenstandes [...] wäre" (KU, AA 05: 211.18–20).

Kant offers is one of an initial encounter with something like a hole or tear in the fabric of fully constituted experience in which a 'something' appears that cannot be bought under a determinate concept, i. e., cannot be properly integrated into the experiential field at all.¹¹ The examples Kant gives militate against this view, since he talks about determinate objects (e. g. tulips).¹² But there are some well-known and quite natural extensions of Kant within contemporary aesthetic theory that press the point. According to Thierry de Duve, for instance, modern art objects, and especially those of the Dadaists or conceptual artists, characteristically resist categorization as proper objects.¹³ It is possible to reconcile the two positions, for my purposes at least, by saying that the beautiful object for Kant cannot at least be a properly determinate object because both sides agree that it must at a minimum possess one property, that of being beautiful, that resists conceptualization. Perhaps the beautiful is not a hole in experience where an object should be but an object that doesn't quite 'fill' the phenomenological space within experience that it should.

In any event, Kant surely therefore owes us an explanation of this explanation, not least because his emphasis on the lack of conceptual specificity, of determinate end or purpose, in the beautiful risks the collapse of *Zweckmäßigkeit* back into the purely pathological, a subjective rhapsody of sensations of delight not only non-cognitive but completely unrelated to cognition, and hence altogether lacking the ability to please universally or necessarily.

To assure both the universality of the pleasure required by the second moment and the necessity of judgments of beauty required by the fourth moment, Kant needs to give an explanation of how it is that something like *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* is itself possible. In brief, the explanation is this: ordinary cognition is made possible by the coordinate activity of the various mental faculties constitutive of the experience of objects. In particular, the manifold of intuition must be brought under determinate conceptual unity (as elaborated at length in the first *Critique*). This coordinated activity can, Kant claims, go more or less well. Something is beautiful, Kant claims, if it presents to the cognitive faculties a pre-experiential sensory manifold that maximally promotes the functioning of the

11 Guyer, Paul: *Kant*. London & New York 2006, 314–5 mentions Crawford, Henrich, Rush and Allison as variants of this view.

12 KU, AA 05: 236.28 as Guyer points out (*ibidem.*).

13 de Duve, Thierry: *Kant After Duchamp*. Cambridge 1996.

cognitive apparatus required for the synthesis of regular objects of experience.¹⁴ Beautiful objects are all and only those objects that must be thought by us as if the intrinsic structure of their corresponding sensory manifolds had been designed for our cognition. This subjective purposiveness is the explanation for the appearance of *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*. The purposiveness is turned inwards, and hence lacks a correlative objective predicate. What he calls “Gemeinsinn”¹⁵ is the feeling that an object has a corresponding manifold that is well suited, fit, for our cognitive faculties.¹⁶ Since every experiencing subject must – as a matter of transcendental necessity – possess the same apparatus of cognition, it follows that the feeling we experience ought to be universal and necessary, as required.

So the third moment, whose slogan is that beautiful objects exhibit a *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* is at the root of all four moments of judgments of taste. Kant also identifies *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* with a second slogan, “lawfulness without a law [Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz].”¹⁷ But I want to suggest a way of differentiating them. I think that it helps to see *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* as a part of a quasi-phenomenological description of the non-objective property possessed by all and only beautiful objects: the universal rule “die man nicht angeben kann”¹⁸ that beautiful things exemplify. And to distinguish this from its close cousin, a *Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz*, which characterizes instead the operation of the cognitive faculties in appraising an object as possessing the non-cognitive character of the beautiful. In such circumstances, the imagination actively strives to bring the manifold into order and must be regarded as “produktiv und selbst-tätig (als Urheberin willkürlicher Formen möglicher Anschauungen).”¹⁹ It is this, transcendental and productive as opposed to empirical and merely reproductive, mode of operation of the imagination that Kant asks us to regard as proceeding according to a *Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz*.

My contention here is that the description Kant offers of the operation of the cognitive faculties in the appraisal of beauty both responds to a lacuna in his argumentation in the first two critiques and also paves the

14 KU, AA 05: 238–39.34–01.

15 KU, AA 05: 238.7.

16 KU, AA 05: 237 f.

17 KU, AA 05: 241.11–12.

18 KU, AA 05: 237.10.

19 KU, AA 05: 240.27–28.

way for Schopenhauer's later extension and reorganization of Kant's thought, and most especially provides an important and unacknowledged context for his signature claim that the thing-in-itself is will.

The lacuna in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is the following. The first two *Critiques* both rely heavily on the notion of spontaneity, but invoke at least two apparently quite distinct and not obviously compatible understandings of it. Clearly Kant requires for his practical philosophy a conception of spontaneity as something specifically distinct from empirical causation that describes the activity of the subject in freely chosen action.²⁰ But it is not at all obvious that this is the same use of the term 'spontaneity' as required in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. There the contrast is between the transcendental activity of the higher faculties of the subject and the receptivity of the lower faculties rather than between the voluntaristic and the causally determined. Immediately prior to his famous claim that "Gedanken ohne Inhalt sind leer, Anschauungen ohne Begriffe sind blind,"²¹ for instance, Kant marks the difference between sensibility and understanding like this: sensibility is "die *Receptivität* unseres Gemüths, Vorstellungen zu empfangen" whereas understanding is "das Vermögen, Vorstellungen selbst hervorzubringen," which he immediately identifies with the "die *Spontaneität* des Erkenntnisses."²²

Some interpreters of Kant, most notably John McDowell, have bitten the bullet here and argued that these two conceptions of spontaneity must be identical, so that the spontaneity of concepts of the understanding in the constitution of experience is the same as the spontaneity of reason in its practical employment (to put the contrast between the two notions of spontaneity in Kantian faculty form). The recent convergence of epistemology with ethics in the notion of epistemic virtues makes this move more plausible than it might otherwise be. For us to have experiences is (in part) to be in possession of concepts whose application imposes epistemic obligations on us. These obligations must ultimately be thought in terms of quasi-moral responsibilities, for example, to search out evidence, to be open to changing our minds etc. And these responsi-

20 In this case we procede, according to Kant, "nach der absoluten Spontaneität" (KpV, AA 05: 99.11).

21 KrV, A 51/B 75.

22 KrV A 51/B 75. This account of spontaneity is repeated several times in the course of both A and B deductions, e. g. at KrV A 126, B 130 f., B 150 f.

bilities themselves must be thought as stemming from our rational spontaneity.²³

I cannot hope to take on this subtle argument here, but I would point to two features of this identification of the notions of spontaneity that raise deep problems. First, what we take in perceptually is not ‘up to us’ in anything like the way what we choose to do is. Even though the world may thwart my acting on my choices, the choices are up to me in a way that my experience just is not. McDowell is of course highly alert to this point. But the fact that his rejection of it requires so much subtlety suggests that it has some bite.²⁴ Second, much of what Kant said in the 18th century about transcendental object-constitution has become, in the 20th and 21st empirically commonplace within cognitive science.²⁵ I do not think that Kant’s work can be so easily naturalized, as I will shortly show. But the central idea of cognitive science – that we are conscious of *objects* and not of the mental processes that underlie their constitution as objects – provides a clear basis for distinguishing the two conceptions of spontaneity. The spontaneity of the subject in its free choice of action is something that takes place within consciousness, whereas the spontaneity of the subject’s cognitive faculties in the ‘production’ of objective experience is not something that takes place within consciousness: we are conscious precisely of our experiences and not of the processes of their synthesis. As Kant writes:

Die Synthesis überhaupt ist [...] die bloße Wirkung der Einbildungskraft, einer blinden, obgleich unentbehrlichen Function der Seele, ohne die wir überall gar keine Erkenntniß haben würden, der wir uns aber selten nur einmal bewußt sind.²⁶

Nevertheless, it is also clear that both conceptions of the transcendental spontaneity of the subject must be distinct from mere empirical causation so that it is not so easy to naturalize Kant as cognitive science might suppose. Kant says this explicitly of spontaneous freely chosen action: at least insofar as one adopts the correct standpoint, a freely chosen action cannot be regarded as the outcome of an empirically causal chain, even if, from another point of view, it must be seen as such. But something similar must also be the case for the transcendental processes involved in the pro-

23 McDowell, John: *Mind and World*. Cambridge 1996, 12 f., 29 ff.

24 *Op. cit.* 10 ff.

25 Kitcher, Patricia: *Kant’s Transcendental Psychology*. Oxford 1991. Brook, Andrew: *Kant and the Mind*. Cambridge 1994.

26 KrV A 78/B 103. See also Kitcher, *op. cit.*, 82 f.

duction of experience. The argument for this position is a *reductio*. If transcendental processes of empirical object-constitution were also empirical, then they would presuppose a *prior* spontaneous act of constitution of the empirical to constitute *them* as the empirical processes they are. But this clearly involves a regress. And this is impossible, so our assumption must be false. Therefore the spontaneity of the subject insofar as it characterizes transcendental processes of object-constitution cannot be empirical.

What is the nature of this process that must be distinct *both* from the causal processes that characterize the interaction of objects of experience *and* from the intentional actions of the free subject? It is not clear. My contention is that it is in the third *Critique* that Kant first starts to thematize something that would fit the bill. *Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz* describes precisely (albeit abstractly) a mode of activity of the spontaneity of the subject within the imagination that cannot be reduced to the empirical (i. e., the reproductive imagination with its empirical laws of association) but is at the same time also independent of intentional (i. e. purposive, i. e. free) action.

If this is correct, then the structural space Kant opens up for the autonomy of art – its irreducibility both to any kind of concept (purpose, category [e.g. cause] or empirical concept or form) and to chaotic or pathological pre-synthetic sensation – can at the same time be read as opening up a space for the characterization of transcendental processes of object-constitution.

Kant of course denies this, but this is not surprising since, presumably, he did not think he was invoking two distinct and incompatible accounts of spontaneity. In any event, when he introduces the distinction between reflecting and determining judgment in the third *Critique*, he retrospectively recasts the operation of judgment in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as determining. And it is only determining judgments that can be part of a transcendently spontaneous operation of world-constitution. Reflecting judgment, by contrast, is not part of any process that constitutes objects. It licenses merely the range of epistemically modest proposals that Kant elaborates: the aesthetic quasi-predicates and the ‘as if’ formulations of the *Critique of Teleological Judgment*. To the extent that *Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz* is co-ordinate with reflecting judgment, its mode of operation must also fall short of actual object constitution.

It would be possible to argue – as was common among the immediate post-Kantian idealists and also influences Heidegger’s reading – that the

reflecting use of the power of judgment is logically prior to the determining use. While I am not unsympathetic to this reading, I want to remain neutral about it at present and simply note that the mode of operation of the cognitive faculties associated with the formula *Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz* does in fact fill the lacuna in the first two *Critiques* concerning the transcendental spontaneity of the subject in its processes of object-constitution.

In characterizing the spontaneity of the transcendental imagination, Kant opens up a new concept of freedom, quite different from that of voluntary action, in which judgment and imagination operate freely only when they are liberated from domination by determinate conceptuality.²⁷ Similarly, the power of judgment is only 'free' when it is undetermined both by a concept of the understanding (i. e., by an object of a determinate empirical sort or form) and by a sensation (i. e., by stimulation of the faculty of desire to want an object of a determinate kind).²⁸ This notion of freedom as freedom *from* the stricture of purpose and concept (as we have seen in the analysis of *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck*) and law (as we have seen in the analysis of *Gesetzmäßigkeit ohne Gesetz*) is of course to be found in the famous formulation that aesthetic judgments are grounded in the 'free play' of the faculties.²⁹

This conception of freedom is very close to Schopenhauer's, and provides a useful bridge to it. Schopenhauer reconfigures the traditional notion of the freedom of the will by interpreting it not as the freedom of the individual agent to choose, but rather in a 'negative' way as the freedom of the thing-in-itself from the various forms of the principle of sufficient reason.³⁰ The principle of sufficient reason is itself Schopenhauer's reinterpretation of the Kantian notion of transcendental form. It does some violence to Kant's transcendental faculty psychology by integrating the transcendental aesthetic (i. e. space and time as the forms of sensibility) with the Kantian category of causation into a general capacity for 'intuitive cognition' and severely downgrading the importance of reason, which he regards as 'feminine', i. e., simply a passive repository for intuitive cog-

27 KU, AA 05: 287.16–17.

28 KU, AA 05: 270–1.33–02. One might add, as Kant does at other places, that the determination of judgment by moral goodness is also, in the sense Kant is now developing, not free. See KU, AA 05: 209–210.29–22.

29 The phrase 'freies Spiel' occurs frequently in the text, e. g. at KU, AA 05: 217.22, 238.14, 240 f., 256.4.

30 I.4 § 55; H 2: 337–8.

dition.³¹ But Schopenhauer's conception of the forms of the principle of sufficient reason reveals an important continuity with the Kant I've been presenting. The various species of conceptual domination that Kant sees aesthetic judgment as a liberation from are all also part of Schopenhauer's view of transcendental forms. The freedom of judgment and imagination is compromised, for instance, by freedom from being an intentional product (something produced for a determinate purpose), freedom from rule and law and, ultimately, perhaps even by freedom from determinate objecthood.

For Schopenhauer the subject/object distinction is the overall form of the principle of sufficient reason, and its other forms are based on the logical ground/consequent relation, in particular the rule-bound relation between cause and effect in the mechanical world and motive and action in the world of human affairs. Thus, although Schopenhauer's account of the transcendental is somewhat different, the freedom of the will from the principle of sufficient reason involves its subtraction from forms of determinate objecthood, human motives (intentions) and law-bound causal mechanisms in just the way Kant's conception of the freedom of the imagination involves its liberation from domination by a determinate concept (of what it is to imagine) and concomitant freedom from the bonds of its merely reproductive operation according to empirical causal laws of psychology (associationism). Indeed, Schopenhauer goes so far as to reprise, in the domain of experience as a whole, the world as representation, Kant's claim within the aesthetic domain that the work of art exemplifies an absent rule. The totality of natural forms, Schopenhauer writes, comprises "a set of exceedingly diverse variations on an unspecified theme."³²

It is, in particular, this subtraction of Schopenhauer's conception of the will from any motive, from the willing of any particular thing or object, that comprises the premise of his signature argument concluding that the will is 'endless striving': it must be endless (i. e. goalless) striving because as will it is something active, but as subtracted from transcendental forms (from the principle of sufficient reason) it cannot have a determinate purpose and hence can never be satisfied.³³

31 I.1 § 10; H 2: 86.

32 I.2 § 17; H 2: 115.

33 I.2 § 29; H 2: 195. Of course Schopenhauer has other arguments at his disposal here too. The will in-itself is also timeless, and hence can never complete its activity.

Moreover, along a second dimension, the result or expression of the endless striving of the will is the production of a series of (for Schopenhauer increasingly clear) inorganic and then organic forms corresponding broadly to the evolutionary pathway culminating in human beings. Similarly, for Kant, it is the freedom of the imagination from domination by the concept of a specific objective form or purpose that enables it to take on the role of “Urheberin willkürlichen Formen der möglichen Anschauungen.”³⁴

Although the topic is too big to take on here, Kant’s account of the production of objects of fine art in acts of genius is of some significance. A genius produces novel forms precisely by harnessing the productive imagination, and hence cannot give an exhaustive conceptual (rule-governed) account of her actions, something that Kant expresses in his definition of the genius: “*Genie* ist die angeborne Gemüthsanlage (*ingenium*), *durch welche* die Natur der Kunst die Regel giebt.”³⁵ Nature (in the person of the genius), in other words, strives continually but without an explicit (conceptually statable) purpose and in so doing continually produces new forms. Harnessing the productive imagination involves both the absence of a particular (formulable) law or purpose, but at the same time a ‘conformity to’ law and purpose that expresses itself in the ‘origination’ of novel forms. But this is just what Schopenhauer’s will does, expressing itself without motive or goal in different ‘grades’ (I.2 §25; H 2:154).

This is my central contention: that the core of the novelty of Schopenhauer’s philosophy, his ‘entirely novel thought’ (I.2 §29; H 2: 193) of the will as thing-in-itself, is a comprehensible generalization of Kant’s account of the mode of operation of the faculties of judgment and imagination in their aesthetic application.³⁶ The historical importance of the idea of a transcendental conception of nature involving a morphogenetic force irreducible to the conceptual determinations either of intentionality or causality is such that it is significant to see something like it in Kant.

Nevertheless, the fragility of the hypothesis makes it important to register objections. Here I would like to deal with one obvious one:

34 KU, AA 05: 240.27–28.

35 KU, AA 05: 307.14–15.

36 There is no textual warrant for this claim; indeed Schopenhauer is particularly dismissive of the third *Critique*, devoting barely 6 out of 142 pages of his ‘Critique of the Kantian Philosophy’ to it (I.App; H 2: 627–33 out of H 2: 491–633).

Kant is concerned (as Schopenhauer points out) with quasi-cognitive processes taking place within the subject (albeit at a transcendental level), whereas Schopenhauer's conception of the will is identified with the in-itself of all appearances. Perhaps the difference of locus makes structural connections tenuous.

But in fact Schopenhauer's own thought starts out from the individual experience of an inner process too: it is the internal feeling of the will in intentional action that for Schopenhauer provides the clue both to the enlargement of the concept of the will and to its identification with the in-itself.³⁷ Recent scholarship emphasizes not Schopenhauer's famous "analogy"³⁸ between my experience of myself from the inside in willed acts and the will as the in-itself of all appearances, but rather the abstractive or subtractive process by means of which my individual acts of willing this or that are extracted by reflection from the law of motivation, from the transitive structure of the subject/object relation and ultimately from the individuality of the willing subject. As a result of this abstraction, will can be identified with the thing-in-itself because the inner core of even an empirical act of willing something, subtracted from motive (intention) and objecthood (as well as from its other formal features) possess, exactly in virtue of this subtraction, all and only the features of the thing-in-itself.³⁹

In a similar way, Kant's aesthetics start out from an investigation of the nature of a certain kind of inner experience (a feeling) occasioned by outer experiences, but whose determining ground is a certain kind of inner process whose 'structure' is elucidated by subtracting it from formal (conceptual, rule-bound) determination. Of course, one might argue that Kant stops there, whereas Schopenhauer makes a huge leap into the unknown, namely the thing-in-itself. But, as I hope I have shown in my discussion of Kant's notion of spontaneity, in fact Kant is himself filling in a notion of the nature of the spontaneity of the subject 'in-itself' with his account of the quasi-cognitive processes accompanying aesthetic experience. Of course Kant does not identify these processes with the 'in-itself' aspect of any other things. But Kant also has no alternative account since all he countenances is the speculative possibility that the human subject might be free.

37 I.2 § 18, § 22, § 19.

38 I.2 § 19; H 2: 195.

39 II.2 § 18; H 3: 213 f. See also Jacquette, Dale: "Schopenhauer's Proof that the Thing-in-Itself is Will." In: *Kantian Review* 12, 2007, 76–108.

I have argued that the distinctive features of Schopenhauer's conception of the will are already present in Kant's understanding of transcendental spontaneity in the *Critique of Judgment*. There Kant is impelled towards a mode of cognitive operation characterized by conformity to law but in the absence of a determinate law; a mode of operation that gives rise to arbitrary forms without being subject to them from elsewhere. Although Schopenhauer is largely dismissive of the third *Critique*, it may have exercised a subterranean influence on him. Indeed, Kant's own use of the genius as a model for non-conceptual transmission may be a better account of this aspect of the Kant/Schopenhauer relation than the conceptually mediated idea of influence.