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The beautiful and the good: Refinement as a propaedeutic to morality

In this chapter, I would like to explore the connection between refinement and morality, both in its closest relation between the judgment of the beautiful and moral judgments, and in the presence of the feeling of pleasure and displeasure in morality. I will begin with *Critique of Judgment* and the thesis of § 59, which claims that the beautiful can be considered a symbol of the morally good. I will move on to the examination of moral emotion in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) and, lastly, I will examine the relation between the realms of taste and of virtue in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798). I will try to show, ultimately, that there is a Kantian consideration of aesthetic aspects in morality, which contrasts with those formalities presented in the *Groundwork* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. I will ask whether there is a possible change in opinion between these two books, or if it is merely a different form of presentation in the various works.

The Beautiful as a symbol of the good

Ted Cohen, in a text called “Why Beauty Is a Symbol of Morality,” claimed that Kant has achieved an unprecedented level of abstraction in the relation

between beauty and morality: “Although Kant believes that ethics and aesthetics have concrete and pedestrian connections as well, he locates a purely formal comparison of good things with beautiful things. It is a comparison which reflects a truly deep insight, illuminating both a profound similarity and a radical difference.”¹

Let’s begin with Ted Cohen’s question: Is a beautiful thing a good thing for Kant? If the reader of *Groundwork* became used to thinking about moral value as something disconnected from feelings of pleasure and displeasure, the reader of *The Metaphysics of Morals* finds, already in the introduction, something that seems to contradict the spirit of Kantian morality. In this work from 1797, Kant mentions the aesthetic prenotions² needed for the receptivity of the idea of respect. Such aesthetic elements would be present in moral action as long as they did not serve as a motive for moral action. The presence of these aesthetic elements leads us to the conclusion that feelings of pleasure and displeasure are indissociable from the process of observance of morality. The contrast between *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) and the *Groundwork* (1785) is at least mitigated if we notice that the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), presents, undoubtedly, a way to approximate the aesthetic and moral realms, as can be found in paragraph 59, entitled “Of the Beautiful as a Symbol of Morality”:

Now I say that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good, and also that only in this respect . . . does it please with a claim to the assent of everyone else, in which the mind is at the same time aware of a certain ennoblement and elevation above the mere receptivity for a pleasure from sensible impressions, and also esteems the value of others in accordance with a similar maxim of their Power of judgment.³

What is the meaning of the beautiful as a symbol of morality? Kant explains that the relation between intuition and concepts can be schematic, in which intuition corresponds to a concept, or symbolic, in which the symbol is related to a concept that can only be derived from reason. The schemes are intuitions

related to the categories of pure understanding; since we cannot have adequate intuitions for the concepts of reason, the reality of these concepts requires a symbol, in other words, an indirect presentation of the concept. Paul Guyer clarifies the difference between intuitions corresponding to an empirical concept, a category (a concept of understanding) and an idea (a concept of reason):

For empirical concepts, examples may be furnished—for the concept dog, we may provide an actual example of a dog. For pure concepts of understanding, schemata may be furnished—for the pure concept of causation, we may supply the appropriately defined schema of temporal succession. Finally, for a concept of reason or an Idea, we may furnish a symbol—an intuition which is an indirect representation of a concept.⁴

If we may present real examples of empirical concepts and if, moreover, we can present schemes of the categories of understanding, the same does not occur with the ideas of reason, which need a symbol in order to make their content indirectly sensitive. Francesca Menegoni calls attention to the difference between symbol, example, and schemes: “We cannot take a symbol as a simple example that shows the necessary intuition to prove the reality of an empirical concept, nor can we take it as a schema, whose reference to the concepts of understanding is direct.”⁵ Proving the objective reality of the ideas of reason is an impossible task, since there is no intuition which corresponds to them; however, there is a possibility to exhibit these ideas, even if indirectly. The scheme is a direct exhibition; the symbol is an indirect exhibition; while the first operates demonstratively, the second operates through an analogy.

Allison explains what the indirect exhibition of a concept comprises:

According to this account, what is directly presented (*darstellt*) in a case of indirect exhibition or “symbolic *hypotyposis*” is not the idea to be symbolized but some other (schematizable) concept. The representation of the object, which is the sensible realization of this latter concept, then

functions as the symbolic exhibition of the initial (unschematizable) idea just in case judgment's reflection on it is formally analogous to the form of reflection on the original idea.⁶

Reasoning through analogy constitutes a theoretical proof to which one may resort when there is no need for rigorous reasoning. However, even if it is not a rigorous reasoning, the level of proof is superior to mere hypothesis or reasonable opinion.⁷ In reasoning through analogy, the faculty of judging, by means of a universal law and a particular principle, accomplishes two distinct operations: first, it applies a concept to the object of a sensitive institution; second, it applies the rule of reflection, under this first relation, to a diverse object, in respect to which the first accomplishes only the function of a symbol. Allison stresses that as Kant indicates, this procedure involves a double function of judgment: one is quasi-determinative and the other is reflective.

Thus, a living organism is a symbol of constitutional monarchy and a mill is a symbol of absolute monarchy. What is the relation between the idea of absolute monarchy and a mill? It is a mere analogical relation: in both cases, we think of the same kind of process, of objects (grains or people) being submitted to powers which are external to themselves (the mill or monarchic power). The structure of reflection, when we consider the way the mill operates, is analogous to the structure of reflection when we think about monarchy; however, there is no relation between the content of the symbol and its object. The determined symbol, in this case, the mill, is not even the only possibility. According to Paul Guyer,

This fact suggests that the connection between a symbol and its referent will be looser than that between examples or schemata and their respective referents. Nothing but a dog can serve as an example of the concept dog, and given the nature of your sensible intuition, nothing but an objectively valid temporal succession can serve as a schema for the pure concept of ground and consequence. But anything which allows one to relate ideas

in the same way as does the handmill—some other mechanical device, perhaps, or other form of human relation—could serve equally well as a symbol of despotism.⁸

In claiming that the beautiful is the symbol of good does not mean that beauty has a moral content or can serve as a scheme for morality, nor does the thesis imply a sensible intuition of morality. The analogy between aesthetics and morals is due not to a similarity of content (be it a moral content of beauty or sensible intuition of morality), but only to the common elements of both judgments, a similarity in the laws of reflection.

Aesthetic and moral judgments present similar structures of reflection, as indicated in § 59 of the *Critique of Judgment*: (1) the beautiful and the morally good please immediately; (2) they please independently of all interest (in morality's case, apart from an interest which precedes judgment); (3) both express the accord of certain faculties; (4) they are equally universal.

Such analogy does not imply an identity, because the beautiful and the good equally display differences. Regarding the first aspect (1), beauty immediately pleases in the reflexive intuition, while the morally good pleases in the concept. As regards the independence of interest in the object (2), the good pleases independently of the interest which precedes the judgment, but not in the sense that it anticipates it, such as in the case of the interest of reason as regards its objects. The accord of the faculties in question in both judgments (3) also differs between themselves: in the judgment of beautiful, it regards harmony between imagination and understanding; in the morally good, it regards the concordance of the will with itself according to the universal laws of reason. Finally, universality (4) in the judgment of beautiful does not refer to a universal concept, such as in moral judgment.

The mere thesis that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good, in itself, would not leave us a viable passage between one and the other from the point of view of their content, since "being a symbol of" simply means an analogy in the reflection of both types of judgment. However, at the end of

§ 59, Kant affirms that taste can be used as assistance for the passage between the sensitive and the moral: “Taste as it were, makes possible the transition from sensible charm to habitual moral interest without too violent a leap.”⁹ Kant goes further than that and attributes to taste the turning of moral ideas into sensible ones: “Taste is, at bottom, a faculty for the judging of the sensible rendering of moral ideas.”¹⁰

Such conception would seem problematic for a reader of the *Groundwork* and *Critique of Practical Reason*, texts which forbid the possibility of a sensitive appeal of morality. In the *Critique of Judgment*, not only is purity in morality’s realm questioned, but also is the independence of beauty as regards morality. An aesthetic education may become propaedeutic to moral education, as long as it refines the sensibility and exerts the meaning of disinterest. In a way, the aesthetic experience develops the disinterest required for morality; in another, the cultivation of moral feeling develops the sense of universality required by taste.

Morality’s and aesthetics’ realms are interconnected in a double-propaedeutic, which surpasses the mere analogy between both types of judgments, broaching common elements in respect to the content of both. Going beyond pointing out analogical elements between aesthetic and moral experience, the *Critique of Judgment* begins the analysis of aesthetic elements constituent of morality—a reflection which becomes clearer in *The Metaphysics of Morals*.

Aesthetical conditions necessary to morality

In the *Introduction to The Metaphysics of Morals*, we are presented with what could be called a radicalization of the project to sensitize morality. The realms of the aesthetic and moral no longer present a viable symbolic or propaedeutic relationship, but Kant speaks to us about sensible conditions necessary for

the reception of morality. While in *Groundwork* only respect for the law is considered a feeling that can work as an incentive of moral action, in the 1797 text several sensitive aspects necessary to the reception of duty are added. The feelings of pleasure and displeasure experienced in relation to morality are not, however, the pleasure of taste, even if the latter, as we have seen, can assist in the development of a greater receptivity of moral sensibility.

After explaining that pleasure and displeasure express what is merely subjective as regards the object, the former is divided, on one side, as an emotion connected to a desire, called practical pleasure, and on the other, a pleasure which is not connected to a desire for the object, but simply with its representation, referred to as contemplative pleasure or taste (MS, 6: 212). In turn, practical pleasure acknowledges another division: if pleasure precedes desire, it regards the interest of inclination; if it succeeds it, this is the interest of reason. In other words, the interest of reason is the pleasure which succeeds the determination of the faculty of desire toward reason. We then have a clear separation between moral pleasure/displeasure, which is related to a desire for the object (even if it succeeds the desire), and an aesthetic pleasure, relative not to the desire of the object but merely to its representation.

In the introduction to the *Doctrine of Virtue* (TL, 6: 399), Kant explains that there are aesthetic Preconditions of the susceptibility of the mind (*Gemüth*) relative to respect (*Ästhetische Vorbegriffe der Empfänglichkeit des Gemüts Achtung*). They are as follows: moral emotion, conscience, love, and self-esteem. They regard not the obtainment *a priori* of moral law or its conditions, but the analysis of the moral agent, the human being and his natural predispositions, which facilitates the effective reception of the moral imperative.

The importance of sensibility for the conscience of duty is attested by moral feeling (*das moralische Gefühl*), defined as “a susceptibility to feel pleasure and displeasure merely from being aware that our actions are consistent with or contrary to the law of virtue” (TL, 6: 399). It is this feeling which gives us conscience of obligation, because it makes us aware of the coercion present in

the mere thought of duty. We do not have any duty to feel such an emotion, since it is in us as moral beings. Someone completely deprived of this feeling would be morally dead:

No human being is entirely without moral feeling, for were he completely lacking in receptivity to it he would be morally dead; and if (to speak in medical terms) the moral vital force could no longer excite this feeling, then humanity would dissolve (by chemical laws, as it were) into mere animality and be mixed irretrievably with the mass of other natural beings. (TL, 6: 400)

Moral feeling is not, however, moral sense (*Sinn*) understood as a feeling that, by itself, indicates what is correct and what is not: in other words, moral feeling does not have any theoretical ability to directly perceive the correctness of an action, since this must be given to us by reason. It simply refers to the internal perception of the coercion duty exerts, provoking a feeling of pleasure when our actions are according to the law and of displeasure when they are against it. Moral feeling, however, while a feeling (*Gefühl*), is not an affect, since the latter is uncontrolled and hinders reflection. In this sense, Kant clarifies that the apathy he proclaims is not absence of all feelings, since this would be a moral indifference and thereby a weakness. Apathy sought as an ideal is absence of affect (*Affekt*), and, consequently, a beneficial strength in the practice of virtue.

The clear separation proclaimed in the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Practical Reason* between the realms of morality and aesthetics in general—understood as the feeling of pleasure and displeasure—is questioned in some passages of *Critique of Judgment* and *The Metaphysics of Morals* which talk about the possibility of, and even the need for, moral feeling. One of the greatest differences between these two approaches comes from the necessity of feeling pleasure and displeasure to receive the concept of duty. Without a doubt, moral emotion goes beyond the feeling of respect. This becomes clear when it is considered necessary for the mind to be affected by the feeling of

respect. If the mind (*animus*, *Gemüth*) is the reactive instance of the soul (*Seele*),¹¹ it seems that the possibility of the former being empirically affected is decisive for the effective realization of moral action, while respect seems to be a feeling which affects the spirit (*mens*, *Geist*) more than the mind. In order for the action to take place, it is necessary that the mind be affected, which is done through moral feeling. Gisela Munzel accurately analyses the importance of aesthetical capacities in the effective practice of morality.¹²

Beyond this, in moral feeling there is a regard for pleasure thus far nonexistent. As Guyer¹³ highlights, the feeling of respect in *Groundwork* is a feeling of displeasure proportional to the coercion of the law, or, at most, as a feeling of self-approval, which radically differs from the feeling of pleasure in the Third Critique and the *Doctrine of Virtue*. A result of the determination of will which opts for the moral action, such a feeling seems to be one of reward. That morality can give us a sort of satisfaction, and, moreover, that were we to lack this capacity—the *Doctrine of Virtue* tell us—we would be morally dead, seems to invite us to question the role of pleasure in Kantian morality. We should ask if moral feeling is a motive for a moral action. As we have seen, some commentators, such as Morrison, think respect is the incentive to moral action. My position, as explained earlier, is that respect is a consequence of the determination of the will by the moral law, not a motive itself. I think the same works for moral feeling: it's not a motive or incentive, but a consequence of the moral determination of the will.

Aesthetic and moral pleasures

The development of the relation between aesthetic and moral pleasure, as well as the propaedeutic function of aesthetic as regards morality, appears in *Anthropology*, a work from 1798, which is based on the courses taught on the subject of anthropology from the semesters of 72/73 to 95/96. In the Book

II of the first part of the *Anthropology*, namely *The feeling of pleasure and displeasure*, we are shown in what sense one may relate the pleasure of taste to moral pleasure.

The feelings of pleasure and displeasure are divided into sensitive pleasure and intellectual pleasure. The former, in turn, can be obtained through sensibility or imagination, as in the case of taste. The second can be obtained through concepts or ideas. The feeling of properly moral pleasure can be classified as belonging to this last division: it is an intellectual pleasure, obtained from an idea, in this case, the idea of duty. How can a type of pleasure obtained through imagination serve as preparation for intellectual pleasure?

Even if there is a distinction between aesthetic and moral pleasure, the idea of satisfaction from the sharing of a feeling of pleasure is what brings the two realms together.

Taste (*Geschmack*) (as a formal sense) concerns the communication of one's feeling of pleasure or displeasure to someone else. It includes a susceptibility, which through this communication affects others with the pleasure of sharing a satisfaction (*complacentia*) with other persons (that is, sociably). (Ant, 7: 244)

This satisfaction of taste derives from an agreement between the feelings of pleasure among agents whose origin is reason, according to a general law. The choice of this satisfaction is in accordance with the *form* of the principle of duty, due to its accordance with a general law. Thus, the exercise of aesthetic taste is a preparation for morality. This idea of the *Anthropology* follows the spirit of the *Critique of Judgment*, but with some interesting additions.

One of the curiosities in the *Anthropology* is the presentation of good manners as a transition between taste and morality. The rules of etiquette, of good hosting, prepare one for virtue. A good host manifests his aesthetic taste when choosing food and beverages, not only according to his/her personal taste but having in mind his guests' tastes. In the composition of these various

tastes, the procedure of constructing a common taste which satisfies all those present has a universal validity (Ant, 7: 242). Something similar takes place in how the host conducts the conversation, in the choice of topic, as in the number of guests, which according to the Chesterfield's rules should not be fewer than the number of graces (3) or more than the number of muses (10). Such a rule is not arbitrary, but seeks to construct an ideal group for communication, which would partake not only of the pleasure of table but of good ideas. The procedures of sociability according to the rules of good manners belong to the realm of taste, but prepare us for morality, in the sense that they construct a community which shares a common discourse:

No matter how insignificant these laws of refined humanity may seem, especially if you compare them with purely moral laws, then everything that furthers companionship, even if it consists only of pleasant maxims or manners, is a dress that properly clothes virtue. (Ant, 7: 282)

Kant refers to the rules of good conversation at the table, probably present in the enlightened European salons of the eighteenth century: choosing topics which interest all; not allowing a somber silence in conversations, but only small pauses; not changing the subject; not discussing any dogmatic matter, but introducing a jest (*Scherz*) to lighten up the discussion. Such rules are not arbitrary, but have the purpose of promoting culture: "Meanwhile the participants in the dinners (how many, I don't know) fancy that they have found culture in the intellect—one wonders how much!-in the purpose of nature" (Ant, 7: 281).

Alix Cohen explains the reason for praising this kind of social interaction in the article "The Ultimate Kantian Experience: Kant on Dinner Parties."

One of the functions of civilized social intercourse is that it leads to the love of virtue. . . . One way of looking at this issue is to focus on the workings of politeness itself. If one love the illusion of the good and enacts this illusion

in social intercourse, one might come to appreciate its worth and to love the good itself for its own sake.¹⁴

The rules of social refinement serve as good drapery for virtue, especially for the construction of common ideas. Such a result does not possess the universality of beauty or morality, but, while a transaction, it has a comparative universality. The *Anthropology* indicates, through examples regarding good manners and the rules of social refinement, how the relation between aesthetic and moral cultivation takes place.

In examining moral and aesthetic educations, one can understand how the cultivation of taste relates to the civilizing process and to the formation of moral character; this would be due to taste's main trait of being imminently communicable. Kant claims (*Ant*, 7: 244) that this characteristic of the aesthetic sense stimulates only the *external* promotion of morality, thereby not yet being the formation of its *internal* aspect. However, it could be said that his analysis is only partially correct: if it is true that the social rules function as a simulacrum of real virtue, then the simulation of virtue encourages the production of virtue itself. The *performance* of virtues leads not to hypocrisy but to the development of virtue itself. Here we have something that reminds us of Aristotelian virtue and its development through habit, with the difference that, in the Kantian version, the events which were simply a simulacrum of virtue will still lead to the effective practice of morality.

It should be noted through the emphasis given to the relation between aesthetic and moral aspects in the texts from the 1790s, that there is a difference in the consideration of the necessity of sensitive aspects for the effective realization of morality. The analysis of the subject does not allow us to give a definitive answer as regards the Kantian change of direction from the 1780s to the 1790s texts. However, we clearly see that, if in the *Groundwork* there was an explicit repudiation of the connection between the feeling of pleasure and moral action, such as the condemnation of sympathy, in *The Metaphysics of Morals* feelings of pleasure and displeasure are considered essential parts

of morality, since without them—Kant affirms—we would be morally dead. Apart from that, the aesthetic preconditions go beyond the feeling of respect in the *Groundwork*.

However, the hypothesis of a discovery or change relative to the theme is questionable if we consider that part of this relation between the cultivation of taste and moral cultivation was published in the *Anthropology*, which reflects the courses given since the semesters of 1772–73, thereby previously to *Groundwork*. What is most likely is that in the 1790s, after discussing the themes of the faculty of pleasure and displeasure in *Critique of Judgment*, Kant developed the philosophical tools required for the unification of the *a priori* obtainment of moral law and his practical anthropology, concluding in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, which shows how moral law can have a definitively motivating power on rational sensible beings.