Uniting Freedom and Lawfulness: Kant on the Power and Limits of Aesthetic Education

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"Each original author must be a poet."
--Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*

Immanuel Kant recognized the important role of education in human life, he took the question of the nature and meaning of education very seriously, and he understood education, in its highest form, as education for freedom. In this sense, Kant was a champion of *liberal* education. Our guiding question in what follows will be the question of whether and how Kant's attempt to think through education as education for freedom can and should inform our own understanding of liberal education, today. We shall approach this question by examining Kant's account of aesthetic education.

Kant is one of the first great modern philosophers to take the educational significance of aesthetics seriously, and he founds a tradition of reflection on the moral, cultural, and metaphysical significance of beauty and fine art that is carried forward by Schiller, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, among many others—a tradition that continues to shape our thinking, today. This essay explores Kant's account of aesthetic education, its power, and its limits. We shall see that, for Kant, aesthetic education is especially concerned with the realization of freedom in and for human life. My hope is that thinking through some of the questions that lie in the background of Kant's investigation of aesthetic education and Kant's way of approaching these questions through an analysis of aesthetic education will help us to further our own thinking about liberal education and the status of beauty and the arts therein.

## I. Kant on the Problem(s) of Freedom

To begin, it is important to recall that Kant self-consciously carries forward the Enlightenment's emphasis on the importance freedom. Indeed, Kant's entire philosophical project can be understood as an attempt to define and promote true human freedom. That said, Kant recognizes that certain problems confront our attempts to realize freedom in the world. Four such problems are especially relevant for Kant's account of aesthetic education. **First**, Kant's critique of reason uncovers an important tension between nature and freedom—"an incalculable gulf" between the causally-determined phenomenal world on one hand and reason's moral vocation, on the other.[1] However, reason *qua* moral always already demands that this incalculable gulf be bridged for the sake reason's own moral projects. Thus, reason's self-critique seems to undermine reason's own-most demands, thereby calling the possibility and meaning rational, philosophical inquiry into question. The question of whether and how the tension between nature and freedom can be resolved is of fundamental importance to Kant's entire critical project and especially to his analysis of beauty in the third *Critique*. **Second**, Kant notes an important difference between external, political freedom and internal, moral and/or intellectual freedom. And, though Kant claims that political freedom is possible even in a city of devils, he indicates that the strong emphasis on the primacy of political freedom in the modern liberal state tends to overshadow the more fundamental importance of moral and intellectual freedom. Indeed, Kant ultimately concludes that moral and intellectual freedom are vital conditions of a lasting, free, republican state. The question of how to synthesize internal and external freedom constitutes the vital core of Kant's political theory. **Third**, Kant recognizes a tension between tradition and creative freedom. For, Kant sees that the great artworks of the past tend to become models for imitation rather than examples of the power and

possibilities of originality. The question of how it is possible to be influenced by tradition without being enslaved by it occupies a central place in Kant's analysis of genius. **Finally**, Kant acknowledges an important tension between philosophical doctrine, which determines thinking from without, and philosophical reflection, which embodies the freedom to think for oneself about all philosophical doctrines. This tension emerges most clearly in Kant's distinction between historical cognition and rational cognition in the first *Critique*, and motivates Kant's famous claim that one can never learn philosophy but only how to philosophize.[2] The question of how philosophers can promote philosophical reflection is of crucial importance for Kant, both as a thinker in his own right and as an author who writes for other thinkers. In what follows, I will attempt to draw out the ways that aesthetic education, on Kant's account, addresses each of these four tensions.

## II. Beauty and Moral Education

Any discussion of Kant's account of aesthetic education must begin with his claim that beauty is the symbol of the morally good.[3] Though Kant suggests a deep connection between beauty and morality, he does not identify the beautiful with the good, as if the contemplation of beautiful objects necessarily makes us better human beings. Instead, Kant argues that beauty contributes to moral formation *indirectly*, by preparing those who encounter beauty for moral judgment. More specifically, Kant highlights a *formal* similarity between judgments of taste and moral judgments—both are disinterested. By habituating us to disinterested judging, encounters with beauty prepare us to disregard our own private interests for the sake of reason's moral law. Indeed, Kant concludes that beauty's symbolization of morality points toward a sort of resolution to the tension between nature and freedom—"taste," Kant writes, "makes possible the transition from sensible charm

to…habitual moral interest without too violent a leap."[4] The question of the meaning of Kant's subtle acknowledgement that the transition between nature and freedom always requires a more or less violent leap merits careful reflection. For our purposes, though, the significant point is that Kant indicates that encounters with beauty indirectly contribute to moral development and that an aesthetic education that exposes its students to beauty contributes, if only indirectly, to humanity's moral progress.

## III. Beauty and Social Unification

In addition to noting its indirect role in moral education, Kant highlights aesthetic education's social and political significance. For, strikingly, in the concluding paragraphs of his analysis of aesthetic judgment, Kant suddenly turns his attention to the great difficulties that confront the "task of uniting freedom" with law.[5] Despite humanity's "vigorous drive toward the **lawful** sociability," Kant notes that laws are made and propagated by a small subsection of society and will therefore seem alien and alienating to many of the people they govern, like external authorities that work to determine thoughts and actions from without.[6] As a result, most people will tend to follow laws out of fear, not because they respect these laws and freely adopt them as their own. But, the free adherence to law by all citizens is a necessary condition of a free, enduring, and morally good political society. Thus, we must wonder: how is it possible to unite the few, who make up the legislative class, with the many, who make up the bulk of society? How is it possible to bring forth a unified society whose members do not simply bow to authoritative laws imposed from without but rather freely adopt their society's laws as their own?

Kant reasonably claims that such social unification depends on "the art of the reciprocal communication of the ideas of the most educated part [of society] with the

cruder."[7] But, how is such reciprocal communication possible? Kant highlights the importance of discovering a shared "standard for taste," i.e., a common stock of beautiful images. For, taste is "a universal human sense"—a natural capacity, shared by all human beings, that allows one to feel the pleasurable intellectual activity that grounds all aesthetic experience.[8] And, because aesthetic pleasure justly claims to be "valid for mankind in general," the capacity of taste ultimately grounds the universal communicability of aesthetic pleasure.[9] Accordingly, the cultivation of a common set of beautiful images opens up the possibility of a mode of meaningful communication about these images that transcends social differences. What is more, such communication about beauty lays the ground for (1) a wide-spread recognition of the shared humanity of all members of society, (2) a "universal feeling of sympathy" with and for other human beings, and ultimately (3) the shared capacity to communicate intimately with others, regardless of their social class, about more general ideas, questions, and problems.[10] Accordingly, Kant concludes that a shared approach to beauty through a common stock of beautiful images forms a middle ground between "higher culture and contented nature" that can mediate social, political, and economic differences.[11] In this way, the aesthetic education of society can contribute to the unification of society and lay the ground for a political culture in which the rule of law is united with individual autonomy.

## IV. The Aesthetic Education of the Artist

Thus far, we have focused primarily on the more or less universal moral and political significance of aesthetic education, and we have discovered two different ways aesthetic education might cultivate freedom in and for humanity. At this point, however,

we shall take up a more particular aspect of Kant's exploration of aesthetic education—his characterization of the aesthetic education of artists.

Kant argues that "beautiful art is possible only as a product of genius."[12] Genius, here, names "the inborn predisposition of mind…**through which** nature gives the rule to art."[13] More specifically, genius refers to the natural capacity that allows an artist to select and express an "aesthetic idea"—i.e., a powerful image that provokes aesthetic pleasure in those who encounter it. Thus, genius describes the special talent that allows an artist to create beautiful art.

Unsurprisingly, genius's beautiful art plays a vital role in the education of other artists, and Kant indicates that it does so in two distinct ways. First, genius's beautiful artworks serve as models for imitation. Kant sees that genius's beautiful art can and often does make such a deep impression on its audience that it indelibly shapes and permanently influences its audience's approach to art. In Kant's terms, genius's beautiful artworks serve others "as a standard or rule for judging."[14] Importantly, though, judgment plays a vital role in artistic production. Thus, genius's art will inform the creative processes of the artists it influences—if and when an artist encounters a powerful work of art, his experience of this work shapes his notion of what a great artwork should be and guides his attempts to create such beautiful artworks in the future. Accordingly, Kant concludes that genius's beautiful art often gives rise to (1) a form of imitation, in which an artist's productive activity is wholly determined by rules that are extracted from a genius's artwork(s) and ultimately to (2) 'schools' or traditions that provide "a methodical instruction in accordance with rules" to their students in an attempt to carry forward the legacy and distinctive style of their founder(s).[15]

All that said, imitation is foreign to genius. Genius, on Kant's account, is characterized precisely by its originality—its creation in accordance with rules that originate in its own nature. By inspiring methodical imitation, then, genius's art seems to foreclose the possibility of future geniuses. We are led to wonder: Can genius contribute to the aesthetic education of other geniuses? How can new geniuses ever arise out of an old tradition? How is the aesthetic education of genius possible?

Kant argues that, in special cases, genius can provoke artists to abandon their desire to imitate great artworks in order to attend to their own natural capacity for selecting and expressing aesthetic ideas, independently of external influence. Kant names this distinctive mode of imitation succession (*Nachfolge*). Succession is an especially important mode of influence, for Kant, because it allows genius's art to inform a student without undermining the student's originality and, therefore, the student's ability to prove his own genius. Of course, succession is difficult to achieve, and genius is an extremely rare talent. But, unlike scholastic, methodical imitation, succession holds out the possibility that genius can contribute to the aesthetic education of future geniuses by (1) freeing the potential genius from the constraint of tradition, (2) freeing him for original artistic production, and thereby (3) freeing him to participate in the tradition as a new link the great chain of genius.

All that said, it would be a mistake to conclude that genius is defined wholly by its originality or that it wholly transcends scholastic instruction. Indeed, Kant is highly critical of the unreflective and unrestrained pursuit of originality. He recognizes the possibility of "original nonsense" that cannot, as such, be beautiful, and he demands that genius cultivate a form of "discipline" that allows its products to remain purposive (i.e., beautiful) for their

audience so that these products can enjoy "a posterity among others…in an ever progressing culture."[16] Thus, Kant claims that "there is no beautiful art in which something mechanical, which can be grasped and followed according to rules, and thus something **academically correct**, does not constitute the essential condition of the art," and that "genius can only provide rich **material** for products of art; its elaboration and **form** require a talent that has been academically trained, in order to make a use of it that can stand up to the power of judgment."[17] Though they cannot themselves produce genius, then, the schools are breeding grounds for genius, providing potential geniuses with the skills and discipline necessary for the production of beautiful art. To realize their vocation, however, potential geniuses must benefit from academic training without succumbing to the scholastic tendency toward methodical imitation. The aesthetic education of genius simultaneously cultivates a regard for tradition's power and an independence from tradition's authority. Genius's art inherits a tradition, while at the same time transcending this tradition. Genius, in other words, embodies a freedom from tradition that nevertheless harmonizes with tradition's lawful character. Genius participates in tradition by transforming tradition. Genius, for Kant, is the soul of living tradition.

## V. Beauty's Philosophical Significance

Having discussed aesthetic education's significance for morality, politics, and art, we are now in a position to begin our approach to a fourth very important but oft overlooked form of aesthetic education in Kant, namely, the aesthetic education of the philosopher. In what follows, I will suggest that the philosopher's aesthetic education is two-fold.

First, Kant's fundamental analysis of beauty unearths an important metaphysical insight; for, it ultimately allows him to reflect on the possibility of a "supersensible

substratum of humanity," in and through which nature and freedom are unified.[18] This reflection attains its full clarity and depth in Kant's resolution to the antinomy of taste. Here, Kant argues that judgments of taste depend on an "indeterminate and also indeterminable" concept of "the supersensible substratum of all our faculties" because the existence of such a substratum is the necessary condition of the purposive but free accord of the imagination's spontaneous activity with the understanding's lawfulness, which accord grounds aesthetic pleasure and, thereby, the experience of beauty.[19] Though Kant's critical restriction of knowledge to the realm of possible experience necessarily implies a unbridgeable gulf between nature and freedom and, by implication, the impossibility of knowledge of the ground of the unity of nature and freedom in the subject, Kant maintains that a thoroughgoing investigation of the meaning of beauty provides insight into the possibility of this unity and even an awareness of its actuality. Thus, Kant's investigation of beauty teaches him about the possibility of the self-consistency of reason and, by implication, the possibility of the meaningfulness of philosophical inquiry in general. It is for this reason that *CPJ* is not only the conclusion but also the culmination of Kant's critical philosophy.

Second, in addition to providing metaphysical insight, Kant's aesthetics also sheds light on the nature and meaning of philosophical activity, as such. More specifically, Kant's account of the aesthetic education of genius and the process of genial succession elucidates the structure of the problem of philosophical influence and begins to point the way toward this problem's solution. The problem of philosophical influence concerns philosophical communication and emerges clearly in the first *Critique*'s distinction between historical cognition, as a passive way of knowing involving memorization, and rational cognition, as

an active way of knowing in which one thinks for oneself.[20] Historical cognition, according to Kant, is a form of methodical imitation (*Nachahmung)* and it ultimately transforms one into "a plaster cast of a living human being" formed "according to an alien reason."[21] Rational cognition, on the other hand, is always drawn from "the universal spring of reason" and embodies philosophical reflection *qua* the dynamic process of thinking through a question or a problem for oneself, independently of all external authorities. With this distinction in mind, Kant notes that systematically argued and powerfully expressed philosophical doctrines tend to promote merely historical cognition rather than philosophical reflection. But, Kant emphasizes the great importance of free, philosophical reflection. Thus, the question arises: how is it possible to inherit and learn from a philosophical tradition without being determined by this tradition. How is philosophical education possible?

At this point, I hope that the formal parallel between the problem confronting philosophical education on the one hand, and the problem that seemed to confront the aesthetic education of genius, on the other, is beginning to emerge—both are grounded in the question of how it is possible for a teacher to influence his pupil without simply indoctrinating this pupil and thereby undermining the pupil's freedom to think or create for himself. We have already seen that Kant accounts for the aesthetic education of genius by appealing to succession (*Nachfolge*), the unique mode of influence whereby a genius inspires a potential genius to imitate his original way of producing beautiful artworks rather than the beautiful artworks he produces. Now, it is crucial to note that Kant does not limit the notion of succession to the sphere of genial influence. In fact, Kant argues that succession answers to the more general question of how the great books—"classical"

works, as he calls them—ought to contribute to human thinking.[22] Kant argues that the great authors of the past must not "make their successors (*Nachfolgenden*) into mere imitators (*Nachahmern*)," but rather "by means of their way-of-proceeding (*Verfahren*)…put others on the right path for seeking out…principles in themselves and thus for following their own, often better, course."[23] Kant explicitly identifies this mode of influence as a form succession (*Nachfolge*), which he now describes, in general terms, as "any influence that the products of an exemplary author"—and here, he means *any* exemplary author—have on their readers that allow these readers "to create from the same sources from which the [exemplary author] created," and to learn from their predecessors "only the manner of conducting oneself in doing so."[24] Succession in other words is the essence of a liberal, philosophical education that teaches its students to think for themselves in and through the careful study of the great works of the past.

All that said, the crucial question remains open: How is succession possible? Or, how is philosophical education possible? Or again, how is liberal education possible? My own thought is that Kant looks to and learns from the example of genius and especially the example of poetry in his attempt to answer these questions. For, the example of great poetry reveals that poets achieve succession in and through the provocative images (aesthetic ideas) they produce. I would argue that Kant learns from the poets that philosophers must supplement their powerful logical arguments, which naturally strive to determine their audience's thinking, with poetic images in order to provoke their readers to think for themselves about these arguments rather than simply accepting them as authoritative doctrines. Unfortunately, I cannot defend this claim here, but I will

nevertheless suggest that the less on Kant learns from the poets is the vital core of Kant's own aesthetic education in the third *Critique*.

## VI. Conclusion

Kant interpretation aside, though, the question of the possibility of the mode of influence Kant calls succession—a mode of influence that allows one to learn from a tradition while maintaining sufficient freedom to think for oneself about this tradition, its meaning, and its future—seems to me to lie very close to the heart of the question of whether and why liberal education is still important to, possible in, and necessary for today's world. It should be a very serious question for those of us who love and study the Great Books and especially for those of us who attempt to teach students through these books. This question should challenge us, and I believe its answer is less obvious than we often suspect. And if Kant cannot provide us with a final answer, he can help us to formulate the question and think through its significance. We carry forward the spirit, if not the letter, of Kant's thought by working to answer this question for ourselves: How can we achieve succession in our own thinking and teaching?

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[1] 5.175.
[2] A835/B863 ff.
[3] 5.351 ff.
[4] 5.354.
[5] 5.355.
[6] 5.355.
[7] 5.356.
[8] 5.356.
[9] 5.356.
[10] 5.355.
[11] 5.356.
[12] 5.307.
[13] 5.307.
[14] 5.308.
[15] 5.318.

[16] 5.308, 5.319.
[17] 5.310.
[18] 5:340.
[19] 5.339, 5.344.
[20] A835/B863 ff.
[21] A836/B864.
[22] 5.282.
[23] 5.283.
[24] 5.283.