

Aesthetics and Culture in Context

A Pettiness of Soul

Kantian aesthetics provides a framework within which to conceptualize various connections between the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure and culture. But Kant does not always make these connections fully explicit in his principal writings, including his writings in aesthetics. In the present chapter, we will take a first step toward understanding Kant's view by considering two of his underlying reasons for attempting to articulate such connections in the first place. The first is that he wishes to engage with the kind of anti-aesthetic thought, based in large part on ethical considerations, that Rousseau advanced. The second reason is that he accepts the general view that we may pursue a developmental process through which we can become more sophisticated moral agents – the process of culture – and he wishes to understand how the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure might be a means by which we can pursue this process. In what follows, we will examine, in turn, each of these reasons.

Rousseau's anti-aestheticism, to begin with, is grounded partly in his concern that a society in which the taste for luxury is widespread – including the supposed luxury of artistic beauty – will be less free, and its members will be less virtuous. Princes, he claims, “always view with

pleasure the dissemination among their subjects of a taste for the agreeable Arts and for superfluities which entail no export of monies,” since “besides thus nurturing in them that pettiness of soul so suited to servitude, they well know that all the needs which a People imposes on itself are so many chains which it assumes.”¹ Kant, in his 1784/5 ethics lectures, points out that the issue of luxury “has long been an object of philosophic consideration,” and that philosophers have been particularly concerned to know “whether it ought to be approved or disapproved, and whether it conforms to morality or is opposed to it.”² He addresses Rousseau’s position directly, tracing it back to what he calls the “Cynic ideal,” whose ancient defender was Diogenes. Kant, in fact, refers to Rousseau as “that subtle Diogenes” of modern times.³

In the ethics lectures, Kant approaches the issue of luxury partly from the point of view of individual happiness. Diogenes’ view, Kant claims, is that “the means of happiness [are] negative” as “man is by nature content with little.”⁴ Kant agrees that the pursuit of luxury risks leading us away from happiness. In fact, he takes seriously the possibility that becoming overly caught up in the pursuit of luxury can make us suicidal. It makes us dependent on things which we may one day no longer be able to procure for ourselves. When we cannot enjoy a luxury on which we have come to depend, he claims, we may then be “thrown into all kinds of distress, so that we may even proceed to do away with ourselves.”⁵

In addition to claiming that the pursuit of luxury risks contributing to our unhappiness, Kant also maintains that its pursuit can serve as a hindrance to us as moral agents. The trouble, he claims, is that insofar as getting caught up in the pursuit of luxury “multiplies our needs,” it also “increases the enticements and attractions of inclination.” Since our inclinations can lead us away from acting in conformity with our moral duties, anything that might increase our dependence on the inclinations is potentially dangerous from a moral point of view. As Kant puts it, when we depend too heavily on luxury, “it becomes hard to comply with morality; for the simpler and more innocent our needs, the less we are liable to err in fulfilling them.” Thus, the pursuit of luxury may indirectly constitute “an incursion upon morality.”⁶

In spite of his reservations concerning the pursuit of luxury, Kant does not advocate avoiding it altogether. Rather, he maintains that if we are going to pursue luxury, we should exercise moderation in doing so.

Thus, he claims, “there can be no objection to luxury from the moral point of view, save only that there must be laws, not to restrict it, but to furnish guidance,”⁷ and as long as an individual violates neither duties to himself, nor duties to others in pursuing luxury, he “may enjoy as much pleasure as he has the ability and taste for.”⁸ In fact, not only does Kant see no objection to pursuing luxury in appropriate ways, he also maintains that there is a sense in which pursuing luxury can be advantageous to us insofar as we wish to develop morally. He holds this view because he thinks of luxuries as potentially amounting to helpful “diversions.” His thought is that if we have a choice between pursuing a luxurious pleasure – which he takes to be a refined pleasure – and a pleasure merely tied to our immediate sensory gratification, it is better to pursue the luxurious one. Thus, in the *Anthropology*, Kant suggests that the pursuit of the arts, specifically, can serve as a helpful diversion, since when one “entertains himself with fine arts instead of mere sensual pleasures, he has the added satisfaction that he (as a refined man) is capable of such pleasures,” and his pleasure will amount to enjoyment “in such objects that it does us credit to be occupied with.”⁹

Thus, Kant and Rousseau are agreed that the arts are luxuries, and that luxuries are diversions. But they disagree over whether the diversion is helpful in the long run, especially when it comes to culture. Moreover, because Kant holds that luxury, as diversion, can help us to develop morally as individuals, and because, as we have seen, he holds that moral development at the individual level makes possible social progress, he is in a position to hold that pursuing the luxury of the arts can contribute, indirectly, to the improvement of society.

Although Kant, unlike Rousseau, supports the pursuit of the arts – even insofar as this amounts to the pursuit of a luxurious pleasure – he does not think that the pursuit of just any pleasure serves to promote our moral development. The pursuit of the pleasure of “agreeableness” is Kant’s prime example of an unhelpful pleasure. Kant takes the pleasure of agreeableness to be “a delight pathologically conditioned (by stimuli).”¹⁰ Sweets or wine can please our senses in a very immediate way, if we are fond of them, yet the pleasure has an addictive and self-centered quality. The object is considered insofar as it is capable of continuing to please *me*. As Kant puts it, the pleasure presupposes “the bearing [the object’s] existence has upon my state so far as it is affected by such an object.”¹¹ It is in this way that the pleasure of agreeableness

is bound up with a “represented bond of connection between the Subject and the real existence of the object.”¹² In other words, the pleasure is bound up with a representation of the object’s continuing to exist. As part of this representation, *I*, the subject, continue in the future to stand in a relation to the object – namely, the relation of being pleased by it.

In experiencing the pleasure of agreeableness, Kant maintains, “inclination is aroused.”¹³ On Kant’s view, inclinations are “habitual desires” that are closely connected with powerful passions which, if allowed to develop in us, constitute a significant hindrance to morality.¹⁴ In the *Essay on the Maladies of the Head*, for example, Kant describes passions as inclinations which are of a particularly “high degree.”¹⁵ And, in the *Anthropology*, he claims that many of the passions to which we are susceptible belong to one of four categories.¹⁶ The first is the category “mania for honour,” which involves a “striving after the reputation of honour,” even though the sought after reputation has nothing to do with our inner moral worth.¹⁷ The second category is “mania for revenge,” which Kant takes to involve the specific passion of hatred insofar as it arises out of an injustice we have experienced.¹⁸ Next, there is “mania for domination,” which involves placing “the advantage of force” over others.¹⁹ Finally, there is “mania for possession,” or the desire to accumulate wealth for its own sake.

A passion amounts to a hindrance to us as moral agents, on Kant’s account, because, regardless of the category to which it belongs, it is at bottom an inclination that threatens to take over the mind and cloud our freedom to select among principles in acting. As he puts it in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, in passion the mind becomes fixated on a sensible desire in such a way as to form “principles upon it.”²⁰ When a passion takes hold in the mind, it comes to ground our action in a very rigid way. The trouble with this is not that passions are connected with principles, as such – principles are essential to moral agency. Rather, the trouble with passions is that, because the relevant principles are grounded in sensible inclinations, it is possible to be rigidly drawn into acting contrary to duty. This is why Kant claims that passions may lead us to “take up what is evil (as something premeditated)” into the maxims that underlie our actions.²¹ In the end, Kant claims in the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, “[i]f one wants to form a good character, one must first clear away the passions.”²²

Because the pleasure of agreeableness is a sensory pleasure that arouses inclinations, thereby paving the way for the development of passions, Kant deems this pleasure unhelpful to us insofar as we wish to develop morally. We have already begun to see that Kant finds it appropriate to differentiate between pleasures of the senses and the more refined pleasure of beauty, and it is worth noting that, in doing this, Kant is by no means alone. For example, Shaftesbury claimed in his *Characteristics*, first published in 1711, that while we are experiencing beauty, we must not be concerned with the sensory enjoyment that the object is able to offer us. He considers a case in which someone observing trees longs “for nothing so much as to taste some delicious fruit of theirs” and returns to them as a source of enjoyment whenever he is in the garden.²³ This “sordidly luxurious” delight could not, according to Shaftesbury, be the delight of beauty. Similarly, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, published in 1757, Edmund Burke claimed that in experiencing the pleasure of beauty, we do not lust after the object that pleases us. Lust is “an energy of the mind, that hurries us on to the possession of certain objects.” Whereas lower pleasures are connected with lust, beauty, the more refined pleasure, is connected with love. Beauty, Burke held, is the quality in bodies “by which they cause love, or some passion similar to it.”²⁴ Kant was familiar with these ideas, and endorsed them in principle – even if he develops them in unique ways in his own aesthetic theory.

There is much more to Kant’s defense of aesthetic pleasure against Rousseauian anti-aestheticism than is apparent so far. Merely focusing on the possibility that the arts amount to luxurious diversions offering a pleasure that is more refined than the pleasure of agreeableness would not fully capture the spirit of Kantian aesthetics. For one thing, Kant’s aesthetic theory is not primarily a theory about beauty in the arts. Some of his remarks, which we will consider later, even give the impression that he is of the view that it is more difficult for us to have genuine experiences of beauty in response to artworks than in response to natural objects. Although he does in the end find a place in his theory for such experiences of artistic beauty, experiences of natural beauty fit most easily within the theory.

There are two relevant features of Kant’s conception of the experience of beauty on which we will focus: its ability to cultivate in us the capacity to feel love, and its feature of being disinterested. Much of

Kant's fuller explanation as to why the pleasure of beauty can contribute to our moral development rests on the claim that it has these features.

Kant's most direct allusion to the first feature occurs in Section 29 of the third *Critique*. The pleasure of beauty, he claims, is "final in reference to the moral feeling," because it "prepares us to love something, even nature, apart from any interest."²⁵ Kant mentions the second feature of the pleasure of beauty in Section 59 of the third *Critique*, where he writes that "[t]aste makes, as it were, the transition from the charm of sense to habitual moral interest possible without too violent a leap," and it does this to the extent that it "teaches us to find, even in sensuous objects, a free delight apart from any charm of sense."²⁶ Kant's view is that the pleasure of beauty is disinterested in such a way that it can teach us to step back from inclinations relating to objects of the senses. We learn how to be pleased by things without also becoming attached to them in selfish ways. As he puts it in a reflection, the beautiful "must betray no alien interest, but please apart from any self-interest."²⁷

There is, of course, a second aesthetic pleasure that Kant takes up – the pleasure of sublimity. His view is that, like the pleasure of beauty, the pleasure of sublimity is connected with a kind of emotional experience that is relevant to our moral development. Whereas the experience of beauty is connected with love, the experience of sublimity is connected with respect or esteem. The pleasure of sublimity, he claims in Section 29, is "final" for the moral feeling insofar as it prepares us "to esteem something highly even in opposition to our (sensuous) interest."²⁸

Kant does not fully express the connections between aesthetic pleasure's possessing these features, and its capacity to foster our moral development. We will need to reconstruct and make explicit these connections in order properly to understand the deeper Kantian response to the anti-aesthetic thought of a philosopher such as Rousseau – and, more generally, to see how Kant's ethical priorities interact with his account of aesthetic pleasure. This is the task that we will take up in the following chapters.

It is worth highlighting that the emphasis here is on Kant's views on the moral implications of the pursuit of *aesthetic pleasure*. However, Kant also entertains various other possible connections between morality and taste which concern less directly the ethical implications of pursuing pleasure, as such. In Section 42 of the third *Critique*, for instance, he claims that if we take an interest in beautiful natural objects, this is an

indication that we have an interest in morality. As he puts it, there is reason to presume the presence of “at least the germ of a good moral disposition in the case of a man to whom the beauty of nature is a matter of immediate interest.”²⁹ Kant accepts this view partly because he maintains that there is an analogy between moral and aesthetic judgments, and he takes it to follow from this that individuals who are interested in the latter can be expected also to be interested in the former. He also has a further reason for accepting the view. When we experience a natural object as beautiful, he maintains, it feels to us as if it were designed to meet the aims of our cognitive capacities. If we have an interest in morality, moreover, we apparently seek messages of hope that the moral progress that we seek is possible given the structure of the natural world.³⁰ But experiencing nature as conducive to our cognitive aims in an experience of beauty can enable us to feel precisely that nature is on our side – a thought that can inspire us to continue to maintain our moral hope. That is, we may feel as if natural beauty is “the cypher in which nature speaks to us figuratively.”³¹

Although these may ultimately turn out to be interesting proposals, we will leave them aside, and focus instead on the features of aesthetic pleasure, itself, that help us to develop morally by becoming better able to distance ourselves from our inclinations.³²

The Disposition to Choose Nothing But Good Ends

The notion of “culture” plays a central role in Kant’s philosophy, including his aesthetics, even if at times it plays its role unassumingly in the background. As mentioned at the beginning of the present chapter, Kant is concerned to understand how the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure might be a means by which we can pursue culture.

The process of culture, considered at the individual level, is a process of development that is divided into stages, according to Kant. In the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, he describes four main stages of culture: discipline, skill, prudence, and moralization. Discipline, he holds, is “merely the taming of savagery”; at this stage, we must be helped to reason by others, who will impose order upon our actions in order to “seek to prevent animality from doing damage to humanity.”³³ Next, once our

“animality” has been suitably disciplined, our skill may be developed. Skill is a capacity for procuring what we need to survive and to garner basic enjoyments in life. It is, as Kant puts it, “a faculty which is sufficient for the carrying out of whatever purpose.”³⁴ Kant’s view is that skill should be developed so that it is “thorough and not superficial,” which partly means that “one must not assume the appearance of knowing things that later one cannot bring about.”³⁵ Next, at the stage of prudence, we develop our manners and other social capacities. We become “well suited” for human society, “popular, and influential.”³⁶ At the stage of prudence, we are becoming “civilized.” However, even prudential action can be largely determined by inclinations, according to Kant, and in this sense such action is still fairly closely connected with instinct. It is not until we reach the final stage of culture, that of moralization (*Moralisirung*), that we begin to become adept at choosing “good ends” for our actions, where these amount to ends which are “necessarily approved by everyone and which can be the simultaneous ends of everyone.”³⁷

According to Kant, our progressing through the stages of culture occurs alongside the development of our reason. We are not, in Kant’s view, born with our reason fully developed. We begin merely with a capacity to develop into rationally sophisticated beings. Reason, Kant maintains, still “needs attempts, practice and instruction in order gradually to progress from one stage of insight to another.”³⁸ Ultimately, carrying out actions from duty – those with full moral worth – will occur near the higher end of this developmental sequence, since moral action goes hand in hand with rational sophistication. It is through the use of reason that we are able to contemplate and act on the basis of principles of duty.

Kant categorizes the stages of culture slightly differently in different works, but these characterizations have in common a tendency to frame the issue of individual development as embodying a transition away from “animality.”³⁹ Kant understands that there is a sense in which a human being is inescapably an animal, no matter how far he or she pursues culture. But Kant believes that it is possible to distinguish between animal aspects of human beings and non-animal aspects. It is a human being’s reason, specifically, that Kant takes to exemplify the part of a human being that is furthest from his or her animal nature. The contrast between humanity and animality, in fact, is implicit even in Kant’s definition

of “reason.” In the *Idea for a Universal History*, for example, Kant claims that “reason” is “a faculty of extending the rules and aims of the use of all its powers far beyond natural instinct.”⁴⁰ Whereas animals act merely on natural instinct, human beings can do more than this.

Distancing ourselves from our animality consists partly in acquiring the capacity to distance ourselves from our inclinations. This is why Kant takes moralization to be the final stage of culture, and also the stage in which the human being exemplifies most fully, and is able to live on the basis of, a split between animality and rationality. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant considers the case of a man who is initially determined to follow his inclinations, and faces a choice between satisfying his own personal needs and caring for a sick father. This man “proves his freedom in the highest degree” if he manages to put aside his inclination in order to take what he believes to be the right course of action.⁴¹ We can say that this man is acting with a preference for his rationality.

Thus, Kant holds that we need to develop our capacity to distance ourselves from our inclinations if we wish to develop as human beings and moral agents. As Kant puts it in the Appendix to the Critique of Teleological Judgment, this distancing will amount to a kind of “negative culture.” It is “negative” insofar as it functions to remove obstacles to “the *will* in its determination and choice of its ends.”⁴² Negative culture consists in the “liberation of the will from the despotism of desires whereby, in our attachment to certain natural things, we are rendered incapable of exercising a choice of our own.”⁴³ Our “natural capacities,” Kant writes, are “very purposively adapted to the performance of our essential functions as an animal species, but the inclinations are a great impediment to the development of our humanity.” The task we face is “to prevail over the rudeness and violence of inclinations that belong more to the animal part of our nature and are most inimical to education that would fit us for our higher vocation (inclinations toward enjoyment), and to make way for the development of our humanity.”⁴⁴

It is worth noting that we need not presuppose Kant’s view that it is appropriate to disparage the “animal” aspects of ourselves, as such, in the reconstruction of the account that follows. Beginning a reconstruction of Kant’s aesthetics on such a controversial premise is best avoided if possible. And it is possible to do so. It is inessential to invoke the notion of “animality” in order to capture what is essential to his account of moral development by means of the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure.

That is, we can make perfectly good sense of the idea of a process of development by which we acquire the capacity to distance ourselves from inclinations without describing this process as amounting to a transition away from what is “animal” in us. While it is important to recognize that Kant is motivated to pursue connections between aesthetic pleasure and moral development partly because he holds a very specific conception of culture, only certain core elements of that account of culture are actually required to articulate the relevant connections.

Kant’s account of moral development interacts with other aspects of his ethical theory in complex ways, and it will be helpful to outline, however briefly, the nature of this interaction. The concept of duty is central to Kant’s ethics, and, on his view, there is certainly a sense in which we are expected to do our moral duties. But, at the same time, Kant acknowledges that we are imperfect and developing moral agents. Insofar as we are not fully developed, there is also a sense in which we cannot be expected to be capable of doing our moral duties in every particular case, especially in the face of powerful inclinations leading us away from duty.

At first glance, this picture can seem contradictory, and we need some way of making sense of it. To begin with, one difference between well developed and less developed moral agents is that the former are skilled at acting not merely *in conformity with* duty, but also *from* duty. This is a distinction between, on the one hand, merely choosing good ends, and, on the other hand, having the right motivation behind our choice of good ends. Actions done merely in conformity with duty will have the outward appearance of being dutiful, but will lack moral worth. For example, the shopkeeper whom Kant considers in the *Groundwork* may choose not to overcharge inexperienced customers, which is what duty requires. Thus, he acts in conformity with duty. However, it does not follow from the fact that his action conforms with duty that he has acted in this way “from duty and basic principles of honesty.”⁴⁵ He may, for instance, merely be acting on the basis of a principle of self-love, such as one bound up with the expectation that, by maintaining a good reputation within his community, his business will do better in the long run. If he does act merely on the basis of such a principle, then his action lacks moral worth. The case in the *Groundwork* of the philanthropist further illustrates this underlying point. This philanthropist helps others merely on the basis of a feeling of sympathy and a desire to enjoy the pleasure

he takes in spreading joy and satisfying others. However, he does not also understand that it is his moral duty to help others. For this reason, Kant maintains, his action lacks moral worth and is “on the same footing with other inclinations.”⁴⁶

Kant describes agents who are very highly skilled at acting from duty as possessing “virtue.” Virtuous agents will be at the pinnacle of moral development. Kant holds that virtue is a kind of inner strength that manifests itself in a disposition to act from duty. Thus, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he describes virtue as the strength “of a human being’s maxims in fulfilling his duty,”⁴⁷ and as “the moral strength of a *human being’s* will in fulfilling his *duty*, a moral *constraint* through his own lawgiving reason, insofar as this constitutes itself an authority *executing* the law.”⁴⁸ And in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, he describes virtue as a “firmly grounded disposition to fulfill one’s duty strictly.”⁴⁹ Virtue is a disposition not just for choosing good ends in the face of the influence of the inclinations, but for doing so in a way that is guided by an awareness of the moral law. It is a disposition to act not just in conformity with duty, but to do so from duty.

It is important for Kantian ethics to incorporate the notion of virtue as a disposition to act from duty, since this makes possible some important distinctions. For it is possible that we should carry out our actions from duty – even all of our actions – while still lacking a morally relevant quality. As Kant points out, we may live long and guiltless lives simply as a result of having been fortunate to have escaped temptations that would have drawn us away from morally worthy action.⁵⁰ For every moral test that we have faced, we might have passed it by acting from duty. But there are many moral tests that we have not faced, perhaps because of the circumstances in which we find ourselves. If we were born into a privileged social position, for example, we might not be tempted to steal; or, if we have become entrenched in certain habits of action that have come to seem necessary, we may never fully realize that we *could* act contrary to duty and on the basis of principles of self-love if we so chose.⁵¹ To the extent that we have been able to act from duty primarily because of our good fortune rather than out of a stable disposition to do so in a variety of counterfactual scenarios, we may be said to lack virtue.⁵²

Thus, consider three cases involving philanthropists. The first is that of the philanthropist considered earlier. Although he succeeds in acting in conformity with duty – which is in itself an achievement – his actions

still lack moral worth, since they do not emanate from a recognition of his duty. A second philanthropist chooses to help others out of a sense of duty in all the scenarios he actually faces. But were he faced with more difficult moral tests, he would choose to disregard the duty to help others and choose instead to act on principles of self-love. This second philanthropist succeeds in acting in conformity with duty as well as from duty, but ultimately lacks virtue. By contrast, a third philanthropist acts both in conformity with duty and from duty in the cases he actually faces, and also would carry out philanthropic acts from duty in a wide range of non-actual cases which would challenge his moral resolve. Only this third philanthropist deserves to be called virtuous.

Even though the gold standard for moral action is to be virtuous, and thus to be capable of acting from duty on a consistent basis, Kant's view admits of degrees of moral development. His view even allows us to say that individuals who manage to act in conformity with duty without also acting from duty are doing better than individuals who do not even manage to act in conformity with duty. In fact, this is exactly what Kant believes. He views it as an achievement when we develop to the point of being able to act in conformity with duty, given that we all face inclinations that tempt us away from doing even this much. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, for instance, Kant describes sympathetic joy and sadness as "sensible feelings of pleasure or pain ... at another's state of joy or sorrow," and claims that the capacity to feel sympathy is "one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what representations of duty alone might not accomplish."⁵³ Even though, as his treatment of the original philanthropist case makes clear, Kant holds that, in acting in conformity with duty by drawing on a feeling of sympathy but not on a principle of duty, our action does not have full moral worth, it is still true that we have accomplished something worthwhile. We have at least acted in conformity with duty, when we might have failed to do so.

Similarly, in the *Anthropology*, Kant describes the role of the feeling of compassion in moral agency. He contrasts compassion, which he describes as an inclination "of pathological (sensible) impulse," with the state of moral apathy which he takes to characterize wise individuals, and to be an "entirely correct and sublime moral principle of the Stoic school." On the one hand, Kant claims, the virtuous or wise individual "must never be in a state of affect, not even in that of compassion with the misfortune of his best friend," and this is because affect "makes us

(more or less) blind.”⁵⁴ Yet, on the other hand, the reality is that we do have a tendency to feel compassion, and there is no reason for us to avoid making use of this tendency in order to bring ourselves to act in conformity with duty. As Kant puts it, “[t]he wisdom of nature has planted in us the predisposition to compassion in order to handle the reins *provisionally*, until reason has achieved the necessary strength; that is to say, for the purpose of enlivening us, nature has added the incentive of pathological (sensible) impulse to the moral incentives for the good, as a temporary surrogate of reason.”⁵⁵

We can now make better sense of what seemed to be a tension in Kant’s ethical thought. It is true that there is a sense in which we cannot be expected to be capable of doing our moral duties in every particular case. We are not born embodying the wisdom that Kant attributes to the Stoic; we are not born with the developed capacity consistently to act from duty. As such, there are bound to be cases in which we will falter, morally. On the other hand, there remains a sense in which we ought to do our moral duties. To say this is to say that we ought to do what it takes to make ourselves into the kinds of people who can consistently act from duty. Given that learning to act in conformity with duty on a consistent basis is a first step in learning to act from duty, we may pursue our task partly by learning how better to act in conformity with duty. This is why Kant claims that we have, for instance, an “indirect duty” to cultivate “the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feeling appropriate to them.” Cultivating our capacity for sympathy is one way for us to develop morally by learning to act in conformity with duty. We may cultivate the relevant compassionate feelings in us, Kant suggests, by placing ourselves in circumstances in which we will be able to share in painful feelings that we find difficult to resist, including circumstances in which we interact with those living in poverty or with illnesses.⁵⁶

Most relevant in the present context is a second way of pursuing moral development. This, of course, is the pursuit of aesthetic pleasure. It is clear that Kant takes this pursuit to be one way of pursuing a process of culture that will help us to learn to distance ourselves from our inclinations, and in so doing to help us to become more sophisticated moral agents.⁵⁷ As he puts in the Critique of Teleological Judgment, the arts “do much to overcome the tyrannical propensities of the senses, and so

prepare man for a sovereignty in which reason alone shall have sway.”⁵⁸ Pursuing aesthetic pleasure will help us to acquire skill in putting aside our inclinations in order to act in conformity with duty, but will not directly teach us to act from duty. From a Kantian point of view, though, even this is an achievement.⁵⁹

Although we are focusing on Kantian moral theory, one does not need to accept such a moral theory in order to endorse Kant’s account of the connection between aesthetic pleasure and the loosening of inclinations. And it goes without saying that achieving such a loosening will constitute a moral achievement from the point of view of various non-Kantian moral theories – including those which do not even consider whether a given action was done from duty in determining its moral worth.

Notes

- 1 Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *“The Discourses” and Other Early Political Writings*, ed. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 11n.
- 2 Ethics 27:396.
- 3 Ethics 27:248.
- 4 Ethics 27:248.
- 5 Ethics 27:394.
- 6 Ethics 27:396–397. See also the Appendix to the “Critique of Teleological Judgment,” where Kant seems directly to reference Rousseau’s views on the arts and sciences, claiming that “[t]he preponderance of evil which a taste refined to the extreme of idealization, and which even luxury in the sciences, considered as food for vanity, diffuses among us as the result of the crowd of insatiable inclinations which they beget, is indisputable” (CJ 5:433–434).
- 7 Ethics 27:396–397.
- 8 Ethics 27:394–395.
- 9 Anthropology 7:237.
- 10 CJ 5:209.
- 11 CJ 5:207.
- 12 CJ 5:209.
- 13 CJ 5:207.
- 14 Morals 6:212.
- 15 Maladies 2:261.

- 16 In the *Anthropology*, Kant distinguishes between passions resulting from human culture (those involving honor, revenge, domination, and possession), and “natural” or “innate” passions – which include the inclinations for freedom and sex (*Anthropology* 7:267–268).
- 17 *Anthropology* 7:272.
- 18 *Anthropology* 7:270.
- 19 *Anthropology* 7:273.
- 20 *Morals* 6:408.
- 21 *Morals* 6:408. Similarly, Kant claims in the *Anthropology* that passions are not merely “unfortunate states of mind full of many ills,” but are “without exception evil as well” (*Anthropology* 7:267).
- 22 *Pedagogy* 9:486–487. Along these lines, Kant claims in the unpublished “first introduction” to the third *Critique* that inclinations come in degrees, and that what is needed is “moderation of the inclinations in order not to yield to passion” (FI 196).
- 23 Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 319.
- 24 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 83.
- 25 CJ 5:267.
- 26 CJ 5:354.
- 27 *Reflections* 827, 15:310.
- 28 CJ 5:267.
- 29 CJ 5:301.
- 30 For more on this aspect of Kant’s view, see Heiner Bielefeldt, *Symbolic Representation in Kant’s Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 124.
- 31 CJ 5:301.
- 32 When it comes to connections between Kant’s aesthetics and ethics, generally speaking, Paul Guyer distinguishes between aesthetic phenomena that play a role in “moral epistemology,” and those that play a role in “moral psychology.” In the case of moral epistemology, Guyer claims, Kant’s view is that the “aesthetic experience of the freedom of the imagination in the response to beauty and of the power of reason in the feeling of the sublime can make our practical freedom palpable to us, thus supplementing the entirely nonexperiential inference of our freedom from our obligation under the moral law” (*Kant and the Experience of Freedom* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996], 335; see also *Values of Beauty* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005], ch. 8). For instance, Kant claims in Section 59 of the third *Critique* that beauty is a symbol of the morally

good, for the reason that there are allegedly structural similarities between aesthetic and moral judgment. Thus, judging aesthetically might reveal to us the freedom we have as moral agents. Much of the secondary literature on connections between Kant's aesthetics and ethics focuses on moral epistemology. See, for example, Henry Allison, *Kant's Theory of Taste: A Reading of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), part III; Kenneth Rogerson, *The Problem of Free Harmony in Kant's Aesthetics* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008), ch. 6; Rachel Zuckert, *Kant on Beauty and Biology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 370–383; Rodolphe Gasché, *The Idea of Form: Rethinking Kant's Aesthetics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 158–165; and Donald Crawford, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press), ch. 7. By contrast, the focus in what follows is instead on moral psychology, and specifically on the moral psychological implications of the experience of aesthetic pleasure. Guyer is one commentator who does find it worthwhile to address these issues, as he does, for instance, in *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*. We also find brief references to them in G. Felicitas Munzel, *Kant's Conception of Moral Character: the "Critical" Link of Morality, Anthropology, and Reflective Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 297–300; and Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 393.

- 33 Pedagogy 9:449.
- 34 Anthropology 7:201. Cf. Pedagogy 9:449.
- 35 Pedagogy 9:486.
- 36 Pedagogy 9:450. In the *Anthropology*, Kant adds that acquiring these social skills partly involves becoming adept at “using other human beings for one’s purposes” (Anthropology 7:201).
- 37 Pedagogy 9:450. When our capacities are developed to the point of prudence, we can be said to be civilized. But, according to Kant, no matter how civilized we have become, “very much is still lacking before we can be held to be already moralized” (Idea 8:26).
- 38 Idea 8:19. See Thomas Pogge, “Kant on Ends and the Meaning of Life,” in *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls*, ed. Andrews Reath, Barbara Herman, and Christine M. Korsgaard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 381.
- 39 In the *Anthropology*, Kant describes the stages in the development of reason as consisting in “skill,” “prudence,” and “wisdom.” There, he suggests that this development can be tied to chronological age: “The age at which the human being reaches the full use of his reason can be fixed, in respect to his skill (the capacity to achieve any purpose one chooses), around the twentieth year; in respect to prudence (using other human beings for one’s

purposes), around the fortieth year; and finally, in respect to wisdom, around the sixtieth year. However, in this last period wisdom is more negative; it sees the follies of the first two periods. At this point we can say: ‘It is too bad that we have to die now, just when we have learned for the very first time how we should have lived quite well’” (Anthropology 7:201).

In the *Religion* Kant distinguishes among three ways in which the “predisposition to good in human nature” may be determined: “[t]he predisposition to the animality of the human being, as a living being ... [t]o the humanity in him, as a living and at the same time rational being ... [and] [t]o his personality, as a rational and at the same time responsible being” (Religion 6:26). In the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, it should be noted, Kant also finds it helpful to employ an additional distinction, between “physical” and “practical” culture. He takes the latter to divide into “pragmatic” and “moral” culture (Pedagogy 9:470).

40 Idea 8:18.

41 Morals 6:382n.

42 CJ 5:431.

43 CJ 5:432.

44 CJ 5:433. Kant makes a similar point in the *Groundwork*, writing that “[t]he human being feels within himself a powerful counterweight to all the commands of duty, which reason represents to him as so deserving of the highest respect – the counterweight of his needs and inclinations” (Groundwork 4:405). And in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he writes that human beings are “rational *natural* beings, who are unholy enough that pleasure can induce them to break the moral law, even though they recognize its authority” (Morals 6:379). Because we are tempted away from morality by our inclinations, we are unlike hypothetical “holy” beings, who, lacking a sensible nature, would not face the prospect of being drawn away from the moral law by inclinations. Such holy beings would not face the need to master inclinations that “rebel against the law,” in the first place (Morals 6:383).

45 Groundwork 4:397.

46 Groundwork 4:398.

47 Morals 6:394.

48 Morals 6:405.

49 Religion 6:23–24n.

50 Morals 6:392–393.

51 Morals 6:407.

52 For a similar interpretation, see Philip Stratton-Lake, “Being Virtuous and the Virtues: Two Aspects of Kant’s Doctrine of Virtue,” in *Kant’s Ethics of Virtue*, ed. Monika Betzler (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 104.

53 Morals 6:456–457.

- 54 Anthropology 7:253.
- 55 Anthropology 7:253.
- 56 Morals 6:457. More generally, Kant holds that the “*cultivation* of any *capacities* whatever for furthering ends set forth by reason” is a duty of wide obligation (Morals 6:391). This is a “wide” duty in the sense that it is bound up with “playroom (*latitudo*) for free choice in following (complying with) the law” (Morals 6:390), and “[n]o rational principle prescribes specifically *how* far one should go in cultivating one’s capacities (in enlarging or correcting one’s capacity for understanding, i.e., in acquiring knowledge or skill).” Instead, “different situations in which human beings may find themselves make a human being’s choice of the occupation for which he should cultivate his talents very much a matter for him to decide as he chooses” (Morals 6:392). Cf. Groundwork 4:424.
- 57 Guyer takes up this issue in *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, where he recognizes that in Kant’s ethics, principles interact with feelings, which are susceptible to cultivation by various means – including by means of aesthetic pursuits (ch. 10).
- 58 CJ 5:433–434.
- 59 In what follows, we will be concerned with Kant’s conception of culture in the very specific sense that has just been outlined. At times, Kant uses terms whose English translation is “culture” (including *Kultur* and *Bildung*) in ways that diverge from the specific sense that is primarily of interest here. It is beyond the scope of the present study to trace the subtle nuances of his usage of these terms, or to examine how Kant’s views on culture fit into the tradition of theorizing culture that was emerging in Germany around the time that Kant lived – and which involved writers such as Mendelssohn, Schiller, and Goethe. For more on this topic, see Nathan Rotenstreich, “Morality and Culture: A Note on Kant,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (1989): 303–316; Susan Cocalis, “The Transformation of ‘Bildung’ From an Image to an Ideal,” *Monatshefte* 70, no. 4 (1978): 399–414; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (London: Continuum, 2004), 8–17; and W. H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: “Bildung” from Humboldt to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).