

Kant's Theory of the Imagination

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§1. Kant and the Power of the Imagination

Immanuel Kant's theory of the imagination is one of the most enduring aspects of his philosophy, inspiring philosophers ranging from Hegel to Sellars, Heidegger to Strawson. The enduring legacy of Kant's account is due, in part, to his *broad* conception of the imagination. In contrast to philosophers who construe the imagination as something that operates in fairly narrow confines, e.g., just in acts of make-believe or visualization, Kant conceives of the imagination as a more pervasive mental capacity that contributes to the cognitive, aesthetic, and moral aspects of our lives. Though compelling, the breadth of Kant's account also poses a certain challenge to readers: in what sense are the wide range of activities that Kant ascribes to the imagination to be understood as exercises of a *single* capacity? Moreover, given that he explicitly distinguishes between different levels of imaginative activity, e.g., empirical and transcendental, and different types of imaginative activity, e.g., productive and reproductive, how are we to understand the underlying unity of the imagination as Kant characterizes it?

In light of these questions, before we can proceed to an analysis of the contribution Kant takes the imagination to make in cognition, aesthetics, and morality, respectively, we need to begin with a discussion of his *basic* conception of the imagination. To this end, it will be helpful to consider two passages in which Kant offers a more general definition of the imagination. In the first passage, which appears in the so-called 'B edition' of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), Kant claims, "**Imagination** [*Einbildungskraft*] is a faculty for representing an object even **without its presence** in intuition" (B151).¹ As this definition suggests, Kant conceives of the imagination as a faculty of

¹ References to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* are to the A and B pagination of the first (1781) and second (1787) editions (A/B). All other references are to the volume and page of *Kants gesammelte Schriften*. **KU**: *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, **Anthro**: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. Bolded words indicate Kant's emphasis in the original text.

representation, more specifically, a faculty that is responsible for *intuitive*, i.e., sensible representations of objects that are not immediately present to us. This often happens when we imagine a physical object or property of an object that is no longer present to us, e.g., when I imagine a Frank Stella painting I saw two months ago or I see a house as having a back-side even though I am only looking at its front-side. However, as we shall see, on Kant's view, the imagination is not confined to representing objects in only this narrow physical sense; rather he takes the imagination to also be able to produce sensible representations of objects that are not present in virtue of being intellectual objects, e.g., concepts and ideas. This happens, for example, in make-believe when a child sees a stick as a wand, in fiction when I picture what Natasha from *War and Peace* looks like, or in mental imagery when I imagine the paragon of moral virtue. On a Kantian analysis, in each of these cases, the imagination plays a pivotal role because it brings something non-sensible, e.g., the absent Stella painting, the unseen back-side of the house, the wand, Natasha, or moral virtue, to bear on our sensible representations. What this line of thought ultimately points to is Kant's idea that the imagination is fundamentally a capacity for producing representations that bridge the gap between what is sensible, on the one hand, and what is non-sensible or intellectual, on the other, and this mediating activity is one Kant takes to be crucial for our cognitive, aesthetic, and moral experience.

In the second passage, which is from the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), Kant states,

The power of imagination (*facultas imaginandi*), as a faculty of intuition without the presence of the object, is either *productive*, that is, a faculty of the original presentation [*Darstellung*] of the object (*exhibitio originaria*), which thus precedes experience; or *reproductive*, a faculty of the derivative presentation of the object (*exhibitio derivativa*), which brings back to mind an empirical intuition that it had previously (Anthro 7:167).

As we see in this passage, after reiterating the definition of the imagination from the first *Critique*, Kant claims that the imagination can produce a 'presentation', i.e., a sensible representation of an object that is not directly present, in one of two ways. The imagination can act in a *productive* way

when it functions as the original source of a presentation. For example, when Tolstoy develops the character Natasha in *War and Peace*, he produces an imaginative presentation of her that, in effect, brings her to life. Furthermore, rather than relying on past experience, in its productive exercise, the imagination makes experience possible. Although this can happen at the empirical level, e.g., Tolstoy's creation of Natasha makes the reader's particular experience of her possible, on Kant's view, this can also happen at the transcendental level, viz., when the imagination produces original representations that make experience *in general* possible. Meanwhile, in its *reproductive* exercise, the imagination acts in a wholly empirical way, producing presentations that are derived from past experience. For example, when I form an imaginative presentation of the Frank Stella painting I saw two months ago, I am reliving a past experience, rather than bringing something to life. What we learn from the *Anthropology*, then, is that the imagination can mediate between what is sensible and non-sensible in either a productive fashion, in which case it makes particular experiences or experience in general possible, or in a reproductive fashion, in which case it is constrained by past experience.

Taking these two passages together, we find that, for Kant, the imagination in general is a capacity for sensibly representing what is not present in either a productive or reproductive way and in so doing it mediates between the sensible and non-sensible aspects of our lives. With this overall framework for the imagination in place, we are now in a position to examine the distinctive contribution Kant takes the imagination to make to cognition and perception (§2), aesthetic judgment and artistic creation (§3), and morality (§4).

§2. The Imagination in Cognition and Perception

In the first *Critique*, Kant's account of cognition turns on his analysis of the various representational capacities and representations that make cognition possible. In addition to the imagination, he

highlights two other capacities, viz., sensibility and understanding. Kant describes sensibility and understanding in dichotomous terms: whereas sensibility is a receptive and passive capacity, by means of which we are affected by the world, understanding is an active and spontaneous capacity, by means of which we think about the world. This dichotomous theme is carried over into Kant's description of the type of representation each capacity is responsible for. While sensibility provides intuitions, which are representations that are "immediately related to the object" and are "singular," understanding provides concepts, which are representations that relate "mediately" to objects "by means of a mark, which can be common to several things" (A320/B377). In spite of these differences, however, Kant insists that it is only through the combination of intuitions and concepts that cognition can arise:

Intuition and concepts therefore constitute the elements of all our cognition, so that neither concepts without intuition corresponding to them in some way nor intuition without concepts can yield a cognition (A50/B74).

Yet given the contrasts between sensibility and intuition, on the one hand, and understanding and concepts, on the other, how could they ever be brought together in cognition?

In order to answer this question, Kant appeals to the imagination: "Both extremes, namely sensibility and understanding, must necessarily be connected by means of this transcendental function of the imagination" (A124).² Kant claims that the imagination is able to play this intermediary role because it shares features with both sensibility and understanding. As we saw above, in §24 of the B Deduction, he claims that insofar as the imagination produces intuitive, sensible representations, it is aligned with sensibility (B151). However, he maintains that unlike the intuitions of sensibility that arise through passive affection, the intuitive representations for which the imagination is responsible are produced through the spontaneous activity of *synthesis*. On Kant's view, synthesis is an activity that involves different ways in which the manifold of intuition is "gone

² For the argument that the imagination is, in fact, the 'common root' of sensibility and understanding (A15/B29), see Heidegger 1990, 1997. For criticism of Heidegger's view, see Henrich 1994.

through, taken up, and combined,” and he claims that both the imagination and understanding are capable of engaging in it (A77/B103). For this reason, he suggests that the imagination is similar to the understanding. Thus, given its dual nature as a capacity for producing sensible representations through synthetic activity, Kant thinks the imagination is able to mediate between sensibility and understanding in the way that is required for cognition.

According to Kant, this imaginative synthesis occurs in different ways in the cognitive context: it proceeds in both an *empirical* and *reproductive* way in perception and in a *transcendental* and *productive* way that lays the ground for the possibility of experience in general. Let’s begin with Kant’s account of the imagination’s empirical contribution to perception. In a rather striking passage, Kant indicates that imaginative synthesis is a ‘necessary ingredient’ of perception:

No psychologist has yet thought that the imagination is a *necessary ingredient* of perception itself. This is so partly because... it has been believed that the senses do not merely afford us impressions but also *put them together*, and *produce images* of objects, for which without doubt something more than the receptivity of impressions is required, namely a function of the synthesis of them (A120fn, my emphasis).

In this passage, Kant articulates one of the differences between his view and the ‘psychological’, i.e., empiricist view of perception: whereas the empiricists treat perception as a passive process that depends on affection through sensibility alone, Kant insists that perception requires the imaginative activity of synthesis. More specifically, he thinks we need the imagination to put together intuitive representations in order to form a distinctive type of perceptual representation, which he calls an ‘image’ [*Bild*]. This, indeed, is one of the important themes he pursues in his account of perception in both the Transcendental Deduction and in the so-called Schematism chapter.

However, before we consider the types of synthesis required for image formation, a few words are in order about the nature of images themselves. One of Kant’s most helpful descriptions of images is found in his Metaphysics L₁ Lectures from the mid-1770s:

My mind is always busy with forming the image of the manifold.... The mind must undertake many observations in order to illustrate an object differently from each side....

There are thus many appearances of a matter according to the various sides and points of view. The mind must make an illustration from all these appearances by taking them all together (ML 28:236).

As we see in this passage, Kant uses the term ‘image’ in what might seem like an unorthodox way: while we often think of image as a representation of a single instant, e.g., a snapshot, he conceives of an image as a sensible representation of an object we perceive from multiple sides and points of view over time, e.g., a three-dimensional image. In other words, for Kant, an image is a single, complex sensible representation that illustrates the various perspectival appearances (or what Husserl might call ‘adumbrations’) of an object. For example, when I perceive the pineapple on my table, depending on the position of my body, the lighting conditions, which side of it is facing me, etc., it will appear to me in different ways and, on Kant’s view, an image of it unifies the representations of those appearances together in a single, more complex representation of the pineapple from those different sides and points of view.³

Kant offers his most extended analysis of the empirical synthesis required for image formation in the A Deduction, specifically in his analysis of the so-called “threefold synthesis” of apprehension, reproduction, and recognition (A97). Of these three syntheses, he attributes apprehension and reproduction to the imagination (reserving recognition for the understanding) and he claims that apprehension and reproduction are distinct, but “inseparably combined” forms of empirical imaginative synthesis that are aimed at image formation (A102, 120).⁴ Kant characterizes apprehension as the act through which the imagination “run[s] through and then take[s] together” the manifold of intuition (A99). It successively gathers together the perceptual representations of an object that unfold across space and over time, e.g., the representation of the pineapple in front of

³ Insofar as Kant’s images involve the perceptual representation of features of an object that are no longer present to us, e.g., when I represent the pineapple as having a backside even though only its front side is currently present to me, Kant’s account bears on what Noë, e.g., 2004, calls the “problem of perceptual presence.” For a discussion of how Kant’s account of the imagination bears on this problem, see Sellars 1978, Thomas 2009, and Kind forthcoming.

⁴ There is a debate as to whether this imaginative synthesis occurs pre-conceptually or must be guided by the conceptual synthesis of recognition, see, e.g., Strawson 1974, Young 1988, and Ginsborg 2008. This issue is further complicated by the fact that in the B edition, Kant seems to attribute all synthesis to the understanding (see, e.g., B130, B162fn).

me in the morning and the representation of it across the room from me at night. However, Kant says that,

apprehension of the manifold alone would bring forth no image... were there not a subjective ground for calling back a perception, from which the mind has passed to another... i.e., a reproductive faculty of the imagination (A121).

As this passage indicates, on Kant's view, the synthesis of reproduction is what allows us to 'call back' representations in the manifold that are past and combine them with what we are representing here and now, e.g., now that it is evening, calling back the representation of the backside of the pineapple I formed in the morning. Kant aligns the synthesis of reproduction with what the empiricists call 'association' and suggests that the laws that govern association are "merely empirical," based on the representations we have often associated with each other in the past (what Hume calls 'custom' and 'habit') (A100). On Kant's view, once apprehension successively takes up representations in the manifold and reproduction calls forth representations from the past, we are able to form the sorts of images that are required for perception.

However, this is not the whole story of imaginative synthesis in the Deduction, for Kant argues that the empirical syntheses of apprehension and reproduction are, in turn, made possible by the *transcendental* synthesis of the *productive* imagination. It is in this context that he clarifies how the imagination makes experience in general possible, highlighting its contribution on two counts, viz., to establishing the affinity of appearances and the objective reality of the categories. Beginning with affinity, according to Kant, in order for our imaginations to be able to empirically synthesize the manifold, there must be something about the appearances represented in the manifold that allows us to do so. To illustrate this point, Kant uses the example of cinnabar, the ore of mercury: "If cinnabar were now red, now black, now light, now heavy... then my empirical imagination would never even get the opportunity to think of heavy cinnabar on the occasion of the representation of the color red" (A101). Yet the empirical rules governing apprehension and reproduction cannot be

responsible for this associability because they presuppose it. Therefore, Kant claims there must be transcendental activities that account for the associability or “affinity” of appearances and he attributes some of these activities to the imagination (A122).

In particular, Kant argues that the imagination contributes to the possibility of affinity through a special act of transcendental synthesis in which it synthesizes together the a priori forms of intuition, i.e., space and time, and the a priori concepts of the understanding, i.e., the twelve categories, like ‘cause’, ‘substance’, ‘reality’, etc. Insofar as space and time are the a priori conditions of all appearances, when the imagination applies the categories to space and time, the categories will come to determine all possible appearances and this will make them associable. In the A Deduction, Kant calls this the “transcendental function” of the imagination (A123). Meanwhile in §24 of the B Deduction, he labels this the “figurative synthesis” (*synthesis speciosa*) of the imagination, which he describes as follows:

the imagination is... a faculty for determining the sensibility *a priori*, and its synthesis of intuitions, **in accordance with the categories**, must be the transcendental synthesis of the **imagination** (B152).

Not only does this ground the affinity of appearances, but also in §24 Kant argues that through this imaginative act the categories acquire “objective reality, i.e., application to objects that can be given to us in intuition” (B150-1).⁵ This is no small feat given Kant’s aim in the Deduction to prove that the categories are objectively valid with respect to objects of the senses.

Although in the Deduction Kant establishes *that* the productive imagination engages in this transcendental synthesis that mediates between sensibility and understanding, he has not yet told us *how* this takes place: the latter is the task of the brief (and notoriously dense) chapter called ‘On the

⁵ For a further argument that our representation of space and time (discussed at B160-1fn) depends on the transcendental synthesis of the imagination, see Waxman 1991: Part I, Longuenesse 1998: Part III.

Schematism of the Pure Concepts of the Understanding'.⁶ The Schematism is the first chapter of Kant's 'Transcendental Doctrine of the Power of Judgment' and he suggests that there is a puzzle about how those judgments are possible in which we subsume intuitions under the categories:

Now pure concepts of the understanding, however, in comparison with empirical (indeed in general sensible intuitions), are entirely unhomogeneous and can never be encountered in any intuition. Now how is the **subsumption** of the latter under the former, thus the **application** of the category to appearances possible? (A137-8/B176-7)

In order for this subsumption to take place, Kant argues that there must be some "third thing" that is capable of mediating between the two, something that is sensible, on the one hand, and intellectual, on the other (A138/B177). He identifies this third thing as a special type of "mediating representation" produced by the imagination, which he labels a 'schema', and he claims that it involves a "rule" or "procedure" by means of which the imagination brings the relevant concepts and intuitions together (A138/B177, A140-1/B180).

More specifically, Kant claims that in order to mediate between the categories and intuition, the imagination produces a particular type of transcendental schema, which he describes as a "time-determination," i.e., a determination of the a priori manifold of time in accordance with the categories (A138/B178). Insofar as these are determinations of time *in general* they attain a level of universality, which is homogeneous with the categories and insofar as they are *temporal*, they are homogeneous with intuition (A138/B177-A139/B178). To cite a few examples, Kant claims that the schema for substance is "the persistence of the real in time" and that the schema for causality involves a particular "succession" in the manifold, such that "whenever [one thing] is posited, something else always follows" (A144/B183). Another interesting example with respect to Kant's theory of mathematics is the schema of magnitude, under which heading falls the concepts of 'unity',

⁶ For a discussion of the Schematism and relevant debates in the secondary literature, e.g., about whether Kant needed to write this chapter at all, why he identifies transcendental schemata as temporal and not spatial, the relationship between empirical and transcendental schemata, and whether empirical schemata collapse to empirical concepts, see Allison 2004: Ch. 8.

‘plurality’, and ‘totality’: “The pure **schema of magnitude** (*quantitas*), however, as a concept of the understanding, is **number**, which is a representation that summarizes the successive addition of one (homogeneous) unit to another” (A142/B182). After discussing the schemata that are connected to each category, Kant concludes his discussion by reiterating the idea that the productive imagination, here in its schematizing activities, contributes to the objective significance of the categories: “the schemata of the concepts of pure understanding are the true and sole conditions for providing them with a relation to objects, thus with **significance** [*Bedeutung*]” (A145-6/B185).

Although this analysis of transcendental schematism takes place at a high level of abstraction, Kant also discusses two more sensible forms of schematism: the schematism of “pure sensible” (mathematical) concepts, e.g., the concept ‘triangle’, and of empirical concepts, e.g., the concept ‘dog’ (A141/B180). This discussion returns him to a different theme in the Deduction, viz., that of image formation; Kant claims that these sensible schemata are that “through which and in accordance with which the images first become possible” (A142/B181). According to Kant in the Schematism, an image is a sensible presentation that “must be connected with the concept,” and it is once again a schema that mediates this connection between the sensible and conceptual (A142/B181). More specifically Kant suggests that we should think of these more sensible schemata as “monograms,” i.e., basic outlines or gestalts we have in our minds that represent the relevant concept in sensible form, e.g., the schema for the concept ‘triangle’ is a vague outline of an enclosed three-sided figure and the schema for the concept ‘dog’ is a basic gestalt of the generic features of dogs, e.g., being four-legged, furry, slobbery, etc. (A141/B181). However, Kant insists that these schemata are not to be confused with images: whereas images are *particular* representations of an object we currently perceive, a schema is a *generic* representation that is supposed to apply to multiple instances of a concept, e.g., my schema for triangles must apply to equilateral and right alike (A141/B180). On his view, schemata make images possible because the monograms that they

involve serve as rules or procedures we follow in synthesizing various manifolds of intuition in accordance with one and the same concept. So understood, the schema serves as something like a stencil we follow when we engage in the sorts of empirical synthesis required for image formation. My schema for the concept 'dog', for example, serves as a guide for me to follow in synthesizing the different manifolds of intuition I have in such a way that in each case, I can produce an image that is connected to the concept 'dog'. Thus Kant's analysis of the schematizing activities of the imagination not only explains how the categories can apply to intuition at an a priori level, but also completes his account of how synthesis and image formation are possible at an empirical level.

In the end, whether we consider Kant's analysis of the reproductive synthesis of the imagination and image formation or its productive exercise in figurative synthesis and schematism in the first *Critique*, the imagination emerges as a capacity that makes perception and cognition possible by mediating between intuitions and concepts at both the empirical and transcendental levels.

§3. The Imagination in Aesthetics

In the next two sections, we will shift our attention towards Kant's account of the imagination in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), addressing how it contributes to both the aesthetic and moral aspects of our lives. To appreciate this contribution, however, it is important to situate Kant's analysis of the imagination within his larger project in the third *Critique*. While in the first *Critique*, Kant explicates the domain of nature and in the second *Critique*, he explores the domain of freedom, the task he sets for himself in the third *Critique* is to explain how to bridge the "great chasm" between these two domains (KU 5:195). Though Kant's full explanation of how this happens by means of the power of judgment is quite complicated, for our purposes it will suffice to examine the ways in which the specifically productive activities of our imagination help reach across this divide. Let's consider how this works in the case of aesthetic judgment and artistic creation.

In §1 of the third *Critique*, Kant begins his analysis of aesthetic judgments, i.e., judgments that an object is beautiful, by distinguishing them from the sorts of cognitive judgments he was concerned with in the first *Critique*: “The judgment of taste is therefore not a cognitive judgment... but rather aesthetic, by which is understood one whose determining ground **cannot be other than subjective**” (KU 5:203). He identifies this subjective determining ground as a special type of pleasure we take in the beautiful: a pleasure that is intersubjectively shareable or communicable [*mittheilbar*] and produced through the free play of our imagination and understanding.

With regard to the shareability of pleasure, Kant claims that when we judge an object to be beautiful, we believe that we “have grounds for expecting a similar pleasure of everyone” (KU 5: 211). In Kant’s technical language, the beautiful is an object of ‘universal’ and ‘necessary’ satisfaction. However, given that not every felt pleasure is one we can expect all other human beings to share with us, e.g., though I find the taste of pineapple pleasurable you may not, the question becomes how to account for the distinctive type of shareable pleasure we feel in the beautiful.

In §9, Kant answers this question by appealing to the notion of the free play of the imagination and understanding. In this section he takes up the question of whether in a judgment of taste the feeling of pleasure precedes the judging of the object or whether the judging of the object precedes the pleasure. He rules out the first option because he argues that if the pleasure came first, then the judgment would be grounded on what is agreeable to our senses, something that is of “only private validity” (KU 5:217). By contrast, he claims that if pleasure in the beautiful is grounded in the judging of the object, insofar as this judging involves something that is communicable, then the pleasure will be communicable as well.

More specifically, Kant argues that, “[n]othing... can be universally communicated except cognition” and even though an aesthetic judgment does not involve a cognitive judgment in which

we apply a concept to an object, nevertheless Kant claims that it still has a cognitive dimension insofar as it involves the interaction between our cognitive capacities, specifically the imagination and understanding. As he tends to make this point, aesthetic judgments involve a “state of mind” that is at work in “cognition in general” (KU 5:217). This being said, Kant argues that in aesthetic judgment the imagination and understanding are proportioned to each other in a special way, viz., in a state he describes as free play:

The powers of cognition that are set into play by this representation [of the beautiful] are hereby in a free play, since no determinate concept restricts them to a particular rule of cognition (KU 5:217).⁷

In this state of free play, Kant suggests that there is a particular “harmony” that arises between the capacities: they are “enlivened through mutual agreement” and the “inner relationship [between the capacities] is optimal for the animation of both powers of the mind (the one through the other)” (KU 5:218, 219, 238). Now, according to Kant, being in a state of free play while judging the object gives rise to pleasure and insofar as the state itself is shareable, the subsequent pleasure can be shareable as well: “this merely subjective (aesthetic) judging of the object... precedes the pleasure in it, and is the ground of this pleasure in the harmony of the faculties of cognition” (KU 5:218).

Though this account of pleasure plays a pivotal role in Kant’s analysis of judgments of taste, the idea that the imagination here engages in a state of *free* play is important for his overall goal in the third *Critique*. On his view, unlike in its reproductive exercise, where the imagination is “subjected to the laws of association,” in aesthetic judgment, the imagination acts in a way that is “productive and self-active” (KU 5:240). The imagination no longer has to synthesize a manifold in light of a particular concept, but is rather free to explore or play with putting the manifold together in a multitude of different ways. For example, when we look at Caravaggio’s *The Calling of Saint Matthew*, we do not have to see it simply as instancing one concept, say, ‘*chiaroscuro*’; though we can see it

⁷ See Guyer 2005 for a discussion of the debate whether free play occurs without any concepts or whether it involves some concepts, perhaps a multiplicity of them.

through this lens, we are free to also see it in terms of, say, the foreground-background structure, the use of color, how the painting conveys the feeling of responsibility, etc. This being said, although the imagination plays in a *free* way in aesthetic judgment, on Kant's view it must nevertheless be in free play *with* the understanding. For this reason, Kant characterizes the imagination's state as one of "free lawfulness" (KU 5:240).⁸ On his view, the imagination's state is lawful because even without a specific concept guiding it, our imaginative activity must still accord with the understanding's demand that there be "unity" in what the imagination synthesizes (KU 5:287). When looking at the Caravaggio painting, my imagination must still help me see it in ways that are unified and ordered; were I to detect only chaos, this would not be a state of free play. Setting the details aside, what is ultimately significant about free play for Kant's overarching purposes is that it is a state in which although we encounter spatial and/or temporal objects, i.e., objects that belong to the sensible world, we are exercising our imaginative capacities in a way that is free with respect to these objects.

A second way in which the imagination's aesthetic activities contribute to the mediation between nature and freedom emerges in Kant's analysis of artistic activity, especially of genius. Kant defines genius as "the exemplary originality of the natural endowment of a subject for the **free** use of his cognitive faculties" (KU 5:318). In §49, he identifies the relevant cognitive faculties as the imagination and understanding and (echoing his account of aesthetic judgment) he argues that unlike in cognition, in genius, the imagination relates to the understanding in a free way:

in the use of the imagination for cognition, the imagination is under the constraint of the understanding and is subject to being adequate to its concept; in an aesthetic respect, however, the imagination is free to provide, beyond that concord with the concept, unsought extensive undeveloped material for the understanding (KU 5:316-7).

⁸ See Ginsborg 1997 for a discussion of how free lawfulness plays a role in Kant's account of aesthetic and cognitive judgment.

On Kant's view, when the artist's imagination relates to the understanding in this free way, it reveals itself as a 'productive' capacity that can act creatively:

The imagination (as a productive cognitive faculty) is, namely very powerful in creating, as it were another nature, out of the material the real one gives us... in this we feel our freedom from the law of association (KU 5:314).

According to Kant, when the artist's imagination acts in this productive and creative way, it produces a special type of imaginative representation that he labels an 'aesthetic idea', i.e., the idea that is expressed through her work of art.

Kant defines an aesthetic idea as follows:

In a word, the aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination, associated with a given concept, which is combined with such a manifold of partial representations in the free use of the imagination that no expression designating a determinate concept can be found for it (KU 5:316).

Notice that Kant claims an aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination that is connected to a given concept. On his view, in order for an activity to count as art, the artist must be guided by some intention she sets through her understanding, i.e., some "determinate concept of the product, as an end," however vague or changeable this concept may be (KU 5:317). Once the artist has a concept, Kant claims that her imagination sets to work in producing an aesthetic idea that simultaneously "presents" and "expands" that original concept (KU 5:317, 315). He maintains that the artist does this by adding "aesthetic attributes" to the concept, i.e., imaginative representations that are connected to though not logically contained in the concept (KU 5:315). Consider, for example, Yeats's poem "Sailing to Byzantium," the guiding concept of which is something like the state of one's soul at the end of one's life (1996: 193-4).⁹ On a Kantian analysis, by means of powerful images ('aesthetic attributes') like an old man sailing away to Byzantium, seas teeming with salmon and mackerel, tattered coats on sticks, gold mosaics, dying animals, etc., Yeats produces an

⁹ Describing his intentions in a draft for a BBC broadcast, Yeats says, "I am trying to write about the state of my soul, for it is right for an old man to make his soul, and some of my thoughts about that subject [sic] I have put into a poem called 'Sailing to Byzantium'" (Jeffares 1968: 253).

aesthetic idea which articulates and expands his original concept in a rich way. As Kant might make this point, Yeats,

add[s] to a concept a representation of the imagination that belongs to its presentation, but which by itself stimulates so much thinking that it can never be grasped in a determinate concept, hence which aesthetically enlarges the concepts itself in an unbounded way (KU 5:315).

The imaginative world of this poem is so expansive that we can find no determinate concept or single interpretation that would adequately capture the wealth of meaning that it contains. From a Kantian perspective, then, Yeats's genius consists in his natural talent for exercising his imagination in a free, productive, and creative way in order to extend concepts beyond their ordinary limits.

This, in turn, points toward the way genius mediates between nature and freedom. To begin, insofar as genius is a *natural* talent for *free* activity, there is something about the artist herself that unifies nature and freedom. Moreover, insofar as the production of an aesthetic idea involves an artist freely transforming nature in light of her concepts and ends, genius signals a way in which if we act "in accordance with principles that lie higher in reason... nature can be transformed by us into something entirely different, namely into that which steps beyond nature" (KU 5:314).

§4. The Moral Imagination

The final dimension of Kant's account of the imagination that we shall consider pertains to morality and his claim that the imagination can help bridge the gap between nature and freedom in virtue of the role it plays in aesthetic contexts that have a specifically *moral* dimension. In particular in his analysis of aesthetic ideas, beauty as a symbol of morality, and the sublime, he argues that the imagination helps us see how we as moral agents can have influence on the sensible world.

Beginning with the moral significance of aesthetic ideas, Kant says that some aesthetic ideas "make sensible rational ideas" (KU 5:314). On his view, rational ideas are a special class of ideas that involve concepts that lie "beyond experience" in the sense that an object that corresponds to

them can never be given in intuition, e.g., ideas like freedom and the highest good (KU 5:342). Kant claims that oftentimes artists will develop aesthetic ideas that strive to sensibly present these rational ideas and this process can be morally valuable insofar as it offers us moral encouragement. On his view, these aesthetic ideas give rational ideas the “appearance of an objective reality,” i.e., they make it seem as if rational ideas can, in fact, be realized in sensible ways (KU 5:314). Consider, for example, Kant’s description of the ‘ideal of beauty’ in §17. According to Kant, the ideal of beauty is an aesthetic idea that represents a human being as both a sensible and moral exemplar: not only is this person correctly proportioned physically, but also she embodies moral virtues. Describing the ideal of beauty, Kant says,

The visible expression of moral ideas, which inwardly govern human beings... make visible in bodily manifestation (as the effect of what is inward) their combination with everything that our understanding connects with the morally good in the idea of the highest purposiveness – goodness of soul, or purity, or strength, or repose, etc. (KU 5:235).

Insofar as this aesthetic idea and others like it present us with a picture of how our moral ideas can be realized by an embodied human being, they encourage us in our attempts to do the same.

According to Kant, another way in which the imagination can bring together nature and freedom is by leading us to engage in acts of reflection that are conducive to morality. This emerges in §59: ‘On beauty as the symbol of morality’.¹⁰ He begins this section by distinguishing two ways in which the imagination can present a concept in sensible form: through “schematic” or “symbolic” presentation (KU 5:351). According to Kant, while a schema is a “direct” presentation of a concept, e.g., the schema of the category ‘cause’, a symbol is an “indirect” presentation of a concept that induces a “form of reflection... which corresponds to the concept” (KU 5:351). To borrow Kant’s example, a handmill is a symbol of a despotic state because the way we reflect on the mechanical nature of a handmill parallels how we reflect on the mechanical nature of a despotic state (KU

¹⁰ For a discussion of the relevant secondary literature and how §59 bears on the connection between works of genius and moral motivation, see Ostaric 2010.

5:352). For Kant, then, symbols are imaginative presentations that invite a pattern of reflection in us that is similar to the pattern of reflection the relevant concept calls for.

Kant goes on to assert that “the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good” (KU 5:353). He suggests that the symbolic relation between the two is grounded in the fact that reflection on both beauty and the morally good involves two things: first, “a certain ennoblement and elevation above the mere receptivity” (KU 5:353). Unlike cases in which we are merely passive with respect to the world, in our aesthetic and moral reflection, we regard ourselves as free and active. Second, Kant claims that our judgments about the beautiful and the morally good require us to “esteem the value of others”: whether we think of the intersubjectivity built into the feeling of pleasure we take in the beautiful or the moral demand to respect others, in both judgments we must take others into account, instead of just focusing on ourselves (KU 5:353). For these reasons, Kant thinks the imagination’s presentation of beauty as the symbol of morality “makes possible the transition from sensible charm to the habitual moral interest without too violent a leap” because it helps us develop the reflective capacities required for morality (KU 5:354).

On Kant’s view, however, there is a further way in which the imagination can play a role in alerting us to our moral vocation and this occurs in judgments of the sublime (§§23-29). Kant distinguishes between two types of the sublime: the mathematically sublime, which involves objects that are very large, e.g., the Grand Canyon, and the dynamically sublime, which involves objects that are very powerful, e.g., a hurricane. Whereas in judgments of beauty the imagination relates to the understanding, Kant claims that in judgments of the sublime the imagination relates to reason (KU 5:247). Moreover, he claims that unlike the purely pleasurable experience involved in the free play of our faculties in judgments of the beautiful, judgments of the sublime involve two moments: an initial feeling of displeasure when we realize our sensible limits and a subsequent feeling of pleasure when we recognize the superiority of reason in us over nature.

In teasing out the imagination's contribution to judgments of the sublime, it may be tempting to think that given its connection to sensibility, the imagination is solely responsible for the displeasure we feel, while reason alone is the source of pleasure. Kant does indeed indicate that the displeasure we feel is connected to the limits of the imagination. For example, he claims that in the case of the mathematically sublime, we feel displeasure because the object is so large that although the imagination can "apprehend" it, the imagination fails when it tries to "comprehend" it, i.e., combine the manifold of intuition together into a single image (KU 5:252). However, although the imagination's inadequacies give rise to the displeasure we feel in the sublime, Kant also maintains that the imagination makes a positive contribution to the pleasure we feel.

In more detail, Kant argues that when we initially perceive the object we judge to be sublime, the imagination acts in a reproductive way, i.e., "in accordance with the law of association [and] makes our statement of contentment physically dependent" (KU 5:270). Given the large or powerful nature of the physical objects we perceive, this gives rise to displeasure. Yet Kant argues that there is a second moment in the sublime, a moment in which the imagination discovers that it has a higher 'vocation', viz., serving as an instrument of reason (KU 5:257):

the very same imagination, in accordance with principles of the schematism of the power of judgment (consequently to the extent that it is subordinate to freedom) is an instrument of reason and its ideas..., a power to assert our independence in the face of influences of nature, to diminish the value of what is great according to these, and so to place what is absolutely great only in its (the subject's) own vocation (KU 5:269).

Part of our feeling of pleasure in the sublime, then, stems from the imagination finding that it is not just bound by nature, but has a higher calling to act in accordance with reason and freedom. This is yet another expression of how the imagination spans across the domains of nature and freedom insofar as its interaction with a natural object reveals our ability as free agents to rise above natural constraint.

In the end, whether we consider aesthetic ideas, beauty as a symbol of morality, or the sublime, we find Kant highlighting the significant moral function of the imagination as it mediates between nature and freedom, encouraging us to see the former as something that can be transformed in light of the latter and making us aware of the latter within us. This, however, is but another way in which the imagination plays its fundamental role in Kant's system, bridging the gaps in human life, enabling us to see beyond what is here and now to the rich layers of meaning that give our human world its texture.¹¹

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