

## The Two Freedoms: The Possibility and Function of Free and Law-like Imagination

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KANT'S ACCOUNT of aesthetic judgments forms a difficult theory to maintain. Kant puts himself in a tremendously challenging situation by arguing for the universal validity of judgments of taste while at the same time specifically denying that judgments of taste can have any basis in concepts, but rather in a *subjective* delight that wells up inside of us as a result of the subjective finality of an object serving as the determining ground of our judgment. Although the language he uses is not completely perspicuous, Kant is extremely clear about the source of this delight that wells up inside of us and gives us the ability to make an aesthetic judgment: it is caused by the harmony of the imagination and the understanding. By making this claim, however, Kant leads himself into another dire strait on the road to a *a priori* vindication of aesthetic judgments. The problem lies in the fact that Kant describes the imagination as, in some sense, free and capable of "exerting an activity of its own" (*Judgement* 240).<sup>1</sup> By itself this claim is not difficult to accept, but its consistency with viewing understanding as a law-like cognitive faculty causes problems since the harmonization of imagination and understanding requires that imagination "be both *free* and of itself conformable to law," which "is a

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<sup>1</sup>The references to Kant will be given by the page numbers in the Prussian Academy Edition of Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften*. The English translations of the *Critique of Judgment* are from the Meredith translation, and translations of the *Critique of Pure Reason* are from the Kemp Smith translation.

contradiction" (241). In order to resolve the contradiction, I will first explore Kant's notion of imagination in its productive capacity. Then I will show that the free law-likeness of the imagination in a judgment of taste is consistent precisely because of the nature of the freedom that the imagination demonstrates, i.e., its productive rather than reproductive nature allows it to be free while sometimes subsuming its own powers under those of the understanding. Finally, it is this apparent contradiction of the autonomy of freedom acting in a law-like manner that gives Kant grounds to call the beautiful a symbol of morality.

The faculty of imagination has two different capacities—productive and reproductive. The reproductive capacity of the imagination (which Kant also calls the "empirical faculty of imagination") is integral to the process of cognition in general for it is through this faculty that we can "reinststate a preceding perception alongside the subsequent perception . . . to form a whole series of perceptions" (*Reason* A121). If the imagination did not reproduce perceptions so that we may develop a view of the empirical world as an actual *series* of perceptions, unity of apperception would not be possible, and without this important possibility, a unitary experience would no longer be possible. The productive capacity of the imagination is crucial to cognition as well. The productive capacity of the imagination (which Kant also calls "pure *a priori* imagination") yields schemata, the grounds of our pure sensible concepts. Through schemata we can connect actual images (provided by the reproductive capacity of the imagination) with pure sensible concepts and thus have a possible unitary experience.

Kant focuses on the productive capacity of the imagination in his *Critique of Judgment* when he attempts to explain the possibility of the freedom of the imagination and its harmonization with the understanding and subsequent law-likeness. The reproductive imagination is passive in the sense that it merely takes up the images we intuit, reproduces them, and synthesizes them for the sake of cognition in general. Empirical imagination is bound by the laws of association, and their binding force makes this capacity of the imagination unfree. In its reproductive capacity, then, the imagination can truly be considered at the service of the understanding (*Judgment* 242). Through these mundane functions of the reproductive imagination (which is bound by the laws of association given by the understanding) we are able to "[give] the manifold its determinate form" (242), i.e., we can make claims of

knowledge by means of determinate concepts. Kant states numerous times in emphatic language that although judgments of taste have a claim to necessity, this necessity does *not* rest on concepts: "Since an aesthetic judgment is not an objective or cognitive judgment, this necessity is not derivable from definite concepts" (237). Judgments of taste are based on the feeling of delight we have upon the observation of a beautiful object. This feeling of delight is a direct result of "the accord, in a given intuition, of the faculty of presentation, or the imagination, with the *faculty of concepts* that belongs to understanding or reason" (244). The pleasure resulting from this harmony of the faculties is clearly not the result of the mundane relationship of the reproductive imagination with the understanding, for that is a relationship that is based on determinate concepts.

The delight on which the judgment of taste relies comes from a harmony of the faculties of imagination (in its productive capacity) and understanding. The reason this harmony focuses on the productive capacity of the imagination is that it is this very aspect of the imagination that is unbounded by the laws of association. In other words, the productive imagination has no dependence on concepts, which makes it the perfect collaborative faculty for judgments of taste that also can have no dependence on concepts.

The freedom of the productive imagination has both negative and positive aspects.<sup>2</sup> In the negative sense, freedom of the imagination is its independence from the constraint placed upon it by the rules of concepts (*Judgment* 229–30). The action in which the imagination engages as a result of its negative freedom constitutes its freedom in a positive sense. Unfettered by concepts, the imagination "exert[s] an activity of its own (as originator of arbitrary forms of possible intuitions)" (240). This "activity of its own" goes well beyond the passive capabilities of the reproductive imagination since it is able to furnish its own "arbitrary forms of possible intuitions" rather than be limited to the images that are presented to it. In this active sense, the productive imagination is positively free, for it goes beyond mere acceptance and recreation of

<sup>2</sup>In casting the freedom of imagination in positive and negative terms, I am following Paul Guyer in chapter 6 of *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, page 251.

images and by doing this shows that it is “a powerful agent for creating, as it were, a second nature out of the material supplied to it by actual nature” (314). Although we cannot really describe these creations of the imagination (arbitrary forms of possible intuitions), we can say that they go beyond the scope of ordinary intuitions that can be subsumed under concepts because, as Kant says, “aesthetically [the imagination] is free to furnish of its own accord, over and above that agreement with the concept, a wealth of undeveloped material for the understanding” (317). So, Kant is clear that the imagination has a freedom to furnish the understanding with all sorts of intuitions. For the purposes of this discussion, it is only necessary that we acknowledge this ability of the imagination, not that we understand exactly what these intuitions are.

Kant is willing to abdicate not only negative but also positive freedom to the imagination in his account of aesthetic judgments, but this easy abdication leads him right into a nasty contradiction out of which it seems there is no resolution. The contradiction can be stated succinctly: a judgment of taste is made based on the subjective delight caused by the harmony of the imagination and understanding, but this harmony arises from the imagination conforming in its free capacity to the law of the understanding. If this is true how can the imagination be acting freely at the same time as it is acting in a manner conformable to law? A man of tremendous experience at dismantling antinomies, Kant shows the way out of this contradiction with typical Kantian elegance. Amazingly, it is the free, productive nature of the imagination that allows the imagination to have its autonomy while conforming to law.

Ordinarily, when the understanding and imagination collaborate to gain knowledge by giving the manifold determinate form, it is clear how the imagination, acting in its reproductive capacity, acts in a law-like manner. For cognition in general, the imagination is at the service of the understanding; however, this law-like manner of the imagination is not the source of our problem. The contradiction arises from the fact that when we perceive an object of beauty our experience is supposed to be outside of the jurisdiction of concepts while cognition in general is necessarily conceptual. The imagination, in its freedom, allows us to step out of the restrictive conceptual framework of cognition in general, but the delight that arises in us as a result of imagination’s *free play* is *rule governed*. It seems that if the free play of imagination conforms to the laws of understanding when we make an aesthetic judgment, then the

activity constitutive of these judgments is no different than the activity which underlies cognition in general; in both cases the imagination is conforming to the laws of the understanding.

The distinction that resolves this apparent contradiction relies on the freedom of the productive imagination. When discussing this contradiction, Kant suggests the solution by examining the motion of the imagination when confronted with an object that is rightfully deemed beautiful:

Still it is easy to conceive that the object may supply ready-made to the imagination just such a form of the arrangement of the manifold, as the imagination, *if it were left to itself* [my emphasis] would freely project in harmony with the *general conformity to the law of understanding* (240–41).

The key to this explanation lies in the nature of the “ready-made . . . form of the arrangement of the manifold” that the beautiful object delivers to the imagination. By coincidence (or maybe by the deliberate but ineffable workings of genius), the “ready-made form” happens to coincide with one of the arbitrary intuitions that the imagination in its productive freedom would have yielded “*if it were left to itself*,” but still conformed with the law of understanding out of its own accord. At this point it is important to stress the negative freedom to which the imagination lays claim. To stretch Kant’s own terminology, in the previously explained example, the imagination acts *in accordance with* the laws of the understanding but not *from* the laws of the understanding as the reproductive imagination does when synthesizing the manifold into a unitary experience. The negative freedom of the productive imagination (freedom from the constraint of concepts) allows for the possibility of the positive freedom it has to actively move beyond the dominion of concepts. The harmonization of the faculties is not a result of the understanding, with the power of its laws, having *control over* the intuitions the productive imagination furnishes but rather the productive imagination furnishing an arbitrary intuition that goes *along with* the type of intuition the laws of understanding would have demanded.

Although the contradiction is resolved, the precise inner workings of the harmony of the faculties in a judgment of taste are still difficult to grasp. From Kant’s account of the imagination in the first *Critique*, one

may think that the imagination is always subordinated to the faculty of understanding since, even in its productive capacity, the imagination is said to provide schema by which images can be connected to concepts (*Reason* A141–42/B181). It seems as if this relationship has been reversed in the third *Critique* when Kant alludes to the dominance of the imagination in aesthetic judgments. When we make a judgment of taste and feel the delight resulting from the harmony of the faculties based on no determinate concept, “understanding is at the service of imagination” (*Judgment* 242). To make sense of this apparent subordination of understanding to the imagination, recall that the productive imagination

is free to furnish of its own accord, over and above that agreement with the concept, a wealth of undeveloped material for the understanding, to which the latter paid no regard in its concept, but which it can make use of, not so much objectively for cognition, as subjectively for quickening the cognitive faculties (*Judgment* 317).

When a subject observes an object that can rightfully be called beautiful, the imagination, in its unboundedness, causes a feeling of delight since it furnishes a ready-made intuition which harmonizes with the understanding. In this sense, then, the imagination is the dominant of the two faculties since its range is free, as it were, while the range of the understanding is restrained by its concepts. But is Kant really committed to the reversal of the dominance of the faculties when functioning for cognition in general and when functioning in judgments of taste?

Such a radical role-reversal is not Kant’s intention by speaking of the understanding being in service of the imagination. In chapter 35 Kant gives a lucid account of the workings of the cognitive faculties when making a judgment of taste:

Since the freedom of the imagination consists precisely in the fact that it schematizes without a concept, the judgment of taste must found upon a mere sensation of the mutually quickening of the imagination in its *freedom*, and of the understanding with its *conformity to law*. . . . Taste, then, as a subjective power of judgment, contains a principle of subsumption, not of intuitions under *concepts* but of the *faculty* of intuitions or presentations, i.e. of the imagination, under the *faculty* of concepts, i.e. the understanding

so far as the former in its freedom accords with the latter in its conformity to law (*Judgment* 287).

This passage shows us that Kant does not consider the understanding as at the service of the imagination when making aesthetic judgments. The whole faculty of the imagination does not subsume itself under the understanding in the sense that it works for the understanding (as in cognition in general). Instead the imagination subsumes itself "in its freedom" meaning that it only happens to accord with the conformity to law of the understanding and there is no compulsion involved.

How can we be sure that the passage in chapter 35 describes Kant's true understanding of the relationship of the faculties in a judgment of taste? We need to turn to context for the answer. When Kant says that "understanding is at the service of imagination" when we make judgments of taste, he is speaking (as he often does in the third *Critique*) about the actual *feeling* of the individual at the moment of her delightful experience. The individual only *feels* as if understanding is at the service of the imagination since the imagination, in its freedom, "puts the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion" (*Judgment* 315). So the actual ontological relationship of the faculties remains the same when making a judgment of taste, but the phenomenological relationship is altered.

Kant has some very important reasons for giving a phenomenological account of the feeling of delight which characterizes a judgment of taste. The most obvious reason is that Kant concedes that this delight is something that *cannot* be demonstrated without experience since it is not based on concepts in any way. The subjective feeling defines the judgment of the beautiful so it is crucial that Kant give some account not only of what happens (as in chapter 35) but also how it feels when it happens.

The primary function of the feeling of delight is that it gives us a signal that an object is beautiful. The feeling of delight, however, has significance beyond this primary function. It is through our experience of the freedom of the imagination that we are given a symbol of morality.<sup>3</sup> In order to give such an account, Kant needed to delineate his

<sup>3</sup>Here I am following Paul Guyer in chapter 1 (especially pages 39–41) of *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* by using the importance of the feeling of the freedom of the imagination as an analogue to the freedom of the moral law.

phenomenological account of delight so we could understand how the feeling of *freedom of the imagination* does well up inside of us when we are confronted with a beautiful object.

We are now in a position to examine and understand how and why Kant argues that beauty is a symbol of morality. First, Kant separates the “intuitions by which *a priori* concepts are given a foothold” into “either *schemata* or *symbols*” (*Judgment* 352). The difference between symbols and schemata is the manner in which they present a concept; schemata present directly while symbols present indirectly. The indirect way that symbols present a concept is by the use of analogy. Symbolic presentation of a concept takes place because it is impossible for that concept to be directly presented through schemata.

Now it should be fairly clear how it is that beauty functions as a *symbol* of morality. The freedom of the imagination that we feel when we experience delight from a beautiful object is a wonderful analogy for the law-like freedom of action from duty. When the imagination, in its *freedom*, subsumes itself under the understanding in its law-like form, “judgment does not find itself subjected to a heteronomy of laws of experience as it does in the empirical estimate of things—in respect of the objects of such a pure delight it gives the law to itself, just as reason does in respect of the faculty of desire” (*Judgment* 353). Kant compares the heteronomy of the will and sensible desires to the heteronomy of the imagination and cognitive goals. The analogy is transparent: just as the will acts freely from the determination of natural laws but still acts from the moral law, so does the imagination act freely from the determination of concepts but still acts in accordance with the understanding in its conformity to law.

Perhaps it is easy to examine the *Critique of Judgment* as an interesting and important text in the history of aesthetic theory, since its main thrust is explicating the search for a principle of the faculty of judgment as evidenced by estimates of the beautiful and sublime. To stop there, however, would be a shame. Kant’s efforts in the third *Critique* are explicitly presented with a view to the “transcendental aspects” of taste (170). Through this view we can understand why Kant would go to such lengths to explain the inherently obscure free play of the faculties and their relationships to judgments of taste. By reading Kant’s third *Critique* we do not gain a determinate sense of what constitutes art or good art for that matter (that would require a basis on

concepts). We can, however, make connections between the experience of the beautiful and its relationship to our cognitive faculties to give us a sense of the type of knowledge we receive when we appreciate art or nature. The fact that beauty functions as a symbol of morality gives judgments of taste a significance that transcends the mere experience of aesthetic appreciation by helping us to understand the autonomy which we are all called, by our rational nature, to participate in and experience.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup>I would like to thank Josefine Nauckhoff for her helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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