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Kant's Earliest Notion of Adherent Beauty

According to *Kritik der Urtheilskraft*, an adherent judgment of beauty is one in which a concept of the object, specifically its kind or purpose or “perfection”, is attended to in the act of judging it to be beautiful. “Free”, not conditioned beauty, is said to be “self-standing”:

There are two kinds of beauty: free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) or merely adherent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it. The first are called (self-standing) [*für sich bestehende*] beauties of this or that thing; the latter, as adhering to a concept (conditioned beauty), are ascribed to objects that stand under the concept of a particular end.¹

Surprisingly, in the *early* period of Kant's aesthetics (1760s on), “self-standing” (independent, lasting) beauties are those that depend on the ends of the object, or are a means to the concept of the good. They are presumably called self-standing because they are linked to the object or work that has objective or quasi-objective purposes in light of which it is judged. The early theory apparently made the inference that since the good is in some sense independent or self-standing (e. g., in the ancient sense in which the good is more stable than mundane events or objects, as in the neo-Platonic theory of evil as privation of the good), any beauty connected to the good would itself also be independent, stable, or lasting. It is somehow relatively independent of us.

Below, I give an overview of the eighteenth-century debate on beauty and utility; examine Kant's *Beobachtungen* (1764); discuss Kant's unpublished *Reflexionen* from the late 1760s and early 1770s; and explain why Kant changed his mind about whether purpose-based, or instead free, beauty was to be called “self-standing” (which continues to mean independent, lasting).

1 Kant: § 16, KU, AA 05: 229. Translations are taken from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge, 1992–), sometimes with emendations such as consistently rendering *selbstständig* as “self-standing”. I have translated passages not found in this Edition.

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110467888-295>

1 The Eighteenth-Century Debate: Beauty and Utility

In the eighteenth century, at least three various models of the beauty-utility relation were available.

1. *Autonomy.* Beauty and perfection/utility are distinct concepts and cannot be united: increase in one has no effect on the other. Utility is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of beauty.
2. *Blocking-unification.* Beauty and perfection/utility are distinct concepts yet can be unified (or the latter can affect the former). A dysfunctional object can block its beauty, or utility can affect beauty: increased (decreased) utility can lead to increased (decreased) beauty.
3. *Containment.* Beauty is a form or mode of perfection/utility.

Although this summary is necessarily simplified, one could say that writers in the broadly Leibnizian traditions adopt the third approach; Shaftesbury (i.e., one aspect of his account), Hume, Berkeley, Home, Sulzer, and Kant, the second; and the Shaftesbury later interpreted as defending ‘disinterestedness’, Hutcheson, and Burke, the first.

The modern debate about utility and beauty began with Shaftesbury.² Intended or not, one consequence of Shaftesbury’s *The Moralists* was to persuade his successors that the response to the beauty of an object had to be independent of possession of the object. Nevertheless, in a passage in *Characteristics*’ concluding “Miscellaneous Reflection”, Shaftesbury *also* stated that the utility and beauty are “plainly joined”. He did not, however, explain how they are conjoined or how they differ. In contrast to Shaftesbury, in *An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) Hutcheson insisted on the difference between utility and beauty. The nature of beauty – understood by Hutcheson as “uniformity amidst variety”, as Kant recognized in his anthropology lectures³ – itself precluded any connection between this response and the recognition of utility generally. In *Alciphron* (1732), Berkeley firmly rejected Hutcheson’s position: the feeling of beauty was dependent on and very closely connected with the recognition of the object’s utility. In the fourth edition of 1738, Hutcheson responded to Berkeley by insisting that there was no direct connection between

² The following overview is indebted to Paul Guyer: *Beauty and Utility in Eighteenth Century Aesthetics*. In: *Eighteenth Century Studies* 35 (2002), 439 – 453.

³ Kant: V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1228.

the utility and the beauty of objects or between our responses to these distinct properties. Burke sided with Hutcheson, arguing in *A Philosophical Enquiry* that an object's utility was neither a cause of its beauty nor sufficient condition for beauty, since many features or characteristics that, at least to their possessor, are highly useful (e.g., a boar's snout), are not beautiful and are even ugly or ridiculous. Hume, whose aesthetic writings Kant mentions in his earliest anthropology lectures (1772/73),⁴ appeared at first to split the difference between Berkeley and Hutcheson, but he ultimately sided more with Berkeley, maintaining that the majority of the cases of beauty are actually cases of the beauty of utility (what Hume called "relative" beauty) rather than the beauty of mere species or appearance ("absolute" beauty). In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (of which the first part was published in 1739), Hume tried to resolve the debate by accepting both sides and recognizing two varieties of beauty, one of which depends on the appearance of utility (which he discussed much more than absolute beauty) and the other which is unrelated to utility. Finally, Henry Home, Lord Kames, held that beauty increases with utility and that an object's utility increases the pleasure in its beauty. Even if Home does not exclude the possibility of absolute beauty, or beauty without utility, he, like Hume, considered it to be rare.

On the European continent, meanwhile, aesthetic theory developed within the framework established by Leibniz and Wolff. The key to this framework was the idea that beauty is the "anschauende Erkenntniß der Vollkommenheit", as Wolff put it in § 404 of *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen* (1720). The Leibnizian-Wolffian conception of perfection left plenty of room for the notion of utility: perceiving an object's utility counted as an instance of perceiving its perfection. Since taking pleasure in the clear, but confused, perception of utility was just as good a case of beauty as any other kind, aestheticians such as Wolff or Gottsched or Mendelssohn saw no special reason to distinguish our pleasure in beauty from that in utility or perfection. Baumgarten considered utility (*Metaphysica*, §§ 336–340) and beauty to be kinds of perfection (§ 662). In *Allgemeine Theorie der schönen Künste* (1771–1774), Sulzer distinguished between "proper" and "improper" beauty. Nevertheless, Sulzer ultimately unified them under the notion of perfection.

⁴ See Kant: V-Anth/Parow, AA 25: 385.

2 *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*

Kant claims that some people “prefer the beautiful to the useful”; beauty and utility are distinct: “For the beauty of all actions it is requisite above all that they display facility and that they seem to be accomplished without painful effort”.⁵ A few pages earlier, Kant reunites beauty and utility, displaying a “unificationist” model:

It is indeed customary to call useful only that which can satisfy our cruder sentiment, what can provide us with a surplus for eating and drinking, display in clothing and furniture, and lavishness in entertaining, although *I do not see why everything that is craved with my most lively feeling should not be reckoned among the useful things.*⁶

The quip at the end is not mere jest. It suggests that whatever evokes the “lively feeling” (which, the context shows, includes beauty), namely the lavish display or radiance, may itself be called useful.

In a footnote in the same treatise Kant associates a cheerful or humorous conversation’s having “real content” with its utility. He praises, “the taste for an entertainment that is certainly cheerful, but must also have real content, that is humorous but must also be useful because of serious conversations”.⁷ The humorous discourse’s content or substance is connected to utility, which in turn is derived from fulfilling its aims. The notion of the “real content” of the conversation is close to “self-standing” beauty, even if Kant does not use the term here. The speech’s conceptual content gives it a kind of lasting independence or substance, and utility. Although Kant’s discussion is not explicitly about beauty, such entertainment with “real content” appears to be the earliest published passage relating to an aesthetic feeling partially based on concepts.

3 *Reflexionen*

The forerunners of the free-adherent distinction in Kant’s *Reflexionen* are interesting not only for their content, but also since they were written after the *Beob-*

⁵ Kant: GSE, AA 02: 229.

⁶ Kant: GSE, AA 02: 226; italics added.

⁷ Kant: GSE, AA 02: 242 n. The context makes it clear that the “humorous” would be subsumed under the treatise’s concept of “lively feeling”, which also includes the feeling of beauty.

achtungen yet before Kant began lecturing on anthropology in 1772/73. Unlike the student notes of Kant's anthropology course, they were composed by Kant himself rather than by transcribers. In his personal copy of Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*, Kant writes: "Self-standing beauty must be grounded on a consistent principle; now no cognition is unalterable but the one that reveals what the thing is; hence it is a combination with reason".⁸ Self-standing beauty is grounded on a "consistent principle", something stable, enduring, substantial. But beyond the fact that "what the thing is" relates to an object, the meaning of the claim that a cognition reveals "what the thing is" remains obscure. It does not specify whether it is a claim about classes and kinds (as in conceptual and purpose-based beauty), or about what it means to be an object as such (as in Kant's theoretical philosophy and the first *Critique*).

In Reflexion 618, also from 1769 if not earlier (1764–68?), Kant introduces the idea that poetry evokes a harmonious *play* of thoughts or motion of the mental powers not "necessitated by an end". Echoing a Berkeleyan worry about blocking, viz., there may be so much disutility in the object that we simply cannot feel any pleasure of beauty in response to it, Kant adds the condition that the thoughts "not be a hindrance to themselves and to reason," although they also cannot have the particular end of promoting reason either. Poesy has the "end" only of setting the mental powers into play, and this is a process that requires it to have mental "content":

Poesy has neither sensations nor intuitions nor insights as its end, but rather setting all the powers and springs in the mind into play; its images should not contribute more to the comprehensibility of the object, but should give lively motion to the imagination. It must have a content, because without understanding there is no order and its play arouses the greatest satisfaction.⁹

This passage is interesting because it shows that a theory of mental play appears in Kant's theory in the late 1760s. According to this fragment, a poem's content, given by the understanding, provides order, while the imagination is enlivened. The fragment also distinguishes beauty that is related to an end from beauty that merely concerns the harmony between the object's "look" and the state of mind.¹⁰

8 Kant: Refl, AA 15: 275, R 635. I follow the Adickes date ranges and question marks as found in the *Akademie Ausgabe*.

9 Kant: R 618, Refl, AA 15: 266f.

10 Kant: R 628, Refl, AA 15: 273f., from 1769, also provides an instance of the unification model. R 629, from the same year (Refl, AA 15: 274) mentions "self-standing" beauty.

Kant claims in another contemporaneous note (though perhaps from 1769–75) that “the utility of cognition is not beauty”¹¹, echoing Burke’s point that utility is not a sufficient cause of beauty, and distancing himself from the German aesthetic tradition while still employing its terminology. Likewise a note from 1769/70 Kant claims that “self-standing” beauty can serve to make general concepts intuitive.¹²

Kant reunites utility and beauty by employing the concept of beauty in relation to the good. The fragment, from 1769, distinguishes between sensible (*sinnliche*) and self-standing beauty:

The sensible form (or the form of sensibility) of a cognition pleases either as a play of sensation or as a form of intuition (immediately) or as a means to the concept of the good. The former is charm, the second the sensibly beautiful, the third self-standing [*selbständige*] beauty.¹³

Here “self-standing” beauty is contrasted with the “sensibly” beautiful. Self-standing beauty is a vehicle to the concept of the good, i. e., an aesthetic or sensible response to that concept, presumably including also the concept of the end of a particular object. In contrast, an object is sensibly beautiful, or pleases immediately in intuition, if its form fits with the law of coordination among appearances.

... The object pleases immediately in the intuition if its form fits with the law of coordination among appearances and facilitates sensible clarity and magnitude. Like symmetry in buildings and harmony in music. The object pleases in the intuitive concept [*im Anschauenden Begriffe*] if its relation to the good can be expressed through a concept that pleases in sensible form.¹⁴

Self-standing beauty, unlike sensible beauty, is elicited by an object that the observer relates to the good. The object pleases in the intuitive concept whose sensible form is found to be pleasant. Note that it is “a” concept, not the understanding in general, which does the expressing. In the early 1770s, still in his first aesthetic stage, Kant continues to use the notion of self-standing beauty, to distinguish, then reunite, beauty and utility. Around 1770/71 (or perhaps

11 Kant: R 1811, Refl, AA 16: 124.

12 See Kant: R 1794, Refl, AA 16: 118.

13 Kant: R 639, Refl, AA 15: 276.

14 Kant: R 639, Refl, AA 15: 279.

1772–77) he repeats the idea that the beautiful object per se is the one “whose intuition pleases sensibly”.¹⁵

In a remarkable fragment (1776–78? 1772–75?? 1773–77??) from the second phase of his aesthetics, Kant claims that “what the art of intuition reveals clearly” is beautiful, and contrasts it with the response to objects where purposes are determined by reason. This is reminiscent not only of Kant’s earlier distinction between pure and purpose-based beauty, but also of the distinction between the immediate and relative beauty presented by Hume and others.

Ars aspectabilis est pulchritudo. [trans.: Art that is worthy of being seen is beautiful]. What the art [*Kunst*] of intuition presents clearly and readily is beautiful. Hence the art must not be cognized through reason, thus insofar as the object is considered as a means, but in the thing itself. Regularity, proportion, measured division. A regular polygon. A pure color; the distribution of colors for charm (tulips, pheasants). Proportionate tone. The agreement (relation) of *phaenomeni* with an idea in general [*überhaupt*]; to beauty there belongs understanding. The agreement of the *phaenomeni* with the essential end [*wesentlichen Zwecke*] is the higher [*obere*] beauty [...].¹⁶

What it would mean to cognize art in “the thing itself” is puzzling, especially if we keep in mind the first *Critique* (1781). However, rather than having in mind the *Ding an sich*, Kant apparently means that a contemplation that does *not* attend to the end set by reason is one that focuses on features that are in the object or thing itself: regularity, proportion, measured division, indeed those features associated with *free* beauty in Kant’s mature theory. (In KU, Kant would pick up on this, but I think he needed a distinct, moral-teleological orientation to move him to call “free” beauties “self-standing”.) In the beginning lines above, Kant appears to subscribe to a position close to Hutcheson’s unity-in-variety theory by claiming that art must be cognized not for its conformity to “the” end but only in the thing itself, in regularity and proportion. According to the passage’s second half, there can be an agreement between the appearances and an idea provided by the understanding or reason (“the essential end”): this constitutes purpose-based beauty. Strikingly, Kant again goes further: the agreement of the phenomena with the essential end is in fact the *higher* kind of beauty. Thus, it would appear that this fragment refers to both kinds of beauty but ultimately privileges the Berkeleyan side of Kant’s account. While the passage is not clear about the specific roles of sensibility (intuition) and understanding, it plainly distinguishes pleasure in the beautiful object’s agreement with its “es-

¹⁵ Kant: R 1813, Refl, AA 16: 125; cf. R 1814.

¹⁶ Kant: R 871, Refl, AA 15: 383.

sential” end, from beauty stemming from a non-instrumental, “clear” presentation in intuition, where the object is not considered a “means”.

4 Conclusion

Why did Kant change his mind about which kind of beauty is “self-standing”? What interests Kant in the KU is how the beauty of nature can be taken to reveal a natural teleology.

Natural beauty (the self-standing kind) [*die selbständige*] carries with it a purposiveness in its form, through which the object seems as it were to be predetermined for our power of judgment. [...] ¹⁷

The self-standing [*selbständige*] beauty of nature reveals to us a technique of nature, which makes it possible to represent it as a system in accordance with laws the principle of which we do not encounter anywhere in our entire faculty of understanding, namely that of a purposiveness with respect to the use of the power of judgment in regard to appearances. ¹⁸

Kant’s self-imposed aim to bridge a gap between nature and freedom is an important factor in his calling free natural beauty the “self-standing” kind. Kant probably thought that it was easiest to draw a connection between the aesthetics and moral-teleology of nature by focusing on the pure beauty of *natural* forms (where the very freedom of the imagination in aesthetic play can still itself be taken as a symbol of *moral* freedom). He probably preferred applying the term “self-standing” to the pure beauty of natural forms, because the task he had given himself was to make a transition to freedom starting from *nature*.

The kind of beauty with “content” granted to it by the object is a precursor to what KU calls “adherent” or conditioned beauty. Kant arrived at the notion of self-standing beauty as early as the 1760s – if one counts the nascent notion in *Observations*, then as early as 1764. It was Kant’s “discovery” (around 1787) of an a priori principle underlying pure aesthetic judgments, the conception of the harmony of the faculties as a kind of freedom, and the idea that there was an analogy between the imagination’s freedom in the experience of (natural) beauty and morality and that beauty could symbolize morality, that also led him to change his mind about what was properly to be called self-standing beauty. It was possible for Kant to have a notion of purpose-based beauty long before he had adopted these positions in the late 1780s. For Kant only needed a concept

¹⁷ Kant: KU, § 23, AA 05: 245.

¹⁸ Kant: KU, § 23, AA 05: 246.

of the beautiful object's end and the utility it provided in fulfilling its *purpose*, and like Hume and others before him, he had this notion, indeed, he had it decades before he began to write his mature work of aesthetics in the late 1780s.¹⁹

¹⁹ I thank Corey Dyck, Richard Eldridge, David Kim, Samantha Matherne, J. Colin McQuillan, Amanda Pirrone, and audience members in Vienna, for comments and discussion.

