

The Usefulness of Kant's Distinction Between Free and Dependent Beauty

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The distinction which Kant draws, in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, between 'free' and 'dependent' beauty is generally taken as one of the more arcane moments in a text that is, in any case, widely regarded (within aesthetics, at least, where accounts of it are usually drawn from first hand acquaintance) as problematic to the point of obscurity.¹⁾ The intention of this paper is to offer an account of Kant's distinction that will resolve some of the difficulties the distinction appears to create. To do so, however, it will be necessary to make connections and draw conclusions that Kant himself neither makes nor draws in so explicit a manner. My intention here, then, is not so much to argue for a particular interpretation of what Kant really meant, as to propose, using the materials of Kant's argument, a more consistent account of that aspect of the judgement of taste towards which his distinction points.

I

It is not necessary here to rehearse Kant's well known exposition of the conditions of the judgement of taste. Nevertheless, since it is the role of the distinction in question within Kant's own account which is most obviously problematic, I will begin my enquiry from that point in his argument which immediately precedes its introduction.

- 1) E. F. Carritt asserts that such a distinction 'simply does not exist'; *The Theory of Beauty* (1914), fifth edition (London, 1949) p. 113. He does, however, go to the trouble of a confutation (pp. 113-19). H. W. Cassirer, by contrast, deliberately passes over the sections concerning this distinction in his *Commentary on Kant's Critique of Judgement* (New York, 1938). Monroe C. Beardsley does not even mention it in his exposition of Kant's theory in *Aesthetics from Classical Greece to the Present* (London, 1966) (pp. 210-25), and George Dickie, despite the various interpretations recently advanced, dismisses the concept of what he calls 'accessory beauty' as inexplicable; *The Century of Taste: The Philosophical Odyssey of Taste in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1996), p. 114. Pluhar mentions the distinction under the heading 'Beauty and Fine Art', but his treatment is cursory; 'Introduction' to *Kant Critique of Judgement* (1790), translated by Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, 1987), pp. lxvi-lxviii. John Kemp avoids the problem by asserting that judgements of dependent beauty are not judgements of taste at all, but merely bear 'some resemblance' to them, being rather judgements based on the conformity of the object to our normative idea of such objects; *The Philosophy of Kant* (Oxford, 1968), p. 105. Donald Crawford likewise asserts that in describing 'dependent beauty' as a 'judgement of taste' Kant cannot be using the latter phrase in the strict sense of 'the product of a disinterested act of judging an object noncognitively'; *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (Madison, 1974), pp. 24-5. Like Kemp, he concludes that a judgement of dependent beauty 'is to be analysed as an assessment of a close approximation to the perfection or ideal of the kind' (p. 114). Malcolm Budd takes a similar line, interpreting 'dependent beauty' as a 'combination of a pure judgement of taste ... with a judgement of qualitative perfection', while conceding that the concept 'suffers from a number of obscurities', and that Kant may possibly have meant that the delight involved arises not from the presence of a pure judgement of taste but rather from the very judgement that the object is qualitatively perfect; 'Delight in the Natural World: Kant on the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature. Part I: Natural Beauty' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 38 (1998), pp. 1-18 (pp. 10-11). Paul Guyer proposes two explanations for the contradiction that 'dependent beauty' appears to contain: firstly, that Kant is perhaps merely stating a commonly held opinion - that beauty is a form of perfection - rather than himself positing the existence of such

The disinterested, aconceptual nature of beauty, the universality implicit in its lack of grounding either in a subjective end (as a source of delight) or an objective end (as a source of the good), leads Kant to assert that the sole foundation of the judgement of taste must be what he calls the 'form of finality' of an object or its representation.²⁾ The judgment of taste, in other words, does not deal with any concept of the nature or of the possibilities of the object, but simply with the relative bearing of the representative powers so far as determined by representation itself: '*Beauty is the form of finality in an object, so far as perceived in it apart from the representation of any end.*'³⁾

This form of finality which the object has for us in a judgement of taste can be contrasted, says Kant, both with *external objective finality*, that is usefulness, and *internal objective finality*, that is, the perfection of the object.⁴⁾ He rejects them both on the grounds that they would involve making the judgement of taste reliant on concepts. This is obviously so in the case of the useful, but Kant holds that it is equally so in the case of perfection. For in estimating any objective finality we require both a concept of what sort of thing the object is, and an estimate of how closely the particular example comes to what we conceive of as the perfection of such things: as he says, 'the mere form of *perfection*', divorced from a concept of type and, therefore, function, is a contradiction in terms.⁵⁾

In deriving that aspect of the definition of the beautiful that is contained in this section ('*Beauty is the form of finality in an object, so far as perceived in it apart from the representation of any end*') Kant adds a footnote to counter the possible objection that we are capable of cognizing a form as useful without also cognizing a particular end for that form. He puts forward the example of a Stone Age implement:

a thing as dependent beauty, or, secondly, that he is proposing that there are judgements of taste which do involve (are 'restrained' by) concepts of purpose, but which are not fully determined by such concepts; *Kant and the Claims of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), pp. 244-53. This is, however, according to Guyer, 'an inadequate interpretation of Kant's claim that judgements of dependent beauty *presuppose* concepts of what objects should be' (p. 247). John Zammito interprets Kant's distinction as a confused attempt to develop a theory of taste that could encompass more than just such 'trivial' phenomena as sea shells, flowers, and arabesques; *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (Chicago, 1992), pp. 124-9. J. M. Bernstein, for no very good reason, makes the distinction 'wholly-dependent on Kant's moral theory'; *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 32-5; 36-8. Roger Scruton attacks the distinction on the grounds that there is only dependent beauty, that is, that it would be 'absurd' to suppose that someone could say a thing was beautiful unless they knew what it was; 'Aesthetics' entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, p. 17. (This is obviously a thesis that presumes a rather idiosyncratic definition of 'beautiful'.) Ruth Lorand takes the view that, since the beauty of an object depends upon its context, and every object must, inescapably, have a significance, all beauty must be dependent; 'On "Free and Dependent Beauty" - A Rejoinder' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 32 (1992), pp. 250-3. (She is answering Stecker's and Lord's replies to her earlier 'Free and Dependent Beauty' in volume 29 of the same journal; see also Robert Stecker 'Lorand and Kant on Free and Dependent Beauty' and Catherine Lord 'A Note on Ruth Lorand's "Free and Dependent beauty: A Puzzling Issue"' in volumes 30 and 31, respectively.) Kant was 'wrong', she writes in a later paper, for 'neglecting the fact that non-conceptual value is and must be preconditioned'; 'The Purity of Aesthetic Value' *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 50 (1992), pp. 13-21 (p. 20). Likewise Denis Dutton rejects the very existence of free beauty, and even discerns such a rejection by Kant himself in the course of the later sections of the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement; 'Kant and the Conditions of Artistic Beauty' *British Journal of Aesthetics* 34 (1994), pp. 226-41. The actual case is, as we shall see, more complicated than this.

2) Immanuel Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (1790) in *The Critique of Judgement* (1790), translated by James Creed Meredith (1911) (Oxford, 1952), § 10, pp. 61-2 [220].

3) *ibid.*, §§ 10-11, pp. 61-2 [220-1]; § 17, p. 80 [236].

4) *ibid.*, § 15, pp. 69-71 [226-9].

5) *ibid.*, pp. 69-70 [227-8].

[Although] these by their shape manifestly indicate a finality, the end of which is unknown, they are not on that account described as beautiful. But the very fact of their being regarded as art-products involves an immediate recognition that their shape is attributed to some purpose or other and to a definite end. For this reason there is no immediate delight whatever in their contemplation. A flower, on the other hand, such as a tulip, is regarded as beautiful, because we meet with a certain finality in its perception, which, in our estimate of it, is not referred to any end whatever.⁶⁾

It has appeared to some commentators that Kant is here asserting that the very quality of being artificial precludes the possibility of being beautiful. Kant's main emphasis in the note, however, is on the idea that being unable to determine the objective finality of the object is not the same as considering the object independently of the concept of an objective finality. He is not, then, saying that we do not perceive the implement as beautiful because it is artificial, but rather that simply being unable to cognize the function of the implement is not *sufficient* grounds for the object appearing as beautiful.

The form of the note does, nevertheless, invite some confusion by the contrast it draws between the implement and the flower. In the case of the flower, Kant writes, 'we meet with a certain finality in its perception'. This would appear to imply that the flower, being without a purpose, is necessarily beautiful, or, at least, potentially beautiful in a way that the implement cannot be. This is not, as we shall see, what Kant wishes to assert; neither indeed is it something that can be deduced from what he has said so far. For if uselessness is not a sufficient condition for a thing's being beautiful then neither is it, in Kant's account, a necessary condition either. It is the bare form of finality in the representation whereby any object is *given* to us, so far as we are conscious of it, that inspires the delight of beauty. If we did not refer, or were not conscious of referring, the form of the implement to a hypothetical use then we might also meet with a certain finality in its perception, that is, find it beautiful. A pure judgement of taste, says Kant, is possible even in respect of an object with a definite internal end, providing 'the person judging either has no concept of this end, or else makes abstraction from it in his judgement'.⁷⁾ On the other hand there are various ways in which the representation of the flower might be given to us (as herbalists, botanists, or gardeners) that would imply either an estimate of its usefulness or its perfection.⁸⁾ It is not, then, that the flower is intrinsically beautiful or potentially beautiful while the implement is not. Hence Kant's definition of 'beauty' not simply as the form of finality in an object, but rather as that finality 'so far as perceived' in the object apart from the 'representation' of some end.

However, having defined the judgement of taste by the exclusion of any role for concepts, either of use or perfection, Kant then appears to retract this very definition. There are, he says, two forms of beauty: 'free beauty', or beauty which presupposes no concept of what the object

6) *ibid.*, § 17, p. 80n1 [236].

7) *ibid.*, § 16 p. 74 [231].

8) *ibid.*, p. 72 [229].

should be, and 'dependent beauty', which does presuppose such a concept, and consequently an answering perfection in the object.⁹⁾ 'Dependent beauties' are, therefore, appendant, for a concept of the good enters in, and, according to Kant, mars the purity of the judgement of taste in just the same way as would an admixture of the agreeable.¹⁰⁾ This would seem to indicate that 'dependent beauty' is not beauty at all, though Kant persists in using the word 'beauty' to refer to this species of normative judgment, which, while it may involve delight, would not appear to be aconceptual after the fashion of beauty as he has described it.

It would be convenient to be able to say that Kant, in distinguishing between 'free beauty' and 'dependent beauty', is merely qualifying his earlier definition: '*Beauty* is the form of finality in an object, so far as perceived in it *apart from the representation of any end*'.¹¹⁾ But it is difficult to see how such a definition can be reconciled with the assertion that there is a form of beauty which is 'dependent'. It is worth noting, however, that some distinction of this kind was no novelty at the time Kant was writing. The author of the article 'Beauty' in Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* had distinguished between a beauty that is ascribed according to the approbation of the mind, and a beauty that is ascribed according to the excitation of 'agreeable Sensations'; concluding, rather unhelpfully, that 'There is therefore *Beauty* and *Beauty*'.¹²⁾ Kames had made a similar distinction, likewise without feeling the need to reconcile what the distinction implied, between relative beauty, which is perceived where a notion of adaption to purpose enters into the subject's reaction, and intrinsic beauty, for which 'no more is required but singly an act of vision'.¹³⁾ If we also bear in mind how theoreticians and critics at this time used the word 'beauty' both to denote an immediate and ineffable effect, and (usually in combination with an article) to denote effects, most commonly in art, the production and enjoyment of which were presumed to be largely, though not wholly, intelligible, we can see that this distinction, or lack of distinction, may have arisen from the unavailability of the word 'aesthetic' as it is now used.

9) *ibid.*

10) *ibid.*, p. 73 [230].

11) *ibid.*, § 17, p. 80 [238].

12) Ephraim Chambers *Cyclopaedia: or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, two volumes (London, 1728), II, p. 94.

13) Lord Kames [Henry Home] *Elements of Criticism*, three volumes (Edinburgh, 1762; reprint, Hildesheim, 1970), I, pp. 244-5. Something similar is to be found in Joseph Addison's distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' pleasures of the imagination (*The Spectator* No. 411, June 21, 1712; *The Spectator* No. 416, June 27, 1712); in Francis Hutcheson's distinction (which appears to be Kames' most immediate model) between 'absolute' and 'comparative' beauty (*An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (London, 1725), p. 13); in David Hume's distinction between the naturally beautiful and the beautiful that depends upon the 'humour' of the beholder ('Of the Standard of Taste' (1757) in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (1777), edited by Eugene F. Miller, revised edition (Indianapolis, 1987), pp. 226-49 (pp. 243-4)); and in Sir Joshua Reynolds' distinction between 'the beauty of form alone', that is, the beauty of symmetry and proportion, and that beauty which is the result of an effect on the imagination 'by means of association of ideas'; *Discourses on Art* (1797), edited by Robert R. Wark (London, 1966), p. 212 (XIII, 1786). None of these distinctions exactly parallels Kant's, nor would I wish to imply that Kant took up a form of this distinction merely because it was the convention. Rather what I wish to emphasize by this rehearsal is the fact that Kant, like his predecessors, is addressing a real problem within the theory of taste.

II

According to Kant, while free beauty is self-subsisting, dependent beauty is conditioned by the concept of a particular end for the class of objects to which the object belongs. The parrot, the humming-bird, the bird of paradise, a number of crustacea, designs *a la greque*, ornamental foliage, all music without words, and so on have, says Kant, no intrinsic meaning, represent nothing, and are thus free beauties.¹⁴⁾ In contrast the beauty of human beings, horses, buildings, and so on, presupposes a concept of the end that defines what the thing has to be, and consequently a concept of its perfection.¹⁵⁾

This is not, of course, to say that flowers are free beauties of nature in themselves. For, as we saw above, while a botanist may know the true nature of the flower, and be able to judge its internal and external finalities, nevertheless, in finding the flower beautiful (freely beautiful), the botanist, as Kant says, 'pays no attention to this natural end', hence 'no perfection of any kind' underlies the judgement.¹⁶⁾ This is purely, then, a matter of the way in which, at any particular time, the representation of the object is given to the subject. The flower tends towards free beauty because, as Kant comments, 'hardly anyone but a botanist knows the true nature of a flower'.¹⁷⁾ By contrast the inclusion of horses in the list of dependent beauties may seem a little odd until we consider that in 1790 a horse was most likely to strike the average subject principally as a functional object. (Thus Reynolds, in 1759, though he rejects the idea that 'fitness to the end proposed' for an object can be a criterion of beauty, since 'we always determine concerning its beauty, before we exert our understanding to judge of its fitness', nevertheless in the same place writes that 'had a horse as few good qualities as a tortoise, I do not imagine that he would be esteemed beautiful'.¹⁸⁾ Indeed, though, Kant gives buildings in his list of dependent beauties, and in particular churches, palaces, arsenals and summer houses, it is the very example of a palace which he uses at the beginning of the critique to outline the conditions of a pure judgement of taste. There he writes that in making a judgement of taste on a palace nothing is relevant except 'whether the mere representation of the object is to my liking, no matter how indifferent I may be to the real existence of the object'.¹⁹⁾ Now he asserts that there may be a form of judgement of taste in which some concept of the function of the class of palaces plays a role in this representation:

In respect of an object with a definite internal end, a judgement of taste would only be pure where the person judging either has no concept of this end, or else makes abstraction from it in his judgement. But in cases like this, although such a person should lay down a correct judgment of taste, since he would be estimating the object as a free beauty, he would still be found fault with by another who saw nothing in its beauty but a dependent quality (i.e. who looked to the end of the object) and would be accused by him of false taste, though both

14) Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 16, p. 72 [229].

15) *ibid.*, § 16, p. 73 [230].

16) *ibid.*, p. 72 [229].

17) *ibid.*

18) Joshua Reynolds *The Idler* No 82, 10 November 1759.

19) Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 2, p. 43 [205].

would, in their own way, be judging correctly: the one according to what he had present to his senses [a pure judgement of taste on a free beauty], the other, according to what was present in his thoughts [a judgement of taste applied intentionally on a dependent beauty].²⁰⁾ It would appear, then, despite Kant's provision of a list of free and dependent beauties, that the distinction he is drawing is not one between different kinds of objects, rather the distinction depends on whether or not the subject refers, or is conscious of referring, the beauty to a concept of the object.

The text will not, then, support an interpretation of 'dependent beauty' as either beauty in art, or artistic merit. Though art is a useful resource for examples of dependent beauty, if we are to interpret this form of beauty as aesthetic merit there is no reason why it should be confined to art.²¹⁾ Moreover, as we have seen, Kant does not intend such a restriction. Neither, of course, can this distinction between 'free' and 'dependent' be made into a hierarchy with the 'purer' as a 'higher' form. Although Kant does ultimately place natural beauty above art from a moral point of view, it should be noted that this ranking will not reflect back on the distinction between free and dependent beauty: his list of objects appropriate to the former kind of judgement includes only ornament and music from the arts, yet in his evaluative ranking of the arts music comes lowest, while his most emphatic example of dependent beauty - poetry - comes highest.²²⁾

Although the distinction is not, then, between the intrinsic nature of different kinds of objects, it is easy to imagine how the kind of object or its properties might act (though never absolutely) as limiting conditions on the kind of beauty that the subject discerns in them. The flower, to most of us, is unlikely to present itself as a dependent beauty, the horse to most of Kant's contemporaries was unlikely to present itself as a free beauty. Things which do not obtrude their 'intrinsic meaning', their internal or external finality, on us are more likely to be judged as free beauties.²³⁾ On the other hand to claim that no form of concept entered into the judgment that a line of poetry was beautiful, that is, to claim that the meaning of the words had nothing to do with the beauty, would be a very difficult position to maintain.²⁴⁾ However,

20) *ibid.*, § 16, p. 74 [231].

21) Malcolm Budd claims that the concept of dependent beauty is rendered necessary by Kant's need to 'introduce a qualification into his account in order to accommodate judgements of artistic value'; *Values of Art: Pictures, Poetry and Music* (Harmondsworth, 1995), p. 30. Budd understands dependent beauty to refer to an object exemplifying 'the function of the kind of object it is a beautiful specimen of' (p. 31). This makes sense in view of the example he himself chooses - a church - but it is perhaps more difficult to see how, given that the function of a work of art is to appeal to taste, it could be applied elsewhere. Indeed he seems to ignore the fact that dependent beauty is a kind of beauty, and to retract his own distinction, when he writes that 'given the satisfaction of the requirement that the work is a successful realization of the artist's intention, its artistic value is determined by whether it is beautiful' (p. 31).

22) For a further discussion of the place of music in Kant's outline of the arts see Martin Weatherston's 'Kant's Assessment of Music in the *Critique of Judgement*', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996), pp. 56-65, and Peter Kivy *Philosophies of Arts: An Essay in Differences* (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 12-17. Eva Schaper presents an extended argument against the idea that Kant's distinction is intended to create a hierarchy of taste in her *Studies in Kant's Aesthetics* (Edinburgh, 1979), pp. 78-98.

23) *Kant Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 22, p. 88 [242-3].

24) One might, of course, claim it is the sound of the line that is beautiful (though to Kant this would be the agreeable rather than the beautiful) but it seems impossible to claim, calligraphy aside, that the beauty is the result of neither sound nor sense.

whether this obtrusion of internal or external finality takes place, or is cognized as taking place, is necessarily a matter for the subject at the moment of making the judgement: whether the subject can be said to be making a judgement of free or dependent beauty depends upon whether they *feel* they are making the one or the other.²⁵⁾

III

A judgement is called 'aesthetic' according to Kant 'for the very reason that its determining ground cannot be a concept, but is rather the feeling (of the internal sense) of the concert of the play of the mental powers as a thing only capable of being felt'.²⁶⁾ How, then, can we justify proposing a form of beauty into which the conceptual enters, or, rather, which appears to depend in some way upon concepts? It might be that Kant wishes us to understand the word 'beauty' in the expression 'dependent beauty' figuratively. (It is not uncommon now to use the word beauty as synonymous with 'fine' in just this way - "a beautiful meal", "a beautiful solution".) Kant, after all, asserts that the presence of a concept in dependent beauty 'mars its purity' as an aesthetic judgement.²⁷⁾ Yet he does not seem to wish to debar such judgements from being judgements of taste, that is, in some way distinct from judgements which are based exclusively either on the agreeable or the good: in discussing 'dependent beauty' he speaks of the *combination* of aesthetic and intellectual delight, not the substitution of the former with the latter.²⁸⁾ There is, however, another way in which we can interpret 'dependent beauty'; in accordance with the way in which Kant himself distinguishes it from 'free beauty', combined with the concept of the 'aesthetic idea' which he advances in a later part of the critique. This interpretation yields a scheme which Kant nowhere explicitly advances, though it appears to be assumed by his argument.

As we saw above, the freedom or dependence of a beauty depends upon whether or not some form of finality, aside from the mere finality of the representation of the object, obtrudes itself on the consciousness of the subject in the act of making a judgement of taste upon that object. Hence Kant, it seems, was conscious of referring the beauty of horses to the presence of those properties of the horse which make it a useful animal, though to us, now, a horse is more likely to appear as a free beauty. This is not to say that a horse qua beautiful object is any different for you than it was for Kant, but only that you are less likely to feel that a concept is in play in your judgement.²⁹⁾ (Reynolds was surely too confident in assuming that the subject can know whether or not the understanding has exerted itself in a given judgement.) In those cases

25) Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 15, p. 71 [228]. How or why these two different kinds of apprehension of the same object should be possible, or why, on any particular occasion it should be one rather than the other Kant does not, at this stage, make clear.

26) *ibid.*

27) *ibid.*, § 16, p. 73 [230].

28) *ibid.*, pp. 73-4 [230].

29) It may be a different object insofar as it does not strike you as dependently beautiful, though this does not mean that, asked to choose the horse that most immediately struck you as beautiful from among one hundred horses, you would choose a different horse to Kant.

(such as a line of poetry) where the obtrusion of internal or external finality appears ineluctable we are obliged to refer the beauty to the concepts we associate with the class to which the object belongs. (In the case of the poetry, for example, this would be, among other things, the meanings of the words as they exist independently of the particular poem.) Where the nature of these associated concepts can be, to some extent, determined, it appears possible for the subject to distinguish in the object the properties or effects to which that subject believes their own judgement of taste can be referred (the line is beautiful 'because it is profound'). There are a host of properties or effects, running the spectrum of dependence upon the conceptual, from 'profound' (or even 'thought-provoking') to the likes of 'graceful' and 'melodious', which denote an approbation in terms of taste, and the presence of which, like beauty, is, for the subject, ultimately a matter of taste, which are yet obviously not identifiable with beauty, either in effect or in perceived immediacy. These properties or effects, I would argue, are what are now more likely to be called 'aesthetic properties' or 'aesthetic merits' rather than 'beauties'.³⁰⁾ (This term is not, of course, available to Kant: his 'aesthetic judgement' also denotes judgements on the good and the agreeable, so that the term 'aesthetic merit', if he had used it, would have been too imprecise, being equally applicable to what is contemplated, what is edifying, and what is edible.³¹⁾ That such effects refer to concepts is obvious from the fact that we are capable of distinguishing them into kinds, and even degrees within any particular kind. That such effects are, nevertheless, not absolutely determined by concepts is likewise obvious from the fact that the presence or absence of some (for example, profundity), or even the merit of others (for example, cuteness), are still matters of taste in precisely the same way as is the presence or absence of free beauty. It is this last point which justifies Kant's use of the term 'beauty' in the expression 'dependent beauty', though, given that the experience of free beauty (modern 'beauty'), and dependent beauty (modern 'aesthetic merit'), is qualitatively different, it would have saved a great deal of confusion if Kant and his contemporaries had opted for a different term - Addison's 'pleasures of the imagination' for instance - to denote the latter.³²⁾

The way in which 'beauty' may be referable to, or dependent on, concepts without actually being determined by a definite concept is described by Kant in his discussion of what he calls

30) While regretting that Kant should be under the necessity of using 'beauty' to refer to what is, by his own definition, not beauty, I will nevertheless carry on, for the most part, using the expression 'dependent beauty', since to use the term 'aesthetic merit' in the context of the discussion of a work in which 'aesthetic' has quite a different meaning would only add to the confusion. Moreover, I am hardly in a better position myself. As we have seen, Kant does not exclude the possibility that 'free beauty' can be found in art. Yet the expression 'aesthetic merit' is often now used to mean whatever particular merit is found in a work of art. This unfortunate combination of facts would place us in the situation of having to say, at least in order to be consistent with some uses of 'aesthetic merit', that sometimes beauty (free beauty) is an 'aesthetic merit' (dependent beauty).

31) If we consider the use of 'aesthetic' within the contemporary discipline of aesthetics this distance between Kant's 'aesthetic' and our own becomes even more marked. The notion of the intelligibility of 'aesthetic merits' (or dependent beauties) has come to dominate both the theory and the practice of art in the twentieth century; to the extent of the almost universal, if only implicit, acceptance of the institutional definition of 'art', in which an associated concept of a certain kind is the only property which an object need be perceived (by the artworld) as 'possessing' in order for that object to qualify as art, and, therefore, to be part of the subject matter of aesthetics.

32) Addison in *The Spectator*, Nos. 409; 411-21, June-July 1712.

aesthetic ideas. An *aesthetic idea*, he writes, is

that representation of the imagination which induces much thought, yet without the possibility of any definite thought whatever, i.e. *concept*, being adequate to it, and which language, consequently, can never get quite on level terms with or render completely intelligible.³³⁾

The representations of the imagination, according to Kant may be termed *ideas* insofar as they have some semblance to objective reality, that is, they 'at least strain after something lying out beyond the confines of experience, and so seek to approximate to a presentation of rational concepts (i.e. intellectual ideas)'.³⁴⁾ The ideas of the imagination become *aesthetic ideas* when they prompt so great a wealth of associations as to defy comprehension in a definite concept:

[The] imagination here displays a creative activity, and it puts the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion - a motion, at the instance of a representation, towards an extension of thought, that, while germane, no doubt, to the concept of the object, exceeds what can be laid hold of in that representation or clearly expressed. [...] [The] aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination, annexed to a given concept, with which, in the free employment of imagination, such a multiplicity of partial representations are bound up, that no expression indicating a definite concept can be found for it - one which on that account allows a concept to be supplemented in thought by much that is indefinable in words, and the feeling of which quickens the cognitive faculties, and with language, as a mere thing of the letter, bind up the spirit [*Geist*] also.³⁵⁾

Kant gives the particular example of language as a form which can be infused with 'spirit' at the end of the above quotation because the passage occurs in the course of a consideration of a poem by Frederick the Great, but any object which is capable of sustaining a symbolic interpretation, that is, any object, might be the object of an *aesthetic idea*.³⁶⁾

Kant does not, however, intend to say that *aesthetic ideas* belong exclusively to art. Indeed

33) Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 49, pp. 175-6 [313-14]. The germ of this apparently paradoxical notion of an idea that is aesthetic (in Kant's sense) can be found in Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's discussion of poetry as the perfection of *sensate representations*; *Reflections on Poetry* (1735), translated by Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley, 1954), § 3-8, pp. 38-9. Such representations, according to Baumgarten, are not distinct, as are the representations of the intellect, but rather possess what he calls extensive clarity: the more that is gathered together in a confused complex concept, which also conveys what is represented as good or bad, the more powerful the effect, and the more poetic the representation (§ 14-18, pp. 23-6; 42-3; 47-8). Kant's own treatment of such ideas, however, seems to owe its working out more to the discussion of poetry in Part Five of Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), second edition (1759), the hint for which may be traced back to Addison's *The Spectator* No. 416, June 27, 1712, and No. 418, June 30, 1712.

34) Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 49, p. 176 [314].

35) *ibid.*, pp. 177; 179 [315; 316].

36) It is not surprising that Kant should claim that it is in poetry that 'the faculty of aesthetic ideas can show itself to full advantage'; *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 49, p. 177 [314]. Literature is the most obviously conceptual of the arts, its very material (language) being inescapably symbolic, and for this reason it stood at the pinnacle of the hierarchy of arts in the eighteenth century. Reynolds, for example, writes that painting is only entitled to be called a Liberal Art, only able to rank itself as 'a sister of poetry', insofar as the painter endeavours to captivate the 'imagination' of the spectator not by means of the power of imitation, but by the 'grandeur' of the 'ideas' expressed; *Discourses on Art*, pp. 51; 43 (III, 1770).

at one point he asserts that all beauty, whether in nature or art 'may in general be termed the expression of aesthetic ideas'.³⁷⁾ This raises some problems for the thesis that free beauty can be distinguished from dependent beauty on the grounds that the dependence of the latter is a dependence on aesthetic ideas. Kant, however, qualifies his statement about the ubiquity of aesthetic ideas in beauty by asserting that in the case of the beauty of art the idea is excited through the medium of a concept of the object, whereas in the beauty of nature a bare reflection upon a given intuition, 'apart from any concept of what the object is intended to be, is sufficient for awakening and communicating the idea of which that Object is regarded as the *expression*'.³⁸⁾ As we have seen in connection with the implement and the flower, the distinction between art and nature that is made here is not tenable in this form within Kant's general scheme. It is perhaps best, then, to understand Kant as here invoking his original distinction between dependent and free beauty – the former being in some way tied up with, though not determined by, a concept, the latter being, or appearing to be, a bare reflection upon a given intuition.

That Kant's account is confused at this point by the introduction of the discussion of art becomes clear if we juxtapose two general statements that he makes about the relationship between art and nature with respect to beauty. In the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* he writes that 'the finality in the product of fine art, intentional though it be, must not have the appearance of being intentional; i.e. fine art must be clothed with the aspect of nature, although we recognize it to be art'.³⁹⁾ Yet in the *Critique of Teleological Judgement* he appears to say just the opposite:

Natural beauty may be justly termed the analogue of art, for it is only ascribed to the objects in respect of reflection upon the *external* intuition of them and, therefore, only on account of their superficial form.⁴⁰⁾

According to Kant, then, art can only be beautiful if it appears, in some sense, as nature, and nature can only be beautiful if it appears, in some sense, as art. That is to say, art must appear like nature in order to be beautiful insofar as, though concepts are obviously involved in art, in order for the concept to take the form of an *aesthetic idea* it cannot be a definite concept; if all

37) Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 51, pp. 183 [320]. I have taken Kant's 'free beauty' as my exclusive topic elsewhere, and suggested what unconscious form the aesthetic idea may take in that form of judgement; James Kirwan *Beauty* (Manchester, 1999), pp. 40-50.

38) Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 51, pp. 183-4 [320]. Dickie deals at some length with the connection between aesthetic ideas in art and nature; *The Century of Taste*, pp. 112-14. However, through mistakenly interpreting Kant's subject as the aesthetic idea as it might exist in the mind of a producer (artist) rather than a beholder, he concludes that by an aesthetic idea in nature Kant means evidence of 'God's purposiveness striving to intimate to human beings something beyond the bounds of their experience' (p. 113).

39) Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 45, p. 167 [306-7].

40) Kant *Critique of Teleological Judgement* (1790) in *The Critique of Judgement*, translated by Meredith, § 4 (65), p. 23 [375].

41) Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 44, pp. 165-6 [305-6]; § 45, p. 167 [306-7]; § 58, pp. 220-1 [350-1]. Unless, of course our taste is for works of art that appeal to our intellect (conceptual art), though in such cases it could be argued that an aesthetic idea is at work in the subject's representation of their own liking of the work. This is not a question, however, that Kant felt it necessary to address.

that we discern in a work of art is the intention to produce a definite concept then that work, while perhaps it may appeal to our reason (we may judge the success or otherwise of the work in fulfilling its manifest intention), cannot be said to be making an appeal to our taste.⁴¹⁾ To appeal to our taste (to be, as Kant would say, 'fine art') it must appear to us that the pleasure we feel is attributable to that object as an object devoid of any specific end: our estimate of the object, even if we are aware that it is not made independently of any concept, must nevertheless appear to be a response to something in excess of that conceptual element - the effect must be greater than the sum of the parts. This excess will appear to the subject, paradoxically, as something less than a concept, that is, as the 'superficial form' of the object, the object in itself. Hence, though we remain intellectually aware that the object (as a product of art) and its properties were intended to appeal to our taste, if the object actually succeeds in doing so it does so only insofar as this intellectual awareness comes to appear irrelevant, that is, insofar as the object appears, like nature, to be devoid of a definite end with respect to our judgement. (Kant's point here finds obvious confirmation in the way in which such epithets as 'contrived', 'manipulative', 'obvious', and others cognate, are so readily reached for as terms of aesthetic condemnation, and also in the perennial struggle of aesthetics to prove that art and propaganda are somehow mutually exclusive.)

In the passage from the *Critique of Teleological Judgement*, on the other hand, Kant looks at the same relationship between art and nature as it appears to the intellect rather than to taste: we know that fine art is intended to create beauty, and that beauty is 'only ascribed to ... objects in respect of reflection upon the *external* intuition of them ... only on account of their superficial form', if, therefore, we find the same phenomenon in nature it appears, by analogy, to be similarly intended. (Kant, of course, definitely rejects the possibility of saying that nature is actually so intended.⁴²⁾ In both art and nature, then, beauty is a matter of the 'superficial form' of the object. In the case of a 'beautiful' art object (that is, an art object with aesthetic merit) we are more likely to be conscious of the role of a concept in our judgement, though if this judgement is one of taste, the concept involved must take the form of an *aesthetic idea*, as Kant defines it, which form of idea, as we shall see, can equally well belong to nature. Likewise art in those of its manifestations which do not obtrude a conceptual element (designs *a la greque*, ornamental foliage, music *without words*) can appear, according to Kant, to be an object of free beauty. Kant's distinction between the beauty of art and nature on the grounds that the former is the result of a bare reflection upon a given intuition, while the latter is excited through the medium of a concept, is not, then, warranted by his own presentation.⁴³⁾

But if this distinction between two kinds of beauty cannot be made to apply to the intrinsic properties of different kinds of objects (natural or artificial) it does nevertheless correspond to, and help to clarify, his earlier distinction between free and dependent beauty. The freedom or

42) Kant *Critique of Teleological Judgement*, § 4 (65), p. 23-4 [374-6].)

43) Kant *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, § 51, pp. 183-4 [320].

dependence of a particular beauty depends upon whether or not we are conscious of an *aesthetic idea* at work in our response. (I emphasize that it is the subject's consciousness of the involvement of an *aesthetic idea* which distinguishes dependent from free beauty; for, it is undoubtedly the case that this same *aesthetic idea* is also at play in free beauty, though the subject experiences the beauty, by subreption, as quite undetermined.) An object is judged a free beauty if the judgement feels like a bare reflection upon a given intuition; an object appears as a dependent beauty if we feel that our judgement is somehow attributable to a concept, though since this concept takes the form of an aesthetic idea, the judgement nevertheless remains one of taste since our approval is not ultimately explicable in terms of a definite concept. This, it seems, is what is ultimately at the root of Kant's apparently obscure distinction.