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Immanuel Kant's concept of 'aesthetic ideas' contains the themes of many subsequent developments in German aesthetics. Without tracing the themes here, I wish to discuss Kant's formulations of the concept in the general context of his *Critique of Judgment*. I shall summarize the source, characteristics, and presentational functions ascribed to aesthetic ideas, and I shall argue that these presentational functions give art an important role in Kant's ethical hermeneutics.

'Ethical hermeneutics' is being used loosely to indicate a process of interpretation through which knowing and acting can coincide with respect to truth. This process strikes me as a crucial concern in German aesthetics, even if sometimes it is also an Achilles' heel. Hegel's aesthetics, for example, gives art the vocation of unveiling the truth by sensuously presenting 'the reconciled opposition' between moral obligation and natural necessity. Hegel criticizes Kant for supposing this reconciliation 'to be only subjective in respect of the judgment and production [of art], and not itself to be absolutely true and actual.' More recently, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Theodor W. Adorno have revived Hegel's view of art's vocation but have used Kantian notions to relativize the absolute reconciliation posited by Hegel. Important for all these authors is the role of art in the process of interpretation through which knowing and acting can coincide with respect to truth.

Kant's own discussion of art occurs within a teleological context. On the one hand, the concept of nature's purposiveness operates within aesthetic judging in a manner that is itself purposive for moral action, feeling, and reflection. On the other hand, the teleological use of this concept to consider nature's ultimate and final purpose points up the purposiveness of fine arts for human morality (s. 82-4, pp. 274-86/293-305). This teleological context implies an overriding concern for the process of interpretation through which rational morality can be enacted and not merely conceptualized. Kant gives aesthetic matters an important role within what I have termed 'ethical hermeneutics.'

For Kant that role has two directions. In one direction, aesthetic matters prepare the field of action for moral considerations, a theme rework-
ed by Schiller. In the other direction, moral development is 'the true pro-
paedeutic for the foundation of taste' (s. 60, p. 202/217), and, to avoid
unhappy consciousness, fine art must be 'brought into more or less close
combination with moral ideas' (s. 52, p. 170/182). My discussion of
aesthetic ideas will emphasize the first direction. After describing their
source and characteristics, I shall turn to the presentational functions
through which aesthetic ideas help prepare the field of action for rational
morality.

1 Aesthetic Ideas as Creative Intuitions

Aesthetic ideas can be initially characterized as genial means whereby
nature gives the rule to art. Kant introduces 'aesthetic ideas' when defin­
ing 'fine art' as 'a product of genius.' Though every art presupposes rules,
the preeminent rules for producing beautiful artworks are not the
definite concepts used. Instead 'nature in the subject must (by the har­
mony of its faculties) give the rule to art; i.e., beautiful art is only possi­
ble as a product of genius' (s. 46, p. 150/160). Aesthetic ideas are genial
means to nature's end.

The more precise source of aesthetic ideas is not genius, however, but
creative imagination. Kant considers imagination an ordinary cognitive
capacity with both reproductive and productive functions. But imagina­
tion (Eimbildungskraft) can also go beyond its usual tasks of associating
sensations, exemplifying empirical concepts, and schematizing ex­
perience for the categories of understanding (Verstand). Imagination can
function creatively:

The imagination ... is very powerful in creating another nature, as it were, out of
the material that actual nature gives us .... By it we remold experience ... in ac­
cordance with principles which occupy a higher place in reason [than ones such as
the law of association by which understanding grasps empirical nature] ... (s. 49,
p. 157/168)

Through creative imagination ordinary experience and empirical nature
are 'sublated' (aufgehoben), to use a Hegelian term. The genial artist is
gifted by nature to sublate it in aesthetic ideas and to present such ideas
in beautiful artworks.

These sublations are peculiar. An aesthetic idea is an intuition
(Anschauung), but, unlike other intuitions or imaginative 'representa­
tions' (Vorstellungen), it is 'an inexponible representation of the imagina­
tion' (s. 57, pp. 187-9/200-3). Consequently Kant's epistemological ap-
paratus must be revised in two respects. (1) Defined earlier as concepts transcending the possibility of experience, ideas now include any representations that, though 'referred to an object,' cannot become 'a cognition' of the object (s. 57, p. 187/200). Thus certain intuitions can be called 'ideas' even though they are not concepts. (2) Before, intuitions had been treated as representations lying within the grasp of concepts and demonstrating (directly) concepts. Now some intuitions are considered inexplicable and possibly symbolical. Aesthetic ideas are considered beyond the grasp of verständliche concepts and perhaps only capable of symbolizing (indirectly presenting) other concepts, namely rational ideas transcending experience.

The following explanation implies both the new definition of ideas and the expanded relationship between intuitions and concepts:

Such representations of the imagination we may call ideas, partly because they at least strive after something which lies beyond the bounds of experience and so seek to approximate to a presentation of concepts of reason (intellectual ideas) ..., but especially because no concept can be fully adequate to them as internal intuitions. (s. 49, p. 157/168)

Later we shall return to the phrase 'internal intuitions.' For now, let me briefly summarize Kant's notion of aesthetic ideas. They are creative intuitions that occasion much thinking, symbolize rational ideas, but exceed conceptual understanding and lingual clarification. Genius is the talent for generating such creative intuitions and presenting them in a manner that animates the mind.

2 Artistic Presentation: Actualizing, Symbolizing, and Communicating

The concept of 'aesthetic ideas' becomes confusing unless one distinguishes the expression of aesthetic ideas in artworks from three presentational functions these expressed ideas can fulfill: the actualizing of an artist's intentional concept, the symbolizing of rational ideas, and the communicating of a special feeling. Kant sometimes uses the same term - 'presentation' (Darstellung) - for all these matters.

In general, Kant sees artistry as the expressing of aesthetic ideas. This view becomes most evident when he classifies the fine arts according to the media and manners in which they express aesthetic ideas. At the same time he recognizes that artists use aesthetic ideas to actualize intentional concepts, even though genius has more to do with expression than actualization. His summary on genius states:
Secondly, ... it presupposes a definite concept of the product as the purpose ...; but it also presupposes a representation ... of the intuition [needed] for the presentment [Darstellung] of this concept. Thirdly, it shows itself, not so much in the accomplishment of the proposed purpose in a presentment of a definite concept, as in the ... expression of aesthetical ideas which contain abundant material for that very design ... . (s. 49, p. 161/172)

More important than the actualizing of intentional concepts is the symbolizing of rational ideas. Kant assumes that every intuition presents concepts. But in the case of aesthetic ideas, either the intuition is so creative that no verständlicher concept can grasp it, or the concept is so rational that no intuition can directly present it. In this case our reason (Vernunft) is stimulated with respect to the represented object, and the concept is aesthetically enlarged 'in an unbounded fashion' (s. 49, p. 158/169).

The indefinite enlargement of concepts is the symbolical function of aesthetic ideas. The enlargement occurs by way of the so-called 'aesthetical attributes' of a represented object. Kant contrasts these with 'logical attributes.' The contrast resembles one between denotation and connotation: whereas logical attributes are inherent in a concept, aesthetical ones are imaginatively attached to a concept. An aesthetical attribute is an associated representation (Nebenvorstellung) expressing a concept's consequences and kinships without letting these be made conceptually definite (s. 49, p. 158/169). Aesthetical attributes provide an aesthetic idea of some represented object. Aesthetic ideas indirectly present rational ideas, thereby making up for the lack of examples or schemata. To use Kant's example, Jupiter's lightning-bearing eagle does not inhere in our concept of creation's sublimity but does suggest indefinite connections with this concept. The eagle functions as a symbol of sublimity. Without such a symbol, the rational idea of sublimity would hang in noumenal mid-air, unable to touch the world of experience and phenomenal objects.

Kant's subsequent examples suggest that the artistic generating of such symbols can proceed in two directions. Either aesthetical attributes can be used to enliven a rational idea, or a rational idea can be used to enliven a sensible representation. Kant's examples are poetic metaphors. In fact, he prizes poetry most highly of all the arts for its ability to cast noumenal light on phenomena (s. 49, p. 158/169, and s. 53, p. 171/183). Yet he does not seem to restrict the dual direction for generating imaginative symbols to poetic metaphors.

In addition to actualizing and symbolizing, aesthetic ideas present or communicate a special feeling. They are 'internal intuitions' made
‘universally communicable’ in works of art. The phrase ‘internal intuitions’ (s. 49, p. 157/168, and s. 57, p. 189/202) implies a distinction between external and internal senses, just as the adjective ‘aesthetic’ in the Third Critique usually implies a distinction between sensation and feeling. Internal intuitions may have to do with externally sensible objects such as eagles or artworks, but for Kant they are primarily results of an inner sense. Through an inner sense the mind intuits its own state as this is affected by the mind’s own operations. Inner sense is the same as ‘the faculty of feeling,’ the capacity for sensory but non-cognitive self-awareness of mental states. Felt self-awareness would seem to explain both the internal character and the conceptual indeterminacy of aesthetic ideas. As internal intuitions they are feelings of self-awareness.

Rather than making aesthetic ideas irrelevant, however, this felt self-awareness helps give them a privileged position in Kant’s ethical hermeneutics. Unlike any other representation generated by the human mind, an aesthetic idea has bound up with it a free but natural feeling of an inconceivable but communicable state of mental harmony. This feeling amounts to a sensory self-awareness of the mind’s ‘supersensible substrate ... with respect to which it is the final purpose given by the intelligible [part] of our nature to harmonize all our cognitive faculties’ (s. 57, p. 189/203). Feeling the mind’s supersensible substrate cannot but encourage our ethical attempts to bring the natural world into harmony with rational morality.

We would receive little encouragement if the artist kept internal intuitions private. Thus the artist’s state of mental harmony must be made ‘universally communicable’ (s. 49, p. 161/172) if beautiful artworks are to prepare the field of action for moral considerations. But not all feelings are universally communicable. Nor does the gist of Kant’s aesthetics permit the artist’s feeling to become communicable by undergoing conceptual definition. Instead Kant seems to tie this universal communicability to the same process of indefinite ‘reflection’ (s. 44, pp. 148-9/158) that characterizes the exercising of taste. In such reflection imagination and understanding are free to play, without concern for definite cognitions, but with reference to rational ideas and in a manner that stimulates both imagination and understanding for their usual tasks.

The feeling of this reflective state of mind can be universally communicable simply because harmony between imagination and understanding is prerequisite for any human cognition (s. 38, pp. 132-3/140-2). To become universally communicable, however, this felt self-awareness must arise from specific mental operations. On the one hand, the artist, like the connoisseur, must exercise taste, ‘the faculty of judging a priori of the communicability of feelings that are bound up with a given
representation (without the mediation of a concept)' (s. 40, p. 138/147). On the other hand, the artist must show 'spirit.'

By 'spirit' Kant means the genial ability to carry out the presentational functions already analyzed and thereby to make internal intuitions universally communicable. Only proper presentation can make aesthetic ideas accessible. And only accessible ideas can serve ethical hermeneutics. If artists were unable to express aesthetic ideas in particular works of art, no internal intuition would become universally communicable in art. Furthermore, without the concepts of understanding, nothing can be universally communicable. Thus no matter how creative an aesthetic idea might be, it would remain a merely private vision if it were not used to actualize intentional artistic concepts. Spirit carries out both expression and actualization. The ability to make universally communicable 'the ineffable element in the state of mind' (s. 49, p. 161/172) also implies an ability to use aesthetic ideas not merely to tickle everyone's fancy but to symbolize rational ideas bound up with our ultimate moral destiny. According to Kant, beautiful artworks get their 'spirit' from the symbolic use of aesthetical attributes (s. 49, pp. 158-9/169-70). Spirit, then, is the talent for finding aesthetic ideas to symbolize rational ideas as well as the artistic means to communicate the mental state accompanying both kinds of ideas.

Without turning art into a form of Absolute Spirit, such presentational externalizing of mental harmony does foreshadow the vocation Hegel ascribes to art — to present an actually reconciled opposition. Kant is more reticent than Hegel about art's role in ethical hermeneutics: The beautiful arts ... by their universally communicable pleasure ... make man more civilized, if not morally better, ... and thus prepare men for a lordship in which reason alone shall have authority ... ' (s. 83, pp. 283-4/303). Nevertheless, Kant's account of artistically presented aesthetic ideas does give art an important preparatory role, as I shall now try to demonstrate.

3. The Preparatory Role of Artistic Presentation

Three preparations for rational morality can be extrapolated from Kant's account, even though the first one is not developed by Kant himself: (1) actualizing artistic concepts provides a model for effective moral action; (2) communicating the artist's feeling makes public a mental state conducive to moral feeling; (3) symbolizing rational ideas encourages moral desire and reflection. Let me make concluding comments on each of these points.
By separating the theoretical world from the practically moral world, Kant created a seemingly impossible task. He needed to explain how human actions can be both effective according to theoretical concepts of 'nature' and moral according to practical concepts of human 'freedom.' The Critique of Judgment is supposed to help accomplish this task. It is supposed to uncover and justify the processes through which theoretical knowledge and practical morality can mesh.

The actualizing of artistic concepts provides an opportunity Kant does not exploit. He could have argued that in artistic actualization both theoretical concepts and nature undergo significant modifications. On the one hand, the artist's definite concepts are modified for the sake of the imaginative material. They function less as established rules, more as projects to be tested (cp. s. 47, pp. 151-3/161-4, and s. 60, pp. 200-1/215-16). On the other hand, the imaginative material sublates nature. In aesthetic ideas nature is not merely placed in the light of human freedom but re-created and liberated from theoretical laws. What better model could there be for actions that are both moral according to rational dictates and effective in the empirical world? Realizing moral concepts in a concrete situation could modify both the concepts and the situation analogously to the way artistic actualization modifies both theoretical concepts and nature. The producing of art could provide us with a better interpretation of practical morality than Kant's own Critique of Practical Reason. Kant does not seize this opportunity. Instead he seems to retreat even farther into a merely reflective approach to human action. In his ethical hermeneutics artistic presentation is primarily a way to encourage moral feelings and desires through aesthetic reflection.

The artistic expressing of aesthetic ideas can encourage moral feeling in reflective recipients, according to Kant. If such expression communicates a feeling of free mental harmony, then those enjoying beautiful artworks can share in this feeling, provided they exercise taste. Kant has such sharing in mind when he says that fine art 'furthers the culture of the mental powers in reference to social communication' (s. 44, p. 148/158). In a larger context this communicable feeling can be seen as a feeling of freedom from selfish, natural interests and for universal, moral interests. Artistic expressions of this feeling 'win us in large measure from the tyranny of sense propensions' (s. 83, p. 284/303) and place us in a state that 'promotes the sensibility of the mind to moral feeling' (s. IX, p. 34/35). What better way to promote respect for autonomous morality than to share delight in a free mental harmony made public?

Aesthetic ideas are more than universally communicable feelings, however, just as taste is more than 'the faculty of judging of that which makes universally communicable ... our feeling in a given representation'
Aesthetic ideas are symbols, and taste is at bottom a faculty for judging of the sensible illustration of moral ideas’ (s. 60, p. 202/217). The symbolizing of moral ideas is the hermeneutic crux to artistic presentation for Kant. Actualization and communication are necessary conditions, but only this symbolic function is a sufficient condition for artworks’ being agents of ethical hermeneutics. For only as symbols do aesthetic ideas encourage moral desire and reflection.

Artistic symbols provide an attractive indication of the morally good. That is a conclusion to be drawn from Kant’s discussing beauty as a ‘symbol of morality’ (s. 59, pp. 196-200/211-15). By ‘the morally good’ Kant means any action, maxim, or disposition that human beings can will according to the moral law and that, when recognized, they must respect and try to achieve. Kant’s problem, of course, is that the morally good so defined does not seem very desirable, no matter how normative, respectable, and achievable it is. His account of aesthetic ideas is part of an attempt to solve this problem. By functioning as symbols of morality, aesthetic ideas can attractively indicate the morally good to be something desirable and not merely obligatory.

To function in this way, aesthetic ideas must lend themselves to a double reflection. Kant says spectators compare an artwork with their own mental state in order to decide whether the artwork is beautiful. If our feeling is one of universally communicable delight arising from the playful harmonizing of our imagination and understanding, then we will also tend to compare this first process of reflective judgment with our passing of judgments on the morally good. This seemingly esoteric and introverted double reflection is quite ‘natural,’ according to Kant (s. 59, p. 198/213). When forming taste judgments, we make several references without much definite thought (cp. s. 59, pp. 199-200/214). The playful harmony of our mental state we refer to the self-imposed harmony of the will with itself when we pass moral judgments. We refer our immediate, disinterested delight in the beautiful to our immediate, rationally obligatory respect for the morally good. And we refer the indeterminate universality of our principle of taste to the rationally determinate universality of our principle of morality. Since aesthetic ideas have had such references built into them by the genial artist, they would seem even more suitable than natural beauty for the double reflection of taste judgments on the symbols of moral ideas (s. 60, p. 202/217). If artistically presented aesthetic ideas are especially suitable for such double reflection, then they can serve in a special way to encourage our desire for the morally good.

Thus we are left with a conclusion not always explicitly drawn by Kant but certainly implied by his concept of aesthetic ideas. Through the
presentational functions of actualizing, communicating, and symbolizing, artworks expressing ideas exemplify effective moral action, engender moral feeling, and encourage moral desire. By enlivening the mind from whence such action, feeling, and desire must flow, artistically presented aesthetic ideas prepare the field of action for rational morality. They open to us the possibility that nature and freedom may harmonize, that reconciliation may be achieved. In their presence, as in the presence of natural beauty, our power of judgment finds itself to be referred to something within the subject as well as without him, something which is neither nature nor freedom, but which yet is connected with the supersensible ground of the latter. In this supersensible ground, therefore, the theoretical faculty is bound together in unity with the practical in a way which, though common [gemeinschaftlich], is yet unknown (s. 59, p. 199/213-14).

The inadequacy of this Kantian reconciliation, according to Hegel, is that it is a mere possibility for subjective reflection, not an actual and knowable achievement sensuously presented in human art. But the problem with Hegel's position, according to some more recent German philosophers, is that reconciliation is not as fully achieved, presented, and known as Hegel supposes. Thus Kant's cautious approach deserves reconsidering, despite its mental subjectivism. The coincidence of knowing and acting is not easily achieved, nor is art’s role in ethical hermeneutics easily explained.

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2 Ibid., 60.


6 Kant sometimes invites misinterpretation by using 'sensation' or 'subjective sensation' when he properly means 'feeling.' But his distinction is quite firm. A sensation (*Empfindung*) is a representation that can function in the cognition of external objects. A feeling (*Gefühl*) is simply the nonrepresentational effect of representations upon the subject's own mental state.


8 See *Critique of Judgment*, s. 3, pp. 40/42-3; s. 9, pp. 53-4/57-8; s. 15, pp. 64-5/68-9; and s. 40, p. 138/147.

9 'Theoretical' is used here with a view to Kant's claim that 'technically practical rules ..., so far as their principles rest on concepts, must be reckoned only as corollaries to theoretical philosophy' (s. I, p. 7/8).

10 For a sweeping but provocative discussion of Kant's apparent retreat, see Odo Marquard, 'Kant und die Wende zur Ästhetik,' *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 16 (1962): 231-43, 363-74.