

Self-Standing Beauty: Tracing Kant's Views on Purpose-Based Beauty

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Introduction

In his recent article, “Beauty and Utility in Kant’s Aesthetics: The Origins of Adherent Beauty,” Robert Clewis aims to offer a fresh perspective on Kant’s views on the relation between beauty and utility. While, admittedly, a fresh approach is hard to come by, given the extensive treatment of the topic, Clewis thinks that a study of its historical context and origins might give us the needed edge. The most interesting and novel aspect of Clewis’s discussion is his detailed treatment of Kant’s changing use of the term “*selbstständig*” (which in general means “independent,” “self-standing,” “stable,” “lasting,” “self-subsisting”). In the process of tackling the more general question as to what kind of eighteenth-century model of beauty-utility relation Kant proposes, Clewis addresses other issues, such as the seeming inconsistency between Kant’s earlier and later views on free and purpose-based beauty. As noted in the editor’s footnote of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment (KU)*, while Kant uses the term “*selbstständig*,” in his precritical period to refer to “purpose-based beauty” (what he calls in the *KU* adherent or dependent beauty), he uses the same term to denote free beauty (independent beauty, that is to say) in the *KU*.¹ Clewis argues that even though Kant uses the same term to refer to both dependent and independent beauty, albeit in different periods of his life, this switch in the application of the term is not caused by a change in the meaning of the term from Kant’s perspective, but a change in Kant’s views concerning the status of free beauty. I agree with Clewis that Kant did not change his mind about the meaning of the term “*selbstständig*.” Nevertheless, I disagree with the line Clewis pursues.

I will argue that Clewis’s mistake lies in thinking that, throughout his career, Kant endorsed what he calls the “blocking-unificationist” view on the relation between beauty and utility (“beauty and perfection/utility are distinct concepts yet can be united or unified” (2018, p. 309)). As I will show, this mistake results in an inconsistent story about Kant’s aesthetics as well as an inconsistency within Clewis’ own argument. I will try to articulate a more consistent story about the development of Kant’s ideas

on aesthetics in general and his ideas on adherent beauty in particular by proposing that, contra Clewis, earlier Kant subscribed to what Clewis calls the “containment” account (beauty is a form of perfection) while the later Kant changed his mind (having given up on rationalism) and came to defend a version of “blocking-unificationist” view.

Self-Standing Beauty 2.0

Let’s start by looking at the passages where Kant uses the term “*selbstständig*” and its equivalents to refer to two different kinds of beauties, with an aim of determining what he might mean by the term. In the *KU*, which was published in 1790, Kant uses the term to refer to what he calls free beauties:

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*]² 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. (*KU* 5:229)³

Here Kant gives us a negative definition of the term but, of course, this does not mean that we cannot derive a positive one.

The beauties that are not self-standing are adherent beauties and what seems to make them non-self-standing is the fact that they adhere to something else, i.e. “a concept of what the object ought to be.” The judgment of adherent beauty can be formed in two basic ways: A judgment of perfection (this is a perfect/good/bad example of its kind) can be incorporated into or combined with a judgment of taste (this is beautiful/ugly).⁴ For instance, when we judge a painting to be adherently beautiful, this involves incorporating the judgment that it is a good example of futurism; when we form a negative assessment of a film, this might result from our positive judgment of taste having been cancelled out by the judgment that the film is an unsuccessful example of film noir. The concepts of futurism and film noir (the concepts of what these works ought to be) directly tell us what properties to look for in a work and we form the aesthetic assessment by reflecting on these properties as forming a whole. For instance, in judging Gino Severini’s *Armored Train in Action*

(1915), the concept of futurism would direct us to focus on properties such as the use of vivid colors, cubist elements, representation of technological advancements, dynamism, and so on. After assessing whether or not the work uses these elements effectively to meet the challenge of futurism, namely the celebration of technology, we can form a positive judgment of perfection and declare the work to be a good example of futurism. This is followed by the incorporation of the judgment of perfection into a judgment of taste: We form a judgment of adherent beauty concerning *Armored Train in Action* when we reflect on the representation of the soldiers on the train, guns in hand, their depiction from an aerial perspective, and light that is almost shooting out from the soldiers' armors, the train, and the canon amidst a cheerful landscape, and this leads us to reflect on the idea of the glorification of war that resonates with a Futurist declaration of the same year: "War is a motor for art" ("Gino Severini," 2009). Perhaps, we would not have made such a favorable assessment as this one, if we had relied on other concepts (even though they might be equally apt concepts, such as the concept of modern art, or cubism, or some such other). We assess the work to be a successful work of futurism because it meets its challenge, namely celebration of technology, and this challenge is not akin to those of other concepts, such as modern art. In this sense, the concepts we presuppose in judging an object provide the conditions for perfection, and thereby conditions for adherent beauty (that's why Kant calls it "conditioned beauty").

When we judge free beauties, we form a single judgment: a pure judgment of taste. The judgment of taste expresses our mental state when we reflect on the representation of an object that we find subjectively purposive for our cognitive faculties. This mental state is the free harmonious play between our imagination and understanding which have been brought about without the mediation of a determinate concept; and we are aware of this free play only through the pleasure we feel (*KU* 5:219). What makes free beauty self-standing is that it does not require the help of another judgment, namely a judgment of perfection, and that it is, in this regard, independent. But is this the whole story? Given that Kant seems to attribute the same quality "*selbstständig*" to what seems to be the precursor of adherent or dependent beauty in his earlier work, is reducing "*selbstständig*" to "being independent" going to exhaust the meaning the meaning of the term?

Self-Standing Beauty 1.0

The following reflection is from 1769:

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 beauty... 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 if its relation to the good can be expressed through a concept that pleases in sensible form. (Refl. 639, 15:276-279)

Clewis thinks that Kant might be talking about an earlier version of adherent beauty here. The issue is that, contra Clewis, in this passage there is no indication that the judgment of self-standing beauty is a combination or incorporation judgment like the judgment of adherent beauty. I think that it might be a precursor of adherent beauty, but this does not require for it to be judged *via* a combination or incorporation judgment. We do not have much textual evidence to work with, however, it is more than likely that the self-standing beauty of reflection 639 (to avoid confusion let's call it intellectual beauty), is a kind of perfection. Indeed, the sensibly beautiful itself is a kind of perfection as well.

Kant had not yet divorced beauty from perfection at this time: He thinks that sensible beauty is aesthetic perfection, i.e. "a perfection according to laws of sensibility" (V-Lo/Blomberg: 24:45). "What makes sensible intuition easier pleases and is beautiful; that is in accord with the subjective laws of sensibility, and it promotes the inner life, since it sets the power of cognition into activity" (V-Anth/Collins: 25:181). A judgment of beauty involves a report of the agreement of the object with the laws of cognition.⁵ The laws of cognition are empirical laws concerning symmetry, proportion, harmony, and so on. For instance, the chord in music, if it establishes proportion and symmetry between the pitches, pleases because it "facilitates sensible comprehensibility" (V-Anth/Collins: 25:182). In this regard, beauty is about how parts of an object are related to one another in space and time with respect to laws of sensibility.

Intellectual beauty is based on a different kind of perfection than aesthetic perfection. Unlike sensible beauty, which is based on contingent laws, "self-standing beauty must be grounded on a lasting [beständig] principle; now no cognition is unalterable but the one that reveals what the

thing is; hence it is a combination with reason” (Refl. 635, 15:275; Clewis’ translation, 2018, p. 313). Intellectual beauty is about what a thing really is. This description resonates with Kant’s description of the judgment of perfection involved in judging adherent beauty, namely, that it is based on the concept of what the object ought to be. In this sense, intellectual beauty seems to be judged on the basis of a kind concept and is equivalent to intellectual perfection.

This description of intellectual beauty also resonates with one of the dominant theories of intellectual perfection at the time, Moses Mendelssohn’s. Mendelssohn differentiates between sensuous perfection and intellectual perfection. The former is unity or sameness in multiplicity (1997, p. 22). The latter is harmony in multiplicity (1997, p. 24). Mendelssohn illustrates the difference by means of an example. When we observe trees in a garden and pay attention to the circular order in which the branches ascend and notice the simple proportions that give the sense of order, the perceived perfection is of a sensuous nature (1997, p. 24). However, when we contemplate each of their properties, such as branches, blossoms, buds, leaves, etc., in connection with God’s final purpose for creating the trees (the purpose that underlies the reciprocal harmony between them) we would be appreciating the intellectual perfection in the trees. While in perceiving the sensuous perfection “we perceive a large array of an object’s features all at once without being able to separate them distinctly from each other,” in perceiving the intellectual perfection we perceive the features distinctly and contemplate the connections between them in partaking of the whole (1997, p. 172). The aptness of seeing Kant’s account in light of Mendelssohn’s is supported by some textual evidence as well.

Just like Mendelssohn, Kant also thinks that the same properties can be considered to be goodness-making or beauty-making properties: “The inner perfection of a thing has a natural relation to beauty. For the subordination of the manifold under an end requires a coordination of it in accordance with common laws. Hence the same property through which an edifice is beautiful is also compatible with its goodness...” (Refl. 628, 15:273-274). The difference is that we judge the property with respect to a different kind of perfection. One can object by saying that the element of pleasure can only be secured if there is an aesthetic element, not maybe a full-fledged aesthetic judgment but something along those lines to be combined or incorporated into a judgment of perfection. Yet, this objection is only consistent with Kant’s later account, not his earlier one. Indeed, earlier Kant thinks that perceiving every perfection give us pleasure and does not differentiate aesthetic pleasure to be of a different

kind: “The formal aspect of all perfection consists in manifoldness (in addition duration and strength) and unity; it can also give pleasure by itself” (Bem: 20:136).

The question now is what makes intellectual beauty self-standing and sensible beauty not. According to the *KU* definition, “self-standing” means to be independent from another judgment and to involve a single judgment. It looks as though, contra Clewis, we use a single judgment, a judgment of perfection, to judge both intellectual beauty and sensible beauty. So why is one self-standing and the other not? As Kant says in reflection 635, self-standing beauty must rest on a lasting principle and the judgment of self-standing beauty must judge the value an object in relation to what it really is. Perhaps the judgment of sensible beauty falls short in this regard. Indeed, the laws of sensibility are empirical, although the judgments are universal (V-Anth/Collins: 25:179). It is not clear what grounds their universality. Kant says that “[t]here is much in the *principium* of taste that is empirical, but the grounds of judgment are not merely abstracted from experience, but lie in humanity” (V-Anth/Collins: 25:180). Perhaps Kant is trying to bring the empiricist conception of these laws closer to the rationalist conception, but it is not exactly clear what he means by the statement that the grounds of judgment partially lie in humanity. One thing we can safely presuppose is that the principle is not *a priori* unlike the principle of taste of Kant’s later account. Hence, the conditions of self-standing beauty are that they must be judged not only on the basis of a single independent judgment but also based on an *a priori* principle. These are necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for self-standing beauty.

Implications: For Kant and For Clewis

Clewis sacrifices the necessary condition of the use of a single independent judgment for the sake of arguing for the “blocking-unificationist” account according to which beauty and perfection are distinct but can be unified. As we can now clearly see, the judgment of intellectual beauty is not a combination or incorporation judgment but a single judgment of perfection. Therefore, contra Clewis, early Kant actually defended a “containment” account: both sensible beauty and intellectual beauty are forms of perfection. However, this does not mean that Kant rejected that they can be combined otherwise. The passages that motivate Clewis to brand Kant a “blocking-unificationist” can be interpreted in a different light. In *Anthropology Collins*, Kant claims that “[b]eauty is always only something contingent and is easy to do without. But it can be that if beauty is united with utility, the liking of it becomes more well-

grounded and enduring” (V-Anth/Collins: 25:176). Kant is not saying that the combination judgments yield a self-standing beauty. He is merely claiming that if we combine two pleasures, sensible and intellectual pleasure, the satisfaction can be more enduring. This is an idea that had other representatives in Kant’s time. Mendelssohn also argues for this position. For instance, he praises music for allowing us to experience three different pleasures all at once, “perfection, sensuous gratification, and beauty” (1997, p. 48).

Furthermore, if Clewis is right in his interpretation that the judgment of intellectual beauty is a combination or incorporation judgment, then he is actually telling a rather inconsistent story about Kant’s aesthetics. First, the implication of Clewis’ interpretation is that Kant’s earlier views were sloppy: Kant thought that something can be self-standing and self-sufficient although not independent. Alternatively, if Clewis does not want to render Kant inconsistent to such a degree, he might bite the bullet and accept that his own article is inconsistent and that his claim about Kant’s consistent use of the term “*selbstständig*” cannot be defended.

Another alternative for Clewis is to say that being judged on the basis of an independent single judgment is not a necessary condition for self-standing beauty. The only necessary condition is having a stable ground. This seems like a line that Clewis can pursue, since he claims that “Kant’s early theory apparently made the inference that, since the instrumental or moral good in the object is somehow self-standing, any beauty connected to that good would also merit being called self-standing” (2018, p. 308). I would not particularly call this kind of beauty self-standing; I can at most call it “standing” with some help, but suppose we grant this. If having a stable ground, let’s say even an *a priori* ground, is the only necessary condition for self-standing beauty, then Kant is in trouble. Since in the *KU* both adherent beauty and free beauty are based on *a priori* grounds, Kant seems to make a mistake when he calls one self-standing and the other not.⁶ Another, less *ad hoc*, explanation is available however: Having an *a priori* ground is a necessary condition but not a sufficient condition for self-standing beauty. Self-standing beauty, just like free beauty and unlike adherent beauty, must also be judged on the basis of a single independent judgment. Then we can say in good conscience that Kant’s account is not as inconsistent as some accounts *unintentionally* make it to be.

How are we to explain the shift in Kant’s usage of the term “*selbstständig*”? Kant didn’t change his mind about the meaning of the term. He changed his mind about other things. First of all, and Clewis also agrees, Kant’s discovery of an *a priori* principle that judgments of taste are based on, and the justification of the universality and necessity of judgments

of taste, is responsible for Kant assigning the term “*selbstständig*” to free beauty. We can call free beauty self-standing beauty because now it is not only judged on the basis of an independent single judgment but also on the basis of an *a priori* principle. This is not the whole story. Kant also changed his mind about intellectual beauty and Kant’s rejection of German rationalist aesthetics played the central role here. In virtue of rejecting that beauty can be reduced to perfection (*KU* 5:227-229), and repeatedly claiming that beauty is judged without a concept, Kant could no longer call intellectual beauty as beauty if it is based solely on a judgment of perfection. The only way out was to adopt the blocking-unificationist account, which he was already sympathetic towards. In the *KU*, we can call adherent beauty beauty because we judge it either by incorporating a judgment of perfection into a judgment of taste or by combining them.

In conclusion, Kant did not change his mind about what the term “*selbstständig*” means. He changed his mind about defending the containment account. And his subsequent acceptance of blocking-unificationism is responsible for the shift in Kant’s assignment of this term to different kinds of beauties.

Notes

¹ For Guyer’s remark, see footnote 36 (2000, p. 371).

² In order to coordinate with Clewis’ terminology, I will make necessary modifications to the Cambridge translations of Kant’s texts. For instance, here, in the Cambridge translation, “*für sich bestehende*” was translated as “self-sufficient.”

³ All references to *the Critique of the Power of Judgment* in this article will be to volume 5 and page number(s) of the Akademie Ausgabe (Kant, 1900), for example (*KU* 5:265). Translations will follow Kant (2000). All other references to Kant’s works follow the translations in the Cambridge edition (Kant, 1992; 2005; 2011; 2012) and provide reference to the Akademie Ausgabe by providing the abbreviated title of each work and volume and page number: Refl: *Notes and Fragments*, V-Lo/Blomberg: *Blomberg Logic*, V-Anth/Collins: *Anthropology Collins*, Bem: *Remarks in the “Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime,”* V-Lo/Wiener: *Vienna Logic*.

⁴ See Zuckert (2007) for a defense of the incorporation view and see Gammon (1999); Allison (2001); and Rueger (2008) for a defense of the conjunction view. I argue that both views are complementary (Tuna, 2018). Clewis also thinks that these views can be reconciled (2018, pp. 324-325).

⁵ See also Guyer (2003, p. 142). A similar formulation of beauty can be found in Refl. 696, 15:309: “Since all things in an empirical sense are properly only that which they are taken to be in relation to the law of sensibility, the perfection of objects of experience is a correspondence with the law of the senses, and this,

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as appearance, is called beauty; it is so to speak the outer side of perfection, and the object pleases merely in being contemplated.”

⁶ Even though, when we form a judgment of adherent beauty, the concept of what the object ought to be constrains our judgment, its judgment of taste component is based on the same principle that free judgments of taste are based on, namely the subjective principle of purposiveness without a purpose. Indeed, Kant lists this principle to be at work when we are judging artistic beauty, most of which is a paradigm example of adherent beauty (*KU* 5:350).

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