

Schiller's Critique of Kant's Aesthetic Philosophy

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This article aims to demonstrate that Schiller began his aesthetic thought by critically evaluating Kant's Critique of Judgment. What most prompted Schiller to reflect and subsequently develop his own theories was Kant's dualism concerning the relationship between necessity and freedom, or the dichotomy of sense and reason. Schiller's dissatisfaction with these dualisms led him to pursue unity, ultimately finding that the perception of beauty is a harmonizing experience. In his critique of Kant's purely subjectivist view of beauty, Schiller introduced an objective concept of beauty as freedom in appearance. Finally, in an attempt to reconcile the two realms of aesthetic and moral experience, Schiller criticized Kant's distinction between aesthetics and ethics, arguing that for humans to become moral, they require preparatory measures, which can only be provided through aesthetic education.

Keywords: Kant, Schiller, aesthetic judgment, dualism, play theory.

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1. Introduction

The intersection of ethics and aesthetics has long been a subject of philosophical inquiry, particularly in the works of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Schiller. Both thinkers explore the role of beauty in human life, yet they diverge significantly in their conceptualization of the relationship between aesthetic judgment and moral development. Kant's aesthetic theory, primarily articulated in his Critique of Judgment (1790), posits that aesthetic experience is an autonomous domain, distinct from the realms of practical reason and ethics (Kant, 2004). He argues that beauty, as perceived through the free play of the imagination and understanding, is devoid of conceptual content, purpose, or moral interest. For Kant, pure aesthetic pleasure arises from this disinterested contemplation, which allows beauty to function as an end in itself. Morality, on the other hand, is linked to rational judgment and the pursuit of the good,

thus placing it in a different sphere from aesthetic judgment.

However, Friedrich Schiller, in his seminal work Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man (1795), challenges Kant's strict separation of beauty and morality. Schiller's aesthetics integrates the ethical dimension into the realm of beauty, suggesting that aesthetic experience has a profound impact on human moral development. For Schiller, beauty is not merely an object of disinterested pleasure but a harmonizing force that reconciles the tensions between reason and sense, freedom and necessity. He asserts that through aesthetic experience, humans can achieve a state of internal balance and freedom, which is essential for moral growth (Schiller, 2005). This departure from Kant's framework reflects Schiller's belief that the cultivation of aesthetic sensibility through art and beauty is a vital pathway toward achieving moral and rational autonomy.

Schiller's critique of Kant revolves around the latter's emphasis on the separation of the faculties involved in



moral and aesthetic judgment. While Kant sees the moral will as governed by rational duty and the aesthetic will as governed by feelings of pleasure, Schiller argues that these faculties are not isolated but interdependent. He contends that aesthetic education—an engagement with beauty—fosters moral development by aligning human desires with rational imperatives. Schiller views beauty as the medium through which the dualities of human nature, such as sense and reason, can be reconciled, leading to a more harmonious existence (Salmani, 2012). In this context, Schiller's concept of the "play drive" becomes central. This drive represents the free interaction between the material and rational aspects of human nature, creating a space where the individual can transcend the limitations of both. For Schiller, the experience of beauty allows individuals to engage in this form of play, leading to a kind of freedom that is essential for moral action (Sharp, 1991).

This paper aims to explore the philosophical tensions between Kant and Schiller regarding the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. It will examine how their differing perspectives on beauty and morality reflect broader concerns about human autonomy, freedom, and the role of culture in shaping ethical life. By analyzing both thinkers' contributions, the article seeks to demonstrate that Schiller's integration of aesthetics and ethics offers a more holistic understanding of the potential for beauty to influence moral development.

2. Explanation of Beauty and Aesthetic Perception from Kant's Perspective

According to Kant, in his third critique, *Critique of Judgment*, the aesthetic experience is a function of the imagination, and he identifies two types of aesthetic judgments: the judgment of the beautiful and the judgment of the sublime. The harmony between our cognitive faculties—namely, the interplay between the imagination, which seeks freedom, and the understanding, which seeks lawfulness—gives rise to the feeling of beauty. Kant presents an organic system, explaining the concept of the whole (world) in a non-cognitive manner. In this sense, the faculty of judgment is connected to reason (morality), extending his transcendental vision into philosophy. The focal point of his discussion on beauty and the sublime is not the objects themselves, but our judgment regarding them. The nature of the aesthetic experience is a pleasure

derived from beautiful objects. Every beautiful object contains order and freedom, easily fitting into the domain of human experience. Aesthetic judgments do not claim objective truths and are therefore free from the constraints of the objective world (Radhakrishnan, 1988). Kant concludes that the perception of beauty is a precursor to the perception of reason. Thus, Kant refers to beauty as the manifestation of transcendent truth in the world. For Kant, beauty is the intersection of unity and multiplicity, the universal and the particular, as well as mechanism and purpose (Yousefian, 2000).

Kant argues that we make rational judgments about beauty, but the perception of beauty is separate from logic and rational activity, and instead pertains to sensory perception. What is crucial in making aesthetic judgments is the feeling of harmony between our cognitive faculties. Based on this, a beautiful object is one that produces a general balance between the faculties of imagination and understanding. To describe this indefinite equilibrium, Kant used the term "play." However, the free activity of the imagination and its harmony with the understanding are not subject to cognitive constraints but relate solely to the possibility of harmony between the two faculties (Schaeffer, 2006). If the mind (faculty of reflective judgment) strives to achieve a unity among multiplicities, without any expectation regarding the utility, perfection, or purpose of the object, it can arrive at aesthetic satisfaction and pleasure (Kraft, 1996). Kant, therefore, saw aesthetics as a bridge between the object and perception, believing that neither the object alone nor perception alone suffices. He considered the faculty of judgment as the intermediary between understanding and reason, arguing that science and faith operate in separate spheres, and neither can be reduced to the other. However, he acknowledged the possibility of a third type of experience and perception, which could function as a synthesis. Kant placed feeling as the mediator between thought and will, expressed fundamentally in subjective and aesthetic judgment (Kant, 2004).

3. Explanation of Beauty and Aesthetic Perception from Schiller's Perspective

Schiller attempted to derive aesthetic perception from the sensory-rational capacities of human nature. He examined two opposing aspects of human nature: one that is permanent (personality) and one that is variable

(condition). He referred to two opposing drives: the "material" drive and the "form" drive, each responsible for the characteristics of the variable and permanent aspects of human nature. Schiller considered the "play" drive as the third intermediary force between these opposites (Schiller, 1974). According to Schiller, only beauty can create harmony and order by unifying imbalance and disorder. He introduced beauty as the unifying force that brings together different aspects or drives of humanity. Beauty, for Schiller, is an objective quality in some objects or works that enables us to develop a comprehensive character (Saperstein). Schiller regarded beauty as form because we contemplate it; but at the same time, beauty is life because we feel it. Additionally, beauty is a state of being and an activity in which we engage. As an object of play, beauty actively engages our inner existence, improves it, and brings it unity (Salmani, 2012; Schiller, 1974).

Schiller also addressed different types of human judgments in his definition of beauty. "Our judgments can be logical, teleological, moral, or aesthetic. If we judge concepts in accordance with the form of cognition, the judgment is logical. If we judge according to the form of purpose, the judgment is teleological. If we judge affections that are free like moral actions in accordance with the form of free will, the judgment is moral. However, if we judge affections that are not free in accordance with the form of free will, the judgment is aesthetic. In an aesthetic judgment, the similarity of a phenomenon to pure will is discussed, where the object of such a judgment is beauty in its most general sense. Beauty is that which appears by itself in the sensory world, and the senses grasp it neither through its matter nor through a particular purpose. Therefore, it resembles pure will, although it is not the product of pure will. In this sense, beauty is nothing other than 'freedom in appearance'" (Schiller, 2005).

He added, "The compulsion toward reality and the dependence on the actual are merely the results of inadequacy, while indifference to reality and attachment to the ideal can be signs of external and internal freedom" (Schiller, 2005).

The Relationship Between Freedom and Beauty in Kant and Schiller

Kant states that beauty is the awareness of a pleasure that accompanies the free play of imagination and understanding, and thus, it is not a logical judgment but

an aesthetic one. In order to recognize the beauty of an object, the mind is influenced by an idea of the object—not its concept or existence, but merely the perception of that object. This influence is then felt. This feeling is a kind of perception accompanied by a sense of pleasure (satisfaction), which is termed aesthetic (Kant, 2004).

These issues are only resolved through the dissolution of all distinctions between phenomenon and the thing-in-itself. Both truth and goodness are transcendent, and "taste is the faculty of judging an object or a method of representing it through satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest; this is called beauty" (Kant, 2004). For Kant, perhaps the most important definition of aesthetics comes under the category of "relation," where beauty is defined as "the form of purposiveness in an object, so long as it is perceived without the concept of purpose". The universality attributed to aesthetic judgments is neither logical nor objective but is rooted in the common nature of humans (Naqibzadeh Jalali, 1985). Beauty, as an object of play, momentarily releases us from the physical limitations of nature as well as the moral limitations of reason. In summary, play allows us to taste absolute freedom, and beauty is the necessary basis for this experience, as it is through beauty that we attain freedom. Therefore, freedom is the cooperation of both aspects of human nature (Schiller, 1974). Schiller believes that the state of freedom resulting from play is not continuous, but by experiencing it momentarily, one can experience human and moral life. Thus, for Schiller, art has a significant liberating power; this is a freedom based on the balance and harmony of the two opposing parts of our personality, rather than freedom of choice (Salmani, 2012).

Schiller began his philosophical research on art and beauty by critiquing Kant's Critique of Judgment, and simultaneously, he evaluated Kant's other works on aesthetics. In this evaluation, what particularly prompted Schiller's reflection and motivated his subsequent theorizing was Kant's dualism regarding necessity and freedom, or, in other words, sense and reason. Schiller viewed this dualism as the cause of some of the problems and challenges that modern humans face (Bakhtiarian & Akbari, 2008). Consequently, modern humans have lost the harmony and unity of their inner faculties, becoming alienated from themselves and from nature.

The external divisions, such as the alienation of humans from nature, led Schiller to the internal and institutional fractures of the human being. His efforts to find the cause of this separation directed Schiller toward a critique of the Enlightenment and, more specifically, the critique of Kant, the great philosopher of the Enlightenment.

Kant based his aesthetic thinking on the concept of form. His formalist approach to aesthetics focuses on beauty and disregards other artistic layers. According to Kant, all of our perceptions of beauty are related to formal judgments of the internal relations of various artistic realms. Kant divides these categories into ethics, beauty, and knowledge. The domain of beauty is independent and autonomous; thus, to understand it, one must not refer to other domains. Clearly, this approach influenced formalist movements in art and aesthetic studies, where beauty is seen as purely formal and only found in the work itself. This Kantian trend led to formalist aesthetics (Hospers, 2000). Another significant element of formalism is the concept of "disinterestedness" in aesthetic judgment, or "existence without interest." Satisfaction in aesthetic judgment is devoid of any existing desire or inclination. Therefore, no concern, anxiety, or interest in the object itself exists. Additionally, Kant says that judgment is purely dependent on appearance, and the judge enjoys the "free play" of imagination and understanding in harmony. In this way, beauty is defined by Kant as the "purposive form" of an object, where form is separated from the meaning or life of the perceived object, becoming itself the content of the reflective, disinterested subject (Caslin, 1998).

The drive to play, which reconciles the body and form (reason), in Schiller's aesthetics attempted to go beyond the limitations of Kant's transcendental idealism, while still maintaining the transcendental derivation of beauty. Schiller examined the two opposing aspects of human nature—one permanent (personality) and the other variable (condition)—and referred to two opposing drives: the "material" drive, which arises from the physical existence of humans, and the "form" drive, which comes from the rational existence of humans. Each drive is responsible for one aspect of human nature, either variable or permanent. The "play" drive serves as the third force that reconciles the opposing drives of "form" and "material" (Schiller, 2005). Schiller's final meaning of play is the reflection and contemplation of beauty. When humans truly play, it is not about satisfying

material needs or achieving a particular purpose but about realizing harmony and unity between the two opposing aspects of human nature, which are not inherently contradictory (Sharp, 1991).

4. The Faculty of Recognizing Beauty (Kant: Reason; Schiller: Reason and Sense)

Kant considers one of the functions of reason to be distinguishing the beautiful from the ugly, and he argues that beauty is the manifestation of the intelligible world within the natural or sensory world. He places this faculty at a higher level than theoretical reason and beyond practical reason (Foroughi, 1996). As Kant states in Critique of Judgment: "Just as reason's idea cannot access the intuition given by the imagination, likewise, in an aesthetic idea, the understanding never fully grasps the inner intuition that the imagination ties to a given concept. However, to translate a concept from the imagination into concepts of reason is to explain it. Therefore, an aesthetic idea can be called an inexplicable concept of the imagination in its free play. Both rational and aesthetic ideas must have their principles. Rational ideas have objective principles in the application of reason, while aesthetic ideas have subjective principles in their application" (Kant, 2004).

Schiller considered beauty to be objective. Just as in logical judgment, there is a correspondence with understanding, and in teleological judgment, there is a resemblance to understanding, so in moral judgment, the correspondence of an action with pure will is present. In aesthetic judgment, the resemblance of a phenomenon to pure will is discussed, and the object of such a judgment is beauty in the broadest sense. Beauty is that which appears in the world of the senses by itself, and the senses perceive it neither because of its matter nor because of a particular purpose (Schiller, 2005). For Schiller, beauty is form because we contemplate it; however, at the same time, beauty is life because we feel it. Beauty is a state of being and an activity in which we engage.

Beauty, as an object of play, actively engages our inner existence, improves it, and brings unity to it (Saperstein, 2004; Schiller, 1974). The reconciliation of reason and sense through the aesthetic play process provides the fundamental basis for morality. Schiller redefines play, attributing a force to it that Kant never acknowledged. Both Kant and Schiller agree that aesthetic

contemplation makes the transition from nature to the realm of supersensible reason possible.

Taste makes the transition from sense to ethics (the supersensible realm) possible. Beauty symbolizes goodness, and Schiller also alludes to a similar transition from the aesthetic state to the moral state. However, compared to Kant, this transition for Schiller is a fundamental and essential one. For him, through this transition, human existence expands, and moral sensitivity grows within it (Salmani, 2012). Beauty, as an object of free play, opens a path to momentarily releasing us from the moral limitations of reason. Freedom is the cooperation of both aspects of human nature (Schiller, 1974). Schiller accepts Kant's view that in our aesthetic judgments, we must avoid considering the purposes of things and judge without the involvement of understanding. Schiller also believes that only through such contemplation can we consider beautiful objects independently and free ourselves.

Moreover, Schiller accepts Kant's main idea of the free play of cognitive faculties, referring to this activity as the "interaction between sense and reason." By raising this issue and affirming that humans overcome this conflict through the act of play, Schiller seeks to go far beyond Kant's concept of the free play of cognitive faculties (Saperstein, 2004).

5. Kant and Schiller on Ethics and Aesthetics

Schiller's departure from Kant's theory stems from his significantly different understanding of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics. Kant, by separating aesthetics from the realms of ethics and the physical and material world, gave beauty sufficient importance. He aimed to show that nature and morality could be unified in beauty. For Kant, pure aesthetic pleasure was one that, like the beauty of nature, was devoid of concept, purpose, intention, and interest in it. Beauty in intellectual intuition and goodness or morality in rational concepts produce pleasure. Morality, in fact, depends on the purposive interest that accompanies it (Kant, 2004). However, from Schiller's perspective, aesthetics does not conflict with moral dissatisfaction, and there is no obligation for a literary work to consist of moral teachings or lessons. Schiller clearly recognized that the intermingling with the sublime is a reaction related to feelings of pleasure and pain, and he used this understanding in his aesthetic analysis (Sharp, 1991).

Aesthetic education serves as a means of integrating morality into nature; by shaping our nature through the cultivation of feelings and senses, aesthetic education encourages us to become moral and rational beings. In fact, this type of education enhances our ability to enjoy beauty for the sake of beauty, leading us unconsciously into a play that guides us toward freedom and moral sensitivity (Salmani, 2012).

Schiller argues that if a person is in a state where their motivations and forces operate in harmony, each within its own realm, without external pressures, then their actions can be deemed "virtuous." In this state, however, "freedom in nature" is emphasized. If, on the other hand, motivations and forces clash, and natural and environmental factors exert pressure, the only remaining option is for the individual to employ defense mechanisms in order to act freely and make choices.

6. Conclusion

The aesthetic judgment is a distinct term used by Kant in Critique of Judgment. Alongside other mental faculties, such as the agreeable, the good, and the sublime, it involves judgment about the beautiful and is defined as subjective, universal, pre-cognitive, disinterested, and an end in itself. Therefore, it can be said that Kant's aesthetics, in contrast to Schiller's, is considered an objective theory of beauty.

On the other hand, Schiller's critical view focused on Kant's entirely subjectivist definition of beauty, which led him to define beauty as freedom in appearance, giving it an objective dimension.

After reflecting on Kant's transcendental deduction, Schiller found aesthetic perception to be a harmonizing experience and argued that beauty alone can overcome the fragmentation of the human mind when confronting freedom and necessity. By utilizing the concept of play and his critical perspective on the separation of reason and sense, Schiller connected beauty with ethics and, more broadly, with humanity. If we approach life through play, our moral activities will become enjoyable and pleasing rather than obligatory. Human inclinations only conflict with the commands of reason, or, in Kantian terms, with human duty, when a person is in an imbalanced and unrefined state. However, once a person attains this ideal state and refinement through the process of aesthetic play, no such conflict will exist between the two.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

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In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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