

Between Reason and Sensibility: The Manifestation Mechanism of Freedom in Kant's Aesthetics

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Abstract

This paper centers on Kant's Critique of Judgment to explore the manifestation mechanism of "freedom" in aesthetics. It points out that Kant achieves a reconciliation between reason and sensibility through aesthetic judgment, thereby providing an experiential intermediary path for the concept of freedom. The article analyzes the four dimensions of aesthetic judgment and the free creativity of art and genius, and combines Schiller, Hegel, Heidegger, and others responses to Kants aesthetics of freedom to reveal how Kant bridges the gap between nature and freedom through aesthetic activities, thus constructing the philosophical foundation of modern aesthetics.

Keywords: judgment criticism, Kant's aesthetics, freedom

1. Introduction

Since Kant, the aesthetic expression of freedom has sparked widespread responses in the history of Western thought. Schiller introduced the concept of "play drive" in his Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man, viewing aesthetics as a practical bridge to moral freedom; Hegel emphasized that art is the sensuous manifestation of ideas, creating a theoretical tension with Kant's "freedom without concepts"; Heidegger further explored how art "opens up the world" through its manifestation, leading to the free opening of existence. These responses indicate that the issue of freedom in Kantian aesthetics is not only a central point in his critical philosophy but also an important starting point for the development of modern aesthetics.

Freedom is sensuously realized through aesthetic activities, extending human rational thought into nature. This allows the freedom originally confined within epistemology to extend to the understanding of ones own subjective spirit, thus exploring how to achieve inner harmony and order in humans. If the first half of the Critique of Judgment focuses on human-centered aesthetic judgment, examining how human emotions can attain freedom in aesthetic activities, then the second half, the teleological critique of judgment, centers on "the entire existence in which man places himself," contemplating how the originally "teleological" nature can be free. Through this bridge of freedom, it connects individual freedom with nature, thereby realizing the fundamental purpose of critical philosophy: the possibility of coordination between the two fundamentally different systems of order—freedom and nature. This possibility points to Kant's idea of the highest good. At the same time, the Critique of Judgment delves into the aesthetic domain, harmonizing humanity with nature and reason with sensibility. In Kants "dual world," humans, as beings of sensuous spirit, are simultaneously constrained by the objective rational world. However, in the realm of aesthetics, humans achieve harmony between sensibility and reason, transcending both to realize the freedom of the subject.

2. The Manifestation of Free Aesthetics — The Bridge of Kant's Critical Philosophy

The "freedom" pursued by ancient Westerners was actually a political or ethical freedom, while modern philosophys focus on freedom has gradually shifted towards the individual and aesthetics. When Schiller, Schopenhauer, and Nietzsche raised the banner of aesthetics, achieving "aesthetic freedom" became a true symbol of human freedom. The concept of "freedom" has always been rooted in Western philosophys understanding of the subject "human." To some extent, the aesthetic themes of Kant and Schiller also argue for the inevitability and rationality of the transition from nature to individual freedom in human history. The Enlightenment portrayed "a capital person" and placed "human" on an equal footing with "god." Reconsidering "humanity" and exploring human nature became the central topic of society at that time. (Bai, 2012) Kant's philosophy emerged against the backdrop of a long-standing split between rationalism and empiricism. The former pursued universality and necessity, while the latter emphasized individual experience and sensory concreteness. In this tension, Kant sought

to establish an "intermediate capacity" — aesthetic judgment that neither entirely appeals to rational commands nor retreats into sensory experience. It is neither cognition nor practice, yet it can subjectively embody a sense of universal freedom, thus paving the way for the unity of freedom and nature.

In Kant's critical philosophy, freedom is always at the core. The Critique of Judgment explores the a priori possibility of freedom, while the Critique of Practical Reason argues for its reality in moral laws. However, there remains an insurmountable gap between the two: how can ideal freedom be perceived in the empirical world? The Critique of Judgment introduces aesthetic judgment to bridge this gap, manifesting freedom through sensibility, thus reconciling the rupture between reason and nature, subjectivity and objectivity. Kant's philosophical thought emerges within the contradiction between rationalism and empiricism. Standing in this contradiction, Kant hopes that these two ways of understanding the world can harmonize, moving from merely using reason to understand the world and merely using senses to perceive it, to finding a method that achieves both. This method seems particularly applicable in aesthetics; if beauty were measured solely by scientific methods, it would not only be difficult to find a rationalist standard but also make aesthetics untheorizable. If beauty were simply a mental sensation, aesthetic creation and appreciation would become overly arbitrary and excessively subjective, losing their commonality and preventing communication and development. Therefore, Kant proposes aesthetic judgment and critiques it, using the theory of aesthetic analysis to encompass the aspects of being without interest or benefit. The combination of rationality and sensibility that arouses the psychological pleasure (i.e. sense of freedom) of aesthetic subjects leads to the exploration of the field beyond the phenomenal world.

Kant, after arguing the possibility of transcendental freedom in his Critique of Pure Reason, further proposed in the preface to the Critique of Practical Reason that "once the actuality of the concept of freedom is proved by an indisputable law of practical reason, it now constitutes the keystone of the entire edifice of pure reason, even speculative reason." (Kant, 2002, p. 2) In Kant's critical philosophy, the Critique of Pure Reason confirms the transcendental nature of freedom—something that can only be thought but not realized. Then, in the Critique of Practical Reason, he argues for the objective reality of practical freedom, which can be confirmed through moral laws and the autonomy of the will. However, whether it is transcendental freedom or practical freedom, both belong to the realm of rational conception. Ultimately, Kant grounds his focus in aesthetic activities. Aesthetic freedom allows the subject to experience the possibility of being transcended and sensory pleasure, making the transition from a natural being to a free being possible. (Hu, 2007)

After Kant, the concept of "freedom" underwent profound transformation and development in both political philosophy and aesthetic theory. In the 20th century, scholar Isaiah Berlin divided freedom into two basic forms: "negative freedom" and "positive freedom". The former refers to freedom from external interference, while the latter emphasizes the freedom of active self-realization and self-determination. From this perspective, the "sense of freedom" discussed by Kant in aesthetic judgment is closer to negative freedom. It does not come from any moral command or purposeful norm, nor is it a result of sensory stimulation or the logical outcome of experience; rather, it is a sense of liberation achieved through the coordination of subjectivity and objectivity. However, in Kant's theory of genius, the process of transforming freedom into creative acts, setting examples, and legislating for art implies an active and positive view of freedom — where the subject shapes the world and expresses ideas through free activity.

Kant emphasizes the unique value of aesthetic judgment in the realization of freedom precisely because it neither relies on the compulsion of rational commands nor falls into the utilitarian mechanisms of the empirical world. Instead, it provides an intermediary sensory experience that allows individuals to find reconciliation between freedom and nature. To further understand how this freedom can be perceived and constructed in specific aesthetic experiences, we need to start from Kant's four definitions of "beauty" and analyze the internal mechanisms of aesthetic judgment and the process of generating a sense of freedom.

3. The Mechanism of Aesthetic Judgment and the Generation of Freedom

Kant, in the Critique of Judgment, gradually constructs the foundation of free experience in aesthetic judgment by defining the four aspects of beauty — quality, quantity, relation, and modality — Each aspect not only points to the philosophical definition of beauty but also reveals how freedom is experienced and symbolized at the sensory level, thereby transforming abstract ideas into actual psychological sensations. The following sections will analyze these four dimensions in sequence to reveal the mechanisms of the generation of a sense of freedom in aesthetic judgment.

From a qualitative perspective, beauty is devoid of interest. Kant describes it as "the ability to judge the mode of appearance of an object based solely on pleasure or displeasure, without any consideration of interest." (Kant, 2002, p. 45) Aesthetics first transcends worldly utilitarianism, constructing a realm distinct from the previous

two critiques through suprasensory means. It does not involve epistemological reason, practical experience, or purposiveness. In this rich sensory experience, Kant singles out interest-free emotions as aesthetic feelings, which bring about free pleasure: "Aesthetic feeling is the only and unique kind of free pleasure that does not consider interest."

After analyzing the most fundamental characteristics of aesthetics, Kant placed individual aesthetic emotions within the whole for consideration. That is, in terms of quantity, beauty should have subjective universality. Kant expounded this feature as "beauty is universally pleasing without involving concepts." In the process of aesthetic communication, that is, in the manifestation of the universal validity of aesthetic judgment, what is conveyed is not a rational understanding, nor a concept, nor even the individual sensations emphasized in empiricism, but rather a "state of mind." The state of mind can be divided into the free activities of imagination and understanding. In his Critique of Judgment, Kant stated: "The various cognitive functions activated by such an image appear in aesthetic judgment as free activities, because there are no definite concepts that compel them to follow any particular cognitive law. Therefore, the state of mind when one sees such an image must necessarily connect a given image with the various functions of perception that ordinary people use to recognize it, in the free activity of sensation. To reflect the appearance of an objects image, if it is to become a source of cognition, it involves both imagination and understanding. Imagination is used to synthesize multiple sensory elements, while understanding is used to unify multiple images. The cognitive function accompanying the activity of reflecting the appearance of an objects image appears in the free activity." "The state of mind that moves is necessarily universally communicable, for all images of the object (regardless of who the subject is) must be consistent with cognition (as the determination of the nature of the object). Therefore, cognition is the only mode of image manifestation applicable to everyone." (Kant, 2002, p. 52) The two abilities of the aesthetic subject—imagination which integrates various sensory perceptions, while understanding unifies multiple images. That is, no matter how rich an individuals imagination may be, after being unified by understanding, they can have the same experience. Although this experience is not specific or detailed, it can achieve the effect of "all people sharing the same heart and mind" through the eruption of imagination and the unification of understanding. This movement of imagination and understanding, first, is not constrained by interests, and most importantly, due to the universal validity of aesthetics, it can fully demonstrate a sense of freedom.

From the perspective of relation, aesthetics possesses purposeless purposiveness. In the relationship between aesthetic objects and aesthetic purposes, Kant's exposition is that "beauty is a form of an object in accordance with purposiveness, but when one perceives this formal beauty, it does not depend on the representation of any particular purpose." (Kant, 2002, p. 72) From the analytical angle of relation, Kant stipulates "purposiveness" beyond the universal validity of results. "Purposiveness" means that the aesthetic object conforms to the free movement of imagination and understanding. The free movement caused by beauty itself is purposeless because it does not involve interests or concepts. This purposeless purposiveness, which does not rely on conceptual forms, is called pure beauty. If it involves interests, concepts, or forms but still evokes harmony between the subjects imagination and understanding, it is called dependent beauty. Pure beauty is generally the beauty of things themselves, while dependent beauty is usually associated with art. Overall, in the relationship between aesthetic objects and aesthetic purposes, the aesthetic object conforms to the universally valid purpose, while the aesthetic purpose itself is purposeless, so Kant summarizes it as purposeless purposiveness. Finally, according to modality, Kant defines beauty as "any object whose pleasure is considered necessary without relying on concepts is beautiful." Connecting the first three perspectives, the conclusion that "beauty has universal necessity" can be seen as a natural progression accomplish.

In summary, Kant established the logical foundation for the generation of a sense of freedom in aesthetic judgment through a systematic analysis of the four dimensions of beauty. Impartiality, subjective universality, purposeless purposiveness, and necessity together form a possible form of experiencing freedom in sensibility. Aesthetic judgment, as an intermediary ability, enables individuals to gain symbolic understanding of the idea of freedom through aesthetic experience without relying on concepts or utilitarianism, thus providing a basis for free practice in subsequent artistic creation. In contemporary aesthetic studies, Charles Taylor further criticized the tendency in modern views of freedom to overemphasize individual autonomy, arguing that "the realization of intrinsic purposes" is the true core of freedom. He emphasizes that people should not only escape oppression but also live with value and meaning. In this sense, the "purposeless purposiveness" in Kant's aesthetics provides a prototypical response: although aesthetic behavior lacks clear utilitarian goals, it embodies the requirement for harmony between form and meaning, nature and spirit, representing a positive experience of freedom that is characterized by "purposelessness" and values "freedom."

4. The Creative Practice of Genius, Art and Freedom

After analyzing beauty, aesthetic activities reconcile and transcend the diverse experiential feelings of imagination and the singular logical judgments of cognition, becoming a free movement. Since aesthetics can reconcile this contradiction, the subject which simultaneously deals with the world of reason and the world of experience, can also achieve freedom in both worlds through aesthetic activities. This leads to the speculation on genius and art in the critique of aesthetic judgment. In this process, the introduction of the concept of "genius" is not only used to explain the mechanism of artistic creation but also reflects Kant's further conception of creative freedom. As the legislator of art, the spontaneous synergy between the imagination and cognition of genius embodies a highly free mental activity. The creative act of genius does not rely on conceptual intermediaries or serve any utilitarian or external purposes; instead, it is a practice of the free spirit manifesting itself in form. This creative process, which is unrestricted by external norms yet resonates with others, is precisely the highest manifestation of "free sensuous appearance" in Kant's sense.

Kant posits that "genius" is the creative subject of art. In aesthetic activities, ordinary individuals can realize freedom through aesthetic judgment, whereas in artistic creation, it requires genius. When defining art and genius, Kant also places great emphasis on the freedom of art in terms of method and form of expression, highlighting the preciousness and rarity of freedom. Among these, the freedom of art is concentrated in the genius who legislates for art. Kant believes that the free creation of genius has four characteristics: first, originality, which means that genius can generate rich imagination without relying on aesthetic judgment, and at the same time, use understanding to endow this imagination with universal validity, bringing freedom to others. As Leo Tolstoy said, "The power and function of art to move people lie precisely in liberating individuals from isolation and loneliness, and in uniting them with others." Second, exemplarity and mystery, which emphasize that the results of genius's creation cannot be replicated or traced back to their source, making them imitable. This ability to "prevent aesthetic individuals from replicating" distances art from interests and concepts, allowing the created art to be purely formal and imaginative, rather than as a fixed concept that fails to evoke the imagination of aesthetic individuals, thus constraining the freedom of aesthetics. Finally, genius possesses an innate function to legislate for art, a nature that originates from within rather than being cultivated externally. Kant unifies nature and art through this characteristic of genius, bridging freedom. Among the four features of genius, one can see its intrinsic alignment with aesthetic freedom, from experiencing aesthetic pleasure to creating it. Although the sense of freedom seems increasingly out of reach, the process by which genius creates art, where freedom is better realized, is precisely the ideal state of human beings.

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"Freedom" is an otherworldly, transcendent, and non-intuitive existence that can only be grasped through rational thought and perception. Through aesthetic activities, freedom becomes concrete, experiential, and tangible. The practice of freedom through aesthetics allows the finite human being to experience a glimpse of the iceberg of freedom through sensibility. Relatively speaking, aesthetic pleasure promotes the pursuit of freedom, which is specifically manifested in the pursuit of beauty, the deepening of art theory, the expansion of humanistic connotations, and even the ultimate goodness of moral ethics, ultimately returning to the question "What is man?" In his letter to Kafkas, Kant mentioned that he was determined to solve four problems: "In the realm of pure philosophy, my long-term work plan for myself is to address the following three questions: What can I know? What should I do? What can I hope for? Then comes the fourth, and last question: What is man?" The inner order of humanity can be harmonized through values, ethics, and religion, but the external order between humans and nature requires the guidance of freedom, thus recognizing the value of life and contemplating how to transcend the essence. (Kant, 2002, p. 204-205)

The hierarchical structure of free experience (aesthetic judgment → artistic creation → transcendence of the self) forms Kant's aesthetic path to address the opposition between nature and freedom. In aesthetics, humans break free from the dual constraints of rational commands and sensory temptations, achieving a temporary and symbolic "transcendent state." This allows them to glimpse the possibility of a free self and return to the ultimate question of "how humans can become fully realized beings."

5. Epilogue

Aesthetic experience arises from the need for freedom, and freedom is sensuously manifested through aesthetics. The dual structure of Kant's philosophy is built on the tension between reason and sensibility, nature and freedom, substance and phenomenon. To bridge these gaps, the Critique of Judgment offers a path to reconciliation: by sensuously manifesting freedom through aesthetic activities, freedom not only exists as an idea in reason but also becomes partially realized in human experiential activities. The introduction of teleological judgment further illustrates that only nature possesses a purposive structure, making the actual manifestation of freedom possible.

"What is man?" This question runs through the core of Kant's three critiques, and in aesthetic freedom, the harmony between man and nature, reason and sensibility, constitutes the fundamental possibility of being human. From Kant to Hegel, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, modern philosophy has continuously explored the reconciliation of freedom and nature. Kant's solution for freedom mediated by aesthetics remains profoundly enlightening: even if freedom is not exhaustible, the non-utilitarian pleasure and spiritual transcendence experienced in aesthetics still illuminate the path toward wholeness for a finite being.

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