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Lecture Handout

PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS in Kant and Schiller
(with special reflections on the Beautiful Soul)

1. Soul. The innermost essence of a being (human and non-human). The human soul: who we most essentially are, but more. For the Greeks the soul was the immaterial part of an individual; in some cultures soul partakes of both the physical and the non-physical. Soul is "the actuating cause of an individual life" (Aristotle).

2. The Beautiful Soul. A central focus in Enlightenment aesthetic theory. "Beautification of Man" became a deliberate aesthetic/artistic method to educate feelings with the goal of human self-completion. (18th century theorists: Herder, Wieland, Mendelssohn, Hegel, Goethe and Schiller)

3. Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). *Critique of Judgment* (1790) in 2 parts: "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment," and "Critique of Teleological Judgment"

   Kant's Antinomy of Taste (CJ, Par. 56 "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment"):

   > "*Thesis*: A judgment of taste <u>is not</u> based on concepts; for otherwise one could dispute about it (decide by means of proofs).
   >
   > "*Antithesis*: A judgment of taste <u>is</u> based on concepts; for otherwise one could not quarrel about them with others (i.e. lay claim to people's assent to one's judgment)."

4. Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805). *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (from Letters 12-15).

   Schiller distinguishes between two disparate human tendencies that are reconciled by a third:

   1. The *sense drive* (or "living sense") pertains to our givenness as sensuous, physical beings;

   2. The *form drive* pertains to our thinking, understanding faculty.

   3. The *play drive* must tend to both sense and form drives to produce a "living form" or Beauty.

Formula yielding Beauty:

Living Sense ←————————→ Form Drive = Living Form or Beauty
Play Drive

Lecture Notes

PHILOSOPHICAL AESTHETICS in Kant and Schiller
(with special reflections on the Beautiful Soul)

Aesthetic theory has become a hot issue in recent academic philosophy. It is closely allied to the mind-body problem, i.e. how to reconcile our passions and emotions (the physiological part of us), with thought and reason (the mental, cognitive part of us). Our discussion is focusing on this issue from the perspective of judgments in art.

I will first set the stage (at some length) for Philosophical Aesthetics as a relative newcomer in academic philosophy. It includes the following:

(1) reasons for its unwieldyness in philosophical discourse;
(2) a brief historical perspective;
(3) preliminary remarks on the "Beautiful Soul" in late 18th century thought. Then I turn to the bulk of my talk.

[For Kant I shall draw on the Third Critique, specifically Part I, "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment". For Schiller, who will help us grasp Kant's complex theories by reworking them in conceptually more manageable components, we draw on the "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man." (Parenthetically: The two primary German classical literary figures in the late 18th century, often mentioned together, were Schiller and Goethe. They were contemporaries of Kant, both drawn to Kant's aesthetic theory but for different reasons. Goethe saw his own scientific insights nourished by Kant's philosophy of nature in Part II of the 3rd Kritik, "Critique of Teleological Judgment". Schiller, our focus, drew from Kant's "Antinomy of Taste").]

(1) Some explanations concerning the recalcitrance of aesthetics for philosophical discourse.

Aesthetics comes from Greek, *aisthesthai*, feeling, sensing, perceiving. It first and simply means taking in the world with our five senses. When I say, "this rose is red", "the music is loud", I make aesthetic statements about the world, using my sense of sight and hearing, respectively. I make pronouncements about sensible facts in the world based on empirical observations; they are "aesthetic" facts based on my perceptions, about which knowledge seekers can argue. This is the first meaning of aesthetics.

But when I say "this rose is beautiful", I elevate my simple per-ception of the red rose to a higher level of conscious reflection. I'm adding a reflective quality that has to do with how I value the rose, how I feel about it; I'm not primarily interested in the *fact* that it is red. It is this second sense that most of us are familiar with when we talk about aesthetics, namely we mean by it a sense of beauty, art appreciation, taste. This is the sense on which we will focus this morning. Aesthetics is a value theory. The beauty of the rose is a felt *value,* not a scientific *fact* and I really can't expect all people to agree with me about personal tastes.

You are familiar with the saying: "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" which means it is based on individual taste. It is *subjective* not *objective*; it is relative to the beholder. Along with that goes another familiar saying "there is no arguing about taste": everyone has a right to their own assessments about beauty, art. Taste is non-negotiable, not open to argument. About facts in the

world we can argue with others and come to an agreement of what is true. But how can we establish the truth of beauty objectively? So here we have a conundrum; some of you may already have picked up on it.

Some of you might raise an objection, Why should aesthetic value judgments be considered merely subjective? Why should there be no objective standards on the basis of which we CAN assess beauty, art, and thus *argue* about it or demand agreement from others? But the belief "everyone has their own taste" seems to rule out independent standards that can be applied in aesthetics. On this notion the Maplethorpe pornographic photographs at the Corcoran a number of years ago (generating a stir whether or not they should have been on display) would be on the same footing with Michaelangelo's David or DaVinci's Mona Lisa, because it all depends on how people feel about it. **Philosophically** we find ourselves on the horn of a dilemma: *on one hand* we AGREE there is no arguing about taste; we insist on our own taste. And *on the other* we also AGREE that we *should* be able to argue about what is good taste and what is bad taste. We want to insist, some art is more worthy than other art. But on what basis? Who is to say? By what standard can we judge when it comes to aesthetic taste? So one of the important issues in philosophical aesthetics is to settle the question: Does art have standards? If so, what are they?

So much for an initial precis into the peculiar conundrum of aesthetics. Now some brief historical notes on philosophical aesthetics.

(2) Philosophical aesthetics has had a thorny path in the history of ideas. I want to touch on a few highlights of WHY academic philosophy has had a difficult time to find a legitimate niche for aesthetics in their curriculum. As already indicated, when it comes to art appreciation we employ our feelings. Our emotions and passions play a major role. But emotions, passions can open the Pandora's box to irrationality. Philosophical reasoning tends to deny the passions their due. John Keats' warning about philosophy in Lamia II is stern and graphic:

> *"Do not all charms fly at the mere touch of cold philosophy? There was an awful rainbow once in heaven: We know her woof, her texture: She is given in the dull catalogue of common things. Philosophy will clip an angel's wings. Conquer all mysteries by rule and line …. Unweave the rainbow."*

Aesthetics weaves rainbows and philosophy doesn't know how to handle this. Philosophy values reason, "rule and line," and shuns unreason and irrationality which often find entry through the passions. Reason and passions are not easily reconciled in the logic of philosophical talk. The domain of aesthetics and its subject matter -- art, painting, sculpture, poetry, tragedy, comedy, music, literature -- did not find an easy entry into the hallowed halls of academic philosophy (although it must be said throughout the ages philosophers had important things to say about art & beauty, at least since Plato). But for millennia aesthetics was denied a formal place in academic philosophy, until the mid-18th century. What happened?

It was a natural disaster that forced the issue and opened the floodgates to a great debate following the Earthquake of Lisbon of 1755 (a tsunami that began in the ocean off the coast of Portugal). Thousands upon thousands perished, mostly by drowning, among them many clergymen who had come to Lisbon for a religious conference. The ensuing debate among the *philosophes* and *literati* was focused on the reason-passion schism. We can't discuss the details

of this debate other than to say, it can be boiled down to the question: *When it comes to making one's way through life, its arbitrariness, when natural disasters strike, when life is mean and groveling -- what should be the primary compass to guide us?* Should we consult our passions, our feelings, faith (a category of feeling)? Should we follow the dictates of our heart? Or should we trust and follow reason and science to understand life and the workings of the universe? This question generated a tremendous outpouring of literature in mid-18th C. Thinkers like Voltaire, Diderot, d'Alembert, Rousseau all weighed in. Voltaire sided with reason. He wrote the famous parody *Candide,* a classic argument and biting critique against the passions, especially against faith. Voltaire called for é*crazez l'infâme,* to erase the infamy of unreason, irrationality, especially unexamined faith. Rousseau, by contrast, sided with the passions, with faith, as the most appropriate, natural and correct human reaction to life's vicissitudes. After the Earthquake, reason had no valid conclusions about existential questions. The debate pressed for a resolution of the crisis of judgment between reason and passion.

In time the debate led to a new discipline "the science of aesthetics" which was formalized by Immanuel Kant. Kant is generally acknowledged to be the founder of modern philosophical aesthetics. We will take a look at his theory in a moment.

(3) How does all this connect with the theme of "the beautiful soul"? The new discipline of aesthetics in the late 18th century held that Beauty was the great educator of humanity. Both Schiller and Goethe, as well as others (Herder, Wieland, Mendelssohn), saw the new discipline as an antidote to Cartesianism (Descartes' rationalism) which had dominated the first half of the 18th century under the Wolff-Leibnizian worldview. To quote Wieland (1777): "Man as he slips from the formative hand of nature [at birth a bundle of feelings and passions] is nothing but potential. He has to expand himself ... He must be his own *second* creator, and only that grants him splendor, beauty and grace." Our destiny is given by nature but its fulfillment is man's alone. Johann Gottfried Herder further argued for a *path of art* as a means to human self-completion: "It is not only poetically permissible but philosophically correct to call Beauty our second creator." The primary task in the early development of aesthetic theory was concentrated on the "Beautification of man," human self-completion through a deliberate aesthetic-artistic method to educate our feelings. So much for a broad introduction.

KANT (1724-1804)

Most students approach Kant's transcendental philosophy with great trepidation because of its forbidding, dense, convoluted and abstruse prose. As someone once said: "Trying to grasp Kant is like taking a journey to the Northpole of thought where one's brain freezes in abstract ice." But there are ways to crack the Kantian "code", and once this happens there are rewards for the effort. I will confine my remarks to the highlights of Kant's aesthetic theory (alas, over-simplified). Then we take up Schiller who makes Kant more accessible.

The Third Critique, *Critique of Judgment*, has been somewhat of a stepchild in Kant scholarship but this has changed in recent decades. It contains Kant's mature philosophy of aesthetics. The work comes in 2 parts: "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment" (to which Schiller was drawn) and "Critique of Teleological Judgment" (Goethe's focus). There are Kant scholars who hold that the Third Critique doesn't altogether fit into Kant's overall transcendental project. My own view is:

Without the third critical work we don't understand Kant at all, or at best merely grasp the trunk of the elephant while missing the totality of his *corpus*.

Kant wrote the Third Critique as an attempt to reconcile the dichotomy between senses-feelings-passions and cognitive understanding, reason. In the course of about 9 yrs. after the First Critique (1781), he searched for and isolated the *a priori* condition in our consciousness which allows aesthetics an independent domain, replete with its own principles. To put aesthetics on a principled trajectory, i.e. demonstrating its own *a priori* modes would establish it as a *science*, granting it a place in academic philosophy. Let me talk for a moment on the importance of apriority for any area of knowledge calling itself science.

Any science worth its salt, many thinkers argue, must have some identifiable principles by virtue of which it can ground its claims. If a *science* of aesthetics is to be possible, it must have its own fixed, identifiable principles, those not subject to frequent change. These must be a priori (based on pure thought, independent and uncontaminated by the senses). The most central aspect of Kant's transcendental philosophy was to establish the operating principles, not only for the physical sciences, not only for morality but also for *art*. Kant had always one goal: to search for and demonstrate the a priori principles in the human mind itself. He found human consciousness is equipped with certain mechanisms that operate in us independent of the senses (this is the heart of transcendental philosophy). Without such principles in us, so Kant, there could be no certainty of knowledge. This is Kant's radical new turn in the 18th century, a/k/a Kant's **Copernican Revolution**. Due to the mind's *a priori* structures we organize the world in a certain way. We can know the world only in terms of what the mind can produce from its own sources of thinking. That's pretty radical! But Kant realized, it's not enough to make claims about such mental structures; they had to be demonstrated. And that became the most formidable task in his three "Critiques", to make a complete inventory of the powers of the mind and establish their a priori conditions.

What does that mean for philosophical aesthetics? Kant identifies the principle of *Zweckmäßigkeit*, purposiveness, that legislates for the general power of judgment, but most especially for aesthetic judgment. Kant makes clear: It doesn't mean there are purposes IN nature (he doesn't return to an Aristotelian telos; nature does not operate by purposes, divine or otherwise). Rather it is a principle operating in us. Purposiveness governs our judgments whether we are aware of it or not (mostly we are not). Without it we cannot discern properly, whether in the domain of science, morality or art. In sum: we judge necessarily on the basis of this principle *in* us, <u>*as if*</u> nature and the world behaved in purposeful (zweckmäßige) ways. This line of argument is not obvious, easily grasped, nor even plausible. One must wade through many abstruse texts to follow Kant.

Kant recognized the central problem of aesthetics is this: First, there is the subjective nature of aesthetic taste, but secondly and at the same time there is in us this objective a priori principle that serves as a standard to measure judgments concerning beauty and art, by which we can assess works of art for better or worse. Kant describes the two antithetical demands in the soul: The *rational part* demands standards of beauty; and our passional feeling part does not need objective rules; rules are inadequate to express aesthetic appreciation. These two demands clearly stand in opposition. Kant says it presents us with an antinomy of reason (an antinomy presents two contradictory statements in need of a resolution).

The Antinomy of Taste (Par. 56); see HANDOUT:

> "(1) *Thesis*: A judgment of taste is not based on concepts; for otherwise one could dispute about it and decide by means of proofs.
>
> (2) *Antithesis*: A judgment of taste is based on concepts; for otherwise one could not quarrel about it with others."

These require a *denouement*.

Kant begins to solve the antinomy of taste by isolating the concept, already mentioned, purposiveness, as the reconciling principle between the thesis and antithesis. It is what he had earlier called a "third thing" required to stand in the breach between two antithetical demands in us. [Parenthetic note: The idea of a "third thing", a trias of elements, to solve entangled plots that human reason is engaged in necessarily, serves as a useful logical device in all Critiques. (Total agreement among scholars on Kant's complex meanings on these issues is far from being achieved even to this day!)]. We will see how Schiller throws light on Kant's theories at this juncture.

But first to conclude Kant. He focuses (as we did), on two common-places: the first "everyone has his/her own taste." And because this is the case, the second follows logically: "There is no disputing about taste." *Why can we not dispute taste*? We have no adequate concepts available by which we can repudiate or agree with a taste judgment, however distasteful or pleasing it appears to us (whether Maplethorpe's photographs, American Idol on TV, or the Mona Lisa). But on the other hand, despite these two beliefs, we also insist that we can argue about taste, i.e. some artworks are more worthy than others when selected for a place in the museum. However, to be able to argue with others we need some intersubjective concept to do so. There seems to be no such concept or concepts available by which to argue about taste.

In the course of much argumentation, Kant argues we do have a concept available to us after all. The concept that operates in us when we argue about beauty is essentially unnamable, incapable of being articulated. It is what Kant calls a "supersensible" concept dwelling in all sentient beings, and through which we can come to a consensus with others, a *sensus communis*. The concept we refer to is none other than purposive-ness; it operates in us a priori and helps us discern when we judge something aesthetically, more, for which we demand assent from others. The human mind is universal in its basic mechanisms and therefore we all can come in principle to a similar conclusion. Kant solves the contradiction by virtue of a supersensible, yet intersubjective concept underlying human judgment power.

But what if people still do not agree and insist on their own taste. That needs to be further fleshed out. For this we consult Friedrich Schiller's idea of the educability of the senses.

FRIEDRICH SCHILLER (1759-1805)

Brings Kant's theory within our grasp.

In his "Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man", first published in 1795 in 3 installments (finished1801), Schiller acknowledged Kant's pivotal influence on his thinking. He talks about

his indebtedness to Kant: “I shall not want to hide that it is for the most part Kantian principles on which my theses are based. ….. Our feelings provide the *material* and the free powers of thought dictate the *formal laws* according to which this inquiry is to proceed” (1st Ltr.). In 8th Letter: “The old philosopher (Kant) is correct when he says there is an abiding demand for educating human understanding ... BUT, the greater difficulty by far is to grasp that the path to the mind leads over the heart.” The seat of our feelings is the heart. Throughout his literary career Schiller points to the need we must educate the ability to feel: "The most urgent need of our age is the education of the heart, revealed through our feelings, because it provides the impulse for improving our under-standing for more effective living." (Most likely, Schiller would not agree with modern psychology that insists feelings just are; there is not much we can do about them.) For Schiller there must be a deliberate conscious effort to educate our feelings and that includes changing them in order to better our lives. Kant provided the conceptual blueprint for exploring the principles that educate the heart.

What are these principles? It is expressed in Schiller’s central hypothesis, also taking us into the theme of the Beautiful Soul: “All that is best and noble in human happiness is contained in the subject matter of aesthetics … Aesthetics is the contemplation of beauty and art leading to an elevated soul, a beautiful soul, to a morally noble soul.” Feelings as well as rational powers must be employed together to yield beauty of soul and strength of character.

Schiller argues: Our human reality is lived out most concretely in the b*alance* between the senses and reason; this balance is the only path through which we attain beauty of soul, essentially a life in which we become fully human. [In much of his literary output, Schiller explored the diversity of human personality, describing the way in which the *imbalances* between *feelings/passions* and *formal thinking* play themselves out. How are souls created, thwarted or enhanced in their process through life?] I will read a paragraph from which we can analyze his theory to educate feelings to create beauty of soul:

“Reason, on transcendental grounds, makes the following demand: let there be a bond of union between the *form drive* and the *material drive*; that is to say, let there be a *play drive,* since only the union of reality with form ... makes the concept of human nature complete. Reason, must make this demand because it is reason--because it is its nature to insist on perfection and on the abolition of all limitation ...Consequently, as soon as Reason utters the pronouncement*: let humanity exist*, it has by that very pronouncement also promulgated the law: Let there be beauty.”

Let’s unpack this complex passage for its 3 essential components.

Human beings are composites of 3 distinct drives:

(1) the material or *sense drive*;
(2) the *form drive* and
(3) a peculiar drive, called the *play drive*.

The first two are contradictory in nature. We recognize Kant’s antinomy of taste expressed in thesis and antithesis. They need to be brought together to relate and cooperate with each other

and thus a third drive is required, namely the *play drive* (cf. Kant's trias of elements). Through the play drive the first two are bonded, find reconciliation. Let's briefly dwell on each one.

(1) Concerning the *material sense drive*: In our physiological givenness we are material beings. The world which confronts us with its profusion of color, sound, touch, smell, taste, enters through our five senses--eyes, ears, skins, noses, tongues. (In scientific parlance: neuro-transmitters fire in the presence of sense objects; sense data is taken up by the senses). But this is not yet thought through or understood. This sensuous content which we experience as "living sense," has to be translated into thought. Kant had said: "With our senses we can't think and with our understanding we can't sense."

(2) Concerning the *form drive* -- it is active in a different way. It pays attention to the formal conceptual qualities of things; it is a function of our thinking faculty. Living sense takes up sense data, but sense data must be translated into forms of thought. The principle of recognizing objects, Kant held, is not supplied by the senses, but by an altogether different faculty: our cognitive understanding. Schiller picks this up and says: the form drive in us that thinks organizes the sense experiences of the world.

(3) Concerning the curious *play-drive* (perhaps the most important because it is here that he locates freedom): From Kant Schiller picks up the notion of a "third thing"; it is the play drive. The play drive moves "to and fro" between sense and form drives. Schiller comes up with a formula of the three components that yield Beauty, or "living form:" "The object of the *play drive*, represented in a general schema, may therefore be called *living form*: a concept serving to designate all the aesthetic qualities of phenomena and what in its widest sense of the term we call *beauty."*

Living Sense ←-----------→ Form Drive = Living Form or Beauty
Play Drive

Let's look at the nature of the play-drive more closely. Play, says Schiller, is freedom! When one plays one is free. "Play is neither subjectively nor objectively contingent; it is free and imposes no constraint on either one or the other. Most of us would agree: We all love to play because doing so we experience our freedom most vividly; it's the most carefree expression of our talents. For Schiller to philosophize on beauty is to allow the play-drive its fullest range, and thus its freedom. "In contemplation of the beautiful, the soul finds itself in a happy medium between the realm of the law (rules of form) and the sphere of physical exigency (feelings and sense) and it is precisely because it is divided between the two, removed from the constraint of the one as of the other, that it plays." (LAEM, 129).

Schiller raises an <u>objection</u> and perhaps you may have raised this in your own mind. He asks: Isn't the idea of "play" to yield beauty a frivolous idea? Is beauty not itself degraded by being made up of mere play, reduced diminished in its dignity to the level of frivolous entertainment? Isn't beauty an instrument and an exalted symbol of culture? Can that be reduced to mere play? Schiller retorts: Why should we speak of "mere" play if, of all human states and conditions, it is the one that makes us whole and unfolds both sides of our nature at once? Why call it limitation and frivolity and not rather *expansion* of character? (LAEM, 130).

We now have a rough theoretical description of how beauty, on the Kant-Schiller scheme, is generated in the soul, namely through the mind's active powers: As we have seen the play drive in its freedom tends to or deals with both sense and form and in so doing, produces Beauty in its most general sense. Beauty is neither an abstract concept, nor a pure feeling, but is a new creation that, according to Schiller, ennobles the soul. As Kant had famously said: "Thought without [sense] content is empty, and [sense] intuitions without concepts are blind." Pure thought and pure feeling, independent of each other, without a reconciling energy, are bereft and emaciated. And so the play drive is a crucial requirement. And it is this which had dawned on the Enlightenment thinkers: one had to find a conceptual middle ground to reconcile the independent energies of sense and thought, namely a "third thing", the playdrive.

With this background we might briefly consider the question: How could one describe the *art of living* to produce a beautiful soul, applying the theories we have just looked at to our lives? We know a human being is neither exclusively matter nor exclusively mind. Beauty of soul, as the consummation of a person's humanity, can therefore be neither exclusively sensuous life nor exclusively formal life. But literature is full of examples (also personal experiences testify to this), where often one or the other of the drives predominates, short-changing the other. One can get stuck in sensuous life (the material world of pleasures predominates), or in formal thought life (philosophers often fall prey to the exclusivity of their contemplative mode). Schiller remarked, even artists who philosophize on beauty can become victim to the exclusivity of form.

Schiller has one more angle on the issue of what the achievement of beauty of soul looks like in our conduct. It seems he backtracks on the notion of a perfect *balance* between form and material drives that produce beauty of soul. He introduces the concept of *dignity*. Schiller gives a more exalted status to the form drive. He argues: Life itself in its *material* existence becomes of lesser importance once human dignity enters, i.e. when the form drive of thoughtfulness and contemplation dominates. Schiller holds, thoughtfulness cannot happen when sensuous inclinations exert a powerful pull on us, and duty ceases to be a constraint (for many people the idea of duty becomes a lackluster requirement that thwarts their passions). Schiller argues, on the contrary, a soul that is able to consider duty does accept the material reality of its existence with greater freedom and serenity because duty encounters formal truth. But when a soul accepts the law of necessity of a life of pleasure, satisfying sensuous desires, it no longer feels constrained by duty or formal abstractions. Schiller gives the form drive a more exalted status claiming when we're preoccupied with the power of ideas, we integrate our everyday sensuous reality in aesthetically more satisfying ways.

Can there be a perfect union of the two? Schiller admits, the highest attainment of beauty would be the perfect balance of sense and form. BUT such a balance is a mere idea itself, because in actual life we are more often than not left with a preponderance of one drive over the other. Our human experience will always be two-fold and there can never be a perfect reciprocal action between these drives and therefore there can be only degrees of beauty. Because of our double nature the ascendancy of one drive will pull us away from the other and vice versa. If we recall that the play drive is associated with freedom, then we see that freedom to choose is that which gives us the greatest worth and dignity, that which makes us uniquely human. Schiller stands squarely on Kantian grounds: **human freedom, active in the play drive, is our greatest human possession that guarantees our worth and dignity, and beauty of soul**.

I conclude with a Schiller quote that encapsulates what the Enlightenment thinkers called "Beautification of a human being":

> *"Man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a human being, and he is only fully a human being, a beautiful soul, when he plays."*

Q&A period. [If time permits, we can look at 2 examples from literature that show, first, that an imbalance between form and material drives can lead to morbidity of soul (cf. Goethe's novel, Sufferings of Young Werther) and second, an individual who becomes authentic reaching beauty of soul in the give and take of sense and thought, but only over a long period of time, in old age (Goethe's Wilhelm Meister's Wanderjahre, Book 6, "Confessions of a Beautiful Soul."]