

BEAUTY AS A SYMBOL OF NATURAL SYSTEMATICITY

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In this essay I examine Kant's claim that a relation of symbolization links judgements of beauty and judgements of 'systematicity' in nature (that is, judgements concerning the ordering of natural forms under hierarchies of laws). My aim is to show that the symbolic relation between the two is, for Kant, much closer than many commentators think: it is not only the *form* but also the *objects* of some of our judgements of taste that symbolize the systematicity of nature.

I

IN A RECENT paper in this journal, Alexander Rueger and Şahan Evren discuss the relationship between the two *a priori* principles that, according to Kant, govern or 'give the rule' to the faculty of judgement: the Principle of the Systematicity of Nature (PS), and the Principle of Taste (PT).¹ Here are the two principles (in the authors' own words at p. 232):

(PS) Nature specifies the multitude of its empirical laws in accordance with our cognitive needs for order.

(PT) Nature specifies the apprehended forms as suitable for the power of aesthetic judgement.

Although Kant *says* that PS and PT are closely related, it is notoriously unclear precisely how this is supposed to work. Both principles claim, very generally, that the world is positively disposed towards certain of our judging faculties—cognitive or aesthetic. But the content of and motivation for each principle are quite different. Rueger and Evren's central claims are (1) that there is *not* an evidential connection between these two principles, but rather (2) that a relation of *analogy* or *symbolization* links them. In what follows I will

¹ Alexander Rueger and Şahan Evren, 'The Role of Symbolic Presentation in Kant's Theory of Taste', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 45 (July 2005), pp. 229–247. I will cite this article parenthetically in the body of the text.

focus largely on (2), though at the end I will also say something that challenges (1). The notion of ‘symbolization’ in Kant is very important and under-discussed, and Rueger and Evren highlight a crucial use of it. I want to suggest here, however, that the symbolic connection between beauty and natural systematicity for Kant is much closer than they think.

II

The main piece of textual evidence for (2)—the claim that PS and PT are linked by analogy—is from 5:193, section 8 of the Introduction, where Kant is talking about *natural* beauty in particular. Here is the passage in its entirety:

Although our concept of a subjective purposiveness of nature in its forms, in accordance with empirical laws, is not a concept of the object at all, but only a principle of the power of judgement for providing concepts in the face of this excessive multiplicity in nature (in order to be able to be oriented in it), we nevertheless hereby ascribe to nature as it were (*gleichsam*) a regard to our faculty of cognition, in accordance with the analogy of an end; and thus we can view *natural beauty* as the *presentation* (*Darstellung*) of the concept of formal (merely subjective) purposiveness and *natural ends* as the presentation of the concept of a real (objective) purposiveness, one of which we judge through taste (aesthetically, by means of the feeling of pleasure), the other through understanding and reason (logically, in accordance with concepts). (5:193, Kant’s emphasis)²

The first part of this passage contains the familiar claim that natural systematicity is not something that we first stumble across in the empirical world and then cognize ‘logically’ with concepts. Rather, we first have to presuppose in an *a priori* and subjectively justified³ fashion that the world is systematically ordered under hierarchies of laws such that it has ‘a regard to our faculty of cognition’. Elsewhere Kant says that this presupposition is downright *required* for us rationally to engage in scientific enquiry, and perhaps even to form any empirical concepts whatsoever (cf. 20:203).⁴

² Quotations from Kant are translated from *Immanuel Kants Schriften*, Ausgabe der koeniglich preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: W. De Gruyter, 1902–). I cite the Akademie pagination (volume:page), or, for the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A-edition/B-edition. The *Kritik der Urteilskraft* is in vol. 5 of the Akademie edition. I have also consulted and often used the English translations of Guyer and Matthews (New York: Cambridge U.P., 2000) and Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

³ For more on ‘subjective justification’ and its various forms, see my ‘Kant’s Concepts of Justification’, *Nous*, forthcoming 2007.

⁴ For a defence of the claim about empirical concept formation *überhaupt*, see Hannah Ginsborg’s work, especially her book *The Role of Taste in Kant’s Theory of Cognition* (New York: Garland, 1990) and her article ‘Reflective Judgement and Taste’, *Nous*, vol. 24 (March 1990), pp. 63–78.

The puzzling part of the quotation comes next: ‘*natural beauty*’—and, Rueger and Evren add, ‘the experience [of it]’—counts as a ‘*presentation* of the concept of formal (merely subjective) purposiveness ... which we judge through taste (aesthetically, by means of the feeling of pleasure)’. This difficult thesis requires some unpacking.

For Kant, there are three main ways in which a concept can be given a presentation. Each of the three involves a connection to intuition, and each provides some sort of positive, harmonious *content* (or ‘objective reality’) to the concept—content which indicates that its object is really possible. This reference to modal epistemology is important, and something that Rueger and Evren do not emphasize. In the pre-critical period, Kant assumed that the fact that something is really possible can simply be ‘given’ to us in thought. In other words, the early Kant supposed that merely by entertaining an idea, we will be able to see whether it represents something that is really possible, or whether some of its constituent predicates bear a relation of ‘real repugnance’ (*Realrepugnanz*) to one another.⁵

In the critical period, Kant worries more about epistemological issues, and this change affects his theory of modality. Or, rather, it affects his theory of the *epistemology* of modality—Kant is no longer content to assert that real possibilities are just ‘given’ to us in reflection (28:1036). Rather, he seeks to understand *how* we can know, or at least justifiably assume, that a thing is really possible in the first place. An appeal to our coherent *thought* of a thing will no longer be enough, since mere thought in the critical period is a guide to logical possibility rather than real possibility (cf. *KrV*, Bxxvi, note). In order to establish that something enjoys the latter, we have to make a connection between the concept and an *intuition* (A771/B799). The main idea is that *if* we have grounds for holding that something is in principle an object we could either intuit or connect via natural laws to intuited objects, *then* it is something that we can justifiably take to be really possible:

To display (*dartun*) the reality of our concepts, intuitions are always required. If they are empirical concepts, then the latter are called *examples*. If they are pure concepts of the understanding, then the latter are called *schemata*. But if one demands that the objective reality of the concepts of reason, i.e., of the ideas, be displayed, and moreover for the sake of theoretical cognition of them, then one desires something impossible, since no intuition adequate to them can be given at all. (5:351)

⁵ For a discussion of the notion of *Realrepugnanz*, see ‘Negative Magnitudes’ 2:172–175, ‘On a Discovery’ 8:240; ‘Real Progress’ 20:283, 299; and ‘Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion’ 28:1016. For Kant’s most significant use of this assumption about real possibility, see *The Only Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, especially 2:77–86.

Examples and schemata connect some concepts to intuitions. Transcendental ideas, however, are not capable of intuitive presentation for the purposes of cognition, and thus we cannot know that their objects are really possible. In his severest moments, when he is focused on his critique of speculative metaphysics and mystical enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*), Kant emphasizes this point over and over again: no intuition or schema can present a transcendental idea. Concepts such as those, without intuitions, are empty.

In section 59 of the third *Critique*, however, Kant is more permissive, and develops the notion of *symbolization* as the third way in which a concept can acquire a kind of intuitional content:

All *hypotyposis* (presentation, *subjecto sub adspectum*), as making something sensible, is of one of two kinds: either *schematic*, where to a concept grasped by the understanding the corresponding intuition is given *a priori*; or *symbolic*, where to a concept which only reason can think, and to which no sensible intuition can be adequate, an intuition is attributed with which the power of judgement proceeds in a way merely analogous to that which it observes in schematization. (5:351)

The claim here is that *non*-empirical concepts can be given a connection to intuition via either schematism *or* symbolization. Transcendental ideas cannot be schematized, of course, and so if they are to have any positive, harmonious content at all it must be symbolic content.⁶

In his other major piece of work from the early 1790s, the *Real Progress* essay, Kant says a bit more about how symbolization works:

The symbol of an idea (or a concept of reason) is a representation by analogy, i.e., by the same relationship to certain consequences as that which is attributed to the object in respect of its own consequences, even though the objects themselves are of entirely different kinds.

This is a bit opaque; fortunately Kant gives us an example of what he has in mind:

For example, I conceive of certain products of Nature, such as organized things, animals or plants, in a relation to their cause like that of a clock to man, as its maker, viz., in a relationship of causality as such, *qua* category, which is the same in both cases, albeit that the subject of this relation remains unknown to me in its inner nature, so that only the one can be presented, and the other not at all. (20:280)

⁶ Elsewhere Kant softens this a bit by saying that symbolization amounts to ‘schematizing without a concept’ (5:287) or ‘schematism by analogy’ (20:322).

So we can get at least some sense of whether a thing—even a supersensible thing—is really possible by drawing an analogy between *its* relationship to something we know to be really possible, and the relationship between two *other* things that we know to be really possible. By reflecting on the relationship between a clock and its designer, we get a glimpse of what the Ultimate Ground of a well-ordered entity like Nature itself might be like, and have at least some sense as to whether such a being could find a footing in (noumenal) reality.

Let us take a different example, since this one brings us too close to the physico-theological argument and Kant's ambivalent relationship to it. Consider the case of telepathy. The idea of a mind that has telepathic powers is not one that we can schematize; nor is it one, presumably, for which we can find an empirical referent. Do we have any indication of whether such a mind is really possible? Is there any content to the idea at all? I think the answer to both of these questions is 'yes', and that we can see this by performing precisely the sort of symbolization exercise that Kant describes. I have a general conception of what it is like to use speech and gesture in order to communicate some piece of information to you—I know that such a relationship is really possible. Likewise, by analogy, I think I can imagine you receiving information from someone without having heard or seen anything at all. The 'consequences' in both of these cases (that is, your receipt of information) are the same, even though the 'objects' in question (that is, the relationships between the communicating minds) are of very different kinds. So perhaps I can say on the basis of these considerations that a mind with telepathic powers *seems* to me to be really possible, at least by analogy, though of course I do not *know* whether it is actual or not. Conceivability by way of analogy, for Kant, is a moderately (though not infallibly) reliable guide to real possibility.

There is more to be said about symbolization and its role in Kant's modal epistemology, but this will suffice for our purposes. Let us now consider the idea of wholesale systematicity in nature. Is this a transcendental idea, rather than an empirical concept or an *a priori* category? Clearly it is: we cannot even in principle hope to cognize the structure of the entire causal nexus or have a fully articulate grasp of the laws and their specification relations. Kant himself repeatedly refers to the concept of the systematicity of the world-whole as an 'idea' (cf. 20:204ff).⁷

Given that systematicity is an idea and not an empirical concept or a category of the understanding, how if at all can it be symbolized? We know that Kant says in section 59 that beauty symbolizes morality. What he means by

⁷ He also claims that this idea is generated by the faculty of judgement rather than by reason (20:216, 236–7). I will set aside this complication here.

this is that our way of making aesthetic judgements is *formally* analogous to our way of making moral judgements. So the relata in this symbolization relation are ways or modes of judging, rather than objects. Rueger and Evren's suggestion is that natural beauty is a symbol *not only* of morality but *also* of natural systematicity. And by this they are likewise making a point about the formal character of the respective judgements, and not about their content or their objects: 'The way we reflect on a beautiful object in nature, i.e., the way we judge it in taste according to PT, is supposed to be analogous to the way we reflect on groups of objects in nature as governed by a neat hierarchy of special laws according to PS' (p. 239). The analogy consists in the *subjective* character of the purposiveness presupposed by the respective mental episodes—purposiveness with respect to our own faculties—and also in the *formal* character of the respective judgements. We 'judge objects or nature merely 'as if' they were designed according to purposes'—especially our purposes as cognizers or aesthetic subjects (*ibid.*).

Rueger and Evren are right to draw our attention to this, but I think they have missed the important fact that the symbolic relationship between beauty and natural systematicity may involve *content* as well as *form*. In what remains, I want to suggest that there is, or at least can be, *both* of these kinds of symbolization relation obtaining between natural beauty and systematicity. I also think that this point is crucial to Kant's argument, located at the beginning of section 61, that experience of beauty in nature can justifiably lead us to accept the existence of systematicity in nature.

III

Consider beauty as a symbol of morality once again. As was just noted, Kant claims in section 59 that this symbol relates our formal *way* of judging aesthetically to the *way* we ideally judge in moral situations—the 'harmony of understanding and imagination' in the former symbolizes the 'harmony of reason and will' in the latter. But Kant also says that the *object* of an aesthetic experience, and in particular the content of a beautiful art object, may bear a symbolic relation to the *object* of a transcendental idea. This often happens in poetry, for instance:

The poet ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings, the kingdom of the blessed, the kingdom of hell, eternity, creation, etc., as well as to make that of which there are examples in experience, e.g., death, envy, and all sorts of vices, as well as love, fame, etc., sensible beyond the limits of experience, with a completeness that goes beyond anything of which there is an example in nature, by means of an imagination that emulates the precedent of reason in attaining to a maximum. (5:314)

It also occurs in experience of nature:

Thus the white color of the lily seems to dispose the mind to ideas of innocence, and the seven colors, in their order from red to violet, to the ideas of (1) sublimity, (2) audacity, (3) of candor, (4) of friendliness, (5) of modesty, (6) of steadfastness, (7) of tenderness. The song of the bird proclaims joyfulness and contentment with its existence. At least this is how we interpret nature, whether anything of the sort is its intention or not. (5:302)

These transcendental ideas of supersensibles—God, eternity, creation—as well as the moral ideas of perfect virtue and vice are not susceptible of full empirical or schematic presentation. But aesthetic experiences of both art and nature *are* capable of ‘making sensible’ these ideas, and thus of giving us a symbolic, fragmentary sense of what their objects could or would be like. This connection is said to go by way of the *content* of the objects and the *content* of the idea, and not just the form of our reflection on them. ‘Taste’ on this picture thus becomes ‘basically a faculty for judging the sensible rendering (*Versinnlichung*) of ... ideas by means of a certain analogy of the reflection on both’ (5:356).

Something similar happens, I submit, with the transcendental idea of natural systematicity. It is right to say that natural beauty can symbolize systematicity in a *subjectively formal* way (that is, our way of judging about the beauty is formally analogous to the way we judge about systematicity). But for Kant, natural beauties and some art objects also, by way of their content, symbolize the systematicity of nature. In this way, they give a non-standard sort of harmonious content to the idea of systematicity, and allow us to think of its object (that is, a fully systematized natural universe) as really possible.⁸

The proposal becomes more plausible when we consider the account of beauty which Kant would have found in Baumgarten, Leibniz, G. F. Meier, and others. Beauty was analysed by the German rationalists (following the scholastics) in terms of objective relational properties such as ‘unity in diversity’ or ‘harmony in complexity’. In other words, the beauty of a vista or an art object was thought to consist (at least partly) in its capacity to unify a diverse but harmonious series of forms, lines, sounds, and so forth. Kant famously rejects this objectivist theory as a general *analysis* of beauty, and says that we must make aesthetic judgements on a case-by-case basis. But vestiges of the traditional account can be found in the way he talks about the various shapes, lines, and forms of objects being responsible for their beauty in

⁸ Rueger and Evren seem to deny this: ‘It should be clear that the judgement of taste does not refer to the *content* of the idea symbolized; what is relevant is the play of faculties set into motion by the process of symbolization, the generation of a complex of intuitions that has a unity—its form—that is only ‘felt,’ not governed by a determinate rule—and this does not depend in any obvious way on the content of the ideas symbolized’ (246).

the Third Moment (5:224–6), and in his discussion in section 8 of ‘aesthetically grounded logical judgements’—the generalizations we make about the characteristics of the many objects that we have judged, individually, to be beautiful (5:215).

Let us suppose Kant would agree with his predecessors that a common characteristic of the objects that we judge to be beautiful is that they contain a multitude of different shapes, sounds, tastes, and structures which are unified in a harmonious, organic fashion: flowers, fantasias, crustaceans, birdsongs, curlicues on wallpaper, and so forth (these are Kant’s own examples at 5:229). Such beautiful things would then be structurally analogous to a world-whole that is diverse and maximally specific and yet harmoniously ordered under a hierarchical system of natural laws. That presumably explains why Kant says, in the first Introduction, that the idea of the systematicity of nature is the idea of ‘nature as art’ (20:204, 215). The analogical relation in this case has little to do with the subjective purposiveness discussed in PT and PS: the relata are not the formal ways in which the respective judgements are made. Rather, the relata are the properties of the *objects* of the judgements themselves—nature as beautiful and nature as systematized.

Another point in favour of drawing this tighter connection between beauty and systematicity is that it involves *all* of our aesthetic judgements, and not only those about nature. For surely beautiful art objects at least *often* display unity amid a diversity of forms and harmony amid complexity—if so, then they too can serve as symbols of the unified diversity and harmonious complexity of a systematized causal nexus. Rueger and Evren, on the other hand, cannot make the connection between beauty and systematicity so tightly, because they are drawing the analogy between the respective *forms* of judgement or ways of judging. PT—the supposition of which is an integral part of the formal analogy in their view—is presumably not involved in our aesthetic experience of artworks, since it explicitly refers to nature.

A third and final point in favour of this tighter way of construing the connection is that it makes better sense of Kant’s ‘rational acceptance’ claim in Section 61 that I mentioned earlier. Here is the whole passage:

One has good reason to accept (*anzunehmen*), in accordance with transcendental principles, a subjective purposiveness of nature in its particular laws for comprehensibility for the human power of judgement and the possibility of the connection of the particular experiences in one system of nature; where among it its many products those can also be expected to be possible (*erwartet werden können*) which, just as if they had actually been designed for our power of judgement, contain a form so specifically suited for it that by means of their variety and unity they serve as it were to strengthen and entertain the mental powers (which are in play in the use of these faculties), and to which one has therefore ascribed the name of *beautiful forms*. (5:359)

This passage says that we have good reason to accept that PS is really possible ‘where’ (that is, just in case) one expects that PT is really possible, presumably by way of having experienced beautiful objects in nature.⁹ Now suppose that we are entitled to expect nature to present itself to us in a way that is amenable to our faculty of aesthetic judgement, as PT states. This alone, I think, does *not* imply that we can rationally accept that it is really possible that nature will display systematicity too, even though there is a formal analogy between PT and PS as principles. But suppose instead that we focus on content: many of these beautiful forms in nature have the quality of harmony amid diversity and unity amid complexity, and *in virtue of this* bear an analogical relation to a systematized natural nexus. Upon perceiving some of these beauties in nature, we might then quite naturally be led to accept that it is really possible that the same natural world will present itself to us as systematized and thus amenable to our cognitive projects. I think this is essentially what Kant says in the above passage: beautiful things ‘by means of their variety and unity’ give us ‘good reason to accept ... a subjective purposiveness of nature ... and the possibility of the connection of the particular experiences in one system of nature’. (Note the references to the contentual basis of the symbolization relation: it is by means of their ‘variety and unity’ that the beautiful objects in nature lead us to expect to find systematicity there as well.)

So by allowing there to be symbolic relations between natural beauty and natural systematicity at the level of content instead of merely at the level of subjective form, we can make better sense of Kant’s claims in section 61. And we can also see that there *is* some sort of evidential relation between PT and PS after all. The relation goes by way of symbolization and justifies the expectation of the real possibility (as opposed to either the mere logical possibility or the full-blown actuality) of natural systematicity.¹⁰ Of course, something other than beautiful art or nature can symbolize natural systematicity as well, especially if we allow the relevant symbolization relations to involve content as well as form. A complex but unified scientific theory might succeed in doing so, for instance.¹¹ But I see no cause for concern here: on the contrary, a

⁹ Rueger and Evren read this passage differently. They claim that it says that ‘PS allows us to expect the *possibility* of the existence of beautiful objects in nature’ (237). In other words, we first accept PS, and then we expect PT to be true as well. But the placement of the ‘where’ (*wo*) after the semi-colon suggests the converse: Kant is saying that we have good reason to accept PS *where* we (already) have reason to expect that PT is true. The sentence is structurally analogous to this one: ‘One has good reason to accept that there is fire where one has reason to expect smoke.’

¹⁰ For further discussion of the evidential role of certain kinds of symbolization see my ‘Are Supersensibles Really Possible? Kant on the Evidential Role of Symbolization’, *Proceedings of the 10th International Kant Congress* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2006).

¹¹ Alex Rueger made this point in conversation.

scientific theory's being structurally analogous to nature is presumably what we hope *would* obtain, especially if we think that the theory is true. I take Kant to be quite liberal about where and how symbolization relations obtain.

IV

Symbolization plays a number of crucial roles in Kant's philosophy: one of them is that of forging of a link between natural beauty and natural systematicity, thus providing some positive intuitional content to our idea of the latter and some evidence for its real possibility.¹² My suggestion here is that we should draw this symbolic link more closely than many commentators think—that is, we should draw it between both the subjective *form* of our judgements in these respective spheres, and the characteristics of some of the *objects* of those judgements. The advantages of doing this are that it allows beautiful art as well as beautiful nature symbolically to express the idea of systematicity in nature, and it exhibits more clearly how the experience of beauty can lead us to rationally accept the existence of natural systematicity.¹³

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¹² Heiner Bielefeldt describes some of the other uses Kant makes of the notion in *The Role of Symbolic Representation in Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2003).

¹³ Many thanks to Alexander Rueger, Şahan Evren, and other participants at a Kant session at the 2005 Pacific APA for very helpful discussion of this paper.