

On Guyer's Reading of Kant on Adherent Beauty

Thomas Heyd*
University of Victoria

ABSTRACT. Paul Guyer attributes to Kant the view that utility may be a *necessary* condition for the beauty of objects that have certain uses or functions. In this paper I consider afresh whether – on the Kantian account – judgements of adherent beauty of natural things indeed are *dependent* on their functionality, as Guyer claims. I propose, rather, that, according to Kant, the degree to which an object fulfills its ends does not pose a condition for its aesthetic appreciation, even if it changes the degree to which the object can be appreciated aesthetically.

1. Introduction

For Kant the utility of an object is understood as ‘external purposiveness’, in contrast with ‘internal purposiveness’ (*innere Zweckmässigkeit*), which is the perfection that a thing may have in light of the type of thing that *it ought to be*. Famously, Kant is believed to repudiate the consideration of utility or perfection in the judgement of beauty. According to Paul Guyer, though, Kant’s view, ultimately, is not as clear cut as all that. He maintains that according to Kant’s, the beauties of things that have a use “depend on nothing other than their utility.” (Guyer 2002a: 446) He claims, furthermore, that, according to Kant, “the suitability of an object’s appearance to its intended use is a necessary condition for our finding the object beautiful,” (Guyer 2002a: 448) that “adaptation to use should be understood as a necessary although not sufficient condition for beauty in any object that has a use,” (Guyer 2002a: 448) and that “[s]urely the recognition of

* Email: heydt@uvic.ca

the utility of an object *enhances* the pleasure of our response to its beauty.” (Guyer 2002a: 450)

So, Guyer’s ascription to Kant of the view that a certain set of aesthetic judgements have as necessary condition that they be recognised as *suitable* to their intended use is in line with the claim that a judgement regarding the (objective) *functionality* of a thing is relevant for aesthetic pleasure or displeasure, at least in the class of cases of things that appear to have a use or perfection. This fits well with a recent trend to think of beauty in terms of function (see, for example, Carlson 2000, Carlson and Parsons 2008, and Davies 2006). For example, coming to understand why in Mediaeval times the Virgin Mary’s gown frequently was painted in blue (even if it might clash with other colours in the painting), or why some buildings (such as the Hagia Sophia) have disfiguring buttresses, would in some sense be important for appropriate aesthetic judgement, according to Guyer. This is because images of the Virgin and buildings (generally) are created to serve objective purposes, such as teaching certain aspects of the Catholic Faith, and holding up to potential earth movements, respectively. Hence, not recognising their respective suitabilities would limit our capacity to aesthetically appreciate those kinds of things, on this view.

Stephen Davies applies this sort of understanding of adherent beauty to the appreciation of things from nature supposing that, insofar as living things are adapted to their environments, their structures can be supposed to serve certain functions, which it is relevant to take into account in our aesthetic judgements. He offers as an example that “[t]he attractiveness of the mottling and blending of brown, grey and black plumage of many birds is surely magnified by the knowledge that this cryptic patterning protects them as ground nesters.” The explanation for the importance of taking the function into account is that “[w]hen seen as camouflage, feathering which otherwise might seem drab and understated takes on an exquisite subtlety in the success with which it mimics the nest’s background.” (Davies 2006:223) Davies also mentions certain cephalopods that change the colour of their skin when irritated. Having a grasp of why, that is, making a judgement regarding the function of such change in skin colour, would be relevant for aesthetic appreciation of the phenomenon, on Guyer’s interpretation.

Now, the supposition that form and function are related, and hence,

that aesthetic judgements of beauty are somehow related to judgements relating to function, has received wide discussion in the 20th century as a result of trends in architectural theory. Consequently, we may be gratified that, according to Guyer's interpretation, Kant seems to be in line with present common sense, which supposes that *function* is relevant to aesthetic judgements, even if we may also be surprised to see that he appears to be entangled in self-contradiction, since Kant is known to have argued for the view that "the judgement of taste is grounded in 'the form of purposiveness' in an object rather than any actual purpose [that] it may be judged to have." (Guyer 2002a: 445)

Here I propose that, contrary to Guyer's view, and in agreement with other recent papers (Gammon 1999, Rueger 2008), Kant does *not* suppose that reference to function is a component of genuine aesthetic judgements, even in the case of what he calls 'adherent beauty'. I will first consider Kant's text and then discuss Guyer's particular way of reading Kant's illustrations. I will then propose that, according to Kant, the degree to which an object fulfills its ends does not constitute a condition for its aesthetic appreciation, even if it changes the degree to which the object can be appreciated.

2. Comments on the Text

In the crucial §16 of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* Kant makes a surprising distinction:

There are two kinds of beauty: free beauty (*pulchritudo vaga*) or merely adherent beauty (*pulchritudo adhaerens*). The first presupposes no concept of what the object ought to be; the second does presuppose such a concept and the perfection of the object in accordance with it. The first are called (self-subsisting) beauties of this or that thing; the later, as adhering to a concept (conditioned beauty), are ascribed to objects that stand under the concept of a particular end. (Kant 2000: p.114)

Even if this translation by Guyer and Eric Matthews (Kant 2000), strictly speaking may be correct, there are alternative ways to translate the original

German from the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*. We may wonder, for example, what Kant means by the term *bloss anhängende* (literally: merely hanging onto) translated as 'merely adherent' by Guyer and Matthews. Guyer points out that this term means that this sort of beauty merely is "attached to something else" (Guyer 2002b: 357), which should lead us to ask in what sense this sort of beauty is attached to anything. The answer from the text at §16 is that it is attached, or connected, or hanging onto, a *type of object* that "stands under the concept of a particular end", which means a thing for which we suppose a function. In other words, it suggests that we are dealing with an aesthetic judgement regarding some object that we (already) understand through a judgement of *what it ought to be*.

We may wonder, furthermore, whether, when Kant speaks of free beauty and adherent beauty, we are dealing with two *essentially* different (even if presumably related) kinds of aesthetic judgements, and hence essentially different types of beauty, *or* whether there is just *one* kind aesthetic judgement, and consequently only *one* kind of beauty that *accidentally* is 'adherent' or attached to some other judgement. (I call one the 'essentialist' and the other the 'accidental' interpretation of adherent beauty.)

Kant is a little vague in the text quoted, since he first appears to say that 'adherent beauty' itself presupposes a concept, but in the next sentence says that adherent beauty is ascribed to *objects* (of cognition) that stand under the concept of a particular end. So, in the first case it would seem that, in order to arrive at a claim, such as that a chair is beautiful, we do so as we take its greater or lesser fulfilment of its specific purpose (its capacity to allow people to sit on it) into account, while in the second case the idea is that we have a case of adherent beauty if, in view of *an object* which is a chair, we recognize it insofar as it is suitable to sit on, and, *subsequent* to the satisfaction of this criterion, we *also* take note of the aesthetic pleasure that it offers, e.g., in terms of its degree of elegance as chair. I will argue that the context shows that the second view is more coherent with everything that Kant says.

Another key term in the quoted passage from §16 is *bedingt*, which Guyer and Matthews translate as 'conditioned' in the phrase "the later, as adhering to a concept (conditioned beauty)." In an earlier translation of *Kritik der Urteilskraft* by J.C. Meredith (Kant 1952/1992) this term was translated as 'dependent'. Both translations suggest that we look for some-

thing like necessary and sufficient conditions for beauty to obtain, which is what Guyer does, and leads to what I have called the essentialist interpretation of 'adherent beauty', which claims that purposes or functions enter into the aesthetic judgement itself in some way, hence making the aesthetic judgement *dependent* on the degree of perfection or utility of the thing judged.

Bedingt, actually, can be translated in a number of ways, but it is notable that the first entry in the *Duden* (the standard reference for the German language) is *nicht uneingeschränkt* (not unrestricted or not unconstrained). Consistent with this the *Reverso-Collins Dictionary* gives as primary translations of *bedingt* the English terms 'qualified', 'limited' and 'conditional' (and 'conditioned' only when used in the context of mathematical operations), for example. Even if the German language has evolved since Kant's time, these alternate translations of the term throw a considerably different light on the meaning of the description of adherent beauty as "*bedingt*," since it points to an *accidental*, instead of an *essentialist*, differentiation of kinds of beauty. If the sentiment of beauty that we experience in the presence of an object is *qualified*, *limited* or *conditional*, because of our antecedent, powerful, tendency to understand certain objects in terms of purposes or functions, then it makes sense for Kant to speak of this type of case as one of *merely attached*, 'on-hanging,' or adherent, beauty. Next, we follow Guyer onto his discussion of the examples that Kant gives of the two types of beauty.

3. Two Types of Beauty?

Kant gives several examples of free and adherent beauties in §16. As free beauties he lists flowers, many birds (including the parrot, the humming bird and the bird of paradise), many crustaceans, designs *à la grècque*, and all music without words (such as phantasias). Kant is most explicit regarding flowers, about which he says that the judgement of their beauty is free because not grounded on any perfection or "inner purposiveness that relates to the composition of the manifold." The reason is that "[h]ardly any one but a botanist knows what sort of a thing a flower ought to be; and even he, though recognising in the flower the reproductive organ of the

plant, pays no regard to this natural purpose if he is passing judgement on the flower by taste." So, it seems that free judgements of beauty are possible either due to ignorance of the functions in question or the appreciators ability to ignore them wilfully (and perhaps habitually).

It is otherwise with the set of examples illustrating adherent beauties. The list includes a human being (a man, a woman or a child), a horse, and a building, among which Kant lists a church, a palace, an arsenal and a garden house. Kant says that, what makes them 'merely adherent' beauties is that a concept of the purpose of the thing, which determines what it "ought to be", is *voraus gesetzt*. Guyer and Matthews translate *voraus gesetzt* as 'pre-supposed', which, though strictly correct, literally means that something is 'set in advance' of the judgement. The question is, however, how does 'setting in advance', or pre-supposing what something "ought to be", affect the judgement of beauty? Does it mean that the purposes recognised in a thing actually enter into the aesthetic judgement? This would be in direct contradiction with what Kant asserts about aesthetic judgements in earlier sections. Guyer, nonetheless, thinks that in these types of cases Kant finds reason to diverge from his original account, which presumably only applies to 'pure beauty'.

Guyer proposes that Kant's non-standard approach to aesthetic judgement, instantiated as adherent beauty, is best illustrated in the case of the beauty of the various buildings. Guyer states that "the different ends on which the different beauties of a palace, arsenal, or garden-house depend are nothing but their different intended uses, and, in depending upon their ends the beauties of such things depend on nothing other than their utility." (Guyer 2002a, p.446) Consequently, the beauty of a palace depends on offering luxurious rooms, the beauty of an arsenal in providing security, and the beauty of a garden house in giving refreshment from the summer heat to its users. So, on Guyer's view, the judgement of beauty in these cases is constrained by the various uses of these diverse buildings.¹ On the alternative reading that I propose, however, in second set of cases, that include humans, horses, and buildings, what something ought to be, its function or purpose (its 'objective purposiveness'), does *not* enter the aes-

¹ This is a view that Guyer has also argued for in an earlier work Guyer (1997: Chapter 6).

thetic judgement as such. This alternative reading suggests that, in these cases we judge what something *is*, and its degree of perfection according to purposes (what it ought to be), through an *antecedent* and *distinct* judgement.

In other words, the purpose-oriented judgement is set in advance or 'pre-supposed', such that, when we engage in the aesthetic judgement, it qualifies, limits or constrains the freedom of the latter judgement by not allowing the play of imagination and understanding to be *as free as it could be* in contrast with the first set of cases. This contrasts with the cases of free beauty (flowers, many birds crustaceans, designs *à la grècque* and music without words), which are not thought of in terms of uses; in these cases judgement is not previously engaged with purposes, and hence the aesthetic judgement is allowed a fully free play of the cognitive faculties.

Quite relevantly, when Kant speaks of "many birds" he mentions in particular parrots, hummingbirds and birds of paradise. These birds have in common that we do not see them in *use* terms, such that we are unconstrained to judge them aesthetically. He does not, for example, mention chickens, which were eaten in his time, or pigeons, which were used for mail work and for food, though. Presumably, the beauty of these latter birds would be *qualified* or *constrained* by previous use-oriented judgements: a chicken would first be judged on whether it gives a sufficient amount of meat or eggs or both, and a pigeon would first be judged on whether it knows how to hone home quickly and safely, before we being evaluated for its beauty. Similarly, Kant does not mention other designs, such as are found in churches to illustrate religious stories, nor does he include religious music that might be sung to remind people of the redemptive acts of their religious figures. Crustaceans are mentioned in this category, perhaps because people in Kant's society did not eat them, even if educated people of his time knew of them, of course.

The view advanced here finds further support in Kant's clarification towards the end of §16 where he outrightly states that, "neither does perfection gain through beauty nor beauty through perfection". In other words, neither the function-oriented judgement nor the aesthetic judgement *as such* gain from the fact that in cases of adherent beauty both of these two judgements are given, even if he says that "the entire capacity for cognition gains when both mental states coincide (or harmonise)". He explains this

by proposing that the state of mind generated by the co-presence of these two types of judgement can be “useful” and function as an “instrument” in support of “the way of thinking which can be maintained only by painful resolve”. Presumably, what is meant are the ordinary cognitive judgements involving concepts, which he describes in other places as *Geschäft* (work), in contrast with the judgement of beauty, characterised as *Spiel* (play). Kant’s reason for this assessment may be that the experience of beauty supports the more tiring ordinary cognitive judgements. For instance, while we do our work as geologists or botanists, we may be able to endure our jobs for longer if we find a landscape beautiful.

The interpretation that I am proposing here is also supported by the final paragraph of §16, where Kant discusses disagreements on the beauty of certain things, which are judged to be free beauties by some and to be merely adherent by others. Kant’s response is that both parties may be in the right, insofar as one party may be judging the items in question according to a purely aesthetic judgement (by the senses), while the other party may be applying concepts (thought), and hence preceding the aesthetic judgement by a function-oriented judgement.

4. Conclusion

According to Kant, in the case of ‘adherent beauty’ we make aesthetic judgements that are ‘qualified’, ‘limited’ or ‘conditional’ (*bedingt*) by other, function or purpose-based judgements. Here it has been argued that there are good reasons to believe that, even in the case of adherent beauty, its qualification by purpose-based judgements does not change the aesthetic judgement *per se*. It is maintained that, for Kant, in cases of adherent beauty, just as in cases of free beauty, the foundation for judgements of beauty is the free play of the cognitive faculties, even if *the object* to which this judgement is applied is restricted by an antecedent judgement that *does* take into account purposes. Consequently, adherent beauty does not differ in a fundamental way from free beauty, notwithstanding that, in the case of adherent beauty, our aesthetic judgement is restrained in its range by purpose-based judgement.

References

- Carlson, Allen, 2000, *Aesthetics and the Environment*, Routledge.
- Carlson, Allen and Parsons Glenn, 2008, *Functional Beauty*, Oxford University Press.
- Davies, Stephen, 2006, 'Aesthetic judgements, artworks and functional beauty', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 223, pp.224-241.
- Duden, <http://www.duden.de/>, accessed 28 September 2012.
- Gammon, M., 1999, 'Parerga and Pulchritudo adhaerens: A Reading of the Third Moment of the "Analytic of the Beautiful"', *Kant-Studien*, vol. 90, pp.148-167.
- Guyer, Paul, 1997, *Kant and the Claims of Taste*, Cambridge University Press.
- Guyer, Paul, 2002a, 'Beauty and Utility in Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3, pp.439-453.
- Guyer, Paul, 2002b, 'Free and Adherent Beauty: A Modest Proposal,' *British Journal of Aesthetics*, vol. 42, no. 4, pp.357-366.
- Kant, Immanuel, 2000, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, New York, Cambridge University.
- Kant, Immanuel, 1952/1992, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. J.C. Meredith, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
- Reverso-Collins Dictionary, http://www.reverso.net/text_translation.aspx?lang=EN, accessed 28 September 2012.
- Rueger, Alexander, 2008, 'Beautiful Surfaces: Kant on Free and Adherent Beauty in Nature and Art', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 535-557.