Ethics // Spring 2019

Handout 10

Beauty, freedom, morality: Schiller

Rethinking freedom. To be free, Schiller argues, is to be determined by itself and to be undetermined by things external (by alien causes). This is a theme familiar to us from the *Groundwork* III. But not only actions can be free. Think of a free object as something determined 'through itself'. Then this object is free by analogy with the free determination of the will. 154

However, in reality, in itself, every object is subject to influences—if not to the outside influences, then from its purpose or its concept. In order to make a judgement of taste, one must ignore the material or the form (the concept) of the object and merely attend to its *appearance*. A beautiful object is rule-governed, when subjected to a rational or empirical investigation, yet must *appear* as free. To appear free, elaborates Schiller, the object must make us disinclined, even unable, to search for its 'real ground', its explanation. 154:3 154:4 155 155:3

As it stands, this is not terribly clear. Schiller gives an example of a triangle that 'explains' itself through a concept, and of a curving line that does not. Presumably he means that our perception of a triangle necessarily involves awareness of it *as* a triangle, as a figure with three angles and three sides. There is no such requirement with a curving line (*eine Schlangenlinie*), though presumably it would be otherwise with a mathematical curve conceived as a geometrical figure drawn according to a formula (a concept). This is a quaint example, especially since it goes against what Kant himself has to say about the nature of geometry and our conception of geometrical figures.

For all these obscurities it is not hard to see what Schiller is after.

Example 1 (*Gretchen am Spinnrade*). Suppose I listen to Schubert's song. And suppose I *just* take in the tune itself and ignore (abstract from) the technical details of the performance, Goethe's text, or the possible purpose of it ('what did the artist(s) try to convey?'). Not only do I actually behave thus, but also I am unable and disinclined to engage with these other questions. Then my experience is an experience of beauty, and the musical piece *appears* free. Of course it only appears so: for all these other questions, of purposes and technical execution, are indeed meaningful questions. The musical piece was executed in a particular way, more or less technically perfect, and the artist did have various purposes, more or less noble.

Beauty and morality. If beauty is, in the sense explained above, a product of freedom (or: requires freedom), and if morality is also aligned with freedom, what is the relation between beauty and morality? Schiller's discussion is labyrinthine in its details, but once again, the general picture is easily comprehensible. Reason and sensibility (sensible intuition) are distinct faculties. So when an object (or an action) appears free, its moral purpose must be hidden, so to speak. However, if Kant's view of moral value is adopted, in a moral action the purpose must be at the forefront of perceiving what actually happened (what kind of action was performed). Understanding that separates moral actions from non-moral ones. That is why 'moral beauty' is an oxymoron—i.e. when morality is understood as acting out of duty. 156 157

The five people. Schiller illustrates his view with a thought experiment involving five possible reactions to a misfortune. The first man is said to be performed a merely kind-hearted action. I am not so sure. A kind-hearted action surely would have contained more concrete involvement and would be free of apparent contempt. And also, why was it not useful? 157-58

The second person offered help, but demanded something in return. This is said to be 'useful', but how so, if the wounded man could not pay back and if, moreover, there was a courier ready to do the same for free?

The third person is supposed to follow Kant's precepts. He is focussed on what the duty commands. He has no inner, emotional inclination to help. He deduces what the right action is, and then follows the deduction. Follows it reluctantly, we might say. His action is determined by duty, but 'is no more than that'. It is not clear whether Schiller thinks it is also useful. It is, however, meant to be represented as neither free, nor beautiful.

The fourth person acts out of pity, we presume, but mixed with hatred or contempt. It is not clear to me what Schiller says or should say about this case. It is also not clear to me why he introduces the second companion in this case.

The central episode is of course the fifth person. He acts, we say, spontaneously. His action is not 'forced', and he is not 'coerced'—either by pity (inclination) or by reason. Instead, Schiller says, he 'forgets' himself in the action. His action comes from within, it is part of himself. That is why 159
it appears undetermined, hence it appears free (and merely an outcome of a free choice), and so is beautiful. It is also moral, but presumably in a superior way than the action of the third person.

Comments. It seems that Schiller's discussion moves in the direction of virtue ethics, the idea that moral value is attributed in the first place to actions performed by good agents, people that possess good character. See here a selection from *Nicomachean Ethics* in the Appendix.

But Schiller's version of virtue ethics is supplemented (so it seems) with Kant's ethics. Character traits must be in congruence with the categorical imperative and the rational determination of the will.

Now it has long been argued by Kantian scholars that, here and elsewhere, Schiller is unfair to Kant, in fact has misunderstood him. According to this argument, Kant's view is not that moral action, following a moral maxim, should always be forced. When he gives examples in the *Groundwork* of a person struggling against his selfish inclinations, but choosing nevertheless to act morally, it is only in order to isolate the element of duty. However, the argument goes on, Kant should be happy to allow a situation where a man acts on a moral maxim, while his inclinations (through habit and education) point him in the same direction.

But I do not think that this is a compelling response on Kant's behalf. What is Kant supposed to say about the third man? Is he acting morally or not? Obviously he is, if the theory in the *Groundwork* is taken at face value. So Kant's view is that acting on a moral maxim and performing a morally valuable action is compatible with having inclinations to the contrary.

Now what is the status of the fifth person? One complaint is that the case is under-described. Just why exactly did he do what he did? We said it is in his character, but does this mean that it is *merely* his habit to help people? Or did he form this habit earlier through moral reflection and is now doing it unreflectively? In the latter case, two problems may be mentioned. First, why the origin of choice, the antecedent procedure through which actions were examined in the distant past should matter when we evaluate the present action? Second, does it even matter to Kant that all that stands between the third and the fifth man is beauty in appearance? If anything, the third man is superior, since he *is* aware of the moral law.

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