Chaouli, Michel

Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment

Michel Chaouli, *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017, 315 pp., $44.56 (hbk), ISBN 978-0674971363.

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Let me begin by saying something about the nature of the project that Michel Chaouli undertakes in this wonderful book, *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*. As a "thinking with," it is a kind of companion to the text and to the reader. It keeps pace with the *Critique of Judgment*'s own unfolding of thought, in the most generous way possible. That is not to say that it bows down before Kant's thought. To do so would be not to accompany, to think *with*, but to follow slavishly. It does not hesitate to acknowledge and to push back where Kant's text strains and to explore why it does so, what keeps Kant from fidelity to his own best intuitions and discoveries. Chaouli's book neither ignores the rich literature on Kant's aesthetics, nor does it allow engagement with that literature to take over or to replace the work that could be done only by its own sincere and open responsiveness to Kant's writing. It recognizes and self-consciously avoids a temptation that arises for anyone writing on the *Critique of Judgment*, the temptation to try to domesticate it, to exert a kind of mastery over it, or to subsume it under established terms or debates. All this means, in my view, that Chaouli's book preserves the best instincts of philosophy. I would add that the spirit in which it meets Kant's thought has a related virtue: one of the ways in which it illuminates the nature of what Kant calls the reflective power of judgment is by enacting the exercising of that power.

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Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment is divided into three parts, treating of taste, art, and teleological judgment respectively. My remarks will focus on its discussion of taste. Kant says that the pleasure in beauty is free, and that its freedom is supposed to set it apart from pleasure in the agreeable, as well as pleasure in the good. Kant characterizes this

freedom as a *Freiheit, uns selbst irgend woraus einen Gegenstand der Lust zu machen*.[1] On Chaouli's rendering, Kant is speaking of the "freedom to make anything into an object of pleasure for ourselves" (xv and 66).[2] To my ear, that sounds like a freedom to make anything at all into an object of pleasure in beauty, or, in other words, a freedom to find anything at all to be beautiful. One gloss of Chaouli's seems to make this explicit: "I can make for myself an object of pleasure out of whatever" (74).

That would be an extreme view. It might seem to be in tension with Kant's idea that taste involves discernment.[3] Further, if anything can be found beautiful, and if there is some sort of imperative to agree with legitimate judgments of taste (if, that is, their demand for agreement is legitimate, as Kant seems to think it is), then wouldn't it follow that we not only can, but *should* or *ought to* find everything to be beautiful? It is true that the view that "everything is or can be beautiful" has been attributed to Kant, and it may well seem to be a view that has to be attributed to him, if his deduction of the judgment of beauty—the legitimation of its demand for agreement—is to succeed. (The lynchpin of that deduction seems to be the fact that the "free play" of the cognitive powers on which the judgment of taste is based (somehow) realizes the subjective conditions of cognition. This appears to give rise to a dilemma, one horn of which is the supposedly "counterintuitive" claim that every object can or should be experienced as beautiful.[4] Readers of Kant who take him to embrace this horn of the dilemma must then show that it is not counterintuitive after all, or that even if it is, there is good reason to attribute it to Kant.)

But Kant's phrase permits a different translation, on which he is adducing the "freedom to make for ourselves an object of pleasure out of something". (Chaouli does translate the phrase this way at one point, but doesn't mention the change from his usual way

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[1] KU V:210. I follow the practice of citing Kant according to the abbreviated German title (KU=*Kritik der Urteilskraft*) followed by the volume and then the page number of the so-called *Akademie* edition of Kant's writings (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*). I have used the edition of the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* edited by Heiner F. Klemme (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2006).

[2] All page number citations in the body of this text are to Michel Chaouli, *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

[3] KU V:204.

[4] See Hannah Ginsborg, "Kant's Aesthetics and Teleology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2014 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2014/entries/kant-aesthetics/>.

of putting it, or what the significance of the change might be.[5]) Then we can understand Kant to be saying that *when* I experience pleasure in a beautiful object, my pleasure is the result, even the expression, of my activity, activity that I have freely undertaken. This allows that whether an object is beautiful or can be experienced as beautiful is not entirely up to me. Some objects are candidates for beauty and some are not. Whether I can find a given object to be beautiful depends (in part) upon the object, upon whether or not it is a possible site for such pleasure.

I think that it would fit the spirit of Chaouli's book to read Kant's claim about our "freedom to make" in this more modest way. I have something particular in mind, namely the care and seriousness with which Chaouli brings out the riskiness that Kantian aesthetic experience involves. To grant that not every object can be "made" beautiful by us is to leave open two forms of risk. One risk I run is that of not rising to the occasion of a worthy object. The other is that of falling for an object that is not worthy.

Chaouli is by no means deaf to the point that the encounter with beauty is not entirely up to me. On the contrary, he is particularly interested in just such a point. One of his earliest contentions is that my experience of beauty is characterized by my activity as well as my passivity.

Let me begin with the dimension of activity. As Chaouli says, Kant's insight is that pleasure in the beautiful is something I *take*. This is a step in Kant's differentiation of the pleasure in beauty from other pleasures, as well as a key to the judgment of beauty's earning the right to its claim upon others—the demand that everyone else share my pleasure. My experience of beauty must reflect an achievement on my part, my doing something. In the case of the agreeable, the object happens to bring me pleasure. Here pleasure is not up to me, because it simply befalls me. Here my pleasure is passive.[6] In the case of the moral, I cannot help but take pleasure in—that is, feel respect for—the morally good. Here my pleasure reflects my activity, in the recognition of the lawfulness of the moral law, but it is not free, because I cannot help but respect the morally good. By contrast with both, in the case of

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[5] See *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*, 13.

[6] For the resources for challenging Kant's picture of the pleasure of the agreeable as merely befalling us, on the grounds that it conflates such pleasures with (what deserve to be called) "sensations," see Richard Moran, "Frankfurt on Identification: Ambiguities of Activity in Mental Life," in *Contours of Agency: Essays on Themes from Harry Frankfurt*, eds. Sarah Buss and Lee Overton (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 207-212.

beauty my pleasure is an achievement of mine that is not a necessary condition of my rationality. It involves not only my activity, but my *free* activity.

But although one takes pleasure in the case of beauty, the scene is not, as Chaouli sees, composed entirely of my activity. The taking of pleasure in beauty "involves a play of activity and passivity, for this taking involves both a form of receptivity and a kind of making" (10). In a sense, of course, this kind of claim is characteristic of Kantian thinking. The idea that there must be both activity and passivity is everywhere in Kant's critical philosophy. Thus, cognition involves what is given to sensibility (=passivity) as well as the spontaneity of the understanding (=activity). Practical reason involves expressing my freedom by asking myself how I ought to act, given the desires and inclinations I find myself to have, and making the moral law my principle of volition. What is the play of activity and passivity to which Chaouli is pointing in the aesthetic case? What, more specifically, does the passivity consist of?

Chaouli's answer is, I think, that the passivity integral to aesthetic experience is its "serendipity." The experience of beauty rests ineluctably upon a "happy coincidence" or "happy chance" (17). But this might seem to concede too much to the side of passivity. Serendipity means not just that it is not all up to me, but that it is not all up to me in a particular sense: I am (to some extent) at the behest of chance (or coincidence). The claim that the experience of beauty is ineluctably serendipitous is then in tension with the strong version of Kant's claim about the freedom of pleasure in beauty, the claim that we are free to make anything at all into an object of pleasure. It is also, I think, in tension with the milder form of that claim that I suggested: the claim that we are free to take the pleasure of beauty in those objects that allow for it. For if the experience of beauty is inherently serendipitous, then even where the object I encounter is a candidate for beauty, my being able to find it to be beautiful depends upon aesthetic luck. By the same token, it is hard to see how the judgment of taste could be entitled to make its demand for agreement, the demand that others take pleasure as well.

Let me make a slightly different, though related point. Kant is concerned in the *Critique of Judgment* not only with the judgment of beauty or (as he also calls it) the judgment of taste, but also with taste itself, as that from which particular judgments of taste flow, or which they express. The notion of taste is the notion of the capacity to respond with

the pleasure of beauty when a candidate object is there. It seems difficult to square the possibility of such a capacity with the ineluctable serendipity of the experience of beauty. Or is the idea that taste is the capacity to set the stage for serendipity to strike, to invite serendipity? In his opening sentence, Kant invokes the situation in which I seek "to decide whether something is or is not beautiful."[7] What *do* I do by way of trying to see if I find or can find it beautiful? Is there anything we can say about what the exercise of taste consists of?

Chaouli suggests another way of construing the passivity in the experience of beauty. Namely: It is not a matter of my will. "The capacity for judging aesthetically is not something I just decide to deploy"; "I cannot command myself into it" (148). This is true, I think. It is not equivalent, note, to the serendipity claim: "at will" is not the only alternative to "depends on chance." But I have some hesitations about this version too. The implication seems to be that I am passive with respect to what I cannot will.

Consider the case of belief. I cannot set out to believe something. It is not up to me to just decide what I believe. I cannot pick and choose my beliefs. And the possibility of that kind of control is not required for belief to be an expression of my activity or agency. Being open to choice by fiat seems indeed to be a mark of a belief that, whatever else, is precisely *not* expressive of my activity or agency. Many of the beliefs with which we most closely identify have for us the force of necessity. If I am to count as exercising agency or autonomy in the case of belief, this has to do not with my being able to believe something at will, but with my taking what I believe to be responsive to reasons justifying the belief.[8] This is part of why it makes sense to say, as Kant does, that a cognitive judgment "demands" the agreement of anyone else, even though one cannot meet that demand—share the belief that the judgment expresses—at will.

A parallel point can be made about my desires. My activity or agency with respect to my desires does not require my being able choose them at will. Just the contrary, many of the desires with which we most closely identify have for us the force of necessity. My activity or

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[7] KU V:203.

[8] I owe these insights, as well as those of the paragraph that follows, to Richard Moran, "Frankfurt on Identification." Moran is there expanding upon some thoughts of Harry Frankfurt, as expressed in the title essay of *The Importance of What We Care About* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and in essays in *Necessity, Volition and Love* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

agency requires, rather, my taking what I want to be responsive to reasons justifying the desire.

I'd like to point to a different site in Chaouli's book for identifying the special play of activity and passivity in the Kantian experience of beauty. Chaouli says that aesthetic experience depends upon "giv[ing] myself over to something for which I remain unprepared" (xv). Or rather, more exactly, he characterizes the freedom of making something into an object of pleasure as a freedom "in which I give myself over to something for which I remain unprepared." This splendid thought suggests a kind of activity that is at once passivity; passivity that is a form of activity. Aesthetic experience depends upon my making myself susceptible to the object, my allowing it to move me. Taste is the capacity for achieving and maintaining an openness to what lies beyond me in the sense that it is essentially new to me. Without this openness, the aesthetic encounter will not take place. The openness that is required of me involves my ability and my willingness to let the object speak (if I may put it that way), to listen to it in its own, necessarily singular, terms, and to let it awaken my responsiveness. I think that something like this captures an important dimension of aesthetic experience, one that Kant is on to. If it is said to court paradox, then perhaps it is aesthetic experience that courts paradox. But perhaps it is not so paradoxical. Or perhaps such fusions of activity and passivity are more common than we might imagine, at least while thinking in the abstract. To trust someone, for example, is to actively do something, but what I do is to expose myself, to make myself vulnerable. Relationships, including relationships of love, involve trust, and in this and in other ways they depend upon the active giving over of oneself.[9] There is in fact a deep kinship—and this too is something that Chaouli's book develops—between the experience of beauty and that of love. (There is a remarkable passage in the *Anthropology* in which Kant says that one experiences the beautiful object as inviting one to "the most intimate union with" it.[10] He goes on to say that what is involved here is

[9] Such dimensions of our interpersonal relationships, and their counterparts in our relationships with the objects we find beautiful, are explored by Alexander Nehamas in *Only A Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

[10] A VII:241-242. The passage is frequently misread as saying that it is the subject making the judgment of taste who extends an invitation to others (to take pleasure in the object). See, e.g., editorial note 18 of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 368.

"similar to Eros in the world of myth," but even before he adduces Eros, the language clearly suggests an erotic encounter.)

While discussing, earlier, Kant's phrase about the freedom to make something into an object of pleasure for ourselves, I raised the issue of the contribution of the object. I said that it is important to leave room for the object to have a say in whether or not it allows of being found beautiful. I'd like now to pick up the issue of the place of the object from a somewhat different angle.

Famously or infamously, Kant finds at the heart of the experience of beauty something that he calls the "free play" of the cognitive powers of imagination and understanding. The pleasure of the experience of beauty is supposed to stem from this free play. In some sense, the pleasure is due to this free play of the mind. Now, I think that if Kant means that what I enjoy is something going on in my mind, *rather than* something in or about the object (namely, [what it would be natural to call] its beauty), then something has gone wrong. The role of the object shouldn't be just that of triggering an experience that then leaves the object behind. The object should be the object *of* the experience it awakens, in the intentional sense of "of": the experience should be about and responsive to it. It should be an engagement *with* the object. (There is textual support for this. For example, Kant says that this free play is a "judging of the object," even if it is a "merely subjective (aesthetic) judging of the object";[11] and he says that it constitutes "consideration (*Betrachtung*) of the object"[12], or reflection upon it [or, more specifically, upon its form[13]].) Chaouli is aware of this problem[14], but I wonder whether he nevertheless tends toward it sometimes. I am thinking of his speaking of "using" an object for imaginative work (67), and remarks like the following: "My pleasure has no content that depends immediately on the material being of the object. It is rather a pleasure I derive from finding myself in a felicitous mood" (62); and "[t]he pleasure I feel, though occasioned by something, is the pleasure of being able to feel what, in me, is not the self with which I live every day" (28).

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[11] KU V:218.

[12] KU V:242.

[13] KU V:190.

[14] See, for example, *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*, 158.

The last quotation brings me to another pair of aspects of Chaouli's reading: the self's self-relation, and the self's relation to the other.

In fact, on Chaouli's interpretation, the self's relation to itself in the experience of beauty is already a kind of relation to the other, because the self encounters itself *as* other. "There is always something that is not mine—something foreign to myself, something impersonal and public—that characterizes and constitutes my subjective feeling of experiencing beauty" (22). This is a take on the judgment of beauty's claim to subjective universality, or (as Chaouli terms it) to intersubjectivity.

There is something surprising about the idea that encountering something "foreign to myself" might be part of an experience of pleasure. But perhaps I am reacting to the sense of "foreign" as "alien," the sense that goes with alienation or estrangement. If I think of "foreign" as more neutrally inflected, as designating what is other to me, then I can also see how this description of my self-relation lines up with the form of pleasure that is ecstasy—a connection Chaouli makes at several junctures in the book.[15] For ecstasy means a state of being outside or beyond oneself.

What about the idea of "impersonality"? Kant's contrast is not between "personal" and "impersonal," but between "public" and "private."[16] (Pleasure in the agreeable is only private, even when many of us happen to find the same thing agreeable. In that case, it is not that our pleasure is common to us or shared between us but that our private pleasures happen to line up.) What is the difference between these two contrasts, personal/impersonal and private/public?

Here is one way of thinking about it. The "im" in "impersonal" serves to negate or oppose. One cannot make the personal impersonal. To move from the personal to the impersonal is to leave something behind. But the public is not necessarily a negation of the private in the same way. One can go public with what was at first private.

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[15] See especially *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*, 28.

[16] "With regard to the agreeable, everyone contents himself with taking his judgment, which he grounds on a private feeling, and in which he says of an object that it pleases him, to be restricted merely to his own person" (KU V:212); judgments of the agreeable are "merely private judgments about an object," while judgments of taste are "supposedly generally valid (public) judgments" (KU V:214).

Of course, there is a clear sense in which Kant's conception of aesthetic experience involves "leaving the personal behind": it involves leaving behind personal interest (as well as other interest). But disinterestedness is only necessary for aesthetic experience, not sufficient for it. I have also to exercise taste, and this is not exhausted by my setting interest aside. What the private/public contrast allows, or anyway invites more readily than does the personal/impersonal contrast, is the idea that exercising taste may have to do with finding a way to make public what initially is, or appears to be, private. Here making public would mean making available, "communicable," to myself as well as to others. And so the private/public contrast allows that the move to the public goes with a move to a greater union with my self, as well as with others, rather than a divide against myself.

Let me try to say what I am getting at—I realize that it is rather murky—in terms of the idea of self-transcendence. Compare the transcendence that marks Kant's moral philosophy. My commitment to the moral law as a principle of volition means that I transcend my natural self—the "dear self," as he calls it in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, with its desires and other contingencies—in favor of realizing what he calls my "proper self" or my "real self," a kind of higher self.[17] My realization of my real self is at the same time a release from my natural self. Does Chaouli read Kant as elaborating an aesthetic self-transcendence? If so, does it share the logic of moral self-transcendence? In the experience of beauty, am I realizing a true self over and against an apparent self? Or am I discovering, or hoping to discover, that I share some of my most "intimate" encounters—recall the *Anthropology* passage—with others, even with everyone? Am I experiencing the pleasure of freedom from myself, or the pleasure of discovering that it is not only *my*self?

I close now with one last thought picking up on the question of my relation to others in the experience and judgment of beauty. How do I address others when I voice my judgment of taste? I "issue a demand or offer a solicitation, and I do so with no argument to back it up" (54). Is there anything that I can say or do by way of backing up my claim, even if it does not amount to a proof that "compel[s] the assent of others" (54)? Chaouli brings out

[17] For the "dear self," see G IV:407; for the "real self" or "proper self" (*das/unsere eigentliche Selbst*), see G IV: 457 and 461.

the deep relationship between the judgment of beauty and the conditions of speech.[18] Does that relationship continue at the level of conversation ("communication")? If not, does the judgment of beauty not run another risk, that of violence, in demanding agreement? It would not be the violence of coercion, since there is no forcing or compelling here. But would it be a different violence? Chaouli notes an alternative to "demand" in the line I just quoted: solicitation. This is a reference to Kant's remark that in the judgment of beauty one "solicits" assent from everyone. "Solicit" translates the verb *werben um*, which Chaouli notes is, or can also be, language of seduction (51). But it can also work as the language of courtship or wooing. The difference I hear between the two is that courtship cares about bringing about mutuality; it would not be happy with the bewitchment of the other.

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[18] See, for example, *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*, 59.

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