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ARTICLE

Attention and the Free Play of the Faculties

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Abstract

The harmonious free play of the imagination and understanding is at the heart of Kant's account of beauty in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, but interpreters have long struggled to determine what Kant means when he claims the faculties are in a state of free play. In this article, I develop an interpretation of the free play of the faculties in terms of the freedom of attention. By appealing to the different way that we attend to objects in aesthetic experience, we can explain how the faculties are free, even when the subject already possesses a concept of the object and is bound to the determinate form of the object in perception.

Keywords: Kant; attention; imagination; aesthetic experience; *Critique of the Power of Judgement*; harmony of the faculties; free play; reflection

According to Kant's theory of taste, a judgement of beauty is not grounded in any concept of the object, nor is it grounded in pleasure *in the object*, although such pleasure can subsequently arise. Instead, the pleasure that grounds a judgement of beauty is pleasure in our own state of mind – and its universal communicability – as we reflect on the form of an object. The state of mind in question is the harmonious relation of the imagination and understanding as they engage in 'free play' in reflection on an object (*CJ*, 5: 217).[1] The free harmony of the faculties is at the heart of Kant's subjectivist theory of taste. But interpreters have long struggled to determine what, *exactly*, Kant means when he claims that the faculties are in a state of harmonious 'free play'. What is striking is not only the disagreement among interpreters but also just how widely the interpretations diverge.[2]

Several scholars have focused on the question of what the faculty of understanding contributes to the state of free play (Cohen 2002; Guyer 2006). This is an obvious question to ask because Kant insists that judgements of beauty are not cognitive judgements (*CJ*, 5: 203, 211). As a species of aesthetic judgement, they are grounded merely on feeling. But if that is so, what does the understanding contribute to the state of mind that occasions the feeling of pleasure in the beautiful?[3] Some interpreters suggest that the understanding playfully applies a host of concepts to the object, but without determining the object under any of these concepts.[4] Others suggest that the understanding does not supply a concept at all, but rather a condition that is necessary for conceptualization in general (e.g. categorical unity or a feeling of

normativity).[5] Still others suggest that the understanding contributes something beyond that which is needed for conceptual recognition of the object.[6]

Interpreters have similarly offered a variety of interpretations of what the *imagination* is doing in the state of free play, which range from the claim that it combines representations in a way that the subject takes to be fitting, yet in the absence of any concept that would underwrite this normativity (Ginsborg 1997); that it 'orders the manifold in any number of different ways unconstrained by the dictates of concept deployment' (Rush 2001: 56); and that it 'runs through [a] series of "partial representations" and associations which are connected to [an] object by the mind and yet somehow elude determinate conceptualization' (Chignell 2007: 424).

However, few interpreters have acknowledged that there is a puzzle concerning the freedom of the imagination in the experience of natural beauty.[7] In the General Remark to the first section of the Analytic (hereafter: General Remark), Kant claims that in a judgement of taste 'the imagination must be considered in its freedom' (*CJ*, 5: 240), but in the very same passage he writes that 'in the apprehension of a given object of the senses [the imagination] is of course bound to a determinate form of this object and to this extent has no free play (as in invention)' (ibid.). It is thus not clear in what sense the imagination is free in the experience of natural beauty if it is bound to the form of the objects it apprehends.

My goal in this article is to offer an interpretation of the experience of natural beauty that can explain the sense in which the faculties of imagination and understanding are in free play even when the subject is bound to the determinate form of an object and even when she possesses a concept of the object. On my view, the free play of the faculties is best understood in terms of the freedom of attention. As I hope to show in what follows, although aesthetic reflection involves the joint operation of imagination and understanding in attending to the form of an object, the way in which attention is guided in aesthetic reflection – and thus what we attend to – is different from the way that attention is guided for cognitive purposes. When an object is such that its form strengthens and entertains our cognitive faculties in our attention to it, we become conscious, through a feeling of pleasure, of the harmonious relation of our faculties.

1. The freedom of the imagination: a puzzle

For Kant, what distinguishes judgements of beauty from judgements of agreeableness is that the pleasure that grounds the former is a pleasure in our state of mind and its universal communicability as we reflect on the form of an object. We think that any judging subject *ought* to feel as we do in the face of beauty. Kant repeatedly characterizes the state of mind that grounds a judgement of beauty as a feeling of the 'free play' (sometimes simply the 'play') of the faculties of imagination and understanding (*CJ*, 5: 217, 222, 228, 238). He further characterizes this free play in terms of 'the animation of both faculties (the imagination and the understanding) to an activity that is indeterminate but yet, through the stimulus of the given representation, in unison' and as a 'facilitated play of both powers of the mind (imagination and understanding), enlivened through mutual agreement' (*CJ*, 5: 219).

Kant contrasts the free relation of the faculties in the experience of beauty to the constrained relation of the faculties in cognition. In cognition, 'the agreement of the

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two powers of the mind is *lawful*, under the constraint of determinate concepts' (*CJ*, 5: 296, emphasis in the original). In particular, 'the imagination is under the constraint of the understanding and is subject to being adequate to its concept' (*CJ*, 5: 316–17). But Kant repeatedly emphasizes that in the experience of beauty the imagination is free, although in such a way that its activity nevertheless accords with the 'lawfulness' of the understanding (*CJ*, 5: 240–1, 287, 297). At one point, he describes the imagination itself as 'at play' in the apprehension of the object (*CJ*, 5: 244). And in another, he writes that the 'imagination is as it were at play in the observation of the shape' of a beautiful object (*CJ*, 5: 230).

But what does it mean for the imagination to be at play (or as it were at play) in the apprehension of an object? This question becomes especially pressing if we turn to Kant's discussion in the General Remark. After emphasizing that the freedom of the imagination in a judgement of taste must be the freedom of the productive, rather than reproductive, imagination, Kant acknowledges that 'in the apprehension of a given object of the senses' the imagination 'is of course bound to a determinate form of this object and to this extent has no free play (as in invention)' (*CJ*, 5: 240). On the one hand, this should strike us as obvious. Judgements of beauty are made in response to objects that we perceive; we are *given* these objects, we do not make them.[8] But, on the other hand, this claim gives rise to a puzzle. How can the imagination be free in the experience of natural beauty if it is bound to the determinate form of the object it apprehends?

Before I turn to my own solution to this puzzle, according to which the free play of the faculties can be understood in terms of the freedom of attention, I want to consider two main lines of interpretation that are specifically focused on the freedom of the imagination.[9] As I see it, an adequate interpretation of the free play of the faculties should be able to explain the sense in which the imagination is simultaneously (1) free and self-active in the experience of beauty and (2) bound to the given form of the object. As these constraints can seem to pull us in opposite directions, it is not surprising that the some of the main interpretations of the freedom of the imagination have been able to accommodate one of these only at the expense of the other.

1.1 The playful synthesis interpretation

One prominent line of interpretation takes the freedom of the imagination to consist in a playful synthesis in which the imagination projects multiple forms onto an object. Fred Rush writes that the imagination is free 'to survey the manifold and "pose" or "suggest" different ways in which it might be arranged' and 'the imagination orders the manifold in any number of different ways unconstrained by the dictates of concept deployment' (Rush 2001: 56).[10] Noël Carroll similarly appeals to this kind of playful synthesis to explain the freedom of the imagination. He uses the example of seeing shapes in a passing cloud to illustrate what he has in mind. He writes that when we experience the cloud 'aesthetically': 'our minds explore its aspects freely', which he further explains in terms of 'allow[ing] our imaginations to roam over it, organizing it in accordance with various patterns with no necessary end in view' (Carroll 2014: 64). In this case, the imagination synthesizes the indeterminate form of the cloud in a certain way so one may see it as a certain kind of thing, and then playfully synthesizes

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it in another way so one may see it as something different (e.g. first as a dog, then as a dinosaur).

Although this interpretation certainly offers an account of the freedom of the imagination, the problem is that, on such a view, the imagination is *too* free. The characterizations of playful synthesis we find in Rush and Carroll come perilously close to Kant's characterization of fantasy, which Kant rules out as an explanation of the imagination's activity in the experience of a given object as beautiful.

At the end of the General Remark, Kant distinguishes beautiful objects and beautiful views of objects, noting that in the latter case 'taste seems to fashion not so much on what the imagination *apprehends* in this field as on what gives it occasion to *invent,* i.e., on what are strictly speaking fantasies with which the mind entertains itself' (*CJ*, 5: 243, emphasis in the original). To explain what he means by fantasy, Kant gives the example of looking at the changing shapes in a fire or in a rippling brook. Carroll's example of seeing the changing shapes in the cloud is of a piece with these examples. But Kant is quick to remark that 'neither [the fire nor the rippling brook] are beauties', even though they sustain the imagination in free play (*CJ*, 5: 244). In terms of Kant's broader goals in the third *Critique* – namely, giving us reason to think that nature is amenable to our cognitive and moral interests – it matters that it is the forms of *given* natural objects that we find beautiful, not the occasion they give us to engage in fantasy.[11] And while both Rush and Carroll might appeal to the fact that the possible forms of an object that we project in our playful synthesis are still in some sense constrained by the material that we are provided by the object, this does not seem to capture the stronger sense in which Kant thinks that we are bound to the determinate form of the object in the experience of natural beauty.[12]

1.2 The counterfactual interpretation

While the playful synthesis interpretation emphasizes the free activity of the imagination in projecting possible ways of unifying the manifold, the counterfactual interpretation emphasizes that, strictly speaking, the imagination is not free in its apprehension of the form of a natural object. Instead, proponents of this view emphasize that the freedom of the imagination must be understood in terms of what the imagination *would* design if it *were* free (Rueger and Evren 2005; Rueger 2008; Vogelmann 2018).[13]

Kant's discussion of the freedom of the imagination in the General Remark provides textual support for this interpretation. After noting that the imagination is bound to the determinate form of the object it apprehends, he continues by writing: 'nevertheless it is still quite conceivable that the object can provide it with a form that contains precisely such a composition of the manifold as the imagination would design in harmony with the lawfulness of the understanding in general if it were left free by itself' (*CJ*, 5: 241).

On one version of the counterfactual view, in order to understand what the imagination would design in the experience of natural beauty, we must turn to Kant's account of fine art.[14] In his discussion of fine art, Kant emphasizes that the beauty of an artwork depends on the expression of aesthetic ideas, where an aesthetic idea is 'a representation of the imagination that occasions much thinking though without it being possible for any determinate thought, i.e., *concept,* to be adequate to it' (*CJ*, 5:

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314). Artists produce aesthetic ideas in order to sensibly present rational ideas, which cannot, strictly speaking, be presented sensibly (i.e. given a corresponding intuition) precisely because they are concepts of that which lies beyond experience (e.g. God, the soul, eternity). However, such ideas can be represented symbolically and can be suggested by the representation of sensible objects that we associate with these ideas. Kant refers to these associations as 'aesthetic attributes' of the concepts, the logical content of which cannot be sensibly presented. For example, an eagle with lightning in its claws is an aesthetic attribute of Jupiter, 'the King of heaven', who symbolizes divine power (*CJ*, 5: 315). The production of aesthetic ideas is an expression of the freedom of the artist's imagination. There are no rules that determine how an artist generates aesthetic ideas.

Of course, in the experience of natural beauty, we are given the form of the object; we do not produce it. But, on this view, the form we find in nature is one that fits with what we *would* produce in the context of fine art, where we seek to symbolize ideas of reason. Alexander Rueger and Şahan Evren describe the freedom of the imagination in the experience of natural beauty as follows:

> In the case of a natural object, we, of course, have a concept of the object (a flower, for example) and perhaps even one of its spatial form; but the intuitions subsumed under that concept are such that they agree with intuitions the imagination could have produced freely ... In other words, we realize, upon reflection, that the given intuitions are similar to those that the imagination could generate by producing 'aesthetic' attributes. (2005: 244)

Rueger similarly writes that, when we experience beauty in nature, 'we are delighted to find natural objects that we recognize as suitable for the symbolic presentation of other (indeterminate) concepts, that is, natural objects that express aesthetic ideas' (2008: 314).

The problem with this view is that, although there is clearly a sense in which it respects the claim that we are bound to the given form of the object in the experience of natural beauty, there is another sense in which this interpretation loses sight of the given form of the object. Let me explain. In his discussions of the experience of natural beauty, Kant suggests that the imagination is more directly engaged with the form of an object in a way that is not connected to the formation of aesthetic ideas that symbolize ideas of reason.[15] Consider Kant's claim that '[f]lowers, free designs, lines aimlessly intertwined with each other under the name of foliage, signify nothing, do not depend on any determinate concept, and yet please' (*CJ*, 5: 207). There is no suggestion that in judging these forms we take them to serve as aesthetic attributes of a rational idea. Instead, as Kant notes in this passage, they 'signify nothing'. Here, Kant seems to have in mind the way in which one perceptually traces the lines and shapes of these forms in apprehending them. In fact, Kant frequently emphasizes the way that the *shapes* of beautiful objects please us.[16] Take his list of paradigmatically beautiful natural objects: 'flowers, the blossoms, indeed *the shapes of whole plants*; the delicacy of animal formations of all sorts of species, which is unnecessary for their own use but as if selected for our own taste' (*CJ*, 5: 347, emphasis added). At the beginning of the Critique of Teleological Judgement, Kant describes beautiful natural objects as those that 'contain a form'

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that is 'specifically suited for [our power of judgement]' (*CJ*, 5: 359). Almost any natural object could serve as an aesthetic attribute of an idea of reason; so this does not explain why he thinks that only certain natural forms are 'specifically' suited for our cognitive faculties. In short, this version of the counterfactual view – by making natural beauty subservient, as it were, to artistic beauty – loses sight of the specific form of the object in the experience of natural beauty.

There is another version of the counterfactual interpretation, however, that avoids this problem. Rafael Vogelmann argues that, although the imagination does not engage in free play in apprehending the form of a beautiful object, it 'emulates' the free creative activity that characterizes invention (2018: 67–8). But unlike Rueger and Evren (2005) and Rueger (2008), Vogelmann does not understand invention in the context of fine art (and the role that aesthetic ideas play therein), but in terms of the invention of nature itself, that is, how judging subjects like us would design the world in order to guarantee its suitability to our cognitive needs. The natural objects we find beautiful, on this view, are those the forms of which are especially suited for our power of judgement, those that conform to our minds (2018: 71).

I am sympathetic to this version of the counterfactual interpretation. I agree with Vogelmann's central claim that beautiful objects are those we *would* design if we *were* free to create a world that was intended to be cognized by judging subjects like us. And this version of the view can capture the sense in which we are bound to the determinate forms of natural objects in the experience of beauty. But the main drawback of this interpretation is that we lose the free activity of the imagination altogether. Vogelmann writes that 'in apprehending the form of a beautiful object imagination is not free' and '[t]he beautiful object does not elicit the free play of imagination' (2018: 67).

Although Kant writes in the General Remark that the imagination 'has no free play (as in invention)' we need not read this as denying that the imagination engages in free play; he is only denying that the freedom of the imagination in the experience of natural beauty is the same as that which occurs in invention. And, indeed, we have strong textual reasons for thinking that Kant *does* think that the imagination engages in some kind of free activity in the experience of natural beauty. Above, I have cited the passages where Kant refers to the free play of the faculties in terms of 'animation' and 'enlivening', terms that suggest an activity on the part of the faculties. Furthermore, he *continues* to describe the experience of beauty this way even after the General Remark. For example, in §35 Kant again refers to the 'reciprocally animating' relation between imagination and understanding and asserts that the judgements of taste must be based on 'a feeling that allows the object to be judged in accordance with the purposiveness of the representation (by means of which an object is given) for the promotion of the faculty in its free play' (*CJ*, 5: 287). Given the many passages where Kant claims that the faculties are engaged in animating and enlivening free play, we should prefer an interpretation that can capture a non-counterfactual sense in which the imagination is free (without, however, denying the further counterfactual aspect of its freedom).

Furthermore, providing an account of the imagination's activity in the experience of beauty can help us to explain *why* the the forms of certain objects agree with what it would design.[17] In the next sections, I offer just such an explanation in terms of the playful way that we attend to objects in aesthetic reflection.

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2. The freedom of the imagination as the freedom of attention

We can best explain the free play of the faculties in the experience of natural beauty in terms of the freedom of attention.[18] In aesthetic reflection on the form of an object, the judging subject actively attends to the object, but attention is not guided by any *particular* cognitive interest in the object, as it would be in object recognition or logical reflection in order to form a concept. Instead, the subject is free to attend to further details of the object's form than those she would need to attend to for cognitive purposes and is free to relate these details to each other in a manner that is different from the way she would for conceptual purposes, as contributing to the particular form of the object, rather than to the common features it shares with others.

Although it is the judging subject who directs her attention, the details to which she attends and the way that she attends to them can be said to express interests that are internal to the faculties. The imagination has an interest in the manifoldness of an object's form, while the understanding has an interest in the unity, regularity and symmetry of forms. Beautiful objects are those whose forms combine the kind of rich detail that can sustain the imagination in its synthesis of the manifold with the regularity of form that is a general requirement of the understanding.

To develop this interpretation, it will help to begin with a quick look at Kant's more general account of attention. In the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, which contains Kant's most extended treatment of attention, he defines attention as 'the faculty of apprehending given representations' (*Anth,* 7: 138). Attention plays a fundamental role in cognition, because it is through attention that we bring representations to consciousness. Kant, following Leibniz, holds that most of our sensible representations are obscure, that is, they are below the level of consciousness (*Anth*, 7: 135). We can indirectly conclude that we have these representations because they are parts of that which we perceive. For example, if I perceive someone's face from a distance, Kant thinks I can conclude that I represent the parts of the face, even if I cannot clearly make them out. He suggests that at any given moment, we are only conscious of a small subset of the representations that are available to us. We become conscious of representations through attention (along with abstraction): 'the endeavor to become conscious of one's representations is either the *paying attention to (attentio)* or *the turning away from* an idea of which I am conscious (*abstractio*) (*Anth*, 7: 131). Although Kant distinguishes attention and abstraction, he elsewhere notes that these two operations go hand in hand: 'I cannot attend to a representation without abstracting from the other [representations] or making them obscure' (Anth-Mr, 25: 1239).

Kant further suggests that attention not only brings representations to consciousness, but also is responsible for making perceptual representations more distinct. In the Blomberg Logic – lecture notes from the early 1770s – he claims that 'we achieve distinctness in intuition through more attention *per synthesin*' (Log-Bl, 24: 42). A clear representation is one of which we are conscious, while distinctness is a matter of our consciousness of the partial representations that make up that representation, e.g. I can have a clear but indistinct representation of someone's face, as in Kant's example above from the *Anthropology*. This representation becomes distinct when I can make out the partial representations that belong to this representation (eyes, nose, mouth, etc.). We thus make intuitions more

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distinct through attention, that is, selecting further aspects of an object on which to focus in order to incorporate (synthesize) these into our perceptual representation of the object. By contrast, we achieve more distinctness in conceptual representations through analysis (Log-Bl, 24: 42).

Recall that in cognition the imagination is 'under the constraint of the understanding and is subject to being adequate to its concept' (*CJ*, 5: 316–17). One of the ways we can understand this constraint is in terms of how perceptual attention is guided by cognitive interest (that is, by the goals of object recognition or concept formation). When we recognize and hence determine objects under concepts (and not just perceptually discriminate and track particulars), we do so by recognizing general properties.[19] The imagination selects for synthesis those representations from the available manifold that serve as identifying marks of the object.[20] Most of the time this kind of identification is quick and momentary. Attention only selects a few features of the object for perceptual recognition. Of course, when recognition is difficult or we lack specific concepts, we must attend carefully to an object in order to determine what it is. But even in this case, our conceptual repertoire will guide our attention to the object, as we search for identifying and distinguishing marks. Here we see why attention and abstraction go together: to attend to certain aspects of the object, I must abstract from others.[21] If I am trying to classify the tree before me, I might attend carefully to the shape of one of its leaves but abstract from the particular pattern of striations on the leaf.

The joint operations of attention and abstraction are also involved in aesthetic reflection on the form of an object, but what we attend to (and abstract from) is different in this case (cf. Zinkin 2012). To begin, it is not geared toward object recognition or concept formation. Indeed, as Paul Guyer (2006) argues, in most experiences of beauty, we already have a concept of the object we find beautiful and this concept figures in our mental state. We know that the object is a shell, an insect or a flower (to borrow some of Kant's standard examples of beautiful objects). We also have various concepts of the parts and properties of these objects. As I see it, these concepts figure in our awareness of the unity of our actions as we attend to the parts of the object and relate them together. It is precisely this awareness that allows us to offer descriptions to other judging subjects of how they should attend to an object we find beautiful.

However, and central to my interpretation, the overarching goal of aesthetic attention, as it were, is to appreciate the *particular* interrelation of the parts of an object in forming an aesthetic whole, which involves a different way of attending to the parts of an object and their interrelation. By 'aesthetic whole' I have in mind something like Rachel Zuckert's whole formalism, according to which 'the beautiful object is . . . (represented as) unified and individuated not as an exemplar of a kind, or under a conceptual description, but only as the subject (currently) find its properties reciprocally to contrast and complement one another' (2006, 261; see also Gorodeisky 2011: 426). Strictly speaking, the unified images of objects that the imagination produces in perception, where it is guided by concepts of the understanding, are also aesthetic wholes. We can nevertheless distinguish between the way that we relate the parts of an object to each other conceptually in object recognition versus the way that we can relate the parts of an object together independently of any concepts under which the object falls.

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To appreciate this difference, consider Kant's example of the botanist, who 'pays no attention' to her concept of the purpose of a flower (i.e. the reproductive role it plays in the life cycle of the plant), when she appreciates it aesthetically (*CJ*, 5: 229). In recognizing the flower as a flower (e.g. a lily), the botanist must attend to the spatial arrangement and number of its parts (e.g. pistils, stamen, petals, sepal, etc.). If the botanist were to produce a scientific illustration or diagram of the flower, she would produce an image that draws attention to these parts and their interrelation. This aesthetic whole is geared toward logical comprehension. Compare this to the way that she might attend to the delicate curl of the lily's petals or the pattern of its multiple bright freckles when she appreciates it aesthetically. Consider, too, the kind of image she might draw if she were trying to capture the unique features of this particular flower (rather than trying to convey general and identifying information). This image would not violate or contradict the one she produces for logical purposes, but it is one that is distinctively aesthetic, reflecting the unique features of this object.

As I see it, central to appreciating an object as an aesthetic whole in this latter sense is attention to the details of the object's form that go beyond what is required for conceptual recognition.[22] In aesthetic reflection, the subject is free to attend to these details of the object, thus making her perception of the object more distinct through attention.

Kant suggests something along these lines in his discussion of aesthetic ideas, in which he distinguishes the cognitive versus the free aesthetic use of the imagination as follows:

> [I]n the use of the imagination for cognition, the imagination is under the constraint of the understanding and is subject to the limitation of being adequate to its concept; in an aesthetic respect, however, the imagination is free to provide, beyond that concord with the concept, unsought extensive, undeveloped material for the understanding, of which the latter took no regard in its concept. (*CJ*, 5: 316–17)

As this passage indicates, Kant conceives of the freedom of the imagination as providing 'extensive undeveloped material' that goes beyond what belongs to the concept. In the context of aesthetic ideas, this includes the many rich associations we might have with an object that go beyond what is contained in the concept of it. But we can extend this to perception, where the 'undeveloped material' that the imagination provides consists in further details of an object's form, details which are made available through increased attention as the imagination synthesizes the manifold of intuition. And, in the case of aesthetic reflection, we do not attend to these further details with the aim of forming a more a specific concept, but simply to relish the way they contribute to the aesthetic unity of the object.

3. An objection: is the imagination really free?

I have characterized the freedom of the imagination in terms of the freedom to attend to details of an object's form that go beyond those required for object recognition and to attend to their holistic interrelation in forming an aesthetic unity. One might object, however, that the free and active exercise of attention is always guided by

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the understanding and hence cannot be attributed to the imagination. There are two related reasons for this worry. The first stems from Kant's remark in the first *Critique* that the synthesis of apprehension that the imagination exercises in perception is 'one and the same spontaneity' as that which is exercised by the understanding in intellectual synthesis (B162n.). This suggests that the freedom of the imagination is not distinct from that of the understanding. Second, Kant distinguishes between involuntary and voluntary attention and often aligns the latter with the understanding. Let us briefly review this distinction in order to more precisely state the objection.

For Kant, acts that happen involuntarily belong to sensibility – in this case we are affected by objects and are thus passive – while acts that happen voluntarily depend on the higher faculty of cognition, through which we affect ourselves in being 'the author of [our] representations' (L-Met, 28: 237–9). Because involuntary attention only requires sensibility, Kant allows that animals can exercise this kind of attention even though they lack inner sense (L-Met, 28: 79–80). Humans, of course, exercise attention voluntarily, but as sensible beings our attention can also be involuntary. In the *Anthropology*, for example, Kant describes the way that the senses can 'force' a representation on the subject (*Anth*, 7: 131). When sensations reach a certain intensity (e.g. bright lights or loud noises or speech), our attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*) is directed away from objects and to our own sense organs (*Anth*, 7: 157). And in the *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Kant describes the way that the charms of an object (i.e. the sensations of colours or tones that we find gratifying) 'repeatedly attract[] attention, where the mind is passive' (*CJ*, 5: 222).

While involuntary attention is a function of sensibility, Kant specifically links the voluntary exercise of attention to the free power of choice and thus to the will insofar as it is determined by reason. In notes from the 1770s, he claims that 'attention and abstraction, as the two formal capacities of our mind, are only ... useful for us, if they are under the free power of choice, so that involuntary attentiveness and abstraction produce much harm' (Anth-F, 25: 488). There are several passages where Kant links voluntary attention to the understanding. In the B-Deduction, for example, he writes that it is through acts of attention that the faculty of understanding 'determines the inner sense ... to the inner intuition that corresponds' to its intellectual synthesis (B156–7n.). And in the *Jäsche Logic*, Kant is reported to have remarked that more difficult cognitive tasks require a 'higher degree of attention' and 'thus a greater application of the power of understanding' (9: 55).

The worry, then, is that an appeal to attention cannot explain the sense in which the imagination is free and self-active in aesthetic experience if the voluntary exercise of attention in perception is guided by the understanding (or reason). Why, in other words, should we attribute the freedom of attention to the imagination and not just to the understanding?

In response to this objection, I want to emphasize that it is the rational agent who directs her attention in aesthetic experience. Voluntary attention, as Kant notes, is an act of the free power of choice. Of course, this is also true of the voluntary attention we exercise in cognition. The reason we can attribute freedom of attention to the imagination in aesthetic experience is because, even though the understanding is *involved* in active attention, the agent allows interests that are internal to the faculty of imagination to take priority in her attention to the object.[23] Central to this

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response is the claim that (a) although the imagination is constrained by the understanding in cognition, it is also a distinct faculty from the understanding, which, as such, has its own internal interests[24] and (b) in aesthetic reflection we allow these interests to take priority in our perception of objects.[25]

I take it that, for Kant, the interests that are internal to a faculty stem from its function (and the conditions for properly exercising this function). The function of the imagination is to 'compose[] the manifold of intuition' while the function of the understanding is to supply 'the unity of the concept that unifies the representations' (*CJ*, 5: 217). In the General Remark, Kant discusses the different perceptual interests that arise from these different functions. The understanding has an interest in the regularity (and especially the symmetry) of an object's form, because, as he explains, 'the regularity that leads to the concept of an object is of course the indispensable condition of grasping the object in a single representation and determining the manifold in its form' (*CJ*, 5: 242). Kant further explains that the understanding takes pleasure in the regularity of an object's form, precisely because (a) this regularity is a condition of conceptual determination, (b) the determination of objects by concepts is an end of the understanding and (c) attaining any end is combined with satisfaction (*CJ*, 5: 242). But while the understanding has an interest in the regularity (especially symmetry) of an object's form, Kant emphasizes that too much regularity is displeasing to the imagination and he gives several examples – Baroque furniture, the English taste in gardens and the variety of flora in the Sumatran jungle – that suggest that the imagination has an interest in intricacy of detail, irregularity and variety, all of which can be classified under a general interest in the manifoldness of an object's form (*CJ*, 5: 242–3).

This interest in manifoldness reflects the function of the imagination, namely, composing the manifold of intuition. In his discussion of the sublime, Kant in fact identifies two actions that the imagination performs to compose the manifold of intuition: apprehension, or the taking-in of the manifold, which 'can go to infinity', and comprehension, which requires unifying the manifold together into a single intuition and which is thus subject to limitations in terms of how much detail can be incorporated into one's image of the object (*CJ*, 5: 252). The experience of mathematical sublimity occurs when the imagination confronts a magnitude that it cannot comprehend in a single intuition (e.g. when trying to take in the magnitude of the Pyramids all at once). Because the imagination fails in this case to perform its proper function, the subject initially feels displeasure (*CJ*, 5: 259). The important point for our present purposes is that this discussion shows that the imagination has an interest in maximizing the manifoldness it can incorporate into a single image of an object, which, when satisfied, produces a distinctive pleasure.

Of course, in cognition, the imagination's interest in producing images is *subordinated* to the understanding's interest in conceptualization. As we have already seen, this means that the way attention is guided in synthesis is geared toward concept formation and object recognition (which means we often must abstract from details of an object that might otherwise interest the imagination). In aesthetic reflection, by contrast, we freely explore the rich details of an object's form and thus the interests of the imagination can be expressed independently of particular cognitive interests.

What I am suggesting in response to the objection, then, is that although active attention is attributable to the rational agent (and involves both the imagination

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and the understanding), the fact that the agent allows the interests of the imagination to guide her attention in aesthetic reflection means that we can attribute the freedom of attention to the imagination (and not just the understanding). And while the actions of the faculty of imagination in human beings are *shaped by* the rational capacities of the human being, and thus the way that one synthesizes and composes the manifold of intuition is guided by the understanding and its concepts, the imagination has its own interest in composing rich images, an interest that is sometimes expressed independently of any role this faculty plays in cognition. This is clear, I take it, from Kant's discussion of the need for taste to temper genius, precisely because the imagination of the artistic genius, left to its own devices, that is, 'in its lawless freedom', will produce rich images that are 'nothing but nonsense' (*CJ*, 5: 319).

The claim that we let the interests of the imagination guide attention reflects an important aspect of many encounters with the beauty of nature. We often describe being struck by the beauty of an object. Beautiful objects *grab* our attention. This would suggest that attention is involuntary, but that is not the full story. Even if our initial attention might be involuntary, aesthetic reflection ultimately involves the voluntary exercise of attention; it is, after all, an exercise of our agency. We actively direct our attention to the details of the object that have caught our eye, but in doing so, we let our imaginations guide our attention to the object as we *continue* to attend to the details of the object's form and continue to find further details to incorporate into our perception of the object. This brings us to another important aspect of the experience of beauty. Although we sometimes describe being 'struck by' beauty, the appreciation of beauty ultimately requires active and sustained attention to an object.

4. Free play, free harmony and the pleasure of beauty

Thus far, I have argued that we can understand the freedom of the imagination in aesthetic experience in terms of the freedom of attention, where interests that are internal to the imagination take priority in our active attention to an object. But it is important to note that the experience of beauty does not merely involve free play of the imagination, but also a free *harmony* of the faculties.

In cognition, the imagination harmonizes with the understanding; however, this is a case of constrained or unfree harmony, because the imagination is under the 'constraint' of the understanding in providing intuitions for concepts.[26] In the experience of beauty, by contrast, the imagination is not under the constraint of the understanding. It is, as I have argued, free to perceptually attend to the form of objects, and especially their rich details, independently of any cognitive interest. In this way, the imagination is free from the understanding (even as the understanding serves the imagination as the subject attends to the object). But the imagination can, even in this free state, nevertheless harmonize with the understanding. This happens, I take it, when the particular interrelation of the rich details of an object's form is not only pleasing to the imagination, but also displays the kind of order and regularity that pleases the understanding, in the sense that it seems to us as if this particular interrelation could only have come about as a product of design. The order and

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regularity in this case is not that which enables us to recognize the object as an instance of a general kind, but the order and regularity of its unique properties.[27]

Importantly, Kant holds that, for an object to be beautiful, its form cannot violate the understanding's interests. Just as too much regularity violates the imagination's interests, too much detail and irregularity (however much it might be pleasing to the imagination) becomes 'grotesque' (*CJ*, 5: 242). As I have already noted, Kant observes in his discussion of fine art that the imagination, left to pursue its own interests *entirely* independently of the understanding, produces rich images that are nevertheless 'nothing but nonsense' (*CJ*, 5: 319). There is thus a certain tension between the internal interests of the faculties of imagination and understanding. But certain objects are such that our faculties are in harmony when freely attending to their forms – they have enough detail and intricacy to entertain the imagination and enough regularity to still please the understanding. The pleasure of the beautiful is thus the pleasure of the *contingent* agreement of the faculties, which can only come about when the subject has first set aside any cognitive (or practical) interest in the object and has let her imagination freely explore it.

5. Conclusion

Let me now summarize how my interpretation can address the puzzles with which we began. My interpretation of free play in terms of attention accords with Kant's claim that, in the experience of natural beauty, the imagination is bound to the determinate form of the object it apprehends. Although *what* we attend to and *how* we attend to it can make a difference to our perceptual experience, we are still attending to an object that is given to us. Its form and details are neither the product of fanciful projection nor invention. At the same time, however, the freedom of attention can explain the sense in which the faculties, and especially the imagination, are at play in the observation of the form or shape of the object. In aesthetic reflection on the form of an object, we are free to attend to the object in a way that is different from how we would attend to it for cognitive purposes, even though perceptual attention in both cases requires the cooperation of both imagination and understanding.[28]

Notes

1 References to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* are to the standard A/B pagination. All other references to Kant's works cite the volume and page number of *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (Kant 1900ff.). Throughout, I have used the translations from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, and I indicate where I have modified these translations. I employ the following abbreviations: *Anth* = *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Anth-F = Anthropology Friedlander, Anth-Mr = Anthropology Mrongovius, *CJ* = *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, L-Met = Lectures on Metaphysics, Log-Bl = Blomberg Logic.

2 For different interpretations of free play, see Rush (2001); Allison (2001); Ginsborg (1997); Guyer (1997, 2006); Rueger and Evren (2005); Zinkin (2006); Zuckert (2006, 2007a); Chignell (2007); Rogerson (2008); Gorodeisky (2012); and Ostaric (2017).

3 Guyer (2006) provides a helpful overview of the interpretative possibilities, which he divides into 'pre-cognitive' and 'multi-cognitive' interpretations before proposing his own 'meta-cognitive' interpretation. Although my interpretation is best classified as meta-cognitive, many of the points I make about the freedom of attention and the relationship between imagination and understanding could be adopted by proponents of both the pre-cognitive and multi-cognitive approaches.

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4 This is what Guyer (2006) calls the 'multi-cognitive' interpretation, which he attributes to Gerhard Seel (1988), Fred Rush (2001) and Henry Allison (2001).
5 This is the 'pre-cognitive' interpretation, which Guyer attributes to Dieter Henrich (1992); Donald Crawford (1974); Hannah Ginsborg (1997); Rudolph Makkreel (1990); and his own earlier work (1997).
6 This is the 'meta-cognitive' view that Guyer defends in (2006). I take it that Zuckert also counts as having a meta-cognitive view, because she holds that the understanding already possesses a concept of the object in most experiences of beauty, but 'articulates' the 'parts, reasons, or marks' of an object that contribute to its beauty, but which go beyond what is required for conceptual recognition (2007a: 286, n. 13).
7 Those who have explicitly acknowledged this puzzle include Rueger (2008) and Vogelmann (2018). I will address their interpretations in what follows.
8 As obvious as this point may be, it is often overlooked in interpretations of the free play of the faculties. Those who acknowledge it explicitly include Henrich (1992: 51); Zinkin (2012: 445); Rueger (2008: 301); and Vogelmann (2018). Rueger (2008) and Vogelmann (2018) explicitly address the difficulties this creates for accounting for the freedom of the imagination in the experience of natural beauty.
9 As noted in the introduction, many accounts of the free play of the faculties focus on what the understanding contributes to this activity. See e.g. Allison (2001: 171) and Cohen (2002: 1-4).
10 Rush cites Kant's description of the imagination as 'an authoress of voluntary forms' to support his interpretation, but he neglects the rest of this passage, where Kant emphasizes that this is precisely *not* what the imagination is doing in the apprehension of given objects of the senses, including those we judge beautiful (Rush 2001: 56). Although I reject the Rush/Carroll way of construing playful synthesis, my own interpretation in terms of attention can be taken as an alternative way of construing it consistently with Kant's claim that we are perceptually constrained by given objects.
11 See also Vogelmann (2008: 66) for discussion of this point.
12 We find a different way of understanding the freedom of synthesis in what Guyer (2006) calls 'pre-cognitive' interpretations of free play. On these views, including (Crawford 1974; Guyer 1997; Ginsborg 1997, 2006), the imagination synthesizes or unifies the manifold of intuition in a way that is required for cognition, but without being guided by a concept. Thus, the imagination is free not in the sense of being playful, but only in the negative sense of being *free from* conceptual guidance. There are two main problems with such views, which have been well-rehearsed in the literature (see Guyer 2006, Rueger 2008 and Ostaric 2017). First, those who claim that the imagination's activity is the same as in cognition except that it falls short of concept application have the burden of explaining why a cognitive failure would be pleasurable. Second, to the extent that such views emphasize that the imagination is doing the same thing it would do in cognition in the experience of beauty, it is not clear why everything would not be beautiful.
13 I have taken the name for this view from Rueger, although it should be noted that Rueger refers to his view as the 'comparison model' of free play (2008: 302).
14 Rueger and Evren (2005) and Rueger (2008). Although Chignell (2007) and Ostaric (2017) are focused on Kant's account of artistic beauty, we can assume that they are both committed to an account of natural beauty in terms of aesthetic ideas. Chignell identifies the freedom of the imagination *in general* with having aesthetic ideas (2007: 424), which would thus include the experience of natural as well as artistic beauty. At one point, Ostaric claims that the 'productive, fictive power of the imagination is in place in our reception of beauty' (2017: 1398). Thus we can assume that, on her view, the experience of natural beauty also involves aesthetic ideas.
15 I do not want to deny that *some* experiences of natural beauty on Kant's account involve recognition of the possible use of an object or its form for the formation of an aesthetic attribute or idea (where such ideas are used to suggest rational ideas). This seems to be going on, for example, in Kant's discussion at the end of §59 (*CJ*, 5: 354). But I deny that *all* experiences of natural beauty involve the symbolization of rational ideas. More generally, I think it is a mistake to identify Kant's account of natural beauty with that of artistic beauty. Although Kant does describe both in terms of the expression of aesthetic ideas, I take it that the expression of aesthetic ideas is essential to finding fine art beautiful, while it is only after we have found a natural object beautiful that it serves as an aesthetic idea, specifically, the aesthetic presentation of the purposiveness of nature.

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16 Reiter and Geiger (2018) emphasize this point as part of their argument that aesthetic pleasure is primarily a response to natural kinds. While I do not accept all of the details of their argument, I think they are right to emphasize the central role of an object's shape in the experience of beauty.
17 According to Vogelmann (2018), beautiful objects are ones whose forms match what the imagination would design in free harmony with the understanding in its creative activity. But this still leaves us with the question of what the imagination would design in its free creative activity. On my view, we can explain this in terms of the imagination's interest in forms that have rich detail that can sustain attention but enough unity in their forms that they do not undermine the understanding's need for regularity.
18 The interpretation of free play in terms of attention is suggested by some of Rachel Zuckert's remarks in developing her interpretation of the free harmony of the faculties in terms of an anticipatory grasp of the object as a whole. At one point, she writes, 'Play, then, is an apt description of the cognitive activity required to represent beautiful form: in experiencing heterogeneous, contingent properties of the object as purposively unified, we must turn our *attention* from one to the another of these properties' (2007: 285, emphasis added). My goal in this paper is to fully develop the suggestion that we can understand free play in the experience of natural beauty in terms of attention. In Williams (2021), I explain how this account applies to the experience of artistic beauty.
19 Technically, we do so by recognizing that our own activity in perceptually discriminating the object is an instance of a general rule. That is, although the dog in front of me has a particular shape, the rule I follow in delineating this shape perceptually is an instance of the rule I follow when delineating other quadrupeds. This is why Kant describes the concept of a dog as 'signify[ing] a rule in accordance with which my imagination can specify the shape of a four-footed animal in general' (A141/B180).
20 For an account of the way that empirical schemata guide perceptual attention to the form of an object, see Williams (2020).
21 In their discussion of the role of attention in Kant's account of cognition, to which I am much indebted, Melissa Merritt and Markos Valaris refer to the way that attention and abstraction are 'dynamically linked' (2017: 577).
22 An appeal to this kind of attention is implicit in some other interpretations of free play. Guyer (2006), for example, characterizes the free play of the faculties in terms of finding unity amidst variety in an object's form that goes beyond that which is required for conceptualization. Henry Allison describes the way that the imagination seeks out 'new patterns of order' in an object's form (2001: 171). Each of these activities (which are perhaps even the same) require attention to the details of an object's form. An advantage of the interpretation I offer here is that, while it can accommodate both of these interpretations, it also offers a more detailed account of what the imagination is doing and the sense in which it is free.
23 Thanks to Janum Sethi for initially suggesting this line of response to the objection.
24 Although Kant often seems to identify the imagination and the understanding in the first *Critique* (B152, B162n., A118-9), this is because the imagination is required for cognition and the understanding in general is the faculty of cognitions (B137). Kant is clear, however, that the imagination is a distinct faculty from the faculty of understanding, understood more narrowly as the faculty of concepts. In §24 of the B Deduction, Kant defines the imagination as 'the *faculty* for representing an object even without its presence in intuition' (B 151, italics added) and Kant's very discussion of the free harmony of the faculties in the third *Critique* presupposes that the imagination and the understanding are distinct faculties.
25 One might worry that this runs afoul of a central feature of Kant's account, namely, that the pleasure in the beautiful is *disinterested*. Importantly, however, the aim in question is not a practical aim (and is thus distinct from the faculty of desire). For an extended defence of the claim that the faculties have interests, see Rueger (2018).
26 Here, I follow Cohen (2018) and Sethi (2019) in drawing the distinction between the unfree harmony of the faculties that occurs in cognition and the free harmony that gives rise to judgements of beauty.
27 I thus agree with Guyer that the object displays a unity and coherence that 'goes beyond anything required for or dictated by satisfaction of the determinate concept or concepts on which mere identification of the object depends' (2006: 183).
28 I presented versions of this paper at the British Society of Aesthetics meeting in September 2019; the American Society for Aesthetics meeting in October 2019; and the Central Division Meeting of the APA in February 2021. I am grateful to audience members for their questions and comments on those occasions and especially to Keren Gorodeisky for comments at the ASA and Alessandra Buccella and Jonathan Fine

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