

## Book Review

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Michel Chaouli, *Thinking with Kant's Critique of Judgment*

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Michel Chaouli's book is not a typical commentary, and in fact, in my view, 'commentary' would be too prosaic a designation for it. Although it provides the reader with a scrupulous, methodical analysis of the central arguments in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgement (CPJ)*, its general endeavour is not to offer a systematic series of interpretations of the text. Chaouli strives, as emerges from the title of his book, to trace Kant's *way of thinking* in the third *Critique* in the genuine sense. His aim is to reveal the internal logic of Kant's text by submitting himself 'to the movement of its thinking' (p. xiv), as he poetically puts it in the preface, rather than to impose on the text presuppositions that proceed in line with a specific exegetical theory. Does this mean that Chaouli is not adopting an interpretative position? He certainly is and I will return to this later.

The aspiring motivation of 'thinking with' is articulated stylistically in the structure of the book which ranges through three basic Kantian themes in *CPJ*, namely, beauty, art and nature, that Chaouli unfolds respectively into nine sub-categories (three under each theme), tracing their function within the various contexts of the third *Critique*. As opposed to orthodox readings that progress step by step along with the text, Chaouli creates in each chapter of his book a sort of conceptually independent unit through which he wanders freely among the various terms that arise in connection with a selected theme, without necessarily maintaining the original order of Kant's arguments. Consequently, even a skilful reader of the third *Critique* can find themselves outside their 'comfort zone' as their reading is reoriented and their awareness directed to places in the text that usually receive scant scholarly attention.

Here lies the originality of Chaouli's book but it can also be seen as its Achilles' heel. On the one hand, Chaouli's reading constitutes a sort of alienation from the way the third *Critique* is usually read among scholars, compelling the reader to rethink familiar arguments in the text almost as if they were being met for the first time (see for instance p. xiii). On the other hand, this raises the question of whether this proposed reading remains true

to the systematicity of Kant's own thought in a way that also enables an inexperienced reader to find their way through the text. I think this ambivalence can be best demonstrated by reviewing the notion of 'serendipity', which Chaouli uses as a key term in his analysis of aesthetic judgement throughout his book. Chaouli's use of the term 'serendipity' in the context of aesthetic judgement is unique, to my knowledge. Although the term *does* appear (in one form or another) in prominent scholars of the third *Critique* it is used merely as another way of describing the harmony in the free play between imagination and the understanding, without being granted any special status (cf. Allison 2001: 50; Nuzzo 2008: 241–2).

'*Serendipity*' Chaouli writes 'is the right word for the strangely passive activity – and the pleasurable feeling – of finding something that I was *not* looking for' (p. 17). The idea that Chaouli seeks to capture through the notion of serendipity is the contingent accord between our cognitive faculties and the infinite variety of the forms and empirical laws of nature articulated in the aesthetic judgement of the beautiful; an accord which Kant describes in section five of the Introduction to the third *Critique* 'just as if it were a *happy accident*' (*CPJ*, 5: 184; Kant 2000). Chaouli relies heavily on Kant's choice of words, connecting this '*happy accident*' with the distinctive form of freedom Kant ascribes to aesthetic judgement, that is, the freedom of concepts, of intentions, and of specific ends, which Chaouli in turn characterizes as an 'experimental freedom, a freedom to experiment with myself' that the subject achieves 'unintentionally', such that 'I might as well say that it achieves me' (p. 18; cf. also pp. xv, 35). Hence the notion of serendipity. Chaouli goes on to explain the connection between experimentality and serendipity through the significance of the *actual* experience of beauty: '[o]ne must try it out' he quotes Kant (cf. *CPJ*, 5: 191; Kant 2000) and clarifies '*man muß ihn versuchen: Versuch* is an attempt, an essay, an experiment' (p. 16).

I find the examination of aesthetic judgement through the notion of 'serendipity' intriguing, yet at the same time it raises important concerns regarding its overall compatibility with Kant's account. First, as a term with a literary origin 'serendipity'<sup>1</sup> introduces an entirely innovative dimension of thinking to the act of aesthetic judgement, one that manages to capture the fundamental and intrinsic tension contained in it, to which Chaouli refers as a 'strangely *passive* activity' (p. 17), as the term 'serendipity' is often applied to discoveries made by chance. Chaouli cleverly succeeds in *literally* embodying the double characterization of aesthetic judgement as involving 'both a form of receptivity and a kind of making', as he puts it (p. 10). This discernment fits very well with the way Kant connects aesthetic judgement with our creative powers, since we learn to become creative in ways requiring us to judge aesthetically, i.e. to *take* aesthetic pleasure in things. However, that is precisely the point at which Chaouli's choice of

the term 'serendipity' becomes a hindrance, since it diverts attention to the randomness, passivity and unintentionality of judgement, as if our very experience of beauty is a result of a blind chance. That is clearly not Kant's position, but neither does it seem one Chaouli wishes to plead. Otherwise he would not have repeatedly, and rightly, emphasized the inseparable moral aspect of aesthetic judgement through its universal voice and its demand for general agreement (pp. 49–66). Stated differently, if aesthetic judgement were genuinely serendipitous, it would not have been possible for us to take responsibility for it, as it would not have been counted as a judgement at all in a genuine Kantian sense. Thus, it would have lost one of its most essential features as a propaedeutic for moral deliberation.

Second, the notion of 'serendipity' aptly reverberates with Kant's cryptic terminology of traces and hints regarding the correspondence between nature and our aesthetic abilities, which Kant articulates as the way nature 'figuratively speaks to us in its beautiful forms' (*CPJ*, 5: 301; Kant 2000). Chaouli links this correspondence with our essential 'openness' to the beautiful which provokes in turn our aesthetic responsiveness to it (p. 103). The idea of openness in aesthetic experience consists, for Chaouli, in the fact that we must be susceptible to the beautiful object by allowing it to figuratively 'speak' to us and thereby affect us, leaving its cyphers intact (pp. 102–3). From that Chaouli infers that the significance of our aesthetic experience in natural beauty is to 'face a world whose meaning I *fail* to grasp with a fully developed thought, a failing that occasions in me an ecstatic pleasure' (p. 105, my emphasis). While I think that the terminology of openness and responsiveness captures an important dimension of aesthetic experience in a Kantian sense, and therefore corresponds aptly to the serendipitous mood, what it implies fails to do so. I believe it is not a lack of understanding of Kant's argument on Chaouli's part but a choice of words that stymies him. The fact that nature gives us hints in a *figurative* way, i.e. through its beautiful objects, in Kant's account, does not imply failure on our part even though we cannot grasp it 'with a fully developed line of thought' as Chaouli writes. On the contrary, it means that nature *can* correspond with us and become meaningful to us even when it is non-conceptualized, that is, through our imagination. Thus, it is not the *failure* of grasping beauty that 'occasions in me an ecstatic pleasure', a theme that Kant develops in his discussion of the sublime (*CPJ*, §§27–8);<sup>2</sup> rather, the fact that our encounter with natural beauty produces a feeling of aesthetic pleasure indicates that nature's traces and hints are being received and responded to as something meaningful (cf. Nuzzo 2008: 229, 242).

Chaouli applies the terminology of 'failure leading to a recognition' also in the context of our teleological judgement of organisms. He contends that 'when faced with organisms, the very ability to build analogical bridges *fails* us. . . . It also means that figurative speech *fails* us (for how to attempt even

the simplest figure without the ability of discerning that A stands in some analogical relation to B . . . ?) thus if judgement ‘fails us in the presence of these organisms, then it becomes acutely clear why they finally remain “inscrutable” to us’ (pp. 260–1, my emphases). Chaouli then goes on to argue that this very ‘failure of judgment is a supreme achievement of judgment itself’ for it ‘must appear against a background of possibility’ (p. 261). To the extent that this description of human limitations as the openness of a space of possibility is relevant to Kant’s dialectic of teleological judgement, Chaouli’s analysis still misses a crucial point about nature’s objective purposiveness, in my view. What Chaouli describes as ‘failure of judgment’ is actually a regulative principle (*CPJ*, 5: 398; Kant 2000). For the purposiveness of nature or of objects in nature does not state how nature really *is* but only presents itself as a principle that we must follow in exploring nature. However, even though this is *our* way of observing nature and conceiving objects in it, the presentation of purposiveness in this regard is nevertheless objective.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, the notion of ‘serendipity’ alludes to Chaouli’s own distinctive endeavour of ‘thinking *with*’ the *Critique of the Power of Judgement* as a way of *actively* submitting oneself to someone else’s text while extracting its insights. Without explicitly stating it (or perhaps serendipitously) the interpretative instrument Chaouli proposes to his readers lies in the romantic gesture it entails. This romantic hue emerges most clearly in the sections devoted to ‘Genius’ and ‘Aesthetic Ideas’ – perhaps not by chance, for these are the two themes in Kant that attracted most the attention of the Jena Romantic thinkers. I find the romantic influence on Chaouli’s terminology clearly discernible in his emphasis on the *poetic* dimension of aesthetic experience. For example, when he makes an analogy between the ‘exemplary originality’ of the genius artist and the structure of the unconscious in psychoanalysis which he refers to as ‘unthinking’ (p. 167) and in his association between aesthetic ideas and the possibility of thinking poetically (p. 174), not to mention in his fascination with Kant’s use of the term *Geist* in the context of aesthetic ideas, which he connects with a ‘mysterious’ spirit of the beautiful and which he describes as having ‘ghostly’ qualities (pp. 170, 175–8, 181; cf. *CPJ*, 5: 313; Kant 2000). Moreover, there are several places in the book where Chaouli refers to aesthetic judgement itself as having poetic features (pp. 11, 21), which strongly resonate with romantic interpretations of the power of imagination in Kant’s aesthetic nexus (as in Coleridge, Hölderlin and Novalis).

In conclusion, serendipitously or not, Chaouli’s thinking-with-Kant leads to an insight of significant importance regarding aesthetic judgement that is articulated precisely in the last part of his book where he examines the ‘Critique of Teleological Judgement’. By intertwining conclusions from the ‘Aesthetics’ into his analysis of the ‘Teleology’, Chaouli draws the

connecting thread between the two parts of the third *Critique*, implying that the arguments presented in the latter are in effect supported by the former (p. 199). Although he eventually applies the importance of aesthetic experience to the notion of ‘life’, stating that ‘Kant’s concept of aesthetic experience, taken broadly, allows us . . . to feel life itself . . . as it is shared by humanity’ (pp. 266–7), I find the kind of reading proposed by Chaouli indirectly opens new ways of thinking that also correspond to the critical metaphysical direction to which the *Critique of Judgement* ultimately guides us, namely, the possibility of moral theology and the question of the supersensible.

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### Notes

- 1 The etymological root of ‘serendipity’ is in the fairytale ‘The Three Princes of Serendip’ which tells the story of three princes being saved by reconstructing past events following only hints and traces they find in nature.
- 2 Chaouli indeed declares throughout the text that he perceives the aesthetic experience of the beautiful as delivering ‘a jolt no less sharp than the one many readers of Kant believe they can find only in the sublime’ (p. 13). And again ‘beauty itself can become the occasion for a sublime experience’ (p. 93).

### References

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James R. O’Shea (ed.), *Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason: A Critical Guide*

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There are numerous books that are intended to serve as an introductory resource to Kant’s first *Critique*. Such resources must navigate between maintaining accessibility and succumbing to an oversimplification of Kant’s philosophy, possibly by focusing too heavily on a single interpretation or considering too many interpretations. Introductions to Kant must compromise between these factors to some extent. O’Shea’s edited collection of