



Links between art and the moral act. A review of the notions of the good and the beautiful in Kant.

Vínculos entre el arte y el acto moral. Una revisión de las nociones de lo bueno y lo bello en Kant.

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SUMMARY

The censorship of art is a phenomenon that allows the approximation of two philosophical disciplines: ethics and aesthetics. With censorship, and sometimes also with the praise of the work of art, links are manifested between valuations with different orientations, becoming evident common phenomena of an intellectual nature referring to conditions of autonomy, valuation, intention, abstraction and assimilation. With this analysis we intend to investigate, following Kant, some fundamental aspects and notions that link art and morality in what refers to the origin and nature of judgments (ethical and aesthetic) and phenomena (work of art and moralact).

Keywords: Beauty. Good. Judgment. Freedom. Reason.

ABSTRACT

Censorship of art implies the connection between Ethics and Aesthetics: different kind of valuations and orientations in artistic work, such as censorship as well as compliment, enlightens usual phenomena concerning autonomy, valuation, volition, abstraction and assimilation conditions of it. Therefore, our aim is to explore some fundamental Kantian features between morals and arts concerning the judgment, as well as its results (i.e. piece of art and moral act).



Keywords: Beauty. Good. Trials. Freedom. Reason.

Introduction

An exhibition by Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch was scheduled to open on February 27, 2015 at the Jumex Museum in Mexico City. But three weeks earlier the performance was cancelled. The reason for this suspension was mainly attributed to the pressure exerted by different sectors of society, especially animal rights defenders who considered Nitsch's work incorrect (from their moral point of view). (Ortuño, 2015), (Ballesteros, 2015), (Burnett, 2015).

Regarding the suspension, the artist told the Excelsior newspaper:

It had never happened to me that an exhibition was canceled. Of course there were debates about my actions based on blasphemy and, in recent years, especially animal rights. The cancellation of the exhibition leaves me very, very sad. (Nitsch, 2015).

Hermann Nitsch is an Austrian artist identified with Viennese actionism. His work is manifested through a peculiar combination of theater, dance, music and painting, with the integration of various religious and pagan ritual manifestations. His work has caused the repudiation of some sectors of society for the inclusion of orgiastic scenes where dead animals and bloodbaths are used, in its intention to represent the force of ritualism.

According to Laura de la Colina of the *mitocracy* research group of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Complutense University of Madrid:

In the work of H. Nitsch, during his stay in Viennese actionism, elements such as blood, viscera or corpses of lambs appear; but always linked to religion, in fact, the artist will be characterized by the use of chasubles that he will wear during the actions, as a master of ceremonies. (De la Colina, 2015, p. 10).



Later he affirms: "Probably the most violent content of their actions is manifested from their rebellious attitude, in which they take to the limit in an exemplary way the human social construction, altering the traditional moral values" (p. 10).

In history we could exemplify hundreds of situations, especially in cases of censorship, which clearly link art and morality, as in the case of Actionism vienes. This interseveres two philosophical disciplines: ethics and aesthetics and moves us to ask ourselves some questions: Should art meet the guidelines of morality? What is the link between art and morality?

Regardless of the opinion we may have about this or other artistic manifestations or aesthetic objects, we can begin our analysis, raising some notions that could help us understand this encounter.

a) Its nature. Beauty and good are considered as judgments that we make about objects or actions and that require the interaction between the mind of the subject and qualities of a phenomenon. The respective phenomenon can be either the work of art or a moral action. Without a subject who exercises an aesthetic or ethical assessment of a phenomenon in question, there is no good or beauty.

b) Its genesis. Regarding the origin of the foundation of ethical or aesthetic judgments there are two possibilities: a) the ideal notions (good and beauty) are independent of the subject or b) they are acquired through processes of social interaction or motives of a psychological nature.

c) On their possibility of knowledge. The judgment of truth that we make about an object is based on the analysis that the judgments on an object in question are presented. In this sense, faced with the question of whether we can know whether "Nitsch's work is bad" (in the moral sense) or "Nitsch's work is beautiful", it implies two possibilities that we can trace depending on whether genesis and development: 1. Given the assumption that the general notions of aesthetic appreciation and morality have a psychological or cultural genesis, it would make it impossible to have certainties about right or wrong judgment; in other words, we would be faced with the general criteria of relativism and moral and aesthetic subjectivism that lead to an axiological skepticism. It follows from the above that we lack a solid criterion for censoring art. On the contrary, if ethical and aesthetic judgments are independent of subjective motivations or culture, then we could trace a criterion that



allows us to judge the truth and validity of the expressions that are issued on works of art and moral acts.

Based on the pretension of finding criteria for the foundation of our judgments about the good, beauty and its links, we could recognize a criterion of analysis attending to some of the reflections that, on art theory, Immanuel Kant wrote.

Kant's philosophical work was written during the eighteenth century. The works that most systematically frame his thought are: *The Critique of Pure Reason*, whose objective is to examine the limits and possibilities of knowledge; the critique of practical reason, whose objective is ethics and the critique of judgment whose central themes are aesthetics and theology. Among its most outstanding claims should be noted:

- a) To highlight the active nature of reason in its cognitive functions.
- b) Identify the limits and scope of the cognitive functions of reason.
- (c) To highlight the role of reason in the practical mastery of morality;
- d) To specify what is the contribution of reason in the domain of the ultimate questions of a metaphysical-religious nature, such as the immortality of the soul and existence.

To advance in our inquiry I will allow myself to review some aspects that would help us to understand the notion of beauty and good, according to Kant, relying mainly on *the Critique of practical reason*, the metaphysics of customs and the *Critique of judgment* or discernment, to subsequently expose my position on the links between the notion of beauty and good in Kantian thought that, in general terms, it consists of showing that in both cases there is a pretension to overcome ethical and aesthetic relativism and, to show that, for a pure understanding of beauty and good, the starting point is the notion of freedom.

In paragraph 43 of the critique of the Kant Judgment he expounds his notion of freedom in art in the following terms: "... production should be called art through freedom, that is, through a free will that puts reason as the foundation of its actions" (Kant, 2003, §43. pp. 269-269). This notion does not offer contradictions with other passages in which Kant refers to freedom and, as I will try to show



later, it is pertinent both to expose the criteria of the production of art, and the criteria for the realization of morality.

A first approach to our inquiries would allow us to affirm that the notion of freedom, which is evident a reflective action of the subject, establishes a first link between art and morality, which, as we have mentioned, materialize through works or actions.

1. The good.

With the critique of practical reason Kant seeks to establish a discernment of universal acceptance based on reason that allows us to recognize a general criterion for moral judgment and, supported by this principle, overcome the skepticism to which both subjectivism and historicism inevitably lead.

In his willingness to establish the rational foundations of morality, Kant will distance himself from tradition, empirical morality, and theological morality. Distancing makes sense if we consider that between different peoples there are different traditions or moral norms: what for one people is a vice, for another can be a virtue. A similar case is found in empirical morality, where, appealing to research in practical ethics, it can be said that while the greatest good for most humans is to live, there will be some situations where the greatest good is to die. Regarding theological morality, the same principles prevail as in tradition, but also with the denial of human rationality by establishing a supra-human principle as a criterion of moral normativity. Therefore, the purity of morality cannot be found in historical, ideological or subjective practices, but in a rational criterion, and this is found in the notions of *duty* and *freedom*.

Duty is an intellectual notion identified with what is necessary and not always linked to contingent phenomena; it is a notion that has its starting point in pure reason. For its part, freedom, linked to the definition I presented above, is detached from causal determinism in so far as it has its starting point in reason. In this way freedom and duty find their manifestation in moral actions or acts and, both freedom and duty, are part of the rational essence of man.

From freedom and duty, Kant, in the *Foundations for a Metaphysics of Customs*, derives the maxims that give foundation to judgment on good or evil, supported on the general law:



1. "Work only in such a way that you may desire that the maxim of your action become a universal law..."
2. "Work as if, by your maxims, you are always a lawgiver member in a universal realm of ends."
3. "Work in such a way that you use humanity, both in your person and in that of any other, always as an end, and never only as a means." (Kant, 2012, pp. 151-154).

Since from empirical and contingent criteria we cannot establish consistent principles for the establishment of moral judgment, Kant appeals to reason, as a criterion of universality for its foundation.

2. Beauty.

As we have pointed out, one of the central pretensions of the Kantian system has to do with the justification of judgments about nature and actions. In this task the starting point is found in pure reason or, in other words, in the formulation of judgments disconnected from the contingency of empirical contents. In the case of the judgment on the beautiful, the procedure does not contradict what was established above, but it does tend to a different procedure depending on the nature of the contents of the judgments and the aesthetic objects.

The judgment of taste is that of the appreciation of beauty and presents a peculiar character when observed from the point of view of four categories that regulate the functioning of understanding:

Quality: the judgment of taste is disinterested, the idea of possessing the object does not arise, we even do not care about its real existence, the pleasure is in the pure representation and this is distinguished from the good and the pleasant.

Quantity: the beautiful pleases us universally without concept, it is distinguished from the good and the pleasant.

Relation: the beautiful as the final form of an object without representation.



Causality: in relation to an object, the beautiful does not like because it satisfies and thus distinguishes itself once again from the pleasant and the good (Plázola, 2007, p. 103).

Beauty gives us pleasure, it is imagination, it is understanding without any interest. It is not subordinated to the sensitive forms of the human species, but it becomes aware of being necessary in front of them, being free of their influence, since the faculties of understanding surpass to every extent the contingency of the senses.

In aesthetics we are faced with three objects of analysis: the creator of art, the spectator of art and the aesthetic object. The criterion of the categories of aesthetic judgment makes sense in the three objects. Regarding the creator as a producer of the beautiful, with respect to the object as an entity on which the judgment of taste is established and with respect to the spectator as an entity with the capacity to judge taste.

3. The link between beauty and good

Regarding Kant's claims to overcome the contingent character of judgments on morality or aesthetics, the starting point is basically formal, without being placed exclusively in a formalization detached from the real since, its point of concretization, occurs in the moral act, the expectation of the beautiful object or the realization of art.

In both notions a formal common criterion is the notion of freedom as "will that puts reason to the basis of its activity"; and, with this notion, it is possible to relate the link in different senses. I will allow myself to elaborate on this point by referring to paragraphs 43 to 45 of the Critique of Judgment:

a) Freedom is presented as a moral principle that humanizes insoore insoout insoever, insoguine as only art and the moral act are the product of freedom, insoout, insoing the manifestation of a will with the support of rationality.

b) A distance is established from nature. Certainly in nature we can recognize beautiful spectacles, but not art and, with respect to morality, an action will only be understood as such insoout as it is the result of human notions of duty and freedom.



c) Kant distinguishes beautiful art from other types of manifestations also called artistic according to their genesis: that is: whether or not they are really the product of freedom. The same could be said of the moral act. Thus, a sunset can receive the qualifier of beautiful or a faithful pet can be described as good, but, in none of the cases, they are neither artistic nor moral respectively.

4. Types of aesthetic manifestations and analogies with the moral act

Between paragraphs 43 and 44 of the critique of judgment or discernment, Kant offers a set of manifestations considered as artistic manifestations, but which, in the analysis of their genesis and materialization, would be far from being considered as beautiful art.

Mechanical art:

When art, suitable to the *knowledge* of a possible object, in order to realize it actually, fulfills the actions required in this regard, it is then a *mechanical art*; but if it has as its immediate intention the feeling of pleasure, it is then called aesthetic *art*. (Kant, 2003, pp. 371).

Such is the case of those productions that may be pleasing to sensitivity, but result from a monotonous and repetitive activity that has left aside the creation product of freedom and reproduces in series with little participation of reason. By analogy, an action that is performed by reproducing customs could not be considered, properly, a moral act.

Mercenary art.

Art also differs from craftsmanship; the first is called free, the second could also be called paid art. The former is seen as if it could turn out badly (or well) teleologically only as a game, that is, as a pleasant occupation by itself. The second as work, that is, as an occupation by itself unpleasant (tiring) and which is only attractive for its effect (for example, retribution) and to this extent as something that can be imposed coercively. (p. 270)



Also, in a sense analogous to morality, those acts that are carried out by external pressure or in order to obtain an economic benefit, despite generating a beneficial to the recipient of the act, cannot properly be defined as a moral act insoout the absence of autonomy and duty is evident.

Nice art:

The pleasant arts are those referred only to enjoyment. Such are all the stimuli that society can satisfy around a table: such as referring to stories in an entertaining way, they excite society with a frank or lively conversation, arrange it through jokes and laughter to a certain tone of joy, where, as they say, at a banquet it can be chattered without anyone taking responsibility for what it says, because it only points to momentary distraction, not to a permanent matter for reflection or repetition. (p. 271)

In correspondence with actions, those that have as their purpose only the satisfaction of individual or collective pleasures, without attention to duty, do not properly constitute a moral act.

Finally, it will be possible to make an analogy of the moral act with beautiful art while the latter is defined in the following terms:

Beautiful art, on the other hand, is a form of representation that is teleological in itself and that despite lacking purpose, nevertheless fosters the culture of mood capacities for sociable communication.

The universal communicability of a pleasure already carries with it in its concept that it should not be a pleasure of enjoyment from mere sensation, but from reflection. Thus, aesthetic art, as beautiful art, is such that it has as a measurement pattern reflective discernment and not the sensation of the senses. (p. 272)

In this tenor, both the pure moral act and the beautiful art correspond to being manifestations not oriented by an end; hence, in the field of Kantian morality, the traditional distinction between utilitarianism and deontology is established, where utilitarianism is understood as a morality oriented by subjective ends, while deontology is a moral alternative oriented by duty. The communicability of the good and the beautiful become possible as they are based on criteria of



formality common to entities of reason. Finally, the judgment on the good and the beautiful implies the overcoming of subjectivity or the immediacy of pleasures by being built on the human basis of reflective judgments.

Conclusion

Both with ethics and with Kantian aesthetics we are faced with the intention of overcoming relativism and subjectivism, the above places us before a new dilemma of which the author of the criticisms, in my opinion, offers an alternative.

If we admit subjectivism or relativism as criteria for establishing aesthetic or ethical judgments, we run the risk of incurring skepticism, on the contrary, if we place ourselves in a formalism, we run the risk of distancing ourselves from art and real moral acts, however, with the Kantian alternative, a universal evaluation criterion is established, which has its starting point in human reason and will have its sphere of reference in the aesthetic objects and actions that materialize.

Returning to nitsch's work and the phenomenon of its censorship, it could be the object of analysis based on the parameters established by Kantian ethics and aesthetics and for understanding I propose the following criteria.

1. Both the moral and aesthetic judgments that are poured on Nitsch's work have the possibility of being the result of the reflective judgment.
2. Both Nitsch's work and the act of prohibiting its presentation are hypothetically the result of a free act.¹
3. The motives of morality are the judgment on good and evil and the motives of art, have to do with beauty, hence there is no correspondence of ends.

¹ I affirm that it is hypothetical in that we do not know the true motivations that lead the artist to produce his work and the censors to repudiate it.



4. The work of art is a materialization of the artist's conscience, that is, it materializes in an act exposed to the public, therefore, it is not exempt from moral judgment and, therefore, from censorship.

5. The analysis of the specific case of Nitsch's work should be oriented, namely, whether the moral reasons for which the work is censored, meet the criteria of a morality with the claim of universalization.

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