

Aesthetic Aspects on Persons in Kant, Schiller, and Wittgenstein

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There are two aspects of persons, which are predominant in contemporary philosophy, one being epistemological and the other moral. The first aspect focuses on problems of continuity and personal identity, the second on questions of moral responsibility. Both aspects are related to the double meaning of the Latin word "*persona*", which stood, roughly, first for the role someone plays in a system - be it on stage or in society - and later, under the influence of Christian traditions, was used to express someone's uniqueness and individuality. But there are further aspects of what is essential for a person, aspects, which, although having been paid attention to in the past, are now rather neglected. These are a person's *development*, *free will*, and *personality*. I want to show here how Kant's theory of aesthetic contemplation and Wittgenstein's notion of language games are useful for a better understanding of these aspects of a person.

Parfit in 1987 distinguished between two questions: (1) "What is the nature of a person?" and (2) "What makes a person at two different times one and the same person? What is necessarily involved in the continued existence of each person over time?" Parfit concentrates on the second question, because "in answering (2) we shall also partly answer (1). The necessary features of our continued existence depend upon our nature. And the simplest answer to (1) is that, to be a person, a being must be self-conscious, aware of its identity and its continued existence over time." (Parfit, p. 202) But this "simplest answer" is not only simple, it is also one-sided. Already in 1971 Harry G. Frankfurt pointed out that "what philosophers have lately come to accept as analysis of the concept of a person is not actually analysis of *that* concept at all" (Frankfurt, 5). Frankfurt criticizes philosophers for having been too much concerned with mind-body issues and having forgotten what is "of our most humane concern with ourselves and the source of what we regard as most important and most problematical in our lives" (6), which, according to Frankfurt, is a person's free will. He therefore develops an account of our capacity of "reflective self-evaluation" (7) and our ability to form "second order desires" (6). These abilities are intimately related to the aspects I am going to point out here.

Kant's theory of aesthetic contemplation and Wittgenstein's notion of language games share three features that are essential to the development of a person. These are the features of openness, indeterminacy, and exemplarity.

1 According to Kant's aesthetics, when we make a judgment of taste, we engage in what Kant called a "free play of the faculties of cognition imagination and understanding". In a state of aesthetic contemplation we play with possibilities of different ways of perceiving and combining what is given to our senses. We are open to varieties of possibilities of what the object could be, we are free from conceptual constraints, and instead of concepts and rules we rely on mere "purposiveness". Furthermore, according to Kant, we regard our judgment of taste as "exemplary" for others. That is, if we make a judgment of taste, this judgment will have to be based on the right kind

of free play and we will think of this play and our judgment as being exemplary for others. What I can do, others can do as well. Whoever hears that music should be able to appreciate it in the way I do. At least I make that claim. In fact, others often do not follow our example, but still, I make the claim that they should. Geniuses, for instance, are often not understood by their contemporaries.

In such a state of aesthetic contemplation we exercise those very abilities by means of which we reflect and evaluate in general, not only in the case of aesthetic appreciation, but also in cases of moral decision-making and decision-making in general. Our ability to be self-conscious and to be aware of our own identity is practiced and refined through aesthetic contemplation when we enjoy and "feel" ourselves (Kant, par. 1, 204).

Furthermore, the two meanings of the word *persona*, the individual and the role we play in society, can be found in Kant's account of judgments of taste. When we make a judgment of taste, we reach out to others and want them to agree with us: "[I]f someone likes something and is conscious that he himself does so without any interest, then he cannot help judging that it must contain a basis for being liked [that holds] for everyone" (Kant, par. 6, 212). Although we feel the pleasure as an individual - it is always only my pleasure (or displeasure) and not yours - we at the same time think of other human beings as well. This exercises the ability to "think from the standpoint of everyone else" (Kant, par. 40, 294), which is necessary in reflecting upon our intentions and actions and their consequences and moral values. Kant therefore called beauty a "symbol for morality" (Kant, par. 51, 351).

2 What Kant wrote in his third *Critique* had an effect on people's ideas about education. Schiller, Goethe, and Humboldt, for instance not only read Kant's aesthetics, they were also moved by it and helped shaping the educational institutions in Europe. Schiller wrote in his influential "Letters about the Aesthetic Education of Man" [*Ueber die aesthetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*] that a being is human only when and in so far as it plays [*er ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt*, letter 15]. When Schiller wrote this, he was inspired by Kant's rather abstract idea of the free *play* of the cognitive faculties. Furthermore, Kant thought of this play as being "harmonious", and this idea, too, left its traces in Schiller's writings: "Taste alone brings harmony into society, because it creates harmony in individuals" [*Der Geschmack allein bringt Harmonie in die Gesellschaft, weil er Harmonie in den Individuen stiftet*, letter 29]. Similarly, the two aspects of a person (*persona*), its individuality and its role in society, which we could find in Kant's aesthetics, are again the object of reflection in Schiller's writings: "It is the beautiful alone that we enjoy at the same time as individual and as species, i.e., as representative of the species" [*Das Schoene allein geniessen wir als Individuum und als Gattung zugleich, d.h. als Repraesentant der Gattung*, letter 27].

The idea of education in the sense of "*Bildung*" was strong and influential during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe. We find it not only in writings by Schiller, but also in Rousseau's "Emile",

Goethe's "Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre", and other popular writings in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman* (or "novel of development"). The idea of the *Bildungsroman* was that a young man must grow up to become an individual and autonomous self, a unique organic unity that is open to the world and that unfolds itself in ways that are unique among human beings and that form his personal history. All this was considered to be part of what makes a person, and very little of this can be found in contemporary discussions about persons.

3 When Kant wrote his third *Critique*, he somewhat softened his rather rigid and systematic style of doing philosophy. He moved somewhat away from the rigidity of concepts and rules, and he opened himself to the relevance of indeterminacy, exemplarity, and mere purposiveness. But he restricted the relevance of such aspects to aesthetics and teleology. The later Wittgenstein was more radical than Kant. He questioned the nature of rules in general, not only in matters of aesthetics and teleology, but also in epistemology. All language games are parts of "forms of life" (Wittgenstein, 1958, par. 23, 11). It is not only in making judgments of taste that we refer to our "feeling of life" (Kant, par. 1, 204). Furthermore, whereas Kant was confined by his transcendental framework and looked for *a priori* grounds and therefore considered only the individual and the universal, Wittgenstein drew attention to particular empirical cases and communities, societies, cultures, and histories. Wittgenstein stressed the differences: "Suppose Lewy has what is called a cultured taste in painting. This is something entirely different to what was called a cultured taste in the fifteenth century. An entirely different game was played. He does something entirely different with it to what a man did then." (Wittgenstein, 9)

Despite many fundamental differences between Kant and Wittgenstein, the aspects of openness, indeterminacy, and exemplarity can be found in Kant's aesthetics as well as in Wittgenstein's notion of language games. In matters of art as well as in learning a language game, we follow examples, there are no determinate rules, and there is always room for misunderstanding and re-interpretation. There are always new geniuses and there are always new language games. Both philosophers have stressed this point. To develop into a person, we have to make many decisions in the courses of our lives. Often we have to decide in one way or another, although it seems to us that we do not have enough information to ensure that we are making the right decision. The ability to reflect and to choose in such situations of under-determinacy has to be developed -- and Wittgenstein never tired of pointing out how many such situations there are in our everyday lives. This ability to reflect can be found in aesthetic contemplation and in the interpretation of language games, and practicing this ability makes self-consciousness and our awareness of our personal identity and continuity potentially more effective.

Although it is true that being in a state of aesthetic contemplation or being involved in a language game, we do not need to be aware of our existence as identical over time, it is also true that through such activities we learn how to live with indeterminacy and openness and thus develop into a more fully grown and competent person. When we follow examples or when we give an example ourselves, for others or ourselves to follow, we continually have to make interpretations and re-interpretations. Following an example is not the same as being determined by rules. In fact, as Wittgenstein pointed out, following a rule is much more like following examples than we thought. He thus extended parts of what Kant did for the judgment

of taste to all kinds of judgments. By making us more aware of certain problems of the nature of rules in general, Wittgenstein made it possible for us to see the relevance of Kant's aesthetics for epistemology.

The features of openness, indeterminacy, and exemplarity are part of Kant's notion of "*freies Spiel*" as well as Wittgenstein's notion of "*Sprach-Spiel*". It is not only a word they share. More importantly here, these features of openness, indeterminacy, and exemplarity are necessary elements in the development of a person, and although they have been much in the center of discussion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe, most philosophers talking about persons nowadays tend to pay almost no attention to them. There is still much truth in Frankfurt's criticism from 1971, namely that "what philosophers have lately come to accept as analysis of the concept of a person is not actually analysis of *that* concept at all" (Frankfurt, 5). I have tried to show here that we need to go even further than Frankfurt. Not only the notion of free will, but also elements of aesthetic education are relevant to what makes a person.

References

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