

## Kant and Plato on the Problem of Beauty

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### *Abstract*

*The problem of beauty emerges as a relative and individual sensual experience under a general and universal concept. As to what that general/universal property of beauty is and under which conditions it can be satisfied in view of its subjective and sensual origins will be the problem to be dealt with here. In that vein, we will be contrasting two different approaches, namely Kantian and Platonic and consequently restrict ourselves to their thoughts on this issue which seem to come up with totally contradictory results. Thus, contrasting of the two may seem in a way as a spanning of the history of thinking on the problem of beauty in its two basic antithetical positions. Accordingly, Kant will be discussed critically in his analysis of beauty in Critique of the Power of Judgment together with his crucial definition of "symbol" at the end of the first part of the book. In contrast, Plato will be discussed as to his notion of philosophy itself being dependent upon the experience of beauty, only to discover that according to his thought, aesthetics is philosophy as the ontological experience per se. Conclusively, the difference between two views on that matter will be discussed taking up symbol as a necessary criterion and a guide for understanding the problem of beauty itself.*

**Keywords:** Plato, Kant, Problem of Beauty, Kalos/Eros, Universal/Individual, Symbol.

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## *Kant ve Platon'da Güzellik Sorunsalı Üzerine*

### Özet

*Güzellik sorunsalı temelde genel ve tümel kavram altında göreceli ve bireysel esaslı duyuşsal tecrübe olarak ortaya çıkar. Güzelliğın genel/evrensel özelliğının ne olduđu ve öznel ve duyuşsal kökenleri itibariyle hangi koşullar altında sağlanabileceğı burada ele alınan sorundur. Bu anlamda, Platoncu ve Kantçı yaklaşımları onların bu konuyla ilgili temel düşünceleriyle sınırlamak kaydıyla kıyasladığımızda tümüyle çelişik sonuçlar sunduklarını görürüz. Böylece de iki düşünceyi güzellik esasında karşılaştırdığımızda düşünce tarihinin güzellik sorunsalı ekseninde birbirine karşı bu iki konumunda kapsayıcı anlamda içerildiğini görürüz. Dolayısıyla da Kant hem Yargıgücünün Eleştirisi'nde yaptığı güzellik çözümlemesinde hem de yine aynı kitapta söz konusu 'sembol' tanımıyla eleştirel anlamda ele alınacak. Karşılaştırmalı olarak; Platon'un ilk kez düşünce tarihine ismini verip yetkin bir biçimde tanımladığı philosophia'yı güzellik tecrübesi üzerine inşa etmiş olduğundan tespitle "felsefe"nin Platon diyaloglarında tanımlandığı biçimiyle tecrübe ontoloji esasında başlı başına bir estetik olduğü ortaya konulacak. Sonuç olarak bu mesele hakkında iki görüş birlikte ele alınarak güzellik sorunsalının anlaşılmasında "sembol" kavramını ölçüt ve rehber alacak kısa bir yaklaşım sunulacak.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Platon, Kant, Güzellik Sorunsalı, Kalos/Eros, Tümel/Tikel, Sembol.

If there is one favourite judgment which is practiced often on a daily basis, it is the judgment of beauty. From the moment we get use to the notion as a child, we've been determining what is beautiful accordingly. However, when asked, in the manner of Socrates, what that so-called beauty might be, we almost immediately resort to or imply the famous Roman saying that "taste is not to be disputed (*De gustibus non est disputandum*).” Hence, the problem of beauty emerges as a relatively subjective experience under a universal concept. As to what might that universal property of beauty be and under which conditions this necessary concept can be satisfied concerning the necessarily subjective and particular experience of beauty forms the crux of the problem here. Although, the name was given by Baumgarten, aesthetics as a distinct intellectual discipline concerning the nature and expression of beauty is determined in its ground and principles for the first time in philosophy by Kant. According to Kant, beauty is in the "mind" –and not in the eye– of the beholder and as such arises as a result of the harmonious interplay of imagination and understanding. In contrast, Plato is the first thinker in the history of thinking to name and define philosophy as a field of knowledge with a certain *pathos* he determines as "eros" which is directly related to "kalos (*beauty*)" as its *raison d'être*. In that sense, the contrasting of the two may seem in a way as a spanning of the history of thinking on the problem of beauty between two rival opinions.

Beginning with Kant, we must never forget that our notion of ‘aesthetics’ today is underlined by Kantian subjectivism. However, Kant’s notion of ‘subjectivity’ depends *not* on a state of mind but upon the ontological conditions of man’s inherent faculties. The subjectivism concerning his aesthetics shows no exception although the kind of judgment concerning beauty as a judgment of taste deviates from the norm of other judgments known as empirical and logical in an essential way. Therefore, we must first get to know what Kant means by judgment. According to his *Critique of Pure Reason (Kritik der reinen Vernunft)*, “judgment (*Urtheil*)” is the “mediate knowledge/cognition (*Erkenntniß*) of an object, hence, the representation of a representation of it” (*KrV*, A 68/B 93). In other words, judgment is the reflective function of the mind. This is closely related to another important definition that “understanding” is nothing but the faculty of judgment (*KrV*, A 69/B 94).<sup>1</sup> Does this mean that judgment of beauty must belong to understanding as a faculty? Things get complicated when it comes to the aesthetic judgment inasmuch as the experience of pleasure or displeasure cannot be determined as cognitive. Now as long as there is judgment, understanding as the faculty of judgment should be involved in some way. Yet, aesthetic judgments cannot be objective as in the case of empirical judgments for they must essentially refer to “subject” in order to be a “taste”. In a following manner, aesthetic judgments also differ from logical ones in terms of lacking objective employment to be knowledge: They are *felt* rather than *known*.

This short introduction brings us to the “moments” of beauty as Kant calls them in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment (Kritik der Urteilskraft)*. The “first moment” of beauty is as follows: Insofar the judgment of taste is disinterested in its subjective employment, it is a delight (or, *satisfaction*) for its own sake and the object of such a delight is called beautiful (*KU*, 211). Here Kant seems to provide us with a definition of taste which defies mere delight as an “agreeable” interest. This will directly lead to the “second moment” in which the beautiful is determined within “subjectively universal validity”. It is here that Kant brings his favorite notion of “free play” between two faculties, namely imagination and understanding in their mutual accord to form aesthetic judgment (*KU*, 217). However, as it is obvious from Kant’s own statement in “The Dialectic of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment”, aesthetic idea is conjoined to a given representation by imagination. Therefore, understanding is not needed in the aesthetic judgment to provide the concept; it only serves as a ground of judgment for general validity. For Kant, beauty is a concept not of understanding but of reason and as such it is an “aesthetic idea” which must be differentiated from rational idea in that the former is an intuition of imagination to which no *determinate* concept can be given whereas the latter is a concept of supersensible to which no intuition can be

1 “(...) Verstand überhaupt als ein Vermögen zu urtheilen (...).”

found. Nevertheless, both aesthetic and rational ideas are unknowable in that their objects cannot be constituted as cognition.

Now Kant calls aesthetic idea an *ideal* insofar it finds its adequate representation in an individual existence (*KU*, 232). However, this *ideal* of beauty is not attainable in itself but sought as to its possible begetting in the mind. That we achieve such a birth of beauty in our mind is only possible on the basis of imagination as a faculty. So the problem of beauty boils down to this: How this *ideal* as an individual representation of beauty is possible? It is here in this critical determination of an ontological problem concerning beauty that Kant makes a surprising turn towards “psychology” for what he calls *normal* or empirical idea and “morality” for *a priori* conditions for the *ideal* of beauty. Nevertheless, he is aware of his *aporia* when confessing with a wonder, before giving his psychological justification, in the form of a question: “[F]or who can entirely unlock its secret from nature?”<sup>2</sup> (*KU*, 233).

Yet, there seems to be a way out of this *aporia* which Kant already knew although he entirely misinterpreted its essence and eschewed its value as to its crucial role in the experience of beauty. Isn't *symbol* defined by Kant as the kind of exemplary *presentation* in which an idea or concept is given individual, sensible existence? To be sure beauty differs as a judgment of taste in the form of a *re*-presentation. However, at the bottom of every sensible representation lies a presentation as a necessary ground for this reflection. In order for something to be beautiful, it must first become an exemplary presentation for the beauty itself. Only then this pre-reflective ground of beauty is reflected upon as an object of beauty in reflection which Kant calls by the name *representation*. When we take *rose* to be beautiful, it is elevated to the status of being capable of presenting beauty *per se*; only then *rose* becomes beautiful as a representation. In other words, in every reflection there is a non-reflective ground for this reflective ability of the mind to be taken as the very object of reflection. In that vein, we will reverse Kant's order of methodology in our critical approach to understand his analysis of beauty in the light of *symbol*.

According to Kant, every kind of *presentation* (which he calls by the name *hypotyposis*) is either *schematic* as where the sensible intuition matches the concept and comprehended by understanding is given *a priori* or else it is *symbolic* where the concept is one which only reason can think and to which no sensible intuition can be adequate (*KU*, 351). We can understand *schematic rendering* if we think of a human figure drawn by a child in the form of stickman. What we have here is the faithful representation of human body not as it is perceived but as it is conceived. The drawing aims to show the child's cerebral ability to conceptualize the human anatomy as a unity of multiplicity in its most simple and corresponding sensible form. Compared to this, the sensible intuition in *symbolic rendering* for Kant does

2 “(...) wer kann der Natur ihr Geheimniß gänzlich ablocken?”

not match the concept of reason. Inasmuch as the sensible intuition is inadequate to represent the kind of concept that reason thinks then the imagination is compelled to interpret. This interpretation according to Kant is done in an analogous way as the birth of *symbol* as follows:

*“All intuitions that are ascribed to concepts a priori are thus either schemata or symbols, the first of which contain direct, the second indirect presentations of the concept. The first do this demonstratively, the second by means of an analogy (for which empirical intuitions are also employed), in which the power of judgment performs a double task, first applying the concept to the object of a sensible intuition, and then, second, applying the mere rule of reflection on that intuition to an entirely different object, of which the first is only the symbol.” (KU, 352).*

It is difficult to understand Kant here unless we make explicate what he means by the “rule of reflection (*Regel der Reflexion*)”. This is because, in Kant’s view, the analogical ground of symbol is justified as a result of observing that which is in *schematism*. The rule of reflection simply applies what it observes in *schematism*. *Schema* in Kant as the product of pure imagination has the crucial role of forming the nexus of pure concepts of understanding -which goes by the name *categories* after Aristotle- and the appearance in order to form the reality as we know (*KrV*, B 201-202). Hence, *schematism* is the application of the pure concepts of understanding to the appearance while in *symbolism* the concept to be applied belongs to the reason exclusively. The question then is: How *symbolism* takes place in an analogous fashion as the observation of what goes in *schematism*? Kant’s example is the hand-mill for the despotic state which for him is determined by “individual absolute will”. First of all, the concept “individual absolute will” as reason thinks is applied to the sensible intuition “hand-mill” as its “mode of operation” on a bodily, physical level. Then merely applying this “mode of operation” as the rule of reflection to “despotic state” but this time on a socio-political level insofar it is in the form of reflection that the agreement with the concept is formed and not in its content. Otherwise we will be picturing the despotic state literally as a hand-mill. This rule of reflection or procedure which is applied to “despotic state” and “hand-mill” in an analogous fashion is what makes the conversion possible between these two different objects in a symbolic way. Thus he writes as follows:

*“For between a despotic state and a hand-mill there is, of course, no similarity, but there is one between the rule for reflecting on both and their causality.” (KU, 352).*

But isn’t it exactly in the rules of reflection that this “function”, as Kant calls it, should be explained? However, Kant evades the problem all too hastily:

*“This business has as yet been little discussed, much as it deserves a deeper investigation; but this is not the place to dwell on it.” (KU, 352).*

Kant ironically writes this sentence at the very end of “Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment”, the first book of *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. If we take up the matter where Kant leaves us, what we see as the rule of a thumb in symbolization is that the two kinds of representations that make up a symbol *must* differ as to their representative status both of which should be mutually exclusive in the first place. However, the difference here lies more than being two different sensible objects on the same ontological status as in the case of Kantian example above. It extends as far as being one of a categorical difference. In the case of a ‘white dove’ symbolizing peace, the power of imagination *synthesizes* the concept of ‘peace’ with the sensible object ‘dove’ to form a *symbol*. To be sure the dove is the sensible part of the symbol, so I basically see a shape of dove. Yet, it has already been transformed into something else then being just that specific, sensible form: It is the embodiment of peace as its incarnation. Thanks to the congruence between peace and dove they are conjoined to form a third thing which is neither peace as a concept nor dove as a sensible object but both of them without being the mixture of the two either. This is because it is simply impossible to mix concept with percept. The innocence in this particular symbol is the white of the dove, whereas the freedom is the bird in the sky. Innocence and freedom together make this symbol so powerful because each of them as a symbol in itself come together to form one symbol. In that sense, peace does not simply mean end of war or simply a ‘nonwar’. A bird in the sky may symbolize freedom but as a ‘white dove’ it is the emancipation of innocence which is exactly what is locked up by the brutality of war.

Now, is there any rule of reflection existing between peace and dove as in the case of hand-mill and despotic state over “individual absolute will”? It seems that there is exactly nothing in between whiteness and innocence on the one hand and freedom and the bird in the sky on the other which may serve as the rule of reflection here. In the symbolization of peace by a white dove, there is no middle term to form the axis of conversion possible from concept to percept in an analogous fashion. However, we must keep in mind that Kant does not think of symbolization as a direct relation of concept to percept at all. He thinks of symbolization as an indirect conversion between two different objects according to the rule of reflection that serves as the middle term which is valid for both in an analogous way. Kant ironically models the form of his analogical explanation of symbol after syllogism.

It is interesting to see how Kant’s definition of symbol boils down to mere resemblance. This also explains why his example is fallacious in the first place inasmuch as the hand-mill is only an analogue for despotic state and *not* its symbol. In symbol, the concept is represented in the percept without any middle term that will serve as the rule of procedure in the form of resemblance. How then relation between concept and percept is possible in symbolization? It should be noted that in *symbolization* although the concept is somehow *given*, corresponding sensible

intuition must be *found*. Just as a plate is *homologous* to circle logically (*KrV*, A 137/B 176), the bird in the sky is *homologous* to freedom imaginatively. In symbolization, the essence of this congruence depends upon the meaning of a concept which in turn lies in its mimetic value as a lived experience. If we are to take Kant's own example, it is easy to see why it fails to be a *symbol* because the meaning of despotic state does not lie in its 'mode of operation' as an "individual absolute will" which is only an analytical determination of its formal structure. Rather, it lies in its content as a mimetic value which is nothing but a lived experience and in that specific sense despotic state can only mean; to be under the rule of a dictatorship. Hence its symbol should be thought from within this passive if not oppressive state of mind this kind of state creates in the minds of its citizens under one man's rule. More to the point, in that empathetic ability to find *homologous* expressions lies the *mimetic* essence of imagination true to its etymology as *einbildungskraft*: The formative power.

As we see, it is purely by the power of imagination that a general, universal concept like peace can appear in a particular, individual dove as its symbol, but then there are others. For an example, justice appears as a blindfolded female figure holding a scale in balance and a sword in each hand. What if we ask the same for beauty? Are we justified in asking for a symbol of beauty? Inasmuch as beauty as an 'aesthetic idea' comes to be determined as an object of sensible intuition called beautiful, the answer should be affirmative. Does this mean there is some kind of a *symbol* for beauty like we have for justice? Yet, how beauty can be represented apart from anything beautiful? This brings us to an inevitable conclusion that whenever something *is* beautiful, that particular, sensible object with its form becomes the *symbol* of beauty as its direct *homologous* expression. In that sense, just as *schema* forms the nexus of pure concepts of understanding and appearance to form the experience of reality, *symbol* conjoins aesthetic idea to a congruent sensible model image to form the experience of beauty. Consequently, symbolization forms the *modus operandi* of beauty in its representation in any individual exemplary presentation as beautiful. This presentation as an individual existence of 'aesthetic idea' *in concreto* is neither analogical nor the result of a "harmonious free play" of faculties but an original product of pure imagination. As such, it is the *free* employment of *schematism*: A 'creative' *synthesis* of intelligible and sensible.

Such a notion of the experience of beauty founded on symbolization as a free *schematism* inevitably questions the very existence of aesthetic judgment. If in any case judgment is defined as a reflected capacity of the mind in the form of a representation, the experience of beauty in its authentic sense cannot be determined as a judgment at all. This is because it resides in the pre-reflective level as a direct expression. How then we will differentiate the pre-reflective modes of beauty from the reflective ones which come out as the most general experience of beauty under the name *taste*?

Insofar the presentation of beauty in a sensible object is an impossible *synthesis* for understanding, that this is possible via imagination must be *felt* as an overwhelming *pathos* in the experience. This *pathos* to which beauty appears exclusively is none other than *eros*. Kant not only excludes *eros* in his whole analysis of beauty but at one point openly denounces from aesthetics under the general name “emotion (*Rührung*)” which he defines as the “outpouring of the vital force (*Lebenskraft*)”. Thus he says that emotion “does not belong to beauty at all” (*KU*, 226).

What then *taste* means to Kant? He thinks of *taste* as a form of pleasure in which the merely “agreeable” must be differentiated from the “disinterested pleasure” of beauty. As disinterested, pleasure becomes purified of *any* emotion and thereby becomes the taste of beauty proper. However, “disinterested pleasure” is not only unfounded and self-contradictory like ‘unequal justice’ but also as pleasure stems from an essential, deeper root: *eros*. That’s why in the form of pleasure it is always in need of a *subject* in order to be a *taste*; after all, the judgment of taste necessarily presupposes a *subject* in order to determine him as the *judge* of taste.

It is this inseparable unity of *eros* and *kalos* which brings us to a Platonic *mise en scène* the stage of which is set in the house of Agathon in *Symposium*. It was Aristophanes’ turn to tell everyone a mythos on *eros* in which gods, when once created them as whole and round, separated human beings as an act of punishment for their *hubris* into two halves mostly as man and woman and urged them to seek each other ever since as the missing part (*Symposium*, 191d). In this way, gender becomes a *symbolon*, a Greek word *symbol* takes root. What does symbol means here? That it is a reminder of the lost unity. Does this tell us anything about the nature of beauty? Yes, insofar beauty is determined as a unity of the universal and the individual.

However, the nature of *eros* and *kalos* will have to wait prudent Socrates for a deeper inquiry. Socrates actually recounts his dialogue with a woman *sophos* Diotima as a young man. In a small part in her long speech about *love* she was telling him another myth in which how *eros* as a heavenly descent *daimon* or spirit born of immortal father “Plenty (*Poros*)” and mortal mother “Poverty (*Penia*)” is in constant oscillation between their opposite natures (*Symposium*, 203b-c). Accordingly, an interesting analogy is established between the lovers of wisdom and personified *eros*. Philosophers as the lovers of wisdom are those who wonder between ignorance and wisdom just like *eros* whose pursuit of wisdom depends upon his being poor towards it (*Symposium*, 204a-b). Poverty in that sense forms the internal necessity to look for plenty in every conceivable form in a man’s life. Thus, *eros* is determined as a lack and destined to seek beauty as a need to be whole. As such, beauty, contrary to Kantian “disinterested pleasure”, serves in the form of a lack, a deeper, ontological interest in this *mythos*. However, it is in a passage in *Phaedrus*, the main part of which is devoted to beauty that we find what we



are looking for; reflective and pre-reflective modes of beauty. We shall be dwelling on a few lines taken from this prolific text but it will be enough to show the irreconcilable gap between Platonic and Kantian views on beauty.

In that particular passage, Socrates is telling that beauty born of a heavenly origin descends to the world through the clearest aperture of sense, shining in clearness for sight being the keenest. However, this is true only if the descent of beauty as a shining forth is not seen via *phronesis* otherwise the lover is overwhelmed by the feelings of awe (*Phaidros*, 250d). Now the word for awe in the original Greek text is “*deinous*” which simply means “dread” as well as “overpowering” in the sense of being wondrous and marvelous. So we must get to know why a word like *deinos* is used in the context of beauty which is supposed to be rather pleasant. This “pleasant” as the definition of beauty here in this world together with “clearance” is expressed in the text as “*ekphanestatôn kai erasmiotatôn*”; the most radiant and the most pleasant (*Phaidros*, 250d-e). Note that being most pleasant literally means the loveliest because love as *eros* lies at the root of every pleasant. As for *ekphanestatôn* it is not that simple since beauty according to this phrase is not an added aspect to the phenomena from without but an emergence from within. Now insofar any sensible phenomenon for Plato is deemed to *me on* and not a genuine being as *ontos on* then beauty as a shining forth is a flicker of true and unchanging being shone through the transient and ever changing phenomena. This is in agreement with Plato’s view that beauty is an *eidos* or *idea* abiding in itself as a determination of being. That’s why, our sight when catches this flicker of beauty in a sensible object is filled with *lasting* impressions of pleasant and clearance. In a way, it is a scarce view of the real being. However, when *phronesis* is involved, this mere viewing becomes a *vis-à-vis* experience with beauty in its full glory. It is this overpowering presence of beauty which is expressed by the word *deinos* as “awe”. In that sense, we are brought to the presence of beauty in itself rather than merely viewing its sensible substitute. Known as a practical wisdom in general, *phronesis* in this particular context means; *to experience the abiding beauty in its full majesty as a lover*. As such beauty here is at once the most sublime: Pleasant and awe are just two sides of the same coin. Compared to this, Kantian sublime as the hopeless elevation of imagination to an unreachable height of rational idea by means of the “speculative” interest of reason and thereupon falling down inevitably due to the impossibility of the task like Icarus is a theater piece resulted in the abandoning of the original sense of beauty. Kant avoided the fact that in its original sense beauty and sublime is one and the same thing.

However, Plato cannot provide us with the remedy as well. Despite the fact that Plato is very keen on beauty (*Phaidon*, 100d) even to the point of defining *philosophia* on the basis and inseparability of *eros* and *kalos*, his famous hypostatization (rather than merely proposing difference or even distinction) of beauty

as *eidos* or *idea* as a separate and 'real being' (*ontos on*) over against and above its non-being (*me on*) 'sensuous substitutes' (*eidola*) introduces the rift into the heart of phenomena in its inseparable aspects of being (*on*) and becoming (*genesis*) under the very problem ironically he himself foresees, namely *methexis* (participation) (*Parmenides*, 130e-134e).

What then we have of Platonic beauty when we disagree with his ontological claims and the hypostatization of beauty as *eidos*? Should we then return to Kantian definition of beauty as "disinterested pleasure" for the sake of realism? Yet, how can we denounce beauty of the most real and emotive quality defined by Kant in the negative sense as "outpouring of the vital force?" Moreover, is there any possibility of compromise between these two rival and almost perennial views on beauty? It seems there is none if we are to understand beauty in their own terms. But there is still hope if we are to take *symbol* as the key and clue to understand the problem of beauty.

Symbolization understood as the sole function of imagination in its pure aspect seems to provide us with the necessary *methexis* between concept and percept as the direct *homologous* expression of beauty in a sensible model image. Plato perfectly named this expression as *ekphanestatôn* as an emergence from within, since it is by being available to senses that beauty shines forth as clearance and pleasure. Nevertheless, the real scope of imagination is nullified in the experience of beauty insofar the creative impetus of *symbol* is not realized. In that unique sense, we are the ones who must *create* beauty by means of our own power to symbolize. And what does this mean if not that *beauty is but a pure dream of imagination*. This dreaming of beauty is not the result of a mere subjective fantasizing but involves the determination of a sensible form as a mode of emergence for beauty. More to the point, this mode of emergence is what can be truly called the *symbol*. This determination of a sensible form as *symbol* means that the concept in its universal aspect is *dreamed* as the very individual in its particular aspect. Accordingly, an individual of this kind acquires the traits of a universal as a result of which the contingent sensible existence is clothed with all the properties of a necessary being like permanence and timelessness. Or if you like, in the revealing words of poet Oktay Rifat: "Was it you who wore those roses, Beauty, / Or did they wear you?"<sup>3</sup>

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3 This study is the renewed and the enhanced version of a paper presented at the "17<sup>th</sup> International Aesthetics Congress" (9-13 July 2007, Ankara).

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