

Semyon Reshenin  
*University of Tartu*

**Conference “Kant: Concepts, Imagination, and Aesthetic Appreciation” 05.04.22**

**Title: Aesthetic experience as a condition for the moral practice**

## **1. Introduction**

'[According to Schiller] only the cultivation of aesthetic experience can transform individuals and their society as morality demands' (Guyer 2014).

In other words, the cultivation of aesthetic experience is a necessary condition for moral practice and moral development.

**The Uniqueness thesis:** there is something unique about aesthetic experience which makes its cultivation a necessary condition for moral practice and moral development.

Paul Guyer proposes cognitive reading of Schiller’s aesthetic education and argues that Schiller fails to prove the uniqueness thesis.

While Guyer's cognitive reading is not false, it is woefully incomplete because it ignores the conceptual connection that Schiller makes between aesthetic experience and capacity for humanity.

**My proposal (humanity reading):** according to Schiller, only aesthetic experience can reveal or restore our capacity for humanity, and since moral acts presuppose unhindered capacity for humanity, the cultivation of aesthetic experience is a necessary condition for moral practice and development.

The structure of the presentation is very simple. First I briefly discuss Guyer's cognitive reading; then I present my own reading and show how it accommodates the uniqueness thesis.

## **2. Guyer's cognitive reading**

The problem Schiller is trying to solve is the problem of unreliability of judgment. This problem is caused by lack of harmony within a person between her rational and sensual selves. Either her feelings rule her principles; or her principles destroy her feelings. As a result we have, e.g. the armchair science, the lack of empathy, projection, etc.

Aesthetic judgments are unique as they not only include both understanding and sensibility, but are based on their harmonious play

- They're a bit like cognitive judgments, as they also involve a constant attempt to think the particular (feelings, details, etc.) under the universal (concepts)
- The important difference is that there is no specific concept under which all details are to be subsumed

"[T]hrough the cultivation of our aesthetic sensibility we can learn to be attentive to detail and particularity as well as to principle and generality, and that being so attentive is a necessary condition for both theoretical and practical success" (Guyer 2014).

**But!** "[T]his is a far cry from any claim that aesthetic education is necessary for such development, as the only or even one indispensable way to cultivate the necessary combination of sensitivities" (Guyer 2014).

- "[A] well-managed scientific education could also teach the student not to project the principles unchecked by the data" (Guyer 2014).
- "[A] proper empathy for the actual circumstances of others ... could also be cultivated directly by suitably edifying moral discourses" (Guyer 2014). Or also by attending hospices, and so forth.

So, according to Guyer, Schiller's uniqueness thesis fails, as there are other ways to improve the reliability of our judgments.

### 3. My proposal (humanity reading)

The problem Schiller is trying to solve is the problem of agency. Schiller argues that aesthetic experience

- reveals our capacity for humanity
- and restores our capacity for humanity

The capacity for humanity is a capacity to set one's own ends and act upon them.

The unhindered capacity for humanity involves:

- (i) reflective distance with respect to incentives, that is, they should not automatically determine one's actions;
- (ii) motivational commitment – if one judges something as the right choice, then this judgment should motivate one to act accordingly.

"[I]t is beauty by which one travels to freedom" (XX 312, AE 6).

"Beauty should be shown to be a necessary condition of humanity" (XX 340, AE 36).

"[B]eauty is <...> our second creator <...> [f]or it gave us nothing more than **the capacity for humanity**, but leaves the use of this to our own determination of will" (XX 378, AE 78, bold is mine).

The transition from the passive condition of sensation to the active one of thought and volition thus occurs no other way than through the middle condition of aesthetic freedom,

and although this condition in itself decides nothing either for our insights or for our attitudes, and thus leaves our intellectual and moral value entirely problematic, it is nevertheless **the necessary condition** under which alone we can attain an insight and an attitude (XX 383, AE 84, bold is mine).

### 3.1. Aesthetic experience is what first reveals our capacity for humanity

According to Schiller, the natural man is in a condition of immediacy in relation to the world and his desires. In other words, he lacks reflection (i).

Want and fear are reasons of immediacy: "the mind must be released from the yoke of necessity before it can be led to freedom and reason" (Schiller LtP: 133).

When a person is released from the yoke of necessity, he may develop an aesthetic perspective to the world. Through the aesthetic perspective man first breaks out of the immediacy of the world by taking a disinterested interest towards its objects.

"Contemplation (reflection) is the first liberal relation of man to the universe which surrounds him" (Schiller XX 394, AE 95).

### 3.2. Modern fragmentation of humanity

Schiller believes that modernity is characterized by the fragmentation of humanity.

The capacity for humanity can be hindered in two ways: "man can be at odds with himself in two ways: either as a savage [*Wilder*], his feelings ruling his principles; or as a barbarian [*Barbar*], if his principles destroy his feelings" (XX 318, AE 12).

Modern savages are similar to the natural man. Extreme need and fatigue drove them back into the state of immediacy in relation to the world and their desires. So they **lack reflection** (i).

Modern barbarism takes various forms: moral asceticism, laziness and cowardice, and even the justification of any evil by egoism from a moral perspective and by utility from a political perspective. Although barbarians are capable of reflection, they often **lack a motivational commitment** to their principles and choices (ii). In Schiller's own terms, they lack resolve [Entschluß] or courage [Muth].

As a result, both modern barbarians and savages are unable to set their own ends and act upon them.

Schiller believes that this is a kind of psychological problem. He analyzes it in terms of the interaction between two basic impulses (or drives): the formal impulse [Formtrieb] and the sensual impulse [sinnlichen Trieb].

The task of the formal impulse "is to formalize matter, or to internalize what is external" (Beiser 2005); it is associated with reason, rationality, principles, concepts, reasons, normativity, morality, timelessness, absoluteness, and so on.

The task of the sensual impulse "is to externalize what is internal" (Beiser 2005); it is associated with sensibility, inclinations, instincts, sensual desires, feelings, self-preservation, happiness, down-to-earthness, and so on.

But until these two impulses come into harmony, people will either be in a state of barbarism or in a state of savagery, that is, either deprived of reflective distance or motivational commitment, or even both.

### **3.3. Aesthetic experience as a cure for modern fragmentation of humanity**

Drawing on Kant's aesthetics, Schiller describes the aesthetic experience of beauty in terms of play. During the aesthetic experience, the two basic impulses, being both strongly tense, engage in an active and reciprocal interaction in which they limit each other's pretensions and form together **the play impulse** [Spieltrieb].

Schiller describes the condition of man at this moment as an aesthetic condition of active indeterminability [Aktive Bestimmungslosigkeit].

It is in this aesthetic state that our capacity for humanity becomes whole and can be exercised.

Technically, **the uniqueness of aesthetic experience** is that only it involves reciprocal interaction between formal and sensual impulses, that is formation of the play impulse.

In more down-to-earth terms, Schiller's idea is that aesthetic experience paradoxically involves at once both **detachment** (i.e., distance and indeterminacy) and **immersion** (i.e., activity or commitment). And this has a conceptual and phenomenological resemblance to the situation of choice, that is, the situation in which we set ourselves ends and choose to act upon them.

To make an aesthetic condition of active indeterminability habitual for us (hence, to make exercising our capacity for humanity habitual for us), Schiller suggests employing aesthetic education.

## **The argument in a nutshell**

P1. The division of labour has made us disharmoniously developed

P2. We can potentially choose to act on duty if and only if we are capable of setting our own ends and act upon them

P3. The lack of harmony between our rational and sensual selves forfeits either reflection or commitment aspect of humanity, thus making us incapable of setting our own ends and act upon them

C1. We systematically fail to act on duty/fail at moral practice/fail to morally develop ourselves and our society

P4. Aesthetic experience is unique in that it is the only experience that can combine (at the same time!) the detachment with immersion

P5. The experience that can combine (at the same time) the detachment with immersion teaches people to be in a situation of choice, preserving both reflection and commitment

C2. The cultivation of aesthetic experience is a necessary condition for moral practice and moral development

## **References**

Schiller, F. (1968). - *Schillers Werke, Nationalausgabe*, Bd. XX. Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger. (Cited XX followed by page number).

Beiser, F. C. (2005). - *Schiller As Philosopher. A Re-Examination*, Oxford University Press

Guyer, P. (2014). *A History of Modern Aesthetics*. Vol. I. Cambridge University Press