

Kant on the Beautiful: The Interest in Disinterestedness

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In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Immanuel Kant proposes a puzzling account of the experience of the beautiful: that aesthetic judgments are both subjective and speak with a universal voice.¹ These properties – the subjective and the universal – seem mutually exclusive but Kant maintains that they are compatible if we explain aesthetic judgment in terms of the mind's *a priori* structure, as explicated in his earlier *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant advances two major claims towards arguing for the compatibility of the subjectivity and universality of the experience of beauty: (i) that aesthetic judgments are 'disinterested', and (ii) that the universality of an aesthetic judgment derives from the transcendental idealist's account of ordinary spatio-temporal experience – that is, our ordinary cognitive framework can explain the experience of beauty. If correct, these two claims support the thesis that, while the experience of beauty is wholly subjective, it nevertheless speaks with a universal voice (or, the experience of beauty can be related among subjects). I will move to interpret Kant's theory of the beautiful with reference to his earlier two Critiques in order to better understand the marriage of subjectivity and universality. In turn, this reveals a deeper symmetry between the disinterestedness of the experience of beauty and the freedom of moral action, allowing Kant to maintain, as he indeed does, that "beauty is the symbol of morality."²

The claim that aesthetic judgments are 'disinterested' means that a genuine aesthetic judgment does not include any extrinsic considerations

toward the object of judgment itself, such as political or utilitarian concerns. Kant reasons that if our aesthetic judgments were not disinterested, then universality could not follow: if the pleasure of beauty were derived from the inclinations with which we encounter an object, then the claims of that object's beauty would be as varied and conflicting as the possible inclinations which we might bring to it.

Kant's proposal that an aesthetic judgment can speak with a universal voice leads him to the claim that an aesthetic judgment is made by the cognitive faculties involved in spatio-temporal experience: "nothing other than the state of mind in the free play of the imagination and the understanding."³ To explore what is meant by this free play of imagination and understanding – the two faculties which shape the spatiotemporal way in which we order our sensible intuition – we shall need to focus on approaching Kant's aesthetic theory in the milieu of the transcendental idealism which Kant expounded in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Only with this understanding can we see why aesthetic judgment constitutes a unique species of judgment, that is, of a way of encountering the world.

Disinterestedness and the Judgment of Beauty

Kant's aesthetic theory rests on the groundwork he proposes in his account of the experience of beauty – other aesthetic judgments, such as those of the sublime, rely on the same sorts of principles and differ in how the cognitive faculties interact. This poses the experience of beauty as the cornerstone of understanding Kant's aesthetic theory at large.

For Kant, judgments have either reflective or determinative powers.⁴ A determinative judgment is one understood in terms of an empirical concept, such as the judgment 'that is a tiger'. The *Critique of Pure Reason* established the governing principles of determinative judgments to legitimise the intersubjectivity of empirical knowledge. Similarly, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* aims to establish the governing principles of reflective judgments to legitimise (amongst other things) the intersubjectivity of aesthetic 'knowledge'.⁵ However, we should be cautious of – indeed, we should refrain from – speaking of 'aesthetic knowledge', for 'knowledge' is reserved specifically for determinative judgments; rather, we should talk of aesthetic experience, the subjectivity of which can be related universally. Indeed, such a conflation of knowledge and aesthetics is one which Kant is striving to question. Hence, Kant argues that the prevailing and 'common sense' assumption (regarding aesthetic judgments as determinative) is mistaken: for this would construe aesthetic judgments as either merely subjective or fallaciously objective – a point he originally argued for in the first Critique.⁶

In other words, with such an error, aesthetics becomes a domain of inquiry which is unfit for the systematic demands of rigorous and critical philosophy. We need to remember that Kant's study of aesthetic experience is critical – hence the title of the work being the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*,⁷ which informs us that Kant is attempting to delineate the legitimate domain for which aesthetic judgments (among others) can be made, and what the nature of these judgments are. The advocacy of 'disinterestedness' and other key elements to aesthetics is Kant's rejection of aesthetic judgments as determinative, to the ends of establishing them as reflective. In this manner he also posits aesthetics as a discipline capable of critical engagement.

Kant ties disinterestedness to the experience of the beautiful in the 'first moment' of the 'Analytic of the Beautiful':

Taste is the faculty for judging an object or a kind of representation through a satisfaction or dissatisfaction without any interest. The object of such satisfaction is beautiful.⁸

This definition provides a convenient springboard into examining the role of disinterestedness in Kant's aesthetic theory; it tells us that to understand 'disinterestedness' we need first to understand what 'interest' itself means. In terms of how these two concepts relate (interest and disinterestedness) it is useful to keep in mind Donald Crawford's suggestion that "'disinterested' refers to a concept the content of which is given by its negation, 'interested'."⁹ It is important to see what role interest plays in judgments and why Kant wishes to eschew this from his aesthetic theory.

Kant defines 'interest' as "the satisfaction that we combine with the representations of the existence of an object."¹⁰ In terms of judgment, this translates as determining an object under an empirical concept of the understanding that gives us pleasure or displeasure. Kant offers an example of such a judgment coming under the guise of beauty:

If someone asks me whether I find the palace that I see before me beautiful, I may well say that I don't like that sort of thing, which is made merely to be gaped at, ... [Or,] I might even vilify the vanity of the great who waste the sweat of the people on such superfluous things ... All of this might be conceded to me and approved; but that is not what is at issue here.¹¹

Such judgments about the palace (which Kant claims are irrelevant to aesthetic judgment) are determinative judgments of taste, that is, empirical judgments. The important point here is that different people may determine

different judgments depending on whether they align satisfaction with a particular empirical concept – that is, empirical concepts will differ from person to person depending upon their contingent experiences. Regarding the palace, one’s interest may concern the waste of manpower and resources. From a moralist’s perspective this certainly may be a concern that evokes dissatisfaction at viewing the building; but from the king’s perspective, it may enhance his satisfaction by affirming the control he has over his kingdom. If interest is a criterion for claiming an object to be beautiful – with the contingent, empirical particulars associated with it – then no genuine universality could be claimed of an object’s beauty.

In arguing against interest as a criterion for beauty, Kant offers an explanation of how the term ‘beauty’ comes to be misused. Because beauty yields pleasure we arrive at the mistaken conclusion that what is pleasurable is beautiful. Pleasure, it seems, fails to allow us to discriminate between, on the one hand, what is pleasurable only to us because of the interests we bring to it, and, on the other hand, the pleasure we take to be held by others who also experience beauty.

To maintain the claim that the experience of beauty is intersubjective, Kant must reject the idea that beauty is sensuous (which he does: “the beautiful... is entirely different [to the sensuous]”¹²) as this is an inherently variable factor depending on a particular person’s inclinations. Similarly, as with the example above, Kant wants to isolate the key features of beauty through the reflection of particular cases: “for one person, the colour violet is gentle and lovely, for another dead and lifeless. One person loves the tone of wind instruments, another that of stringed instruments.”¹³ Kant calls these personal preferences ‘charms’ or ‘agreeables’ and states that admitting them as criteria for beauty is mistaken because we cannot universalise our own sensuous preferences. To do so would be to argue that the statement ‘I find a glass of merlot beautiful to drink in the evening’ is equivalent to ‘Everyone who drinks a glass of merlot in the evening finds it beautiful’. Charms and agreeables are for Kant merely another species of interest; they do give us a clue, though, as to why disinterestedness contributes to the consideration of something as beautiful, which I will delve into in the next section.

For now we can note an important distinction: that the experience of pleasure is not always the experience of beauty; that what is pleasurable cannot always be held to ‘speak with a universal voice’. However, to divorce pleasure from beauty completely would surely appear an improvident move. Kant does not make this move, but takes on the challenge of describing how beauty (a disinterested judgment of taste) might be pleasurable in its own way. How Kant meets this challenge is by no means

straightforward.

On the role of disinterestedness in aesthetic judgments, the commentator Salim Kemal plays devil's advocate and raises a sceptical objection to Kant, namely "all that may be happening is that, because we are ignorant of the causes which in fact still continue to operate and serve our interests, we delude ourselves into thinking that certain occurrences of pleasure are disinterested."¹⁴ Kemal's charge here is that causality itself excludes disinterestedness, because the experience of beauty must be part of a causal chain whereby alien factors bear on the sense of pleasure from beauty. The charge has been voiced by a number of philosophers since Kant, notably by antithetical thinkers such as Nietzsche, who wrote, "[when aestheticians say] that, under the enchantment of beauty, one can look *even* upon naked female statues 'without interest', one is entitled to laugh a little at their expense."¹⁵ These alien factors themselves (such as sexual desire) constitute interest, as they are something that a subject may arbitrarily bring to the experience of an object. What bears on this charge is, in essence, the heart of the Kantian aesthetic project: how can the experience of beauty be subjective and also maintain the claim to speak with a universal voice? What if my diagnosis of an experience as being one of beauty is mistaken by some subversive operation of my psychology?

This sceptical charge is one which Kant considers in the course of his moral philosophy. The moral philosophy also aims to be disinterested, i.e. that if one is acting *only* according to one's inclinations, one is not acting morally. Scepticism exists here if we admit the possibility of acting in concordance with the moral law, but not in accordance with it; we may choose to uphold the moral law and believe we are doing so in the right spirit, but in fact our own egoism is guiding our actions. To this, Kant admits that "we can never, even by the most strenuous self-examination, get entirely behind our covert incentives."¹⁶ Similarly, in the aesthetic philosophy, the charge is that we may voice our experience of an object as being beautiful, only to find that our account differs from a universal consensus.

In the realm of moral philosophy, Kant's response was to describe such an act of concordance with (but not accordance to) the moral law as an instance of the moral subject who is enslaved by their inclinations and self-interests. Kant proposed the inverse to this situation: that, as John Russon summarised, "*it must be the moral law that interprets the situation for us, and not the situation that interprets the moral law.*"¹⁷ To be a moral subject at all, Kant requires that the motive for our actions can transcend the phenomenal world of sensuous causes rather than be informed by it. In other words, the subject must be *free*. So, for Kant's aesthetic project to be successful – that is, for disinterestedness to escape scepticism – the ex-

perience of beauty must be ‘disinterested’ to the extent that the subject is not bound only by phenomenal experience: that the locus of the experience can be traced to other, non-sensuous grounds. This requirement is simply that the subject can exert his freedom in some capacity. The bolder claim following from this is that this exertion of freedom is one which resounds universally.

What all this directs us towards is that aesthetics, as a philosophically rigorous discipline, needs to be grounded by the freedom of the subject. Moreover, since the experience of beauty is not to be grounded empirically, this freedom must be exercised in a special way: namely, in how the pure, *a priori* subject constitutes the experience of beauty – rather than how the beautiful object constitutes the experiencing subject. Kant holds that a system capable of describing aesthetic experience in this way will find its home in the critical philosophy.

Free Play and the Judgment of Beauty

Kant initially deemed aesthetics to be impossible in the earlier *Critique of Pure Reason*, because “the putative rules or criteria are merely empirical as far as their sources are concerned, and can therefore never serve as *a priori* rules to which our judgment of taste must be directed.”¹⁸ In short, he formerly held that objects of taste are only experienced empirically and thus our judgments of beauty are merely *a posteriori* and thus not the proper area for a systematic philosophy to explore. This is the thesis that he subsequently challenged, as we have seen so far in the discussion of disinterestedness. It also marks a distinction between philosophically legitimate and illegitimate accounts of aesthetics.

For it to be possible that an aesthetic judgment of beauty can be subjective and yet speak with a universal voice, Kant maintains that the judgment must follow a rule. The rule cannot be empirical (because it then becomes contingent, related to inclination, the phenomenal, etc., and so not a rule) but must be a synthetic *a priori* principle – that is, a principle which is known without reference to particular experiences but which also has the power to predicate synthetically, or without tautology. This principle should govern judgment such that certain objects are experienced as being beautiful.

As cited earlier, Kant defines the mind’s role in experiencing beauty as the free play of the imagination and the understanding. His approach here reinforces the transcendental idealist doctrine which he espoused in the *Critique of Pure Reason* by citing the experience of beauty as one in which the faculties of the imagination and understanding are employed – those

very faculties which also determine ordinary perception. The *Critique of Pure Reason* proposed and studied these faculties towards emphasising knowledge of how the mind's synthetic *a priori* structure constitutes the world. As regards a critique of taste, such an approach does not attempt to isolate some property that is unique to beautiful objects, but instead aims at revealing how the mind finds certain objects beautiful. Kant believes that this is possible because of the cognitive faculties involved in ordinary spatio-temporal experience, so it is only fitting to look first at the nature of these faculties before proceeding to how they relate to aesthetic judgments. Another reason to proceed in this manner is that the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* is scant when it comes to explicating the 'free play' of the imagination and understanding – Kant expects that his readers have gleaned this from the first Critique.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* we see that in determinative judgments the imagination is involved in synthesis: of space and time,¹⁹ the manifold of intuition,²⁰ apperception (consciousness)²¹ and reproduction.²² Imagination, though, is considered to be "spontaneous"²³ and *free*, which opens an avenue toward understanding how disinterestedness might inhabit a space removed from the sceptical charge that the experience of beauty is ultimately motivated by causal influences such as sexual desire or pleasure. At bottom, though, in a determinative judgment the imagination serves to synthesise sensations so that they can be subsumed under the concepts of the understanding, the most general of which encompass all spatio-temporal experience: that is, the categories. Indeed, Kant argues that "the understanding in general can be represented as a faculty for [determinative] judging."²⁴ So how do these faculties of imagination and understanding 'play' in aesthetic judgment (such that disinterestedness is a feature of aesthetic experience), and what is required of an object such that this is possible?

For a judgment to be determinative is for it to come under a concept of the understanding. For a reflective judgment "the powers of cognition that are set into play by this representation [of an object] are hereby in a free play, since *no determinate concept restricts them* to a particular rule of cognition."²⁵ Kant summarises this in defining beauty in the 'second moment': "that is beautiful which pleases universally *without a concept*."²⁶ Free play occurs when the imagination is not restricted by the understanding, but grasps the object in varying ways which nevertheless work in concert with concepts – it is a free, undetermined accord between the faculties. So when, say, appreciating a work of art such as de Blaas's *God's Creatures*,²⁷ we are drawn to interpret what is meant by 'God's creatures' by referring all at once to the pigeons that the nun is feeding, the nun herself,

the harmony between the nun and the pigeons, and the statement of divine harmony between God, man and nature. What makes such a painting beautiful on the Kantian account is the myriad of concepts in play with the imagination which can never settle on a single interpretation of the object (i.e. the work of art itself). Kant's account has its power in expressing art as something which carries a variety of interpretations, interpretations which the mind cannot synthesise adequately and which are not necessarily in a conceptual harmony with one another.

The cognitive powers are involved in free play much like melodies in a fugue: one melody begins and that melody is repeated a fifth higher while the first continues, creating a block of sound distinct from both the melodies. The bass varies the melody and generates momentum for the tempo. The melodies are free: accidentals occur as they are needed harmonically at the given moment, not by a previous statement of it in exposition. The music itself, though, is set in the established framework of tonality, just as the free play of imagination and understanding takes place within the framework of our cognitive faculties. Within this framework the melodies play freely with each other to create a multiplicity of detail within a whole experience of the music.

The question of 'how' the faculties play in aesthetic judgment is somewhat misleading, purely because they are not lead by any rule that the question of 'how' presupposes. The rule is in part comprised of freedom: "the judgment of taste must rest on a mere sensation of the reciprocally animating imagination in its freedom and the understanding with its lawfulness."²⁸ If this freedom did not contribute to the rule of play, then the rule would indeed be objective; but objectivity is allied with causality, which on Kant's account excludes freedom.²⁹ The question of how free play is possible is also misleading on the grounds that it assumes we can comprehend how freedom operates; such an understanding is not possible because "freedom... is a mere idea, the objective reality of which can in no way be presented in accordance with laws of nature and so too cannot be presented in any possible experience."³⁰ This might seem to slip us back into scepticism – for how can we know the experience of beauty to be free, when freedom itself cannot be known or experienced? What I take Kant to be saying here is that freedom, as in the moral philosophy as much as the aesthetic, is an Idea which cannot be proved or disproved to be actual; what we can say of freedom, however, is that it must necessarily be assumed to be operative if we are to understand the moral and aesthetic philosophy to be possible (and meaningful) at all. Freedom is thus an integral component to experiencing beauty alongside the faculty of the understanding when it is "in harmony with the latter [i.e. the understanding]."³¹

At this point, we can now see why Kant was especially concerned with disinterestedness. Interest involves encountering an object with the prior aim of aligning it with a concept in the understanding. This, however, completely rules out any free play, as the 'lawfulness' of the understanding will have dominated over the 'freedom' of the imagination, thus ruining the balance between the two which is required to find something beautiful. Under a sophisticated guise Kemal provokes the idea in us that interest may be covert and so smuggled into the beautiful; but this is challenged by the understanding of beauty as free play. This is because Kant has distilled the necessary conditions for the possibility of experiencing beauty to be the cognitive faculties: since these are independent of interest, it follows that the experience of beauty is disinterested.

Just as with the experience of beauty, where our freedom designates the beautiful in conjunction (or in play) with the understanding, (albeit in reflecting intuition rather than universal concept), so too is the moral law designated by freedom in conjunction with understanding. This is what prompts Kant to recognise that "beauty is the symbol of the morally good."³² Disinterestedness is the cornerstone of aesthetic experience for Kant because it provides for a certain "ennoblement and elevation above the mere receptivity for a pleasure from sensible impressions,"³³ which is only possible because of the freedom of the subject above and beyond the phenomenal realm.

The Subjective Experience and the Universal Voice

Kant's wider claim is that beauty as the free play of understanding and imagination entails that our aesthetic judgments, while necessarily subjective, speak with a 'universal voice'. He summarises his views correspondingly:

In the judgment of taste nothing is postulated except such a universal voice with regard to satisfaction without the mediation of concepts, hence the possibility of an aesthetic judgment that could at the same time be considered valid for everyone.³⁴

For Kant, the subjectivity of an aesthetic judgment is clear. In the experience of beauty, I cannot assume that my satisfaction is simultaneously held by other subjects who share my cognitive faculties; the experience is unique to me and is dependent upon the calibre of my imagination and the particular architecture of empirical concepts in my understanding. What is meant by the 'universal voice' is not so clear.

In §37 of the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant asks this very

question: “what is really asserted *a priori* of an object in a judgment of taste?”³⁵ The *a priori* is of special concern, because without this component to Kant’s treatment of beauty, universality could never be claimed. Kant reasons that it is not the pleasure derived from beauty that speaks with a universal voice, as this would lead to the conclusion that pleasure is a determinate concept impressed upon objects in the world much in the same way as, say, colour. This leads to the formulation of an answer to his question:

It is not pleasure but the universal validity of this pleasure perceived in the mind as connected with the mere judging of an object that is represented in a judgment of taste as a universal rule for the power of judgment, valid for everyone. It is an empirical judgment that I perceive and judge an object with pleasure. But it is an *a priori* judgment that I find it beautiful, i.e., that I may require that satisfaction of everyone as necessary.³⁶

From this we learn that the capacity for aesthetic judgments to speak with a universal voice is not the content of the judgment but its form.³⁷ Disinterestedness has the consequence that ‘beautiful’, in the words of David Bell, “does not predicate a property of an object,”³⁸ meaning that beauty is not to be found in an objective world, but in the minds of those perceiving an objective world. As such, while the content of subjects may differ, the form of a judgment is common. Insofar as we can ascribe the form of an aesthetic judgment to subjects who share identical cognitive faculties we can also ascribe to them the same experience of beauty and the satisfaction that it yields. It is the validity of this commonality which Kant supposes justifies our aesthetic judgments as speaking with a universal voice.

The Humanity of Aesthetic Experience

Kant presents a humbling depiction of aesthetic experience as an essential element to humanity itself. The experience of beauty dovetails with his overarching thesis of transcendental idealism as expounded in the first Critique. This democratizes aesthetic judgment by making it dependent upon the cognitive apparatus involved in ordinary spatiotemporal experience rather than in one’s ‘cultivation’ or ‘aesthetic education’. In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant extends the Copernican Revolution of the first Critique to encompass aesthetics. The depth and fundamentality with which he credits aesthetics is surely the most striking aspect of his theory for his advocates and critics alike. Aesthetic experience pertains not only to the conditions for possibility of human experience, but – in its uni-

versality and symbolism of the morally good – to the conditions for the possibility for being human at all.

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¹ Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Mathews, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 101.

² Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 227.

³ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 103.

⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 15.

⁵ 'Knowledge' for Kant, strictly speaking, is when an appearance is arranged under an empirical concept to become phenomena; this definition is biased toward referring to determinative judgments, and since aesthetic judgment is reflective we cannot speak of 'knowing' an object to be beautiful in the typical sense of 'knowing'.

⁶ Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) 156 (n. 1)

⁷ Emphasis added. Only recently has the title of the third Critique been translated into English correctly. The German, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* is unambiguous, and lends itself to the critical nature of Kant's philosophy.

⁸ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 96.

⁹ Crawford, Donald W., *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (London: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1974) 41.

¹⁰ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 90.

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 90.

¹² Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 98.

¹³ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 97.

¹⁴ Kemal, Salim, *Kant's Aesthetic Theory* (London: Macmillan, 1992) 39.

¹⁵ Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, in *Werke in Fünf Bände*, I – V, ed. Karl Schlechta (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1976), vol. III, 292 (my translation)

¹⁶ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, 19.

¹⁷ Russon, John, *Reading Hegel's Phenomenology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004) 152

- ¹⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 156 (n. 1)
- ¹⁹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 228-9.
- ²⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 211.
- ²¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 241.
- ²² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 230.
- ²³ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* 245.
- ²⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 205. I have inserted the word 'determinative' because at the time of writing the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant thought that judgment *only* consisted of subsuming a synthesis of the imagination under a concept of the understanding. He revised this view in writing the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.
- ²⁵ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 102 (my italics).
- ²⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 104 (my italics).
- ²⁷ De Blaas, Eugene, *God's Creatures*, oil on canvas, 1877, private collection
- ²⁸ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 167.
- ²⁹ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* 52.
- ³⁰ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* 63.
- ³¹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 168.
- ³² Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 227.
- ³³ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 227.
- ³⁴ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 101.
- ³⁵ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 169.
- ³⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* 169.
- ³⁷ McCloskey, *Kant's Aesthetic* (Hampshire: Macmillan Press, 1987) 65.
- ³⁸ Bell, David, "The Art of Judgment", in *Immanuel Kant: Critical Assessments*, Vol. IV, ed. Ruth F. Chadwick and Clive Cazeaux (London: Routledge, 1992) 26-7.