

one finds Kant's discussions of the character of the person, the human sexes, peoples, races, and the species as a whole – receives no attention in this book. The result is a somewhat sanitized anthropology, albeit one that may well be of more interest to a traditional philosophical readership.

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Susan Meld Shell (2022) *The Politics of Beauty: A Study of Kant's Critique of Taste*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. pp. 75. ISBN 9781009011808 (pbk) \$22.00

Susan Meld Shell's *The Politics of Beauty* is a wonderful and erudite contribution to the rapidly growing body of literature on Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. It is one in a relatively new series of books called Cambridge Elements. The list of titles under the 'Philosophy of Immanuel Kant' division of the series is fast becoming impressive. The series consists of shorter texts – too short for a traditional manuscript but too long for a journal article or book chapter – and is billed to readers as offering 'original, succinct, authoritative' books that 'provide a dynamic reference resource'. This book does not disappoint, and the format of the series is perfect for Shell's topic: the Critique of Aesthetic Judgement (or, as she designates it, the Critique of Taste). Shell is the author already of three books on Kant, in addition to a trove of articles and book chapters. Her two principal works – *The Embodiment of Reason: Kant on Spirit, Generation and Community* (University of Chicago Press, 1996), and *Kant and the Limits of Autonomy* (Harvard University Press, 2009) – were both texts that, at the time, challenged the prevailing approaches to Kant's Critical works. These books did not start from received scholarly debates, but with what Shell has consistently observed in Kant throughout her own writing on him: a deep tension constituting the being of the human being as a rational animal. Shell's work has long recognised Kant's complicated humanistic core, and likewise disavowed caricatures of his thought, particularly in his practical philosophy. While much of the literature has caught up to her insights about the nuanced and complex relation between the various sites of human finitude and reason in Kant, this book once again will likely set the curve

for understanding Kant as committed to a holistic, social, and robustly *humane* human being.

Readers and scholars of the third *Critique* have long noted the difficulty of discerning unity in this text. This is certainly true for the two seemingly disparate halves – the Aesthetic and Teleology – but also within each of the halves. Shell's task in this text is to offer a reading of the Critique of Taste according to a simple interpretative frame: as a direct response to the Rousseauian charge that 'progress in the arts and sciences was inimical to moral health and collective human happiness' (p. 1). Kant's account of beauty thus ultimately makes an important defense of the arts and situates them *essentially* as playing a crucial role in the social, civic, and political life of human progress. Shell's thesis is remarkably successful. This interpretative frame brings many aspects of the text into a harmonious alignment; it is like getting the right angle of vision so that different parts show themselves in a previously unseen organised whole. Shell herself observes that answering Rousseau's criticisms of the arts is not Kant's principal aim. However, the legitimacy of the thesis is motivated by Kant's own claims about the work that culture does to promote the highest aims of human life, with the arts, of course, a central pillar of human culture.¹ Shell closes her book with a nod to Kant's discussion of culture in the Critique of Teleology, but it could also form the principal heuristic to his account of beauty – and the arts in particular – by his own lights.

In reading Kant's Critique of Taste as actively making a 'practical/political intervention' into his own milieu, Shell posits that the four moments in the Analytic of the Beautiful can be read as a kind of instructional manual (p. 3). Kant's analysis of the four moments makes explicit what is already implicit in all judgements of taste. Shell's emphasis on this throughout her explication of the text – as well as attention she repeatedly calls to Kant's own claims about how we actually talk about the beautiful to one another – reminds readers that Kant's critical methodology begins with a kind of phenomenology of our experience. Indeed, the order of the four moments does not follow the logic laid out in the first *Critique* but rather begins with what it is we notice in ourselves when we find that something is beautiful. The idea here is that once we become more reflective about the use of our own taste, we may become more cultivated and refined in its use. This cultivation, in turn, contrary to corrupting us, can have broad, positive consequences for social, communal, and political life.

The cultivation of our taste elides Rousseau's concerns about vanity and immorality because, as Shell argues, it moves us away from our *natural* sociability to a properly *human* one. The keystone of her argument involves untangling a long-standing interpretative difficulty with respect to what Kant says about 'common sense'. Kant names common sense both as a constitutive ground and as a regulative standard of taste. In a close and careful reading of the movement and organisation of the text, Shell concludes that the first part of the Deduction of judgements of taste pertains to natural beauties, and in this context, common sense functions as a shared transcendental ground of human judgement. With this, we do not really need to be brought up to appreciate the beauty in nature – we do so natively. In the latter part of the Deduction, however, common sense functions regulatively and specifically with respect to fine art. As a regulative ideal, it is something towards which we must aspire, and which must be actively and deliberately developed in us. Shell notes a

decisive shift, too, in the text. In the latter part of the Deduction, Kant appeals not only to common sense but more importantly to *communicability*. The arts, then, contribute to our ability to communicate well with one another, thus cultivating a properly human sociability that transcends our merely natural inclination. Shell's argument thus elevates the role of beautiful art in Kant's philosophy in virtue of its relation to a core human function.² Scholars have long held that Kant privileges natural beauty, and, with this, they have attributed to him a kind of formalism. While I doubt Shell's book will put this argument to bed, it is a welcome contribution to the increasing amount of work being done to demonstrate the centrality of Kant's discussion of art for his overall aesthetic theory and its place in his system.

The capacity for the kind of communication we find in judgements of taste – to dispute, but with hope of eventual agreement – has a clear social and political value. But this is not the ultimate political or social value that Shell diagnoses taste to promote (contra Arendt). Shell further draws readers' attention to what underlies this possibility, namely, a 'supersensible substrate of humanity'. Shell works this out in her text as involving not only our shared transcendental faculties but also our being as fundamentally social; these two things are inextricably linked, in fact. Our faculties are what allow for us to be social in a distinctly human way, one that avoids the Rousseauian stalemate between civil freedom and the full perfectability of our being. In fact, what taste allows us to do is resolve the tension between what may be individual or private and what is universal and public. A cultivation of taste through engagement with the arts does not merely allow us to express our feelings better. Rather, it actively refines our feelings such that they come into accord with universal norms, bringing our inner lives into agreement with the inner lives of others who are likewise cultivated well. Shell reads Kant, compellingly, as 'privileging [...] the communicability of a feeling over the feeling itself' (p. 66). The cultivation of taste arises because in our efforts to be social, we find that communicating and sharing thoughts with others are more deeply gratifying than simply having the feeling. She here brings us back to Kant's ordering of the four moments. 'The Critique of Taste', she writes, 'aims to nudge civilization back onto its proper tracks – not least, by restoring subjective feeling to its rightful place as the first "moment" of beauty' (p. 66). This moment is, in a sense, left behind once we become cultured about our taste and the kind of reciprocal communication and publicness of feeling it affords.

One key virtue of her interpretation of Kant as responding to Rousseau's challenge is that it situates Kant's account of beauty in a certain historical context. Kant himself does not expressly do this – the idea that philosophy is meant to comprehend or respond to its own time would come in his wake (or perhaps even contemporaneously, as with Friedrich Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* in 1795, which takes up directly the role of aesthetics in forming a political community of free individuals). In one regard, Shell's account of the Critique of Taste has Kant answering the question of how a people becomes enlightened in a way that anticipates Schiller more than Kant would have recognised. On the other hand, and importantly for those of us who study the history of philosophy because it may have something to say to us, her account lifts Kant's seemingly abstract account of taste and drops it into our own time. Shell's observation about moving beyond the first moment of taste – the subjective pleasure – might likewise function as a diagnosis of and recommendation for our cultural ills, where what is subjective seems to be somehow self-legitimizing.

Alongside this, Shell skilfully picks out and picks up on Kant's subtle claims about the success of ancient polities being found in a prior discovery of an elevated manner of speaking fostered by the arts. Kant's denial of rhetoric may here be seen to attend to a move away from mere subjectivity – rhetoric remains ever mired in 'provisional opinion' rather than moving onto 'well-grounded conviction', which is based on rational, shareable grounds (p. 41). Again, we find in Shell's reading of Kant the potential to better understand our own age – its shortcomings as well as the as yet hidden routes for progress. It allows us to think more deeply about what kind of speech is suited to free people with republican aims, and what is at stake in how we speak in the public sphere.

Thus, art, on Shell's account, is political not in the way we mean today (that art is inherently *politicised*), but because it fosters central aspects of our humanness upon which the political itself rests. The cultivation of taste promotes communicating in a way that is genuinely human and essentially sociable. On her reading, we are reminded that what is universal about human beings is not, for Kant, something pre-given as a determinate essence. Rather, the universality is a humanity we must raise ourselves up into socially and communally. Being human is something we must accomplish, and the arts play a necessary and constitutive role in that vocation.

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Notes

1 It is worth noting that while Kant maintains a historically progressive notion of culture, fine art itself does not 'progress'. What does progress, however, is our ability to communicate.

2 While she herself does not reference it, one could develop communication as central to the human person out of Kant's discussion of the immorality of lying in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, 6: 429–31.