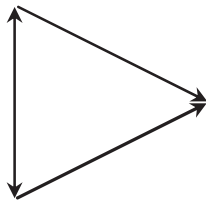


Stephen Palmquist

Creative Genius: The Aesthetic Basis for a Kantian Symbolic Theology

No aspect of Kant’s Critical philosophy suffers from more ambiguity than his multifaceted portrayal of human imagination. One need look no further than the Analytic of the first *Critique* (KrV)¹ to find evidence that imagination functions as a wild card in the Kantian deck of cognitive powers: it functions both empirically, as memory (“reproductive imagination”), and transcendently, as the synthesis required for concept-formation (“productive imagination”) – and in various other ways. The theory of productive imagination expounded in KrV’s second edition replaces the first edition’s portrayal of concept-formation as a threefold synthesis, whose details can be summarized as follows:

1. synthesis of apprehension in intuition
(i. e. empirical diversity via manifold of intuition)



2. synthesis of reproduction in imagination
(i. e. memory)

3. synthesis of recognition in conception
(i. e. intellectual unity via apperception and the categories)

Fig. 1: Threefold synthesis in KrV’s first edition

The special role of reproductive imagination, the middle term in this threefold logical process, is to *synthesize* the three syntheses, which together function as necessary, pre-conceptual conditions for any possible experience. In this application imagination – and here I take Kant to be referring to the entire threefold/productive process – is “a blind but indispensable function of the soul, without

¹ I use Werner Pluhar’s translations of KrV and KU (Indianapolis: 1996 and 1987, respectively).

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which we would have no cognition whatsoever, but of which we are conscious only very rarely.”²

As such, productive imagination is a *pre-conscious* activity: it *informs* understanding without involving “cognition in the proper meaning of the term.” Step 1 of the threefold synthesis entails the wholly *unconscious apprehension* of data from the senses, through intuition – the formal requirements for such apprehension being the theme of the Aesthetic. What is lacking in the reproductive imagination’s synthesis of the manifold of intuition, making step 2 still less than fully conscious, is the *unity* contributed by step 3: we *recognize* something only by bringing it to the power of *apperception*, connecting all synthesized sense objects to each other by virtue of being experiences of a single ‘I’.³ The first aspect of human imagination that Kant deems *necessary* for cognition in KrV thus occurs at a stage of cognitive processing that is (at least logically, though perhaps not chronologically) *prior to* one’s awareness of self-identity as a thinking subject.

A thorough treatment of Kant’s theory of imagination would have to examine its role in *schematism*, where it enables the categories (especially the three “moments” of quantity – unity, multiplicity and totality) to produce knowledge, and its explicit absence from the topic of practical reason, which requires *moral* reasoning to effect a non-imaginative synthesis. But the foregoing summary must suffice for the modest goal of this paper: to lay the basis for a Kantian symbolic theology by scrutinizing the role of *aesthetic ideas* in Kant’s theory of genius, in search of clues as to how imagination might function in *theological* reasoning.

Of all the ways Kant employs the concept of imagination, none is more profound yet less understood than his discussion of *genius*, near the end of the Analytic of Aesthetic Judgment in the third *Critique* (KU, §§ 46–50). He begins with a cryptic definition that prefigures the complexity of his entire discussion: “*Genius* is the talent (natural endowment) that gives the rule to art.”⁴ As this talent is itself a *product* of nature, Kant clarifies that genius is a “mental predisposition [...] *through which* nature gives the rule to art.” He then ties this creative impulse directly to imagination – not surprisingly, since his definition of genius presents it as having the same primordial status as schematism in KrV: Both occur prior to our attainment of empirical knowledge. Creative genius brings a prior synthesis *to* nature, manipulating it through acts of imagination in order to produce art, a

² Kant: KrV, A 78/B 103.

³ Kant: KrV, A 78f./B 104.

⁴ Kant: KU, AA 05: 307.

process that (as we shall see) can be depicted as a reversal of the type of synthesis that creates empirical knowledge:

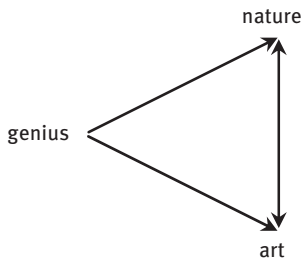


Fig. 2: Genius as imaginative synthesis giving rise to art

In this definition “art” refers to products of *fine art* – i.e. to artworks based on an *indeterminate* rule. Overly purposive and under-creative works, based on a *determinate* concept, Kant calls “mechanical art”.⁵ Genius endows a person with an “originality” that “must be *exemplary*”, yet the person “cannot describe or indicate scientifically how it brings about its products”.⁶ That is, genius is an *immediate experience* of knowing how to create a beautiful work of art, but cannot be expressed through discursive explanations.

Religious implications of Kant’s theory emerge when he portrays genius as the ability to be specially *open* to nature’s transcendent, rule-shaping power: he refers to it as a “guiding spirit that each person is given as his own at birth”⁷ – the genius being a person who can *channel* this spirit and depict it in physical forms through the manipulation of natural objects, but who nevertheless “does not know” and cannot “show how his ideas [...] arise” and thus “cannot teach it to anyone else.” Kant assumes that, because “the artist’s skill cannot be communicated”, it “must be conferred directly on each person by the hand of nature.”⁸ Indeed, although this skill “dies with [the artist]”, *genius* does not die; rather, it merely waits “until some day nature again endows someone else in the same way”.⁹

Kant carefully distinguishes (e.g. in § 48) art *criticism* (i.e. learned expertise in *judging* products of beauty via *taste*) from art *work* (i.e. the natural talent of

⁵ Kant: KU, AA 05: 306.

⁶ Kant: KU, AA 05: 308.

⁷ Kant: KU, AA 05: 308.

⁸ Kant: KU, AA 05: 309.

⁹ Kant: KU, AA 05: 309.

creating products of beauty via genius). An art critic's aim is to judge the *perfection* of an artwork, where "perfection" is "the harmony of a thing's manifold with an intrinsic determination of the thing, i. e., with its purpose".¹⁰ This "manifold" is the manifold of intuition that, as KrV argued, serves as the *given* for the synthetic work of productive imagination in bringing perceptions to the mind during the process of concept-formation. When Kant says "art always presupposes a purpose"¹¹ – i. e. good works of art serve as an empirical means to convey some *end* – he is suggesting that the unorganized manifold *becomes* a work of art only when genius drives imagination to synthesize it in a way that brings it to *unity*, a unity contributed by *concepts* in the case of determinate knowledge. What is the unifying feature that makes a work of genuine *art* perfect?

Kant answers this crucial question in § 49 by introducing two key terms: what is missing when artwork fails to meet the standard of genuine beauty is *spirit*, for only through spirit does genius gain access to *aesthetic ideas*. By "spirit" here Kant means "the animating principle in the mind" that *uses* some "material" to give our "mental powers a purposive momentum, i. e., [it] imparts to them a play" that is self-perpetuating.¹² As Kant develops this claim, it emerges that this "play" is the same play of imagination that gives rise to beauty (when it plays with understanding) or sublimity (when it plays with reason). Kant uses two closely related terms to explain the relationship between the factors enabling a genius to produce a perfect work of art: "presentation" (*Vorstellung*) and "exhibition" (*Darstellung*). Translated literally, these terms denote two types of "positioning" ("*Stellung*"): "pre-" ("*Vor-*") positioning and "re-" ("*Dar-*") positioning. As such, he claims the specially-endowed principle of artistic spirit is "nothing but the ability to exhibit [*re-position*] *aesthetic ideas*";¹³ such an idea is "a presentation [*pre-positioning*] of the imagination which prompts much thought, but to which no determinate thought [...] can be adequate." Comparing aesthetic ideas with the more familiar rational ideas (God, freedom and immortality), which KrV portrays as the proper objects of metaphysics, he points out that, whereas "a *rational idea* is a concept to which no *intuition* (no presentation of the imagination) can be adequate",¹⁴ an aesthetic idea is an intuition (a presentation of the imagination), to which no *concept* can be adequate. Just as the philosopher presents (*re-positions*) *concepts*, hoping to gain insight into the na-

¹⁰ Kant: KU, AA 05: 311.

¹¹ Kant: KU, AA 05: 311.

¹² Kant: KU, AA 05: 313.

¹³ Kant: KU, AA 05: 313f.

¹⁴ Kant: KU, AA 05: 314.

ture of God, freedom and immortality, the artist and/or the art critic¹⁵ presents (re-positions) *intuitions* hoping to – *what?* Kant answers that question in § 49.

Kant's radical suggestion in § 49 is that the *purpose* of aesthetic ideas corresponds directly to that of rational ideas. By imaginatively unifying diverse materials into a whole under an aesthetic idea, genius "creates [...] another nature out of the material that actual nature gives it."¹⁶ That this *other nature* refers at least to the idea of freedom, and perhaps also to the other two ideas of reason, becomes clear when Kant adds that the artist's restructuring of experience on the basis of "analogical laws" follows "principles which reside higher up, namely in reason (and which are just as natural to us as those which the understanding follows in apprehending empirical nature)." The two "natures" here are the *empirical* nature known by means of imagination-*enriched* understanding and the *moral* nature known by means of imagination-*impoverished* reason. (From the moral standpoint, Kant argues in the second *Critique*, we have access only to a formal "typic", not to a concrete "image".) Aesthetic ideas contribute to our appreciation of the ideas of reason, for they enable us to "feel our freedom from the law of association" – i.e. our freedom from "the empirical use of the imagination" as set out in *KrV*. Here the *paradox* of art comes fully into view: "for although it is under that [empirical] law [of productive imagination] that nature lends us material," art gives us the power to "process that material into something quite different, namely into something that surpasses nature."¹⁷

Kant concludes § 49 by arguing that such aesthetic ideas, as "presentations of the imagination" on the basis of an *analogy* with rational ideas, "strive toward something that lies beyond the bounds of experience."¹⁸ By shaping natural materials so they *aim* at this transcendent result, aesthetic ideas "try to approach an exhibition [re-positioning] of rational concepts (intellectual ideas)" that gives them "a semblance of objective reality." Such "sensible expression" of rational ideas "goes beyond the limits of experience" by expressing "a completeness for which no example can be found in nature." Aesthetic ideas thus do for the creative work of genius what the unity of apperception does for ordinary empirical knowing: They bring the *plurality* conveyed by the manifold of intuition into

15 Kant's intended referent is ambiguous. Samuel Stoner persuasively argues in "On the Primacy of the Spectator in § 49 of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*" (in the present *Proceedings*) that Kant is still talking about the *perceiver* of art rather than its *creator* in the opening paragraphs of § 49. I do not see these options as mutually exclusive.

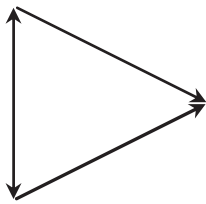
16 Kant: KU, AA 05: 314.

17 Kant: KU, AA 05: 314.

18 Kant: KU, AA 05: 314.

unity by means of an imagined object, synthesizing these opposites by applying to them the categorial moment of *totality*, as shown in Figure 3.

plurality of unorganized material
(as found in nature via intuition)



totality of a genuine (creative) artwork

unity provided by aesthetic ideas
(as conveyed by genius through
presentations of imagination)

Fig. 3: The function of aesthetic ideas

In this process “the imagination is creative”, setting “the power of intellectual ideas (i.e., reason) in motion: it makes reason think more”¹⁹ – more than when we seek empirical knowledge of the same natural material through determinate concepts. This direct linking of aesthetic ideas to rational ideas suggests that Kant’s theology requires us to take into account the crucial role of *symbolism* in bringing life, so to speak, to a God that would be a mere abstraction, if human understanding were left to its own, purely speculative devices. That is, Kantian theology must be *grounded* in aesthetic imagination.

What is easy to overlook when reading KrV is that Kant’s interest in God does not begin with the *Dialectic*, but permeates the entire book. For example, in the passage immediately before his (first edition) discussion of the steps in imagination’s threefold synthesis, whose function is to explain how “pure concepts of the understanding” (i.e. the 12 categories) are possible, he observes that once the mind has generated the categories by performing this synthesis, it finds *other* pure concepts of understanding also arising – some of which may be “impossible”, while others “are in themselves possible but cannot be given in any experience.”²⁰ The objects corresponding to the *latter* “may be incapable of being given in experience” either because we have omitted part of the pre-conceptual threefold synthesis (making the object *impossible* to experience) or because the concepts in question “are extended beyond what experi-

¹⁹ Kant: KU, AA 05: 314.

²⁰ Kant: KrV, A 96.

ence can encompass (as in the concept of God).” The process of such *extension* “must always contain the pure a priori conditions of a possible experience and of an object of possible experience. For otherwise not only would nothing whatever be thought through these elements, but they themselves would be without data and hence could not arise even in thought.”²¹ While Kant clarifies that the latter statement refers primarily to the categories (the “elements” of all a priori cognition), he applies it also to *other* a priori concepts that the mind generates in its extension of thinking beyond the boundary of experience. His point is that our concept of God cannot refer to a real object *unless* we apply it in imagination to synthesize the manifold of *something* presented to our ‘I’.

Turning to KrV’s Dialectic we find that the operative a priori concept guiding Kant’s entire discussion of the ideas of reason is “totality”. When introducing God, freedom and immortality, as pure concepts of reason that transcend the possibility of experience, Kant writes that an idea “always concerns only the absolute *totality* in the *synthesis* of conditions, and never ends except at what is unconditioned absolutely [...]. For pure reason leaves everything else to understanding, [the power] which initially refers to objects of intuition, or rather to their synthesis in the imagination.”²² This passage tells us that all empirical knowledge generated by our application of the understanding to concepts that *are* exhibited in experience is subject to the synthesis that is the essential feature of imagination (see Fig.1); but this *same* “synthesis of conditions” is precisely what generates ideas of reason when extended, *as if* it could reach the unconditioned. Kant adds that, in the same way categories *are* “the unity of understanding” as applied to appearance, ideas are “the unity of reason” *so applied*. Moreover, the only proper *use* of these ideas, once we form them, is “to prescribe to understanding the direction leading to a certain unity – a unity of which the understanding has no concept and which aims at collating all acts of understanding, in regard to every object, in an *absolute whole*.”²³ This “collating” function refers to imagination’s *proper* (non-speculative) role in reason’s application. However, the result of *this* synthesis is not to set reason loose in the transcendent realm to generate whatever suits its fancy; this is the source of the illusory pseudo-science of metaphysics that Kant debunks in KrV. Rather, Kant’s point here is that, by requiring the ideas to be synthesized *in our imagination* with “acts of understanding”, we ground them in the very experience that they by definition transcend – the same ineffable experience harnessed by creative genius. That

²¹ Kant: KrV, A 96.

²² Kant: KrV, A 326/B 382f., my emphasis.

²³ Kant: KrV, A 326 f./B 383.

is, the proper function of the ideas of reason is to provide hypothetical *unity* to what we might call the manifold of *conception* – i.e. to the diverse directions in which the unbridled understanding leads the mind when it is set free from intuition – and this *regulative* use of ideas occurs most fruitfully when we tie them back to concrete symbol(s) of the sort arising in religious or theological traditions.

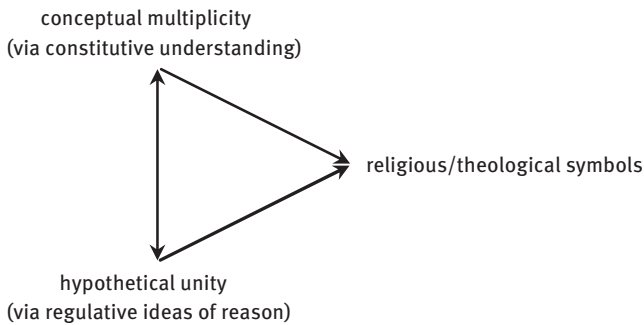


Fig. 4: The synthetic/imaginative grounding of symbolic theology

The purpose of KrV’s Dialectic, as Figure 4 illustrates, is neither to destroy theology nor to reduce it to a pretended moral belief in what we know to be nothing but an idea created by the mind; rather, it demonstrates that *imagination must be reintroduced to theology* to provide it with appropriate grounding and thus eclipse the sophisticated speculation that often misleads philosophers.

Given this way of grounding Kantian theology, we should not be surprised to find Kant portraying imagination as the power first enabling us to form the concept of God, as when he states in *Religion* that, in our “theoretical presentation of God and his essence”, “anthropomorphism [...] is scarcely avoidable” and usually “innocent enough”.²⁴ It is unavoidable because anthropomorphism allows imagination to flourish by supplying the intuition that is missing from pure rational theology. This is dangerous, he cautions, only when we anthropomorphize our *moral* relation to God, because when that occurs we improperly “make a God for ourselves”, deluding ourselves that we can win God’s favor just as we win approval from other human beings – as if God were *not* primarily concerned with our moral integrity.

Kant’s solution to the antinomy of reason arising in respect to KrV’s cosmological idea suggests a similar approach:

²⁴ Kant: KGV, AA 06: 168, my translation.

The absolute totality of the series of conditions in the world of sense is based solely on a transcendental use of reason that demands this unconditioned completeness from what it presupposes as being a thing in itself. The world of sense, however, does not contain such completeness. Therefore, the issue can never again be the absolute magnitude of the series that occur in the world of sense [...].²⁵

Rather, “the issue”, when considering our attempts to *experience* the absolute totality that Kant calls “the thing in itself”, is only the limit of our application of the concept in the *empirical* world – i.e. how we *symbolize* this totality. This approach to Kantian theology challenges the post-Kantian tradition that led to Hegel’s absolute spirit on the one hand and Feuerbach’s view of God as a projection of human nature on the other – as a careful reading of Kant’s *Religion* demonstrates.²⁶ Here I make no claim to have *set out* the terms for a Kantian symbolic theology, nor even that Kant himself ever did so; I have rather argued only that KrV and KU lay the foundation for such an approach through Kant’s theory of imagination.²⁷

25 Kant: KrV, A 515/B 543.

26 See my *Comprehensive Commentary on Kant’s Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (Chichester, U.K.: 2016). See also Kant’s emphasis on “visible expression of moral ideas” in KU, AA 05: 235.

27 Kant: KU, AA 05: 235. I presented a longer version of this paper at the “Force of the Imagination” conference held at Macau University (December, 2013). I thank William Franke and other participants for their helpful feedback on that draft. Thanks also to Brandon Love and other participants in the Hong Kong Kant Seminar, in conversation with whom the idea for this paper and many of its details first gelled. Research for this project was funded by grants from Hong Kong Baptist University.

