

Kant on the use of poetry for moral culture

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Abstract. While in his early writings Kant offers positive evaluations of fine arts as a suitable means of moral culture, in his texts on critical moral philosophy he considers poetry an obstruction in the formation of moral character. However, in the third *Critique* and in the *Anthropology* Kant also speaks of the fine arts as having a special, vivifying, and “strengthening” effect on the human mind, which may be of some relevance to moral education. Kant’s observation here, which gives the impression of an inconsistent (or at least immature) position, demands some scrutiny in order to find an initial, preliminary answer to the question of whether (and to what extent) poetry contributes to moral culture. First, I identify Kant’s comments on poetry and, second, I present his conception of moral culture. This allows me then in the third part to consider the question of the contribution of poetry to moral culture. It becomes clear that poetry may be attributed a useful function within the framework of the Kantian conception regarding almost all aspects of moral culture. In each case, Kant presents a sophisticated position which, although it gives poetry the character of a suitable means of moral culture, is sensitive to potential risks and exaggerated expectations.

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Introduction

In many of his writings, Kant offers positive views on poetry as a suitable means for moral culture. For example, at the beginning of his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant refers to a special feeling that is remarkably similar to moral feeling (see *GSE*, AA 02: 208; Kant, 2007, p. 24). That this “finer feeling” can arise not only when looking at certain natural objects, but also when reading the products of poetry, is shown by Kant’s references to Milton’s “depiction of the kingdom of hell” and Homer’s “depiction of the girdle of Venus”. In his *Critique of Judgement*, Kant then repeatedly points out that through poetry the mind “elevates itself aesthetically to the level of ideas” and can feel its “self-acting” capacity. Accordingly, poetry “expands”, “strengthens” and “enlivens” the mind (*KU*, AA 05: 326; Kant, 2000, pp. 203-204; *Anth*, AA 07: 247; Kant, 2007, p. 351; see also *KU*, AA 05: 314). The extent to which poetry is thus relevant for moral education is not

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yet clear. However, it seems to provide a specific kind of access to that which is a necessary precondition of morality and moral culture, namely the self-acting capacity for freedom.

The usefulness of poetry for moral culture that Kant appears to claim here does not fit well with Kant's statements in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Anthropology* and *Pedagogy*, where he warns of the risks of poetry, especially novels.¹ In particular, Kant mentions two problems: Reading novels leads to weakness of memory and tempts readers to moral enthusiasm. The first problem concerns only a characteristic of novels: Novels lack "systematic presentation", so they lead to "digressions" and "distraction" for readers (*Anth*, AA 07: 208; Kant, 2007, p. 314). The second problem concerns poetry as a whole. According to Kant, it is mostly novels and their "sentimental" authors who exaggerate morally relevant actions or actors and thus paint an inappropriate picture of morality (*KpV*, AA 05: 86; Kant, 1996a, p. 209). However, other forms of poetry can also represent what Kant calls "heroes of the novel" (*Romanhelden*) and their authors may fall into "sentimentalism".

Kant's view on the contribution of poetry to moral cultivation is therefore ambivalent. According to him, on the one hand, it can present exaggerated cases of moral action but, on the other, it can at least support a subject in his or her efforts to achieve moral culture. From this perspective, then, the relationship between poetry and moral culture in Kant's philosophy seems notoriously unclear.² In the following, I will offer some preliminary considerations which should show that, within the framework of the Kantian view, poetry can certainly be understood as a suitable means for moral culture.

In a first step, I examine Kant's remarks on poetry, concentrating primarily on a few paragraphs in the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment" (1). Subsequently, I outline Kant's conception of moral culture to the extent necessary for my preliminary considerations (2). Afterwards, in the third part, I consider the question of the possible contribution of poetry to moral culture (3). It will become clear that poetry may be attributed a useful function within the framework of the Kantian view regarding almost all aspects of moral culture. In each case, Kant takes a differentiated position which does not naively insist on the morality-promoting character of poetry, but also warns of potential risks and exaggerated expectations.

1 Kant on poetry

Kant himself uses the term 'poetry' primarily regarding texts (or their production) that are written in metrically regulated language and are more or less fictional in content. Occasionally, he also includes more freely written texts under this term, thus following contemporary usage.³ Three points are essential in the present context: first, Kant's classification of poetry within the fine arts (a); second, his prioritisation of poetry over the other fine arts (b); and third, his assessment of its usefulness (c).

(a) *Poetry as fine art*. In the context of his classification of the fine arts in § 51 of the third *Critique*, Kant characterises poetry along with rhetoric as one of the two types of "arts of speech" which, along with "pictorial art" and "art of the play of sensations", is one of the three types of fine arts (*KU*, AA 05: 321; Kant, 2000, p. 198). Like all fine arts, both rhetoric and poetry are a "free" and "entertaining play of the imagination", both being characterised by their linguistic form and thus by a direct relationship to the faculty of understanding. Nevertheless, according to Kant, the two types of arts of speech differ in the way they appear to the recipient: While poetry makes no secret of its fictionality and its "play with ideas",

¹ See *KpV*, AA 05: 155; *Anth*, AA 07: 185; 208; *Päd*, AA 09: 473; *KrV*, A 570 / B 598.

² Consequently, in more recent works on Kant's conception of language and poetry little attention is paid to the relationship to moral culture. See e.g. Schalow and Velkley (2014).

³ On the contemporary use of the term 'poetry' ("*Dichtkunst*", "*Poesie*"), see Rosenberg (1990, pp. 42-45).

rhetoric provides a similar product but appears with a doctrinal intent to achieve an advantage for the speaker (see also *KU*, AA 05: 327).

(b) *Poetry as supreme fine art*. In his assessment of the aesthetic value of several fine arts in §53 of the third *Critique*, Kant ascribes the “highest rank” to poetry (*KU*, AA 05: 326; Kant 2000, 203). He cites two considerations as justification: Since the production of poetry is least dependent on special rules and exemplary samples, it has its origin almost exclusively in the “genius” of the poet and thus comes closest to the ideal of fine art; and since it provides the imagination with only vague conceptual “limits” for its free play, it can cause a particularly successful connection and harmony of understanding and imagination and thus cause the recipient to “elevate[s] itself aesthetically to the level of ideas” (*KU*, AA 05: 326; Kant, 2000, p. 204). Following Kant’s characterisation of the beautiful as an “expression of aesthetic ideas” (*KU*, AA 05: 320; Kant, 2000, p. 197), poetry is thus distinguished insofar as it is particularly suitable for the representation of aesthetic ideas.

(c) *The use of poetry*. This also indicates Kant’s appreciation of poetry. With its closeness to the discursive capacity and its relative independence from material media, only poetry, according to Kant, can completely reveal “the faculty of aesthetic ideas” (*KU*, AA 05: 314; Kant, 2000, p. 193). It “expands” the mind by referring the freedom of imagination merely to the “limits of a given concept”, and it “strengthens” the mind by making one feel one’s own “capacity to consider and judge of nature, as appearance, freely, self-actively, and independently of determination by nature” (*KU*, AA 05: 326; Kant, 2000, p. 204). This “expansion” and “strengthening” of the mind makes poetry useful in two ways: First, poetry provides non-discursive access to the pure rational concept of the “supersensible” by producing a feeling of one’s own spontaneous “capacity”. Insofar as poetry can evoke this feeling in an excellent way and the supersensible has to be regarded as the ground of freedom (see Dörflinger, 1988, pp. 215-216), it can be taken as a particularly suitable means for “strengthening” the mind. Second, poetry is particularly suitable for the expression of ideas, since the poet “ventures to make sensible rational ideas of invisible beings” (*KU*, AA 05: 314; Kant, 2000, p. 192). And – in contrast to rhetoric – by aiming solely at an “entertaining game with the imagination”, poetry has a certain honesty (*KU*, AA 05: 327; Kant, 2000, p. 207).

Apart from this usefulness, which is based directly on the aesthetic quality of poetry, Kant mentions another practical use elsewhere: According to Kant, poetry can also be helpful in learning something about humans. As Kant remarks in the “Preface” to *Anthropology*, the characters of “plays” and “novels” are indeed exaggerated but “taken from the observation” of the real actions of human beings” (*Anth*, AA 07: 121; Kant, 2007, p. 233). This is because all arts of speech are based with their “combinations of the sensible” on the sensually recognised, and therefore remain bound to the experiences of their authors (see *Anth*, AA 07: 246-247; Kant, 2007, pp. 349-350).

From an aesthetic point of view, poetry can thus serve to produce a feeling related to the supersensible and to an appropriate expression of ideas of reason, and finally, from a pragmatic point of view, it can also serve to acquire anthropological knowledge.

2 Kant on moral culture

Kant’s sporadic references to moral culture are aimed at cultivating the human moral disposition (*moralische Anlage*). By ‘moral disposition’ Kant means the ability of humans to be “receptive” to moral feeling in such a way that this feeling can actually be sufficient to form and follow lawful maxims (see *Anth*, AA 07: 324; *RGV*, AA 06: 27-28). Thus moral

culture concerns the mind of rational subjects, i.e. their empirical inner life.⁴ More precisely, it concerns the problem of a targeted formation⁵ of human desire, whereby the goal is the conformity of actions and maxims with practical laws. It is about the foundation and culture of “genuine moral” attitudes (*Gesinnungen*, see *KpV*, AA 05: 153; Kant, 1996a, p. 262),⁶ that is, about the question of how objectively practical reason can also become subjectively practical (see *KpV*, AA 05: 151; Kant, 1996a, p. 261). This question is an anthropological one since it considers the possibility of morality *under specific human conditions*.⁷

Following Kant’s considerations, I propose to distinguish five steps of moral culture. The first two are necessary conditions (a, b) and the third is a supporting condition (c) for the foundation of a moral attitude, while the fourth concerns the foundation itself (d), from which the cultivation (preservation) of a moral attitude can still be distinguished as the fifth (e):

(a) *Formation of maxims*. The first necessary condition for the formation of a moral attitude and the fulfilment of the task of moral culture is the existence of maxims on the part of the subject (see Albrecht, 1994, pp. 143-146).

(b) *Cognition of practical laws*. The second necessary condition is the subject’s familiarity with practical laws. Kant emphasises here the natural familiarity of “common human reason” with practical laws or their principle (see e.g. *GMS*, AA 04: 403-404; in detail Sticker, 2015, pp. 361-367), but also cites the “moral catechism”, in which the subject is to be enabled to explicitly recognise practical laws by selective questioning (see *MS*, AA 06: 478-479).

(c) *Exercise in moral observation*. This “ethical *didaxe*” can be extended by the first part of the “method” of the foundation and culture of a genuine moral attitude presented by Kant in the second *Critique* (see *KpV*, AA 05: 159-161). This involves the judgment of one’s own and others’ actions according to pure reason and its practical law. This evaluative perspective is first to be practised habitually and supplemented by the question of obligation, so that essential and non-essential duties can be distinguished. Finally, the question has to be answered as to whether the actions evaluated were merely done in conformity with the law or also for the sake of practical laws. The subject could thereby already evolve a certain interest in the practical laws and actions in accordance with them. This interest is only of an aesthetic kind. But in the exercise of his or her skills of moral observation, the subject already notices his or her moral disposition, which can be understood as a useful intermediate step on the way to the foundation of a moral attitude.

All three conditions are only preliminary steps to moral culture in a narrow sense. That is because they alone lead, at best, to technically intelligent action, extended by the perspective of morally reasonable judgement. The moral disposition is not yet realised through them, i.e. the practical laws are not yet recognised for their own sake and obeyed in actions.

(d) *Formation of the moral disposition*. In the second part of his method, Kant therefore proposes to “lively” illustrate the “purity of the will” in examples (*KpV*, AA 05: 160-161; Kant, 1996a, pp. 268-269). In this way, the attention of the subject is directed to the “consciousness of our freedom” and a certain self-understanding, namely “respect for ourselves”, is generated. In a similar context in his *Religionsschrift*, Kant explicitly links the reference to selected examples and the feeling of respect that arises from them directly to the moral disposition. The targeted awareness of the “original moral predisposition in us” (*RGV*, AA 06: 49; Kant, 1996b, p. 93) is even a particularly suitable means of founding a moral

⁴ On the concept ‘mind’ (*Gemüt*), see Kant’s *Anhang zu Sömmerring, Über das Organ der Seele* (*Br*, AA 12: 31-35); J. Grimm and W. Grimm (1884, col. 3296-3297).

⁵ On the technical dimension of Kant’s concept of culture, see Klingner (2012).

⁶ See also *MS*, 06: 392; 484; *RGV*, AA 06: 48. In the following I translate *Anlage* with ‘disposition’ and *Gesinnung* with ‘attitude’.

⁷ For a highlighting of the anthropological perspective of Kant’s reflections on moral culture, see Munzel (1999, e.g. p. 127). See esp. *KpV*, AA 05: 152-153; *MS*, AA 06: 399-400.

attitude, since the feeling that accompanies it decisively promotes the formation and observance of maxims that are suitable for the law. He points out there that this useful feeling is not yet the feeling of respect for the moral law itself, but a “feeling of the sublimity of our moral vocation” (*RGV*, AA 06: 50; Kant, 1996b, p. 94; see also *MS*, AA 06: 483).

(e) *Cultivating the moral attitude*. While the successful foundation of a moral attitude can be assumed, the business of moral cultivation is, according to Kant, not yet completed. Rather, what has been achieved must also be preserved. Kant also calls this second task of moral culture “practising virtue” (see *MS*, AA 06: 484–485; Kant, 1996a, pp. 597–598). This “Ethical ascetics” then includes such rules as are appropriate to the task of preserving what has been achieved. In the corresponding section of the “*Tugendlehre*”, Kant mentions rules of “discipline” (*Zucht*) and “cheerfulness” (*Frohsinn*), which he does not, however, explicate in detail (see Dörflinger, 2013, p. 407). He attributes the former to the “motto of the Stoics”, the latter result in the habitualisation of a satisfaction with a self-chosen way of life, oriented to the demands of moral law (see *KpV*, AA 05: 88). He furthermore points out another aspect: community with other people. Kant mentions two means which emerge under this aspect for the preservation of the moral attitude. First, he advises us to avoid dealing with “vicious” people as much as possible in order not to endanger one’s own virtue (see *MS*, AA 06: 474; Kant, 1996a, p. 588); and second, he sees in the establishment of an “ethical community” the only appropriate means to eliminate the danger of a relapse into an evil state of one’s own character (see *RGV*, AA 06: 93–97, Kant, 1996b, pp. 129–132).

Both the conditions and the means mentioned should make it clear that Kant does indeed give concrete indications of the targeted formation of human morality: He names special conditions and specific means that are appropriate for the foundation and preservation of a moral attitude. These means are of a didactic or dogmatic, psychological, ascetic or dietetic as well as social nature and obviously result from considerations that see humans not only as rational beings but as learning, developing and confronted with special circumstances. These considerations are technical, directed towards a moral purpose and involve anthropological circumstances for its realisation.

This does not mean that a kind of technical manual is given with the mentioned steps and the rules corresponding to them, through the punctual observance of which the intended result (the moral attitude) adjusts itself as it were mechanically. Regarding the first three steps, this is easy to understand insofar as they are merely necessary or favourable conditions for the foundation of a moral attitude. Especially regarding the fourth and fifth step, however, the current account might lead to misunderstandings. For, as is well known, according to Kant, the foundation of moral attitude is something that the subject must not only strive for alone and continuously, but that cannot be brought about by the mere observance of any rules (see e.g. *RGV*, AA 06: 47–48, 52). Moral culture is rather a business that cannot be completed in principle. This does not change its categorical obligation, nor does it change the fact that the available means should actually be used.⁸

Moral culture is thus limited with its means exclusively to the production of suitable framework conditions. These concern a targeted manipulation of the disposition, emotional state and level of knowledge of the individual subject, as well as a targeted creation of favourable opportunities and circumstances. The goal of all these efforts is solely the formation of the moral disposition and the constant concern for the preservation and improvement of the respective level reached.

3 Poetry as a contribution to moral culture?

In the light of the outlined conception of moral culture, the question of a possible contribution of poetry to moral culture can be reformulated as follows: For which of the five steps can

⁸ On the categorical obligation to moral culture, see *MS*, AA 06: 389, 392–393, 446–447.

poetry and its products be useful for the moral attitude? The first point (formation of maxims) can be set aside, since there are no points of reference following Kant's considerations. With the other steps, the situation is quite different. According to Kant, stories and narratives can be helpful for the cognition of practical laws and the exercise of moral observation (a), "living" literary expressions for the formation of moral disposition (b), and religious texts for the preservation of the moral attitude (c).

(a) *Stories and narratives*. First, the relevance of products of poetry for Kant's "moral catechism" and the first part of his moral pedagogical method, i.e. for the second and third steps, is striking. Stories and narratives, in addition to personal experiences, are useful for becoming familiar with moral laws and for training moral observation skills. Here it is less about historical authenticity, but rather about a successful and convincing presentation of morally relevant actions. Kant himself first recommends the use of biographies (see *KpV*, AA 05: 154). But there is nothing to be said against fictional narratives, as long as they are not "extravagant" (*überschwänglich*). Thus, in Kant's citation of the "story of the honest man", who should be induced to defame an innocent person under threat of death (*KpV*, AA 05: 155-156; Kant, 1996a, p. 264), it does not play a decisive role whether it actually happened in this way or not. This counts even more for the training of moral observation skills. For this consists only in the conscious assessment of the moral value of the given action (see *KpV*, AA 05: 153), for which a narration of the action is a necessary precondition, but not its truth. Here, products of poetry can provide concrete material that can familiarise us with single practical laws and give occasion for moral judgements. And, depending on the plausibility of the presentation of the respective actions, events, situations etc., they can, in the best case, also promote aesthetic interest in practical laws and their corresponding actions.

(b) *"Living" examples*. While the aesthetic character of products of poetry does not play an extraordinary role in the realisation of the conditions of moral culture, it is decisive for Kant in the fourth step, i.e. the formation of the moral disposition. Since here it is a matter of a living expression of moral attitude, an aesthetically appropriate representation is even recommended. Kant himself, for example, refers to verses by Juvenal (*KpV*, AA 05: 158-159) that point to a morally important fact – the fulfilment of duty regardless of one's own advantage – and at the same time make the subject aware that he or she can also act accordingly. What is special here is the effect of a certain feeling in the reception of such verses – namely, the feeling of the sublimity of the human moral disposition. In Kant's eyes, Juvenal apparently succeeds in presenting the idea of a purely rational will in a way that makes the recipient aware of his or her own ability to form and follow lawful maxims solely out of respect for the moral law, in such a way that a feeling of sublimity is evoked. This feeling is, of course, not identical with the feeling of respect for the law. But it makes the person concerned aware of his moral disposition and gives him the opportunity to "respect himself" as a being capable of morality and destined for it.

(c) *Religious literature*. Kant's moral-pedagogical considerations do not give any explicit reference to the contribution of poetry to the preservation of a morally good character. If one understands the foundation of a moral attitude as a decision that is to be immutable, but implies a continuous effort, then even the means mentioned so far do not lose their value. Dealing with stories of morally relevant actions as well as the aesthetically successful presentation of moral convictions should not only be entertaining but also (re)vitalizing and strengthening for the person of virtue, for example by further refining his or her own ability for moral judgment. If one also adds Kant's religious-philosophical considerations, then some reference points can be seen. It is no news that Kant assigns a particular function to religion for the preservation and strengthening of moral attitudes: Insight into the possibility of the highest good, answers to certain moral-philosophical mysteries, or the communalisation of the good-minded are important reasons that can be found as examples of this in Kant. Moreover, historical religions often have a long tradition of text production

and transmission. Taking both points together, it is not surprising that Kant repeatedly praises the catchy exposition of moral ideas in religious texts. On the one hand, this applies to religiously inspired poetry such as the poetry of Haller, which he occasionally quotes in his writings;⁹ but, on the other hand, it mainly concerns religious texts in the narrower sense. Thus, he repeatedly assigns a symbolic function to selected passages of the Bible in moral-philosophical terms. Prominent examples are the story of the Fall of Man or the stories of Jesus' life. And, also with regard to texts of other religions, Kant at least occasionally refers to the more or less successful symbolisation of moral ideas (see e.g. *RGV*, AA 06: 111). As with the foundation of moral attitude, it is the aesthetic quality of the representation of moral ideas that qualifies religious poetry as useful for the consolidation and strengthening of a moral attitude. Examples from Kant's *Religionsschrift* include the metaphorical representation of the idea of an "intelligible act", the personification of the idea of moral perfection, the "beautiful" narrative of the idea of a realisation of the highest good, and the story of the revelation of the "origin" of a moral religious doctrine and its church (see *RGV*, AA 06: 43-44, 60-61, 135-136, 107). In all these cases, the aesthetic character of the various products of poetry allows the virtuous to find orientation and consolation or to cultivate their community in a way that is not just intellectual.

From the Kantian perspective, poetry may therefore be considered useful for the moral cultivation of humans. This is not to say that every concrete product of poetry is to be assessed as a contribution to moral culture. Apart from the fact that the content in question must be morally relevant, according to Kant it must also be suitable for the aims of moral culture. The criteria for this can be summarised as a conclusion to my reconstruction of the relationship between moral culture and poetry in Kant: In the context of his moral-pedagogical method, Kant repeatedly warns against exaggerated portrayals, e.g. in the form of *Romanhelden* who act especially nobly. For Kant, the decisive factor here is that impressive descriptions of exceptional and extraordinary situations are a hindrance to becoming familiar with practical laws and discovering one's own moral disposition. This warning is not fundamentally directed against the use of poetry in a moral-pedagogical context, but only against certain forms. The same applies then to the use of religious texts in the context of preserving a morally good character. For here, too, according to Kant, not every narrative symbolisation of moral ideas – such as the moral legislator, future life, the origin of evil or moral perfection – is suitable as a contribution to moral culture. Rather, according to Kant, only the standards of pure practical reason can be decisive here.

Conclusion

The preceding preliminary considerations have marked out the field that must be taken into account for a precise answer to the question of whether and to what extent, according to Kant, products of poetry can make a contribution to moral culture. These considerations have also pointed out that the discussion of elements of aesthetics theory is a not insignificant part of a Kantian theory of moral education or culture (see e.g. Munzel, 1999; Recki, 2001). According to my reconstruction, the significance of aesthetics for moral culture can be considered justified in two respects: On the one hand, according to Kant, poetry can at least be helpful for getting to know and appreciate moral laws and ideas, thus making it an attractive means for founding and preserving a moral attitude. On the other hand, Kant simultaneously points out normative limits of aesthetic production and consumption and defends the primacy of practical reason also regarding beauty. This seems to me to be a point that is still relevant

⁹ See *EAD*, AA 08: 327; *KrV*, A 613 / B 641; *RGV*, AA 06: 65; *MS*, AA 06: 397, 461; *NTH*, AA 01: 315, 321, 365.

today and should therefore be central to any further investigation of the relationship between poetry and moral culture in Kant's work.

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