Aesthetic disinterestedness in Kant and Schopenhauer

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Summary/Abstract: While several commentators agree that Schopenhauer's theory of 'will-less contemplation' is a variant of Kant's account of aesthetic disinterestedness, I shall argue here that Schopenhauer's account departs from Kant's in several important ways, and that he radically transforms Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgement into a novel aesthetic attitude theory. In the first part of the article, I critically discuss Kant's theory of disinterestedness, pay particular attention to rectifying a common misconception of this notion, and discuss some significant problems with Kant's approach. In part two, I argue that Schopenhauer gives up Kant's concern with the transcendental conditions of the reflecting judgement, but nonetheless retains two crucial aspects of Kant's analysis: first, the idea that pure aesthetic pleasure cannot be based on the satisfaction of some personal desire or inclination and, second, that aesthetic experience is ultimately based on the stimulation of our cognitive powers. For Kant, too, suggests that, although our application of the predicate 'beautiful' be independent of the subsumption of the object under any determinate concept, it still leaves room for the imagination and the understanding to play 'beyond' what is regulated by determinate concepts. For Schopenhauer, aesthetic pleasure is equally the result of the cognitive freedom and expansion that the 'will-less' attitude affords. Schopenhauer thus transforms the Kantian transcendental analysis of beauty in terms of 'non-conceptual reflection' into a psychological theory of beauty in terms of 'non-conceptual cognition'. Hence, according to both Kant and Schopenhauer (or so I argue) a beautiful object yields a degree of harmony that cannot be reduced to the discursively rigid unity offered by conceptual knowledge. And, although Schopenhauer's 'idealistic' version of aesthetic perception fails to accommodate for several valuable ways in which artworks can convey ideas, thoughts, and emotions, his account of aesthetic contemplation in terms of 'will-lessness' and objectivity is still rich in psychological insight.