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Finite vs. Absolute Knowledge in German Idealism: The Case of Art

Abstract

Aesthetics plays a key though often neglected systematic role in the philosophies of Kant, Schelling and Hegel. Their overall projects are nonetheless opposed in some important respects: while Kant attempts to secure the limits of human knowledge, Schelling and Hegel try to articulate an actually 'absolute knowledge'. I consider the treatment of art of each of these three figures as elucidating his position on the scope of knowledge. I suggest that the very limited role Kant allots art is a direct consequence of his limits-of-knowledge position as claiming that we can presuppose but cannot cognize the actuality of the ideas of reason. Art as identity-within-difference gives a model for Schelling's 'absolute idealism', for which art is no subordinate form of cognition. Hegel's treatment of art shows that the highest reconciliation in the idea cannot entirely take place in something outside thinking.

Key Terms

Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Art, Finite, Absolute, Knowledge, System.

Alman İdealizminde Sınırlı Bilgiye Karşı Mutlak Bilgi: Sanat Örneği

Özet

Estetik Kant'ın, Schelling'in ve Hegel'in felsefelerinde önemli sistematik bir rol oynar. Kant'ın projesi, insani bilginin sınırlarını göstermeyi içerirken, Schelling ve Hegel bilginin aslında mutlak olduğunu göstermeye çalışmışlardır. Ben, her üç figürde de sanata yönelik tutumu sırasıyla doğa bilgisinin kavrayışının aydınlatılması olarak değerlendiriyorum. Ben, Kant tarafından sanata tahsis edilen çok sınırlı rolün, aklın idelerinin aktüelliğini varsayabileceğimizi fakat bilemeyeceğimizi göstermesi gibi, onun bilginin sınırları konumuyla doğrudan ilişkili olduğunu önereceğim. Değişim içindeki aynılık olarak sanat, sanatı idrakın alt bir formu olarak görmeyen Schelling'in "mutlak idealizmi" için bir model vermektedir. Hegel'in sanata yönelik tutumu, ideadaki en üst düzey uzlaşımın, dünyadaki bir şeyle bütünüyle ilişkili olamayacağını gösterir.

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Kant, Schelling, Hegel, Sanat, Sonluluk, Mutlak, Bilgi, Sistem.

A striking characteristic of what is commonly called 'classical German idealism' is the sustained and intensive effort of its main figures to conceive of what 'absolute knowledge' might be like and to develop a philosophical system that amounts to just such absolute knowledge. What is even more striking is that this effort is immediately preceded by and heavily – and consciously – influenced by the work of a philosopher one of the main tasks of whom is to firmly show the limits of human knowledge, namely Immanuel Kant.

As a matter of fact, it is precisely the limiting part of Kant's project that seemed misguided to many of Kant's successors, especially the young Schelling and Hegel. One can point out as a source of this dissatisfaction Friedrich Jacobi's highly influential attack against the thing-in-itself[1] (the thing-in-itself being of course intended by Kant as a negative concept demarcating the boundaries of knowledge). In Jacobi's famous words, one could *not* get in Kant's philosophy *without* the thing-in-itself, but *with* the thing-in-itself one could not *remain* in Kant's philosophy. Transforming Jacobi's criticism, Schelling and Hegel thought that the insistence on the radical finitude of human knowledge is incompatible with the fundamental and revolutionary Kantian claims about the systematicity and autonomy of reason. There was a problem with a limit that we can think, yet know only one side of. Yet, on its turn, the 'Absolute' that is the persistent topic of Schelling's and Hegel's thinking meets a somewhat similar fate: these philosophies are incomprehensible in their systematic unity without an understanding of what they call 'the Absolute'; but if one comes to such an understanding, it is hard to find these philosophies appealing or convincing. This is attested as early as Gottlob Schulze's scathing criticisms.[2] If in Kant's case the problem concerns a partially unknowable limit, here it concerns the claim not only to unlimited, but also to fully thorough knowledge.

The story of the transition from finite to absolute knowledge in German idealism can be told in many different ways,[3] all of which will most likely involve the later idealists' welcoming of Kant's conception of the systematic unity of reason and of the spontaneity of the mind, as well as their rejection of his 'formalism', 'subjectivism' and 'dualism'. Here I am not going to reconstruct this story, but will rather try to throw some light on what is contained in the claims that human knowledge is 'finite' or 'absolute'. I will not do this by means of an extensive analysis, but by trying to give

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1 In the appendix to *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus*, a work that came out soon after the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1787.

2 In the 1803 article "Aphorismen über das Absolute".

3 This transition does not have to be a transition 'from ... to ...' in the necessary teleological way of the classic narrative of Kroner's *Von Kant bis Hegel* (Tübingen: 1977). R.-P. Horstmann, *Die Grenzen der Vernunft* (Frankfurt/M: 2004), for instance presents a convincing case for the position that Schelling and Hegel radically break away from Kant's philosophy and that their projects have quite different aims and presuppositions.

some sketches for an illustration. The example chosen will be that of *art*. This example is very convenient – and, I hope, instructive – for art plays a peculiar 'unifying' role in the systems of Kant and two of the main figures succeeding him, Schelling and Hegel. I will consider the different ways the aesthetic 'unifies' each of these systems and the extent to which in each of them philosophy can cognize or get to the bottom of art. The systematic role of art characteristic of them, I believe, can say a lot about the way they conceive of philosophical knowledge. Thus, turning our attention to some aspects of their thinking about art, we will get closer to appreciating in what sense human knowledge is finite for Kant, as well as the different senses of the absoluteness of knowledge in Schelling and Hegel.

Kant famously wrote his third *Critique* to a large extent in order to "bridge the gulf" or rift between nature and freedom.[4] Nature is knowable but thoroughly phenomenal, while freedom brings us closer to the noumenal, yet is completely unknowable. The two realms or *domains* are completely heterogeneous and fall under the different legislations of the understanding and reason. So the task of the third *Critique* is to provide in the most general sense a *connection* between those two domains and to show how they form parts of *one* philosophical system.

Thus stated, the task is very general and underdetermined. Kant himself, in the introduction to the third *Critique*, specifies that at least one aspect of this task involves showing how it is at least possible for reason to exert influence on nature, how, in other words, nature is not *completely* heterogeneous or unpurposeful for the ends of reason.[5] At least part of Kant's solution is to suggest that it possible to form *sensible images* of freedom – and that such images are in some ways important or even necessary to our conceptions of the world and morality.[6] The fact that the sensible is suited to presenting a *likeness* of freedom suggests that there is something common between these two realms. These sensible images are provided by the three paradigmatic cases of aesthetic experience – the beautiful in nature, the beautiful in art, and the sublime. In this way, aesthetic experience *shows* that nature itself can be purposeful for us to fulfill our ends as rational, i.e. moral beings.

The notion of art as a way of 'being' or 'actuality' of the 'idea' or 'reason' is of course of prime importance for Schelling and Hegel – though they assign to it a quite different meaning and draw from it some very bold conclusions that Kant does not. We are not justified to claim that the *Critique of Judgment* provides for some 'substantial' unity of the critical system, for Kant makes many qualifications regarding the connection or "bridge" between nature and reason.[7] Aesthetic experience *can* provide

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4 Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* = *CPJ* (tr. Guyer/Matthews), Cambridge: 2000, p. 63, 81.

5 Kant, *CPJ*, again p. 63, 81.

6 For a recent reconstruction of this position, see Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom* (Cambridge: 1993), esp. Ch.1. According to Guyer, this aspect of the third *Critique* amounts to an elaboration of Kant's moral theory that places an additional emphasis on the relevance of nature both in and outside of humans for morality, while not abandoning or modifying the unconditional primacy of duty.

7 For the conditional and "subjective" nature of the transition, see the reconstruction in Düsing, "Beauty as the Transition from Nature to Freedom", *Noûs* 24, 1990. Düsing however also

such a link, but the link is very precarious. Aesthetic experience does not prove how nature and freedom are in the end *identical*, nor that they have *one* common root, nor does it demonstrate the *actualization* of freedom in nature. Those are things that Schelling and Hegel will later attempt. Not only does not the aesthetic prove any immanent connection between the two domains – its function as a connection *is not* constitutive of it as aesthetic. The realm of the aesthetic can function as such without any relevance to knowledge of nature or practical interests.

Kant's treatment of art is peculiarly revealing of this precariousness and tenuousness of the systematic bond provided by the aesthetic. More specifically, we can find this out by looking at the contrast that emerges between Kant's treatment of the beautiful in nature and the beautiful in art. Both of them qualify *par excellence* as objects of pure judgments of taste. Despite arguments to the contrary in the literature, for Kant the beautiful in art is in no way inferior *as beautiful* to the beautiful in nature.[8] The distinction that Kant makes is that to the beautiful in nature there can be attached an "intellectual interest", which is not the case for the beautiful in art. It is precisely this intellectual interest that constitutes the link between aesthetics and morality, for intellectual interest consists in the *moral* interest that there exist beauties of nature. In Kant's words, beautiful nature in some way suggests that it is not impossible for ideas to have "objective reality" insofar as it manifests nature's conformity and purposefulness for our supersensible faculties and in particular for our disinterested pleasure which is a common feature of aesthetics and morality.[9]

Why does Kant deny intellectual interest to works of art? One of his arguments has to do with the explicit intention or purpose involved in the creation of art. We recognize that art is intentionally created by someone *for* our pleasure.[10] This does not disqualify it as an object of pure aesthetic experience, for we can abstract from these intentions when judging the work of art. But on the other hand, the intentional creation of something beautiful by someone does in no way show that nature as such is *of itself* purposeful or in conformity with our reason. Thus, art cannot function as a link between nature and reason. What is more, Kant provides the additional argument that there is an "empirical" interest connected with art, which arises in society as a consequence of the *inclination* to society. As the product of an inclination, this interest cannot have a moral significance.[11]

These arguments have been seen as problematic by the commentators, but it is a fact that there is at least some ambiguity in Kant's position on the moral relevance of

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discusses Kant's talk of "the unity of the supersensible substrate" (p. 89-90), which is left out of consideration here.

8 E.g. at p. 179 of *CPJ* Kant suggests that the beautiful in art *can exceed* the beautiful in nature in terms of form. See also the beginning of § 51.

9 See *CPJ*, p. 178 ff., esp. 180-1.

10 Cf. the famous "artificial flowers" (p. 179) and imitation of nightingale song (p. 181-2) examples in *CPJ* §42. These examples aim to show that although such artificial phenomena *might* be still aesthetically pleasing, they nonetheless fail to give rise to an intellectual interest, for only if they were *products of nature* could they show that *nature itself* is purposeful to our ends.

11 *CPJ*, §41.

art.[12] This ambiguity betrays Kant's reluctance to admit not only that art has a moral relevance, but also to admit that it has a *systematic* relevance. This is in turn telling about his conception of the unifying role that the "Critique of the Aesthetic Power of Judgment" is to play in the critical system.

In the last but one paragraph of the "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment",[13] Kant formulates a striking analogy between aesthetic and moral judgment that allows viewing beauty as a symbol of morality.[14] This analogy rests on the isomorphism of the two kinds of judgment and in this sense is purely formal. On the one hand, this means that it applies to *all* aesthetic judgment – judgment on art included. On the other hand, this only emphasizes what Kant repeatedly suggests from the onset of the *Critique* – namely that there is no 'substantial' unity between the beautiful and the good. The beautiful as such has the resources for linking nature and morality, yet this link is by no means necessary. The 'actuality' of the linking depends on the fulfillment of conditions that are extrinsic to its formal presence. For the reasons provided above, the experience of art *as art* does not show us any link between us as sensory beings and us as rational beings.

Kant's treatment of art is revealing about the radical finiteness characteristic of human knowledge. While we can know *a priori* of the analogy between our experience of something sensible – namely the beautiful – and our moral selves, we have no way to be sure that the requirements of morality can be actualized with any necessity in our aesthetic experience or in nature in general. As art demonstrates, aesthetic experience can be viewed as something completely independent without losing its intrinsic aesthetic qualities. While we know that nature and freedom *may* have the same structure, we cannot know whether they *do* have it. Or in other words, while we have to require that the ideas of reason have objective validity, we can in no way demonstrate this objective validity.

This conclusion is just one of the things in Kant that persistently worries Schelling and Hegel. To turn our attention to Schelling, we can view some of the formulation in the work decisive for his conception of art – the *System of Transcendental Idealism*[15] – as both a critique *and* a bold appropriation of key moments from Kant's aesthetics. It is not unjustified to say that Schelling recognized and put to work resources in the *CPJ* that Kant refrained from using.

Indeed, it is Schelling's aim in the *STI* to demonstrate that art is a combination of the most extreme opposites that amounts to their *identity*. If there were not such an identity, then we would not have the experience of what we call 'art'. In the final sixth part of this work[16] – the part devoted to grounding the fundamental systematic role of

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12 Two texts by Guyer give a good example here: Guyer, "Interest, Nature, and Art", *Rev. Metaph.*, 31(4), 1978, where he thinks that Kant's arguments here are problematic and that Kant's conception of art gives resources for a more worthy role of it, and Ch.7 ("Nature, Art, and Autonomy") of *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, where Guyer reconsiders his previous position and finds Kant's argument largely justified (see also Ch.8, *op.cit*).

13 *CPJ*, §59.

14 *CPJ*, pp. 227-8.

15 Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* = *STI* (tr. P. Heath), Charlottesville: 1978.

16 *STI*, p. 219 ff.

art – Schelling for instance remarks that art is both "subjective" and "objective" in the sense that it is the objective product of the subjective intentions of the artists, and moreover inevitably surpasses these subjective intentions. The work of art is not possible without the intellect, but is also impossible without something that stands beyond consciousness.

Here of course Schelling is originally appropriating Kant's notion of the genius. What is striking here is that this appropriation is part of an argument for the fundamental *identity* between nature and art. More importantly, it is part of an argument for the possibility and actuality of absolute knowledge.

Art, like nature, is purposeful, but lacks any definite purpose. What is more, art shows the *identity* of the conscious/subjective and the unconscious/objective.[17] For if the two were separable in the work of art, then we would obtain an object that is to some extent produced according to some intention of craftsmanship, while to another extent a mere thing of nature. Simply putting purposefulness and naturalness together does not make for artistic beauty.

Being the result of the unity of conscious and unconscious activity, art is the objective incarnation of the absolute identity ("intellectual intuition") unachievable in ordinary thought.[18] What is more, as isomorphic with this absolute identity, art presents the condition for the possibility – and the deep structure – of all thinking. That is why for Schelling all thinking is fundamentally aesthetic, which allows him to claim that art is "the only true and eternal organ of philosophy".[19]

It is important to see that Schelling comes to this conclusion by means of accentuating on the role of the genius in the constitution of art. With regard to the creation of art, Kant claims that genius should be secondary to taste[20] and thus stresses on the purposeful, intentional and reflective character of art. Schelling, on his part, emphasizes the conscious, intuitive aspect of art and this allows him to draw the forceful analogy between aesthetic and intellectual intuition. After *STI*, in his 'philosophy of identity', Schelling keeps the leading role of intuition for the grounding of his philosophical system. Intellectual intuition is a mode of considering things that allows seeing them as internally unified in their internal differentiation. Thus it is not only a way of knowing the absolute identity in itself, but also a way of knowing non-absolute entities in relation to the Absolute, or insofar as they are absolute.

In the *STI*, art plays a role in a transcendental argument for the absolute identity in intellectual intuition by demonstrating the actuality of the unity of opposites. Schelling needs this transcendental move precisely because for him the absolute unity that grounds philosophy is so absolute that there ultimately is no differentiation in it. As such it is not accessible in (ordinary) thought. For him, art is a manifest instantiation of something that is internally differentiated, or articulated, while at the same time being

17 *STI*, pp. 219-22.
18 *STI*, pp. 229-30.
19 *STI*, p. 231.
20 *CPJ*, §50.

internally unified *as articulated*.[21] Thus art can demonstrate the validity of the assumption of the highest unity.[22]

This significance of art remains – albeit in a modified fashion – in Schelling's philosophy of identity, in which he claims that philosophy as it were has an access to a direct contemplation of the Absolute. This claim is hard to grasp without an awareness of the significance and structure of art.[23] This is precisely why Schelling writes in the introduction to his lectures on aesthetics[24] that art is a "magic and symbolic mirror" for philosophy. A self-closed, undifferentiated Absolute as the object of mystical contemplation would hardly possess much philosophical force – at least because it would be completely abstracted from and irrelevant for the world of finite experience.[25] By expressly manifesting the unity of opposites, art is what makes manifest the relation between this 'Absolute' and non-absolute entities.[26] The Absolute is not a 'thing': it is rather the structure-content of particular things – while particular things *are* only insofar as they are ways of expression of identity.

For Kant, the beautiful was a formal and, we can say, conditional image of the moral, while art in particular failed to provide a full-fledged connection between nature and reason. Schelling's motives for constructing the 'absolute' philosophy considered above had to do with his dissatisfaction with this as it were unstable connection that to his eyes left the system disjointed and in the end ununified. For him, art is an image of the Absolute – that is, of the fullest systematic unity – in a very peculiar sense. Art both shows a particular way of identity of opposites *and* thus is in some measure identical with the Absolute itself.

We are now in a position to also see that Schelling's 'absolute idealism' is quite different from Hegel's. In Hegel the essence ('Spirit') *itself* is what appears, and this appearance plays in some sense a constitutive role for the essence. The reconstruction of the necessary moments of this appearing is also a reconstruction of the structure of what appears. This cannot hold for Schelling – because with him strictly speaking *nothing* appears, or, which is the same thing, because everything is *nothing* insofar as it is not in the Absolute.

This conception of art as an image – not appearance – of the Absolute for Schelling has the surprising consequence that art for him obtains a high degree autonomy and independence. This is implied by in his *Philosophy of Art* by the construal of art as a "universe" (or a self-closed totality).[27] It is also revealed by his

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21 See *STI*, pp. 226-7; see also §18 of the later *Philosophy of Art*.

22 See the classic presentation by Dieter Jähnig, "Die Schlüsselstellung der Kunst bei Schelling", esp. pp. 337-339 (in Frank & Kurz (Hrsg.), *Materialien zu Schellings philosophischen Anfängen*, Frankfurt/M: 1975).

23 For a recent account of how Schelling's earlier conception of aesthetics influences his *Identitätsphilosophie*, see Braeckman, "From the Work of Art…", *Rev. Metaph.*, 57(3), 2004.

24 Schelling, *Philosophy of Art* (tr. D.W. Scott), Minneapolis: 1989.

25 This is the main drift of the famous Hegel-inspired criticism of Kroner against Schelling, in *Von Kant bis Hegel*, vol.1, p. 552, vol.2, pp. 39-42, 104 ff., 119 ff.

26 Cf. the Introduction to Frank & Kurz, *Materialien*, pp. 39-43.

27 Schelling, *Philosophy of Art*, Introduction, also §§21-4.

notion of the work of art as a "symbol" as not *signifying* or *meaning* a content that is not *in* it, but rather as *being* just the content it is a symbol of.[28]

As we will presently see, this is not the case for Hegel.[29] Like Schelling, Hegel understands the 'Absolute' as some form of unity of opposites. Unlike him, he does not think that this unity is adequately accessible in some form of intuition – to the contrary, it is somehow ultimately accessible only 'in thought'. Nevertheless, it is also a commonplace to mention that what Hegel calls the "idea" is the unity of the concept and its actuality or objective reality.[30] And art, as we may recall, being a state of 'Absolute Spirit', provides the most adequate sensible correspondence to the absolute idea. As such, art provides the fullest objective existence of the idea – and yet Hegel classifies it as merely the lowest stage of 'Absolute Spirit'. Why is that the case?

The question is all the more pressing in light of the short discussion and criticism of Kant in the introduction of Hegel's *Aesthetics*. There Hegel says that even though Kant found in the beautiful a "point of union"[31] of the "inseparability of what ... is presupposed in our consciousness as distinct",[32] he nevertheless construed this point to be "purely *subjective*" and not "absolutely true and actual".[33] This is actually in line with Hegel's overall criticism of Kant to the effect that Kant firmly separated the idea from objective reality and had no way to show the actuality of the idea. Nevertheless, Hegel himself claims that even art – which is the most perfect sensible manifestation of the idea – cannot be adequate for it.

Then, the case of art here shows that for Hegel the "actuality" or "objective reality" of the idea cannot mean something completely straightforward, even if his use of these words is not always incompatible with their ordinary use. Nevertheless, it *is* the case that one basic goal of Hegel's philosophy (a constant goal from Hegel's youth on) is to remedy the *rift* between the realm of the sensible, transitory and finite and that of the pure, free and infinite. As manifestation of Absolute Spirit, art is the "first reconciling middle term" between the two.[34]

However, we must also not forget that from the onset Hegel starts with a notion of art as radically conceptually informed. It is just this notion of the original conceptual articulatedness of works of art that allows Hegel to build a systematic, 'scientific' philosophy of art.[35] Nevertheless, even though it is the fullest sensible appearance of the idea, art, being irreducibly sensible, provides a lower level of conceptual articulation

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28 *Ibid.*, §39.

29 An interesting recent interpretation of the lack of autonomy of art in Hegel is to be found in Pippin, "The Absence of Aesthetics in Hegel's Aesthetics"; as will become clear, I have to disagree with some of Pippin's main points.

30 It is true that Hegel expresses himself in a couple of different ways regarding this matter.

31 Hegel, *Aesthetics* (tr. T.M. Knox), Oxford: 1975, p. 56.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 60.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 57.

34 *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8. About the need for reconciliation in philosophy and about the reconciliation offered by art, see also the Introduction to Part I of the *Aesthetics* on the relation of art to the finite world and to religion and philosophy, pp. 91-105.

35 See Hegel's famous remarks, *op.cit.*, pp. 1-3 and 11-4.

than that of reflection. According to Hegel, nothing sensible can be *completely* adequate to the idea.[36] The remedy of the rift between the idea and the world is the coming to itself of the idea, that is, its complete *conceptual* articulation, which is manifestly not art's element. It is because of this that art itself strives for ever greater reflective articulation, thus passing into a so to speak 'philosophizing' art and thus of its own accord exits from its own limits. This "end of art" is actually built in Hegel's most general conception of art and is present at almost every stage of art's development, as Hegel reconstructs it. Art always lets something *internal* shine through itself, or *points to* something else – and never constitutes meaning with resources entirely of its own.

The Absolute for Hegel has to do much more with a complete self-transparency of (self-)knowledge in which it knows about all its presuppositions, grounds them and connects them into a system – it has to do with a thorough conceptual articulation and clarity.[37] The case of art helped us see that in his system as a whole Hegel is concerned with the 'actualization of freedom' or the 'objective reality of the idea' in no ordinary sense, at least not completely in the sense of the idea receiving its fullest development in some form of what we call 'the real world'. It is commonly remarked that for Hegel the world is a lot more rational and 'purposeful' for human knowledge and action than for Kant.[38] Thus, for Hegel, it is not contingent that freedom be actual or that nature conform to reason. Nevertheless, for Hegel the experience of art teaches and confirms that the 'absolute' reconciliation between 'thought' and 'world' can take place only in 'thought'.

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36 *Locus classicus*: *Ibid.*, pp. 9-11.

37 For a reconstruction of how such full cognition unfolds according to Hegel, see A. Nuzzo, "Hegel's "Aesthetics as Theory of Absolute Spirit", *Int. Jahrb. des d. Ideal.* 4, 2006. Nuzzo also interprets "absolute knowledge" as the "highest reality" of spirit, pp. 297-8; on the limitation of art, see pp. 308-10; however, for Nuzzo the reconciliation somehow takes place "in reality" and she fails to stress that this reality for Hegel is just "thought", see p. 299 ff.

38 For instance see Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, Ch.5, pp. 179-83.

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