

6-2003

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Recommended Citation

Wright, J. Lenore (2003) "Review of “The Beautiful Shape of the Good: Platonic and Pythagorean Themes in Kant’s Critique of the Power of Judgment”," *Essays in Philosophy*: Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 1.

Essays in Philosophy

A Biannual Journal

Vol. 4 No. 2, June 2003

Book Review

The Beautiful Shape of the Good: Platonic and Pythagorean Themes in Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment, Mihaela C. Fistioc. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. vii-xxiii + 160 pp., ISBN 0-415-93869-4 (cloth).

Though Immanuel Kant cites David Hume as the source of Kant's mid-life philosophical crisis, might it have been Plato who awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumber? Mihaela C. Fistioc suggests just that in her provocative book, *The Beautiful Shape of the Good*. Selected as an outstanding dissertation in philosophy, Mihaela C. Fistioc's *The Beautiful Shape of the Good* appears in the Studies in Philosophy series, edited by Robert Nozick and published by Routledge Press. The aim of Fistioc's monograph is to draw a parallel between "the notion of eros in Plato's *Symposium* and that of reflecting power of judgment in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*" (xxi). She devotes every word to this end, never straying from the task at hand.

Like Kant, Fistioc is systematic in her approach. First, she shows the possible sources of Platonic and Pythagorean thought available in Kant's day. This part of the text involves a degree of speculation—Kant's reading history is neither completely known nor knowable. Fistioc neither denies nor hides her speculations. Ever conscious of the potential pitfalls of her argument, she shows the reader where history ends and speculation begins. Second, she explicates the Platonic and Pythagorean overtones in Kant's work—the most likely sources, she argues, of Kant's 1787 realization of *a priori* principles for the feelings of pleasure and displeasure, principles he elaborates in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Finally, Fistioc compares the ideas of these Ancient Greek lovers of wisdom to those of Germany's most prodigious eighteenth-century thinker; a comparison "meant primarily as a tool which can provide an introduction to the reading of the third *Critique*...." (97). Hence, her task is at once philosophic and pedagogic. She aims to demonstrate not only that Kant may have read Plato *directly* (Kant knew Plato indirectly—he owned *Die letzten Gespräche Sokrates*, and he must have been familiar with the Cambridge Platonists). But more importantly, Fistioc attempts to show that Plato had an important *indirect* influence on Kant's thinking about the reflecting power of judgment. In demonstrating this influence, she teaches us a new way of reading Kant: through the eyes of an ancient rationalist.

Three questions shape *The Beautiful Shape of the Good*: Did Kant read Plato's *Symposium*? Can a Platonic/Pythagorean conception of beauty—one focused on Ideas, the other on numbers—help us understand the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*? And might a Platonic experience of beauty, one that culminates in the Good, illuminate a Kantian view of moral experience? In answering these questions, Mihaela C. Fistioc exhibits extraordinary skill with both historical and philosophical documents. First, Fistioc devotes great attention to Brucker's *Historia Critica*, a text that influenced

Kant's lectures on the history of philosophy delivered between 1767 and 1782. Moreover, there is evidence that the second edition of Brucker's text, published in 1767, may be the source of Kant's knowledge of Pythagoras. To support Kant's familiarity with Brucker's work, Fistioc cites Max Wundt's 1924 *Kant als Metaphysiker* wherein "Wundt holds that Kant made use of the long Brucker version" (16). I will say more about Brucker's influence on Kant below.

Fistioc divides her monograph into three chapters. Chapter one is entitled "Kant's Relationship to Plato and Pythagoras." Herein she investigates the possible sources of Kant's knowledge of Platonic and Pythagorean ideas as well as the ideas she thinks Kant received from these two ancient philosophers—a *a priori* intuition and form, and moral education. In Chapter two, "Plato on the Ascent from Beauty to Virtue," Fistioc walks the reader through Plato's *Symposium*. She offers a thorough exegesis of each encomium to love. She ends her analysis of the dialogue by focusing upon the meaning of the myth of the birth of eros and the final passage of Diotima's speech, which has come to be known as the Ascent Passage. Finally, in chapter three, "Kant on Beauty and the Vision of the Good," she draws out the parallel between a Platonic understanding of beauty as a link between the human world and the realm of the divine to Kantian features of beauty, which provide both a freedom and a link between creativity and concept formation. Each chapter is outlined on the contents page of the text (vii-viii). And an explanation of Fistioc's method of citation, as well as the meaning of all abbreviations used throughout the text, appears at the beginning of the book.

Fistioc begins chapter one by exploring the literary life of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). She reports that between 1766 and 1772, Kant worked as an assistant librarian at the library of the royal castle in Königsberg (8). There is little information about the books contained in the royal castle's collection (it appears to have been a rare book collection). But it does prove that Kant had access to books outside his own library. Fistioc is particularly interested in Kant's knowledge of Plato and Pythagoras: did Kant read Plato's work directly; i.e., in the original Greek? Did he read German translations of Plato's work? Did he read scholarly analyses of Platonic and Pythagorean ideas? She notes that the "first edition of Plato's works in German came out between 1778 and 1797.... The third volume, which contained the *Symposium*, came out in 1783, seven years before the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*" (9). Moreover, she reports that "a German translation of the *Symposium* was published in Zurich in 1782, eight years before the publication of the third *Critique*" (10).

A careful genealogist, Fistioc enumerates the Latin renditions of Plato's work available during Kant's lifetime, texts which Kant, an avid and skilled reader of Latin, could have easily understood. And she lists the references to Greek philosophy in Kant's own work. Among these she notes the 1764 reference to Platonic love in Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1) and Kant's mention of Plato's *Symposium* in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1). Such information helps us contextualize Kantian thought. But why does Fistioc develop such a copious analysis of Kant's own research and reading? She confesses, "we do not know if Kant read any of Plato's dialogues, whether in the original or in translation" (7)." It appears that Kant did not own Plato's work at the time of his death (11). Nor was he particularly adept with classical Greek (as a theology major, he studied New Testament Greek and Hebrew). Though Fistioc remains unconvinced that Kant did not read Plato directly (8), she admits that Kant's knowledge of Plato may be second-hand. That is, if Kant did not own Plato's work, and if he did

not read Plato in the original, he must have derived his knowledge of Plato from a secondary source. From whom and which sources might he have derived his knowledge of Plato?

As mentioned above, we know Kant acquired some knowledge of Platonic thought from Brucker's *Historia Critica* (12). Fistic reports that Kant read Brucker's work around 1767. And this version of the critical history of philosophy includes a chapter on Pythagoras's influence on Plato (36). Kant learns from this text that Brucker finds Plato's philosophy "too complicated.... Brucker comes back over and over to Pythagoras's negative influence on Plato" (19). She continues, "Now one of the major influences on Plato which Brucker traces back to Pythagoras regards the theory of Ideas.... [I]t is precisely the moral application of the theory of Ideas which Kant finds of interest in the latter's thought" (19), though he mentions him only twice in his published works ("On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy," 1796 and the *Logik*, 1800). So Kant may have learned some unintended lessons from Brucker. Kant praises Pythagoras in his lectures on metaphysics as a "man of unusual genius" (19). Kant writes, "History says that the discovery of numerical relations between the tones and the precise laws according to which they alone could be made into music brought Pythagoras to the following thought: because in this play of sensations mathematics...also contains the formal principles of this play (and indeed, as it appears, does so a priori, on account of its necessity)...." (44). So Kant learns from Pythagoras that "human beings respond with a certain special kind of pleasure to form, and that the connection between sensibility and intellect is effected through such response to form" (48). Hence, Kant shares with Pythagoras the view that feelings of pleasure precede recognition of forms. And he believes that sensible experiences can help us understand intellectual experience; in particular, sensible experiences can clarify moral experience or moral order. Furthermore, Kant learns that Platonic Ideas are "patterns or images" that reside in the mind and form all things in nature—an idea for which Kant praises Plato in the first *Critique*; Ideas that connect exemplars or archetypes to moral philosophy. Hence, Kant connects Platonic Ideas and Pythagorean Numbers with form^{3/4}he sees them both as abstract theories of metaphysics. Moreover, Kant sees a parallel between their abstract theories and their view of intuition and moral education (60).

Fistic believes Kant's rendering of the ascent from beauty to moral order in the third *Critique* was inspired by Plato's *Symposium*. She devotes chapter two to explicating this Socratic dialogue. Her reading of Plato's dramatic middle dialogue on love bears much similarity to the dramatic interpretation of Plato's dialogues by such scholars as Seth Bernadete (to whom she refers), Stanley Rosen, David Roochnik, Anne-Marie Bowery, et al. Though she sometimes relies on conventional translations and analyses of Plato—Bury, Cornford, and Dover, among others—she avoids the mistaken tendency of many Platonic scholars to extract Platonic thought from its dramatic structure, ignoring the elements and nuances of the dialogue form. Instead, Fistic is careful to describe and account for each interesting and meaningful element of the *Symposium*. In addition to her own facility with Greek, she relies on Nehamas and Woodruff's excellent translation of the work, published by Hackett in 1989.

And what does Fistic find in Plato's *Symposium*? In her step by step analysis of the encomia to love comprising the *Symposium*, Fistic finds an "allegory of the human condition: Life...is an endless search. The search tracks no less than the right way to live. It is a forward movement, a progress...an ascent" (64). Kant too sees the incompleteness of humankind. In the third *Critique*, he asserts that there is a basic unity of the human being (98). The two-fold path toward this unity in

Plato's *Symposium* is one of search and ascent. The search aspect of the human condition is best exemplified in Aristophanes' speech, a speech in which humans were born with two faces, four arms and legs, and traveled about by turning cartwheels. There were three kinds of human beings: women, men, and androgynous beings. These humans became strong and ambitious. They challenged the gods. So Zeus cut them in half. They started dying, unable to carry on without their other halves. Zeus took pity upon them and had Apollo turn their genitals around so they could procreate. Since then, human beings have spent their lives in search of their other halves, their split-aparts the one with whom they can be made whole again. Hence, humans spend their lives *seeking* wholeness, motivated by a desire for psychological completeness, a completeness found in love.

But the search for wholeness is only half the journey. Humans must also ascend. Fistic explains: "Eros...is the symbol of the duality inherent in the human condition: there is poverty of not having what one desires, but then there is the resource of having the capacity to get it.... Intelligence brings with it the capacity to track an ideal, and this is what makes the search into an ascent" (82). The view that intelligence is the ability to posit an ideal is similar to Kant's philosophy (I say more about this in chapter three). For instance, in the long version of Diotima's account of the ascent up the ladder of love, we learn that human beings begin this ascent by recognizing beauty in one body, then in two. Then in all bodies. Then in tradition, customs, and laws. In other words, beauty leads us away from selfishness to selflessness, or to use Kantian language, from interestedness to disinterestedness. Fistic continues, "the key here is again given by structure, pattern, lawfulness: knowledge of mathematics and science, no less than philosophy...involves gaining an awareness of the rule, the law behind the particular examples.... This must have been the kind of impact the discovery of pattern and interconnection in mathematics had on the Pythagoreans" (91). Like Socrates, Kant sees this unity in the Good; i.e., Kant sees that this unity is moral and universal in character.

The end of the Platonic ascent up the ladder of love is virtue. Plato writes, "...when someone rises by these stages, through loving boys correctly, and begins to see this beauty, he has almost grasped his goal. This is what it is to go aright or to be lead by another, into the mystery of Love: one goes always upwards for the sake of this Beauty, starting out from beautiful things and using them like rising stairs...he arrives in the end at this lesson, which is learning of this very Beauty, so that in the end he comes to just what it is to be beautiful.... In that life alone, when he looks at Beauty in the only way that Beauty can be seen—only then will it become possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue...but to true virtue" (*Symposium*, trans. by Nehamas and Woodruff, 59-60). Hence, once one ascends the ladder of love and binds oneself to the Good forever, one necessarily lives life according to the dictates of that Goodness. Fistic believes Kant's thinking on the Kingdom of Ends owes much to this idea. "It is only when one sees the world from above, as God would—hence in terms of ends (Kant's gloss on Platonic Forms)—that one understands the destiny of humankind and, with it, one's own destiny, it is only then that one attains a unified vision of oneself. The picture one has of oneself depends on how one slices up the world, and this in turn, on Kant's view, is a matter of the reflecting power of judgment...." (95).

The purpose of chapter three—the heart of Fistic's book—is to show the parallel between the ideas in Plato's *Symposium* and the ideas in Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Fistic clarifies her argument at this point: "The parallel is not meant to establish the claim that Kant was influenced directly by Plato's *Symposium*...." (97). Rather, she hopes to show, and then use, the

resemblance between the two to create a new way of reading the third *Critique*. Citing a letter from Kant to K.L. Reinhold, Fisticoc shows that by the end of 1787, Kant had “elevated the capacity to feel pleasure and displeasure to the status of one of the basic faculties of the human mind. The shift in view occurred, as he [Kant] explains, upon his discovering a new *a priori* principle, different from those he had spelled out in the first and second *Critiques*...” (99). Fisticoc represents this new discovery graphically and follows up with clear and helpful examples (100-101). What she shows is that between the Faculty of Cognition and the Faculty of Desire resides the Feeling of Pleasure and Pain. Just as Understanding has an *a priori* principle for the Faculty of Cognition; and just as Reason has an *a priori* principle for the Faculty of Desire; there is an *a priori* principle for the Feeling of Pleasure and Pain: the Power of Judgment. Kant has found his missing link. As Fisticoc explains, “Kant has been much maligned for upholding a conflict between reason and inclinations and, more generally (and more maliciously) for upholding a view which takes all the fun out of life; yet the Kant of the third *Critique* has already amended this view” (101).

Echoing Diotima, Kant suggests we half-blindly find our way in the world as we endlessly search for our happiness: “To be happy is necessarily the demand of every rational but finite being.... For satisfaction with one’s whole existence is not, as it were, an original possession and a beatitude, which would presuppose a consciousness of one’s independent self-sufficiency, but is instead a problem imposed upon him by his finite nature itself, because he is needy and this need is directed to the matter of his faculty of desire....” (*Critique of Practical Reason*, Ak 5:25; 159). Fisticoc continues, “...we search for happiness and, due to our imperfections, we roam about in confusion.... Yet this is not Kant’s whole picture, or rather not the final one, just as a blind search is not the final picture we get in the *Symposium*. Just as Plato describes a lower eros but also a higher one, so Kant, by the time of the third *Critique* has worked out the details of a type of pleasure which is not a source of confusion but rather a guide” (109). To state this differently, the Kantian world is something we encounter. It is knowable. Yet our knowledge of it is incomplete, just as for Plato eros is the progeny of need. On the other hand, we have the capacity to create order out of the chaos of the world—eros is also the progeny of resource. This capacity is what Kant calls the reflecting power of judgment.

I cannot restate Fisticoc’s analysis of Kant *vis-à-vis* Plato in its entirety. But let me touch upon some of the crucial points of her account. She argues that like Plato, Kant understands the experience of beauty as a search for form and a feeling of pleasure upon finding that form. Hence, this search is creative in two senses. One, the search for beauty ends in concept re-formation. “To see beauty...is to create a new image of a slice of the world; it is to exercise one’s capacity to see things differently, from new angles” (125). This experience of beauty is the experience of finding an order to the world—to see how the world ought to be, rather than how it is. Second, the experience of beauty is one of pleasure upon finding structure in the world. It begins with animalistic pleasure, but because eros is a force which drives human lives, it culminates in what Kant calls a “feeling of life” —a rational appreciation for something outside of one’s self, beyond one’s own skin (118-119). This experience of beauty is one type of the reflecting power of judgment. And Fisticoc’s ability to capture the poetic side of Kant on this point is laudable.

Next, Fisticoc pulls out her axiological umbrella to show how the aesthetical and ethical dimensions of beauty converge both in Platonic thought and in Kantian thought. She writes, “Beauty is a revelation of community as contrasted with solitude. Another person’s understanding of, say, a

novelist's vision of beauty is a concrete proof to all involved that solitude does not, after all, have to be our lot in life. This has a parallel to moral thinking. I may intend to do good, but what if nobody shares my views? Worse still, what if nobody can share my vision? What if all those around me are all too tied down by the image of how things have always been to be capable of seeing how things could be better? Yet the human capacity to communicate beauty...gives me some hope that others will be capable of sharing my vision of a better world. Beauty is only the indication of a possibility (135)."

Finally, Fistic considers Kant's claim that the reflecting power of judgment can bridge the chasm between the sensible and supersensible—between the realm of science and the realm of moral thought. She begins by arguing that the purpose of the third *Critique* is to show that we perceive empirical nature as patterned or ordered rather than random. Nature not only appears to us to have purposes or ends—there is meaning in what we see—but we take pleasure in those ends, in the meaning we find therein. This pleasure arises from the reflecting power of judgment. Fistic offers several compelling conclusions: "In both beauty and morality, we constantly assess matters, rather than simply accept them as they are. We compare them with an ideal, a form from us rather than from nature.... We need to take seriously Kant's description of beauty as a matter of the reflecting power of judgment; it is a moment of reflection in our lives, a moment of recapturing the center of our existence, which makes us human, a moment in which we rejoice at experiencing the world.... At the most basic level, being capable of noticing beauty is a matter of hope. Hope that one can find meaning in the world, hope that the meaning one finds is not just an illusion. Most importantly, it is hope that one can share this meaning with others, that oneself and others can reach the same vision of the world" (140-141).

Fistic's work is among the best work on Kantian philosophy produced in the past decade. First, it is novel. Like Hannah Ginsborg's *The Role of Taste in Kant's Theory of Cognition* (1990) and the articles and book chapters on Kant's notion of taste by such philosophers as Carolyn Korsmeyer and Christine Battersby, Fistic breathes fresh life into Kant. Second, a clear and engaging writer, Fistic is systematic in her thinking and unyielding in her analyses. At every turn of the page, she offers sophisticated and persuasive exegeses of Pythagorean thought as well as Platonic and Kantian texts. Her tone is warm, her language inclusive. Third, Fistic embodies the organization of Kant without the "difficult and stern" language for which Kant himself has been criticized and ultimately misunderstood (97). Fourth, Fistic's facility with languages, including Greek and Modern German, is enviably good. And she is always careful to give credit where credit is due. This work is an important contribution to an exciting, burgeoning field of research within Kantian scholarship (Fistic refers to T.K. Seung's 1994 work, *Kant's Platonic Revolution in Moral and Political Philosophy*). Finally, I would be remiss not to mention that Fistic's impressive work was directed by Christine Korsgaard, an accomplished Kantian scholar in her own right. The success of these two exceptional women philosophers, both engaged in first-rate scholarship, should not be overlooked. I suspect this will not be the last we hear from Mihaela C. Fistic or about *The Beautiful Shape of the Good*. And it won't be the last we hear of the similarities between Plato and Kant. As Fistic argues so well, Kant's message in the third *Critique* is a Platonic one: "the human condition is intrinsically connected with the struggle to live up to a standard of perfection" (98).

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