Introduction: Kant as youthful observer and legislator

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A Cambridge Critical Guide devoted to Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (*Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhaben*) and the *Remarks* therein (*Bemerkungen in den "Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhaben"*) might at first seem anomalous. One is a work of belles-lettres, the other a set of fragments, and neither has the technical density and imposing scale one has come to expect in writings of this philosopher. But recent scholarship by Dieter Henrich, Joseph Schmucker, Richard Velkley, Susan Meld Shell, Marie Rischmüller, John H. Zammito, and others has brought new attention to these works, prompting an upwelling of interest in what may well be the most revealing of Kant's early writings for purposes of understanding his later practical thought.

Observations, which was first published in 1764, marks a high point in Kant's interest in British common-sense philosophers. It is also a work that reflects the early impact of Rousseau, making this a document that is particularly revealing of Kant's emerging views on morals and aesthetics. Like Addison's *Spectator* (which is in many ways its model), *Observations* addresses itself to a general (and largely feminine) audience, and takes up subjects that reappear in Kant's successive treatments of anthropology through the rest of his career. These topics include both the rudiments of what he will later treat under the rubric of empirical psychology, and subjects ranging from basic categories that will inform his later ethics and aesthetics, to issues of gender, religion, and race.

Read in conjunction with the *Remarks*, *Observations* casts an exceptionally revealing light on Rousseau's early and ongoing influence on Kant. *Observations* seems to mark the impact of Kant's initial reading of Rousseau, one that the *Remarks* already presents as naive. Whereas in the *Observations*, Kant treats the observation of the variety of human tastes and customs as furnishing unproblematic access to human nature, *Remarks* treats that opinion

as too simple. Instead, Kant there seeks what is "in accord with" nature, rather than what lies "in nature" directly. *Remarks* furnishes clues, in other words, both to what impressed Kant in Rousseau on a first and second reading, and to the "rare" thought to which Kant was brought on further reflection.

The text that has come to be known as the *Remarks* consists of hand-written notes inserted into Kant's own copy of his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, the first of his works intended for the general reading public. Marie Rischmüller's definitive edition of *Remarks* (Kant 1991) put German readers in a position to make their way in Kant's uncommonly challenging text as never before. The recent publication of a complete English translation by Cambridge University Press should now guarantee Kant's *Remarks* the substantial audience and interest among English-speaking readers that it deserves.

Remarks has a freshness and immediacy that will surprise most readers who are mainly familiar with Kant's later published writings. It addresses topics as diverse as ethics (including an early formulation of the categorical imperative), the moral basis of religion, the relation of the sexes, republicanism, and the negative role of metaphysics (or what he there calls "the limits of reason"). It sets out a remarkably coherent philosophic position in its own right, while also anticipating many key elements of his later critical philosophy.

We may never know why Kant wrote such extensive notes (now known as the *Remarks*) into his own specially prepared copy of the *Observations*. Those notes do not seem to have been composed with revision of the printed text directly in mind. They do not lay out a continuous argument in any obvious way; they are also rich in allusion, occasionally fragmentary, and frequently ambiguous as to precise tone and meaning. It is sometimes hard to know Kant's source, or in whose voice he is speaking. Few of the notes bear directly on the published text with which they are contiguous. Indeed, *Observations* was subsequently reprinted several times in Kant's own lifetime essentially unchanged. What cannot be doubted is the deeply searching character of these notes, which sketch out or otherwise anticipate essential elements of Kant's mature theoretical and practical philosophy.

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Kant's stance in *Observations* "as an observer" more than "a philosopher" (*Beo* 2:207) puts him in an ambiguous position with regard to his earlier insistence (in the *Universal Natural History*) on the supreme value of speculative activity. On the one hand, the essay's expressed goals are largely practical and civic: to improve aesthetic taste and help cultivate morality (or

a "feeling for the beauty and the dignity of human nature" [*Beo* 2:217]) in the society around him. He does not address an elite group of actual and potential "scientists," but the general literate public, male and female (or every potential "young world citizen" [*Beo* 2:256]). On the other hand, in discussing "finer feeling" and its own "universal" pleasures, Kant expressly disregards the "even finer feeling" that is accessible only to an elite few capable of speculative inquiry (*Beo* 2:208). Removing himself from his earlier position without necessarily wholly rejecting it, Kant stands somewhere between his encomium to the poet-scientist, in the *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755), and his definitive elevation, in the *Remarks*, of practical over theoretical ends.

Kant's *Observations* presents the beautiful and the sublime as distinct yet interdependent qualities that together bring into harmony the simplicity of nature and the refinement of the civilized. Each alone is defective: sublimity without beauty exceeds the bounds of nature and becomes "adventurous" or "grotesque" (as with medieval knights and monks, respectively), while beauty without sublimity is lacking in seriousness (*Beo* 2:213–14). "Crude" nature, on the other hand, is neither always sublime nor always beautiful, even in the latter, unserious way.

The kind of finer feeling Kant identifies as "moral" similarly combines elements of beauty with ones of sublimity. Among such qualities, "[t]rue virtue alone is sublime" (*Beo* 2:215). Qualities like tenderheartedness are beautiful, yet often also weak and blind – for example, when a person neglects his or her duty out of pity for the undeserving (*Beo* 2:216). Benevolence becomes genuinely virtuous only when it becomes a "principle" to which one's personal affection is subordinated:

> When universal affection toward the human race has become a principle in you, to which you always subordinate your actions, then love toward the needy one still remains, only it has now been set, from a higher standpoint, in true relation to your entire [*gesammte*] duty. Universal affection is a ground of sympathy [*Theilnehmung*] for the ill he suffers, but also of the justice whose prescripts must forestall this action. (*Beo* 2:216)

The resulting feeling combines moral sublimity and moral beauty:

> true virtue can only be grafted onto principles, such that the more general they are, the more sublime and noble they become. These principles are not speculative rules, but rather consciousness of a feeling that lives in every human breast and stretches much further than upon the particular grounds of sympathy and complaisance. I believe that I would grasp it all together [*fasse alles zusammen*] if I were to say it to be the feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature. The first is a ground of universal affection, the second of universal respect, and if this feeling

should attain the greatest perfection in a human heart, this human being would, to be sure, love and esteem himself, but only insofar as he is one of all those over whom this broadened and noble feeling extends itself. Only if one were to subordinate one's own inclination to one so enlarged could our kindly [*gütige*] drives be used proportionately and bring about the noble bearing [*Anstand*] that is the beauty of virtue. (*Beo* 2:217)

For Kant at this stage, moral feeling is characterized by a subordination of personal feeling to one that involves a universal principle, or what he here calls a "feeling of the beauty and dignity of human nature." At the same time, both moral and aesthetic beauty and sublimity transcend "crude" nature without leaving nature as such behind.

In sum, in *Observations*, a kind of finer feeling that is accessible to all cultivated men and women supplements the speculative pleasures that the *Universal Natural History* had presented as the sole means (other than revelation) by which human beings can achieve the end for which they were created (or transcend a life devoted to "sucking fluid, propagating one's kind and dying" [*AN* 1:356]). Kant, in other words, no longer rests human dignity solely in the ability and willingness of a small minority to undertake the laborious task of speculative inquiry.

But Kant also does not yet declare (as he will in the *Remarks*) that "establishing the rights of mankind" is what alone makes philosophic inquiry worthy of esteem. Instead, *Observations* suggests an alternative position, in which human "dignity" is universally but unevenly distributed. According to that position, a feeling for the "beauty and dignity of human nature" can be evoked (in a manner to which Kant's own "observations" are intended to contribute) by a representation of the "fittingness" of a variety of human qualities, including virtue, tenderheartedness, love of honor, and even crude desire. By showing how these qualities all cooperate in virtue's universal end, Kant's "portrait of the human race" itself exhibits the "beauty and dignity of moral nature," and thereby arouses an aesthetic "feeling" that is akin to moral virtue proper (*Beo* 2:227). In sum, *Observations* seems directed toward the beginnings of an "aesthetic education of the human race."

Indeed, that "the most powerful impulses all derive from sexual desire" makes such an aesthetic education especially pertinent. The "complementary drives" which "move some to beautiful actions even without principles," and give "greater impulse" and "impetus" to principles (*Beo* 2:227), themselves depend on finer feelings that are "interwoven" with sexual attraction (*Beo* 2:234, 254). The relation of the sexes is thus critical, on Kant's present account, "for all education and instruction" and, indeed, as he puts it, for "all attempts at moral perfection" (*Beo* 2:228).

Sections 3 and 4 of Kant's *Observations* mainly devote themselves to an elaboration of this arresting claim – one largely though not exclusively derived from Rousseau. Section 3, "On the Difference between the Sublime and the Beautiful in the Counter-Relation [*Gegenverhältniß*] of the Sexes," discusses how sexual love both aids and hinders the moral perfection of each sex. Kant's presentation is burdened, however, with a series of unresolved tensions between the claims of finer feeling and force of sexual inclination. On the one hand, he insists that sexual impulse is the source of all finer feeling between the sexes, especially as it bears on refining the feelings of men (*Beo* 2:235). On the other, we are told that such finer feeling and the sexual mustn't come "too near" each other (*Beo* 2:237). These tensions suggest that Kant remained unclear about the matter. He is unwilling to follow all the way Rousseau's reductively materialist hint in *Emile* that virtue is merely a derivative of sexual desire – a "distillation," as it were, of the animal "spirits" accompanying puberty. But Kant admits that the "finest" of human inclinations draw their life from that "most powerful" natural impulse. And, like Rousseau, he presents feminine "modesty" as a crucial link between crude sexual desire and moral virtue proper (*Beo* 2:234–35).

For all the charm of his own writing, the position staked out in section 3 remains unsatisfying on a variety of levels. Sexual inclination, as he insists, could help to ennoble the male sex if women's "moral qualities" were themselves developed more adequately (*Beo* 2:241). A woman of this sort (expert in the "anthropology" that is woman's special province) would not only look beyond the physical defects of a man to his noble qualities and possibilities, but would herself complete them. And yet, as Kant reminds us, "nature seldom unites all noble and beautiful qualities in one human being," and "even more seldom brings that human being to one who would be worthy of them."

This difficulty is especially telling, given the hopes for moral and civic education with which his essay closes. The superiority of Europe lies above all, in the peculiar sense of "decency" that marks its appreciation of female beauty:

> the European alone discovered the secret of embellishing the sensual charm of a mighty inclination with so many flowers and interweaving it with so much that is moral that he has not merely very much elevated its agreeableness as such but has also made it very decent. (*Beo* 2:254)

The "interweaving" that both veils and elevates sexual desire recalls Rousseau's famous reference to the laws as "garlanded" chains. Aesthetic culture relieves the harshness of those laws with the sweeter charms of feminine attraction.

Section 4, on "National Characters, in So Far as They Depend upon the Distinct Feeling of the Sublime and Beautiful," elaborates upon this theme. Through its moral idealization of female beauty Europe exceeds the common human plane, where beauty remains an object of sexual commerce. As for the varied finer tastes of Europe, Germany emerges from Kant's discussion as a nation of mixed status: the German, who has a special feeling for the sublime and beautiful "in combination," avoids the defects of excessive strength on either side (*Beo* 2:243–44, 248). Where Frenchmen do not esteem women enough, and Engishmen esteem them too much, the German's methodical approach to love (*Beo* 2:248) lets him reflect upon human appearances. Where Frenchmen need more seasonably developed women if they are to morally improve, the more matter-of-fact Germans need only to develop their talent for spectatorship, above all, by eliminating the awkwardness and stiffness that affects their "way of writing [*Schreibart*]" (*Beo* 2:249). It is tempting to read Kant's *Observations*, frequently cited as an early masterpiece of modern German style, as a deliberate step in that direction.

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Withal, as the conclusion of *Observations* grants, the "secret" of education remains to be discovered. That admission throws into relief the task, as well as the achievement, of the *Remarks*. Newly resigned to the inaccessibility of human nature through the direct observation of current taste, Kant now turns to a rational construction that he calls (following Rousseau) the "state of nature." By this, Kant means any condition in which free yet mortal, and hence dependent beings (like us) can coexist harmoniously – any state, to borrow Rousseau's wording, in which human beings can be both good for themselves and good for others. This "state of freedom" furnishes an "Archimedean" point from which to "move the emotions" of men. The "state of nature" is intended less as an historical description of actual primitive conditions than as an *Unterstützungspunkt* on the basis of which human aspiration can expend itself effectually.

Not less noteworthy is the extraordinarily personal character of many passages, by an author who famously avoided the first person in most of his writings and greatly distrusted psychological introspection as a general mode of inquiry. Nowhere is that personal character more evident than in a frequently cited confessional note from the *Remarks*:

> I myself am by inclination an inquirer. I feel in its entirety a thirst for knowledge and the yearning restlessness to advance along this way and satisfaction with each

forward step. There was a time when I thought that this alone could constitute the honor of mankind, and I scorned the masses, who know nothing. Rousseau set me upright . . . This blinding preference [*Vorzug*] vanishes. I learn to honor human beings, and I would find myself far more useless than the common worker if I did not believe that this consideration could bestow worth to all others, to establish the rights of mankind. (*Bem* 20:44, *Ri* 37–38)

As a number of the essays included in this volume argue, the *Remarks* reflects a turning point in Kant's life, in which earlier speculative preoccupations assume a new civic and moral direction. "After Rousseau," the "blinding" opinion that such pursuits could constitute "the honor of mankind" vanishes. Instead, Kant displays a new determination to advance the cause of "establishing the rights of man." Later in the *Remarks* Kant speak of a "decision," absent which genuine virtue is not possible. And later in his life, he will speak of a decision of the will, rarely undertaken before the age of forty (the approximate age at which Kant wrote the *Remarks*), in which human character first shows itself. Although scholars differ on the meaning of this passage, there can be little doubt that the *Remarks* reveals a mind gripped by questions in which life and thinking intersect in a manner that is particularly revealing both in itself and for an understanding of Kant's later thought.

The *Observations* already reveals a significant engagement with Rousseau's thought, but as noted the *Remarks* offers clear signs of a deeper investigation of Rousseauian themes and questions, turning above all on the problematic status of reason and nature. It is as if Kant had been set on a certain path by the Swiss thinker and in pressing forward on it had found himself in a tangled thicket of questions. In order to proceed Kant had to reconsider Rousseau's first principles and arguments, which up to this point he had imperfectly mastered. The outcome is Kant's radical breakthrough in the *Remarks* in understanding nature and morality in ideal and rationally legislated terms, a breakthrough ushering him into new territory which in the end is in many ways distant from Rousseau's thought. Collectively, Kant's "remarks" not only facilitate a clearer understanding of the bearing of Kant's "Rousseauist turn" on his subsequent writings; they also shed significant light on the crucial thinking that surrounds it, thinking whose importance has not always been fully appreciated by scholars.

Although Rousseau has a preeminent position in understanding these ethical writings, it would be a serious error to neglect the roles of other figures who are to varying degrees important in the formation of Kant's ethical thought (Leibniz, Christian Wolff, Christian August Crusius, Alexander Baumgarten, Thomas Hutcheson), and accordingly they also make

appearances in this volume (thus Corey W. Dyck's informative chapter on Baumgarten's contribution, along with that of Meier). In this regard, we found it helpful to begin the volume with a contribution that is chiefly concerned with Kant's thoughts on ethics predating the *Observations* and *Remarks*. Dieter Henrich's seminal essay argues that by 1762 Kant had already formulated the view, in opposition to the rationalism of Leibniz and Wolff, that perfection properly defined is inherent to willing, rather than being an object or standard independent of the will and apprehended intellectually. Henrich thus shows that Kant proceeded on a trajectory (one involving further reflections on Wolff, Crusius, Baumgarten, Hutcheson, and Rousseau) that led at the time of the *Remarks* to the first version of the categorical imperative as the highest inner universality and agreement of the will with itself. Henrich's essay provides indispensable background and context for appreciating the emergence of the ethical principles of the two thematic writings of the volume.

The other contributions to Part I fill out and extend this background. Patrick R. Frierson notes the importance of two sorts of universality in Kant's early moral works. In *Observations*, universality entails "expanding the scope of benevolence, treating the welfare of *all* others as an end." This universality is "teleological" or "objective" because it involves universalizing *objects* or *ends* of volition. Universality in *Groundwork*, by way of contrast, begins with the practical *subject*. As Frierson shows, signs of the latter approach to universalization are already evident in the *Remarks*. Paul Guyer finds initial evidence in the *Remarks* and roughly contemporary writings of two distinct routes by which Kant tries to connect the idea of freedom and its absolute value with the concept of universalizability. According to one, to respect freedom in this way is to respect all instances of freedom as equal in value; according to the other, maintaining one's independence from determination by sensible inclination involves acting in accordance with principles that are *ipso facto* universally valid and hence binding. As Guyer concludes, Kant may never have fully resolved the question of which route for him is primary.

Part II takes up the bearing of Kant's *Observations* and *Remarks* on ethics, aesthetics, and their interrelation. Focusing especially on "honor" and "sympathy," Rudolf A. Makkreel argues for the importance of an emerging distinction between "active" and "passive" aspects of feeling that is further validated in Kant's later writings. Robert R. Clewis elaborates on the distinction between the "true" and "false" sublime as it appears in Kant's early work, with a view to showing the importance of that distinction for Kant's later anthropology and moral theory. Alix Cohen draws attention to certain

consistent themes, roughly corresponding to the traditional "four humors," as they bear on Kant's idea or "portrait" of the human race as a whole.

Part III, on "Education, Politics, and National Character," examines the relation between anthropology and civic and moral pedagogy more closely. G. Felicitas Munzel traces a red thread of Rousseau-inspired pedagogy from Kant's early writings (including his early support for Basedow's Philanthropin project). Reinhard Brandt highlights ways in which the *Remarks* (in contrast to the published *Observations*) serves as "laboratory" of certain (Stoical) notions of property and ownership later developed by thinkers such as Marx. Finally, Robert B. Louden brings out ways in which the *Observations* anticipates Kant's later pragmatic anthropology, particularly with regard to his Rousseau-inflected understanding of "national character" and its relation to moral development.

Part IV, on "Science and History," opens with an essay by Peter Fenves on Kant's treatment of what he refers to in *Observations* as "even finer" feeling, namely, that associated with a certain sort of intellectual and moral inquiry. As Fenves argues, in its complex treatment of human feeling in its various modes, Kant's early essay not only sheds light on his own self-understanding, but also turns out to have surprising affinities with Kierkegaard and even Nietzsche. John H. Zammito finds in the *Reflections* and related writings compelling evidence of Kant's personal struggles, for which his reading of Rousseau proved a catalyst, concerning the value and significance of his own intellectual vocation. And Karl Ameriks explores the historical implications for Kant of a scientific revolution that decisively complicated the course of human development in ways that Kant's early reading of Rousseau first made Kant aware of.

The recent publication by Cambridge University Press of a new translation of the *Observations* has made an accurate and readable edition available to an English-speaking audience for the first time (in Kant 2007). This factor, combined with the accompanying translation by Cambridge University Press of the first English-language version of the *Remarks* (in Kant 2011), along with growing interest in the historically situated character of Kant's work, makes this an opportune time for this volume of critical essays.